

Study Guide: *The Catcher in the Rye* American Literature

Author Bio

Full Name: J. D. Salinger

Date of Birth: January 1, 1919 (d. 2010)

Place of Birth: New York City

Brief Life Story: Jerome David Salinger grew up on Park Avenue in New York. His father was a successful Jewish cheese importer, and his mother was Scotch-Irish Catholic. After struggling in several prep schools, Salinger attended Valley Forge Military Academy from 1934-1936. He went on to enroll in several colleges, including New York University and Columbia, where he wrote a writing class in 1939. He did not graduate from any of them. He began writing seriously in 1939, publishing his first story in *Story* magazine. During World War II, Salinger ended his military division and served in combat, including the invasion of Normandy in 1944. He continued to write during the war and published his first short story in *Story* magazine. He went on to publish many stories in the *New Yorker*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, and others from 1941 to 1948. In 1951 he published his only full-length novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which rocketed Salinger into the public eye. Salinger hated his sudden fame and retired from New York to Cornish, New Hampshire, where he has lived ever since. He continues to avoid contact with the media, and has ceased to publish. No one knows if he continues to write.



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Key Facts

Full Title: *The Catcher in the Rye*

Genre: Coming-of-Age Novel (Bildungsroman)

Setting: Agerstown, Pennsylvania and Manhattan, New York in 1950.

Climax: When Holden leaves Mr. Antolini's apartment

Protagonist: Holden Caulfield

Antagonist: Stradlater, Phonies, and Adults

Point of View: First person (Holden is the narrator)

Historical and Literary Context

When Published: 1951

Literary Period: Modern American

Related Literary Works: Not much is known about the influences Salinger drew upon to write *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is known that during World War II he met with Ernest Hemingway in Paris, which suggests that Salinger admired Hemingway's work. Even if that's true, it's difficult to trace any particular author's influence in *Catcher* because it's written in such a fresh and unique voice with a degree of candor and brashness perhaps unprecedented in American fiction.

Related Historical Events: Many parallels exist between Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and J. D. Salinger: both grew up in upper class New York, both flunked out of prep schools, and so on. It's no surprise, then, that Salinger's experience in World War II should cast a shadow over Holden's opinions and experiences in *The Catcher in the Rye*. World War II robbed millions of young men and women of their youthful innocence. Salinger himself witnessed the slaughter of thousands at Normandy, one of the war's bloodiest battles. In *Catcher* we see the impact of Salinger's World War II experience in Holden's mistrusting, cynical view of adult society. Holden views growing up as a slow surrender to the "phony" responsibilities of adult life, such as getting a job, serving in the military, and maintaining intimate relationships. World War I was supposedly "the war to end all wars"; World War II proved that this claim was as hollow as the "phony" ideas adult characters impose on Holden throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Extra Credit

Banned in the Rye. Many critics dismissed the book as trash due to its healthy helping of four-letter words and sexual situations, and even today *Catcher in the Rye* has been banned in school districts in Washington, Ohio, Florida and Michigan.

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Themes

Growing Up

In contrast to all adults whom **Holden** sees as riddled with flaws and phoniness, he sees children as pure, gentle, innocent, and perfect. The characters he speaks most fondly about in the novel are all children: **Allie**, **Phoebe**, and the poor boy he hears singing the song about the “catcher in the rye.” He constantly dreams up schemes to escape growing up, such as fleeing to a New England cabin or working on a ranch out West. The only role that Holden envisions for himself in life—catching children before they fall off a cliff—is symbolic of his wish to save himself and other children from having to one day grow up.

However, Holden’s view of perfect childhood is as incorrect as his view of the adult world as entirely “phony,” and just helps Holdenhide from the fact that the complex issues ranging from sex, to intimacy, to facing death, all of which he will have to face in growing up, terrify him. Further, this form of delusional self-protection can only last so long. Holden *will* grow up, whether he likes it or not. Mr. **Antolini** and Phoebe both make it clear that unless he learns to accept the complexities of adulthood, he will end up, at best, bitter and alone.

Alienation

From the very first scene of *Catcher in the Rye*, when **Holden** decides not to attend the football game that the rest of his school is attending, it is clear that Holden doesn’t fit in. What makes *The Catcher in the Rye* unique, however, is not the fact that Holden is an alienated teenager, but its extremely accurate and nuanced portrayal of the causes, benefits, and costs of his isolation.

In short, alienation both protects and harms Holden. It protects him by ensuring that he will not ever have to form connections with other people that might wind up causing awkwardness, rejection, or the sort of intense emotional pain he felt when **Allie** died. Just as Holden wears his hunting cap as a sign of independence, separation, and protection from the world, he creates his own alienation for the same purpose. The problem, though, is that Holden is human. He may wish that he didn’t need human contact, but he does. So while his alienation protects him, it also severely harms him, making him intensely lonely and depressed. He therefore reaches out, to **Mr. Spencer**, or **Carl Luce**, or **Sally**, but then his fear of human interaction reasserts itself and he does his best to insult or make the very people he wants to connect with angry at him. Holden has gotten himself caught in a cycle of self-destruction: his fear of human contact leads to alienation, which leads to loneliness, which causes him to reach out to another person, which excites his fear of human contact and leads to a terrible experience that convinces him that people are no good, which leads to alienation... and so on.

Motifs

Phoniness

Holden constantly encounters people and situations that strike him as “phony,” a word he applies to anything hypocritical, shallow, superficial, inauthentic, or otherwise fake. He sees such “phoniness” everywhere in the adult world, and believes adults are so phony that they can’t even see their own phoniness. And Holden is right. Many of the characters in the novel, from **Ackley** and **Stradlater**, to **Sally**, to **Mr. Spencer** are often phony, and say and do things that keep up appearances rather than reflect what they truly think and feel.

Yet even though Holden is right that people are phony, *Catcher in the Rye* makes it clear that Holden’s hatred of phoniness is still self-destructive. Though Holden is constantly pointing out the phoniness in others, he is himself often phony. At various times in the novel, he tells pointless lies, claims to like or agree with statements or ideas he hates, goes out with girls he doesn’t like, all to try to feel less lonely or to avoid direct confrontations. The point, then, is that, yes, people are “phony” and can’t live up to Holden’s wish that the world be simple, a place of black and white. But in the end what **Mr. Antolini** is trying to make Holden see is that while this “phoniness” is harmful and hurtful, it doesn’t make people evil or worthy of hate. It makes them human. Holden, in effect, is wishing that the world could be inhuman, could be something that it never can be.

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Sex

Like most teenagers, **Holden** struggles with his sexuality. He considers himself a “sex maniac,” but is also completely inexperienced. In addition, he has very strong and often contradictory feelings about women. Most women, such as **Bernice Krebs** and **Sally Hayes**, he sees as utterly stupid, largely because they seem interested in boys and men, whom Holden knows from experience are up to no good. On the other hand, Holden sees **Jane Gallagher** as a perfect woman: kind, loving, gentle, innocent, wonderful. In other words, he idealizes her. Yet the fact that he is so frightened to call or talk to her implies that he knows that she can’t possibly be as perfect as he wants her to be. In the end, Holden’s feelings about women and sex mirror his feelings about society as a whole. He desperately wants to have a girlfriend, have sex, and achieve emotional intimacy, and at the same time is desperately afraid as well.

Madness, Depression, Suicide

If “phony” is the most frequently repeated word in *The Catcher in the Rye*, “crazy,” “madman,” and “depressed” rank close behind it. Because **Holden** is the narrator of the novel, and because he seems in so many ways to be a typical teenager battling typical teenage issues of identity, it seems like he is using these words for effect. In other words, when he says he’s crazy he seems to mean that he’s acting oddly, or inconsistently, or stupidly, but not that he’s actually going insane. And when he says he wishes he were dead, it likewise seems at first as if he’s using the phrase as a teenage expression to make his emotions seem as intense to you as they seem to him. But as the novel progresses, it begins to become clear through hints and an intensification of Holden’s own language that Holden really is on the verge of losing it, and really is seriously thinking of killing himself as the only way out of this world he can’t control or understand.

Symbols

The Catcher in the Rye

What **Holden** most wants to be in life is someone who stands on the edge of a cliff in a rye field catching children before they fall. The image is symbolic of Holden’s desire to save both himself and other children from having to grow up into an adult world he sees as “phony.” The image is even more symbolic because it is based on Holden mishearing a song based on Robert Burns (1759-1796) poem “Coming Thro the Rye,” which is about two bodies meeting in the rye to have sex. Holden’s misinterpretation underscores both his desire to shield children from the adult world, and his misunderstanding about just how innocent the world of children is.

Holden’s Red Hunting Hat

Holden’s red hunting hat is a symbol of his alienation. It protects him, and makes him feel unique, but also singles him out as strange, which in turn reinforces his alienation. The hat is also a symbol of Holden’s attachment to childhood—it’s the kind of goofy accessory that a proper adult wouldn’t wear.

The Ducks in the Lagoon in Central Park

Holden’s fixation on the ducks is also a symbol of his struggle with change and growing up. He wants things to stay the same, but the ducks prove that one must adapt to the environment, that one has to change in order to survive. At the same time, the duck’s offer hope: though they disappear each winter, they always reappear.

The Museum of Natural History

Holden loves the permanence of the exhibits at the Museum of Natural History because, unlike people, the displays never change. This constancy satisfies Holden’s desire to stop time and remain in childhood.

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Important Quotes

Chapter 2 Quotes

“Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.” “Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it.” “Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game.

Chapter 3 Quotes

[Ackley] took another look at my hat while he was cleaning them. “Up home we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in, for Chrissake,” he said. “That’s a deer shooting hat.” “Like hell it is.” I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it. “This is a people shooting hat,” I said. “I shoot people in this hat.”

Chapter 5 Quotes

My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder’s mitt. He was left-handed. The thing that was descriptive about it, though, was that he had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink.

Chapter 8 Quotes

You know those ducks in that lagoon right near Central Park South? That little lake? By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over?

Chapter 16 Quotes

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. You could go there a hundred times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty, skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you.

Chapter 22 Quotes

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around — nobody big, I mean — except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff — I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.

Chapter 24 Quotes

This fall I think you’re riding for — it’s a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement’s designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn’t supply them with. So they gave up looking.

Chapter 25 Quotes

[W]hile I was sitting down, I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody’d written “Fuck you” on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them....I hardly even had the guts to rub it off the wall with my hand, if you want to know the truth. I was afraid some teacher would catch me rubbing it off and would think I’d written it. But I rubbed it out anyway, finally.