

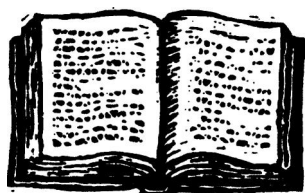
# *The Catcher in the Rye*

J. D. Salinger

1951

Although *The Catcher in the Rye* caused considerable controversy when it was first published in 1951, the book—the account of three disoriented days in the life of a troubled sixteen-year-old boy—was an instant hit. Within two weeks after its release, it was listed number one on *The New York Times* best-seller list, and it stayed there for thirty weeks. It remained immensely popular for many years, especially among teenagers and young adults, largely because of its fresh, brash style and anti-establishment attitudes—typical attributes of many people emerging from the physical and psychological turmoil of adolescence.

It also was the bane of many parents, who objected to the main character's obscene language, erratic behavior, and antisocial attitudes. Responding to the irate protests, numerous school and public libraries and bookstores removed the book from their shelves. Holden simply was not a good role model for the youth of the 1950s, in the view of many conservative adults. Said J. D. Salinger himself, in a rare published comment, "I'm aware that many of my friends will be saddened and shocked, or shock-saddened, over some of the chapters in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Some of my best friends are children. In fact, all my best friends are children. It's almost unbearable for me to realize that my book will be kept on a shelf out of their reach." The clamor over the book undoubtedly contributed to its popularity among the young: It became the forbidden fruit in the garden of literature.



For some reason—perhaps because of the swirling controversies over his written works—Salinger retreated from the New York literary scene in the 1960s to a bucolic New Hampshire community called Cornish, where he has lived a very private life and avidly avoided the press. Despite the fact that he has granted few interviews, there is a substantial body of critical and biographical works about Salinger and his all-too-brief list of literary creations.

### Author Biography

Born in 1919 to a prosperous Manhattan family, Jerome David Salinger grew up in a New York City milieu not unlike that of young Holden Caulfield. Being a diligent student was never his first priority: After he flunked out of several prep schools, including the prestigious McBurney School, his parents sent him to Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1936. (Many people believe he modeled Pencey Prep, the fictional school attended by Caulfield, after Valley Forge.) He briefly attended Ursinus College, also in Pennsylvania, and New York University, where he stayed one month.

It was not until he took a short story course at Columbia University that Salinger officially launched his literary career. His teacher, Whit Burnett, was the founder and editor of *Story* magazine, which gave a headstart to a number of mid-century fiction writers. Salinger's first published piece appeared in *Story*. Then he moved rapidly into the big time of slick commercial magazines, writing short pieces for *Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan* and the upscale *New Yorker*.

Salinger has consistently refused to allow anyone to republish his early stories—those written between 1941 and 1948. (However, they may still lurk among the microfilm or microfiche copies of old magazines in local libraries.) Several are about draftees in World War II and may mirror Salinger's own military experiences in that war. He served in the Army Signal Corps and the Counter-Intelligence Corps from 1942 to 1945, participating in the Normandy campaign and the liberation of France. Winner of five battle stars, he still found a way to keep writing during this period, toting a portable typewriter around in the back of his Jeep (as did Holden's brother, D. B., in the novel).



J. D. Salinger

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The extant body of Salinger's work therefore consists (in addition to *The Catcher in the Rye*) of three collections of short stories: *Nine Stories* (1953), *Franny and Zooey* (1955) and *Raise High the Roof Beams* (1963)—plus, of course, his more recent book, *Hapworth 16, 1924* (1997), which is a republication of a former *New Yorker* novella.

Since the early 1960s, Salinger has lived in seclusion in rural New Hampshire, his privacy fiercely protected by loyal friends and neighbors. Married twice, he has two children, Margaret Ann and Matthew, from his second marriage. Both marriages ended in divorce.

### Plot Summary

#### **Part I—Holden Flunks out of Pencey Prep School**

*The Catcher in the Rye* tells the story of Holden Caulfield, a teenage slacker who has perfected the art of underachievement. The novel begins with Holden flunking out of school for the fourth time. During the last days before his expulsion, he searches for an appropriate way to conclude his school experience, but he ends up getting so annoyed with his school and schoolmates that he

leaves in the middle of the night on the next train home to New York City. Arriving home a few days earlier than his parents expect him, he hangs out in the city to delay the inevitable confrontation with his parents. When his money runs out, he considers hitchhiking out west, but he ultimately returns home, mainly to be with his younger sister Phoebe.

The first few chapters describe Holden's last days at Pencey Prep School in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. Advertisements portray Pencey as an elite school that grooms boys into sophisticated men, but Holden sees it as a nightmare of adolescence run amok. Fed up with everything about Pencey, Holden skips the football game against Pencey's rival to say good-bye to his history teacher, Mr. Spencer. He vaguely hopes that Spencer might give him some comfort and useful advice, but Spencer is a sick old man who simply lectures him with a thousand platitudes about not applying himself. Like Spencer, the other teachers and administrators rarely spend any time mentoring boys because they are too busy spouting off platitudes or kissing up to the wealthy parents visiting the school.

Moreover, Pencey's students do not fit the prep school ideal any more than its teachers do. Holden's classmate Robert Ackley, for example, is the quintessential adolescent nerd. His acne and unbrushed teeth make him physically repulsive, while his annoying social habits—such as barging into the room uninvited, asking annoying questions, and refusing to leave when asked—make him a general nuisance. Other students, like Holden's roommate Ward Stradlater, initially appear sophisticated, but even they are really phonies. Stradlater seems good-looking, but he is secretly a slob who never cleans his rusty old razor. He also appears to be a successful student, but he is really an ungrateful egotist who gets other people to do his assignments. Nevertheless, Holden still feels a certain affection even for these annoying phonies. He is annoyed by Ackley but still invites him to the movies, and he sees through Stradlater's phoniness but also notices his occasional generosity.

The tension between Holden and his classmates eventually climaxes in a fight between Holden and Stradlater. Stradlater annoys Holden by asking him to write his English paper, so he can go on a date with Jane Gallagher, an old friend of Holden's. Stradlater really angers Holden, however, when he returns from the date and begins insinuating that he did all kinds of stuff with Jane in the back seat of a car. Fed up with Stradlater's phony nice-guy image, Holden picks a fight. Strad-

later easily defeats the weaker Holden and gives him a bloody nose. After the fight, Holden retreats into Ackley's room to forget about Stradlater, but Ackley only makes Holden more lonely. Then Holden goes into the hall to escape Ackley, but the hall is just as lonely. Surrounded by Pencey's all-pervasive loneliness, Holden decides to return home immediately instead of waiting for school to finish. He quickly packs and heads for the train station late at night, but before departing he vents his frustration with his schoolmates one last time. Yelling loud enough to wake everyone, he screams his final farewell to his moronic classmates.

### ***Part II—Holden's Adventures in New York City***

The middle section of the novel describes Holden's adventures in New York City. As soon as he arrives in New York, he looks for something to do, since it is too late to call his friends. He calls Faith Cavendish, a stripper recommended by a friend, but she does not want to meet a stranger so late. After a failed attempt to get a date with some girls in the hotel bar, he takes a cab to another bar in Greenwich Village. When he returns to his hotel, a pimp named Maurice sets him up with a prostitute named Sunny, but Holden is too nervous to do anything with her. The next day Holden asks his old girlfriend, Sally Hayes, to a show. While waiting to meet her, he has breakfast with two nuns and buys a blues record for his sister. When he finally meets Sally, they go to a concert and go skating, but they eventually get into a fight and split up. After their fight, Holden meets an old classmate, Carl Luce, at the Wicker Bar, where they have a brief discussion until Holden gets drunk and starts asking inappropriately personal questions. After Carl leaves, the still-drunk Holden calls up Sally and makes a fool of himself.

### ***Part III—Holden Returns Home***

The last section of the novel describes Holden's return home. At first, Holden only wants to briefly say good-bye to his sister, Phoebe, so he sneaks into his house late at night in hopes of avoiding his parents. He successfully sneaks into the room where his sister sleeps, aided by the lucky coincidence that his parents are not home. At first, Phoebe is delighted to see Holden, but she gets upset when she realizes that he has flunked out again. She asks him why he flunked out, and he blames it on his terrible school. After listening to Holden's excuses, Phoebe criticizes him for being too pessimistic. Holden tries to deny this by explaining



*Men at the Swing Rendezvous club in Greenwich Village, 1955.*

how he likes lots of things, but he can only think of a few: his dead brother Allie, a kid named James Castle who died at one of his schools, and Phoebe. In the end, Phoebe forces Holden to admit that he is a rather pessimistic failure. In the passage that gives the book its title, Holden explains that he cannot imagine himself fitting into any of the roles that society expects him to perform, like growing up to be a lawyer or scientist. Instead, he can only imagine being a catcher in the rye who stands at the edge of a large rye field watching over and protecting little kids from danger.

"You know that song, 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye'? I'd like—"

"It's 'If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye'!" old Phoebe said. "It's a poem. By Robert Burns."

"I *know* it's a poem by Robert Burns."

She was right, though. It is "If a body meet a body coming through the rye." I didn't know it then, though.

"I thought it was 'If a body catch a body,'" I said. "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 be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy."

In this passage, Salinger brilliantly blends the two sides of Holden's character. On the one hand, Holden admits that he *is* a failure: he is incapable of even imagining himself functioning in the adult world. On the other hand, however, Holden is not *only* a failure: he is also a deeply sensitive and compassionate person, albeit in an unorthodox way. In particular, he understands and cares about people who are outcasts or powerless. Phoebe seems to understand and accept this unorthodox sensitivity because she eventually reconciles herself to him, and they celebrate their reconciliation by dancing until their parents return and Holden has to sneak back out of the house.

After sneaking out of the house, Holden spends the night with his favorite teacher, Mr. Antolini, but he leaves early in the morning when he wakes up to find Mr. Antolini stroking his hair. Confused by such unusual behavior, Holden spends the morning wandering the streets until he eventually decides to hitchhike out west. He leaves a note at Phoebe's school telling her to meet him at the museum so they can say good-bye, but Phoebe shows up carrying her own belongings in a suitcase be-

cause she wants to go with Holden. At this point, Holden realizes how important they are to each other, and he finally decides to return home and face his parents. The novel never actually describes what happens next, but it suggests that Holden faces the dreadful confrontation with his parents and then later experiences some sort of nervous breakdown. The novel concludes with Holden looking back at all the people he has described and fondly remembering how he likes them despite their annoying and phony qualities.

## Characters

### **Robert Ackley**

Holden's unpleasant dormmate, whose personal habits are dirty and whose room stinks. Holden suspects that Ackley does not brush his teeth and describes them as mossy. Cursed with acne, Ackley constantly picks at the sores. Ackley dislikes Stadlater, calling him a "son of a bitch." Holden finds Ackley disgusting but appears to feel sorry for him at the same time.

### **Mr. Antolini**

Holden's former English teacher, Mr. Antolini, "the best teacher I ever had," invited Holden to come right over, even though Holden probably woke him and his wife up in the middle of the night. Mr. Antolini asked why Holden was no longer at Pencey, warned him about heading for a fall, and wrote down a quote on paper for him: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." Later that night, after falling asleep on the couch, Holden wakes up to find Mr. Antolini patting his head in the dark. Holden leaps up, convinced Mr. Antolini is a pervert, and rushes out of the apartment. Later Holden is unsure whether his reaction was mistaken.

### **Allie Caulfield**

Allie Caulfield is Holden's younger brother. While he has died of leukemia, he is very much alive throughout the book. Holden refers to him as still living and even talks to him. Bright and charming, Allie is/was Holden's best friend other than Phoebe.

### **D. B. Caulfield**

D.B. Caulfield is Holden's and Phoebe's older brother. He is a successful and financially secure

screenwriter in Hollywood. But Holden feels that D.B. has prostituted his art for money and should instead be writing serious works. While D.B. shows great solicitude for Holden, the relationship between the brothers is distant.

### **Holden Caulfield**

Holden Caulfield is a deeply troubled sixteen-year-old boy who is totally alienated from his environment and from society as a whole. He looks on people and events with a distaste bordering on disgust. The reader can view him either as an adolescent struggling with the angst of growing up (the Peter Pan syndrome) or as a rebel against what he perceives as hypocrisy (phoniness) in the world of adults (i.e., society).

The novel is the recollection of three depressing days in Holden's life when his accumulated anger and frustration converge to create a life crisis. The events of this long weekend eventually propel him to a hospital where he is treated for both physical and mental disorders. Since the book is written in the first person, we see all people and events through Holden's eyes. He tells his story from the vantage point of the 17-year-old Caulfield, who is still in a California hospital at the outset of the book.

He begins with a statement of anger that includes the reader in its sarcasm:

"If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.... I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this mad-man stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.... Where I want to start telling about is the day I left Pencey Prep."

Holden has once again flunked out of prep school, where he failed every subject but English. On this day, he says goodbye to his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, who is home with the gripe. He views the sick man with both sympathy and disgust and escapes hastily after the teacher begins to lecture him about flunking out of three prep schools.

The novel continues with equally flawed encounters with two fellow students, Bob Ackley and his playboy roommate, Ward Stradlater. Holden decides to leave Pencey that very night.

He packs his belongings, heads to the railroad station and grabs a train to New York City. There he embarks on a harrowing weekend staying at hotels, frequenting bars, and trying desperately to communicate with everyone he meets—the mother of a classmate (to whom he lies about his identity), hangers-out in bars, taxi drivers, a prostitute and her pimp, and two nuns in a restaurant. His two most memorable encounters are with his old friend, the pseudo-sophisticated Sally Hayes, and a former schoolmate, Carl Luce. Both take place on Sunday.

Late Sunday night—thoroughly chilled from sitting in Central Park and having used up most of his money and everyone else's patience—Holden sneaks into his family's apartment. He wakes up his engaging ten-year-old sister, Phoebe. Phoebe is the only human being with whom Holden can communicate except for the memory of Allie, for whom he continually grieves. Phoebe represents the innocence and honesty of childhood, which is all Holden truly respects—a viewpoint shared in part by Salinger himself. (In contrast, Holden sees his older brother, D.B., as a “prostitute” because he has sold out his art, becoming a Hollywood scriptwriter instead of what Holden views as a serious writer.)

Phoebe is direct and blunt. When she learns that Holden has been expelled from yet another private school, her instant comment is, “Daddy'll kill you.” And of course that's what Holden has been running away from all weekend—confronting his parents about his expulsion. Later, Phoebe tells him: “You don't like anything that's happening ... You don't like any schools. You don't like a million things. You *don't*.” Holden is stunned and defensive. When he tries to think of something he likes, he finally comes down to nothing but Allie and Phoebe. He tells Phoebe that he's going to hitchhike to Colorado and start a new life there.

Still avoiding his parents, he arranges to spend the rest of Sunday night with a former favorite English teacher, Mr. Antolini, and his somewhat frowzy wife. During the night, he awakes to find Antolini stroking his hair. He immediately panics, deciding that Antolini is just another pervert in a world full of twisted people, and flees the Antolini apartment.

On Monday, he goes to Phoebe's school to leave a message for her to meet him at the Museum of Natural History. He wants to say goodbye. When Phoebe shows up, she is dragging a huge suitcase along the sidewalk. She intends to go with him. This is not in his plan at all. Instead, he takes her to the Central Park Zoo. While watching her ride

on the merry-go-round, he worries that she'll fall off while trying to catch the gold ring. “The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them,” muses Caulfield. This, in a way, is the end of a dream he has told Phoebe:

“... 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. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy.”

Is this a turning point in Holden's withdrawal from the world—a point at which he knows he has to accept the inevitable realities of life and people? Or will he continue to run away toward his dream of saving the world?

We leave Holden where we found him—or he found us—in the California hospital. When he is well, his brother D.B. will drive him back East, where he will attend yet another school.

Holden Caulfield is both tragic and funny, innocent and obscene, loving and cruel, clear-sighted yet viewing the world from a warped perspective, an expert in identifying phonies and the greatest phony himself. Of course, how you see Holden depends upon your own point of view. For many young readers of the book, especially in the 1950s and '60s, Holden still represented the true reality—the innocent abroad in a corrupt world. For older readers, he represents the angst of adolescence in its nightmarish extreme. For the ultraconservative, he still remains a threat to the status quo.

### ***Phoebe Caulfield***

Phoebe Caulfield, Holden Caulfield's pretty, redheaded ten-year-old sister, is straightforward and independent. She says exactly what she means. She does not share Holden's disenchanted view of the world. Quite the opposite, she scolds Holden for not liking anything at all. This hurts him very much because Phoebe is his favorite person—the only one with whom he can truly communicate. Phoebe is bright, well-organized, and creative. She keeps all her school work neatly in notebooks, each labeled with a different subject. She also loves to write books about a fictional girl detective named Hazle [sic] Weatherfield, but according to Holden, she never finishes them. Holden delights in taking

her to the zoo and the movies and other places, as did their dead brother, Allie. Her directness and honesty are both refreshing and amusing.

### ***Faith Cavendish***

Faith Cavendish is the first person Holden calls when he gets to New York City. He met her previously at a party, where she was the date of a Princeton student. A burlesque stripper, she is supposed to be an “easy” conquest. She turns down Holden’s invitation to get together and wishes him a nice weekend in New York.

### ***Jane Gallagher***

While she does not appear in the book, Jane Gallagher is very much present. Holden has a crush on this attractive and interesting young woman, who dances well and plays golf abominably. He resents the fact that his roommate, Stadlater, takes her out on a date and suspects that Stadlater, who likes to brag about his alleged sexual conquests, has forced her to have sex with him. When he first arrives in New York, Holden wants to call her up, but he never actually does so.

### ***Sally Hayes***

Sally Hayes is Holden’s very attractive ex-girlfriend. He considers her stupid, possibly because she has an affected, pseudo-sophisticated manner. But he makes a date with her anyway. They go ice skating in Rockefeller Center, then go to a bar. Holden asks her to go away with him to Massachusetts or Vermont. She refuses, pointing out that they are much too young to set up housekeeping together and that college and Holden’s career come first.

Holden doesn’t want to hear about a traditional career. He becomes angry and tells Sally she’s a “royal pain in the ass.” She “hit the ceiling” and left. Later, drunk, he calls her late at night to tell her that, yes, he will come to help trim her family’s Christmas tree.

### ***Horwitz***

Horwitz is the second taxi driver Holden encounters in New York City. Holden tries to strike up a conversation with him about where the ducks in Central Park go when the water in the lake freezes over. But Horwitz obviously considers Holden somewhat of a loony and is abrupt with him.

### ***Carl Luce***

Carl Luce, Holden’s former schoolmate, ostensibly his Student Adviser, was about three years older and “one of these very intellectual guys—he had the highest I.Q. of any boy at Whooton.”

Holden called him, hoping to have dinner and “a slightly intellectual conversation,” but Luce could only meet him for a drink at the Wicker Bar at ten that evening.

He arrived saying he could only stay a few minutes, ordered a martini, kept trying to get Holden to lower his voice and change the subject. Before leaving, he suggested that Holden call his father, a psychoanalyst, for an appointment.

### ***Mrs. Morrow***

Mrs. Morrow is the mother of Holden’s classmate, Ernest. Holden runs into her on the train to New York. They have a superficial conversation in which Mrs. Morrow is very friendly. So is Holden—but he lies about his identity because he doesn’t want Mrs. Morrow to know he has been kicked out of school.

### ***Piano Player in the Wicker Bar***

Holden encounters the Wicker Bar’s “flitty” piano player in the men’s room. He asks him to find out whether the waiter delivered his message to the singer, Valencia, whom Holden wanted to invite to his table. The piano man, seeing how drunk Holden is, tells him to go home.

### ***Lillian Simmons***

Lillian Simmons is D.B.’s ex-girlfriend. Holden’s main observation about her: “She has big knockers.” Holden encounters her in Ernie’s, a Greenwich Village hangout, where she introduces Holden to her companion, Navy Commander “Blomp.”

### ***Mr. Spencer***

Mr. Spencer is Holden Caulfield’s history teacher at Pencey. Before leaving on Saturday of his long weekend, Holden goes to Spencer’s house to say goodbye. Spencer, ill with the gripe, is wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. Holden finds old men dressed this way to be pathetic, with their pale, skinny legs sticking out under their bathrobes and their pajama tops askew, revealing their pale, wispy chests. Spencer obviously likes Caulfield, but he cannot resist giving him a lecture on his poor performance in history. Holden listens, agrees, and leaves as soon as he can.

### **Ward Stradlater**

Ward Stradlater is Holden's obnoxious roommate at Pencey Prep. A playboy, he asks Holden to write an essay on a room or a house for him while he goes out on a date with Jane Gallagher, the girl Holden really cares about. A resentful Holden writes an essay about his brother Allie's baseball glove, on which Allie scribbled Emily Dickinson poems. A secret slob (he shaves with a dirty, rusty razor), Stradlater makes a good appearance. Smooth and slick, he likes to boast about his alleged sexual prowess. When he returns from his date, he is irate because Holden has written an essay about a baseball glove instead of a house. Holden tears it up, has an argument with Stradlater, and ends up in a fistfight with him.

### **Sunny**

Sunny is the prostitute Holden requests. When she comes to his room in the Edmont Hotel, she discovers that Holden just wants someone to talk with. She leaves in disgust. Later, she returns with her pimp, Maurice, the hotel's elevator operator. They demand another five dollars for her time. Holden protests, and after she takes the money from his wallet.

### **Three girls from Seattle**

After checking in and calling Faith Cavendish, Holden goes to the bar of the Edmont Hotel—"a goddam hotel" that was "full of perverts and morons," comments Holden. In the bar, he strikes up a conversation with three thirty-ish girls from Seattle who are spending their vacation touring New York City. He dances with them all, one by one, but the whole experience fizzles and he leaves the bar, calls a cab, and goes to Ernie's, a night club in Greenwich Village.

### **Two Nuns**

Two nuns with whom Holden strikes up a conversation in a restaurant. They are both school teachers, and Holden charms them with his expressions of enthusiasm about English literature. Since they have a wicker collection basket with them, Holden gives them \$10 as a contribution to their charity.

## **Themes**

### ***Alienation and Loneliness***

The main theme that runs through this book is alienation, whether the book is read as the

funny/tragic account of a deeply troubled, rebellious, and defensive teenager or as a commentary on a smug and meaningless social milieu. Phoebe sums up Holden's sense of separateness from and anger at other people when she tells him he doesn't like anything. Holden's red hunting cap, which he dons when he is most insecure, is a continuing symbol throughout the book of his feeling that he is different, doesn't fit into his environment, and, what's more, doesn't want to fit in.

### **Failure**

A second theme is that of failure. Holden continually sets himself up for failure, then wears it like a badge of courage. Thus he fails in every encounter with other people in the book with the exception of Phoebe. Why would a sixteen-year-old want to fail? Failure serves as a great attention-getting device. And perhaps, more than anything, Holden wants attention from his parents, the absent characters in the book. What Holden really longs for, most likely, is acceptance and love.

### **Guilt and Innocence**

Holden is deceitful and manipulative in most of his dealings with others. And he knows this all too well and even boasts of his prowess as a liar. But throughout the book we glimpse another Holden, the one who feels sorry for the people he cons. His basic kindness comes through in glimpses, particularly in the passage where he reveals that the only thing he would like to be is a "catcher in the rye" protecting innocent children from falling into the abyss of adulthood.

### **Anger**

Holden is angry at everyone except Allie and Phoebe and perhaps the ducks in the pond in Central Park. Anger, of course, is the flip side of hurt. Holden is wounded by his disappointment in the faults of the world and frustrated because he finally realizes that he can't fix them. His failures may also be a way of acting out his anger at his parents and society at large.

### **Sexuality**

Holden struggles with his emerging sexuality. He is unable to relate in any meaningful way to the girls he encounters along the way, writing them off as sex objects. He writes off other males as perverts or morons and views their sexuality with disgust. Confusion about sexual identity is common in adolescents. For Holden, it is terrifying.



## Topics for Further Study



- Investigate current research on adolescent psychology. According to current theory, argue whether Holden Caulfield is a typical troubled adolescent or a seriously mentally ill young man.
- Is Holden Caulfield a reliable narrator? Why or why not?
- Compare Holden's generation of the 1940s to today's generation. How are the two cultures similar and different?

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### Courage

Courage is one of the subtle themes running throughout the novel. Holden, in his own twisted way, confronts the demons in his life and, therefore, stands a chance of wrestling them to the floor.

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### Style

#### Narrator

In essence, we have three narrators of the events that take place in this book. The first is the author, J. D. Salinger, who was looking back in anger (or in creativity) from his thirty-two-year-old vantage point. The second is the seventeen-year-old Holden, still institutionalized, who tells the story as a recollection. And the third, and most immediate, is the sixteen-year-old Holden who does all the talking. The form of the narration is first person, in which a character uses "I" to relate events from his or her perspective.

#### Stream of Consciousness

The technique of the narration is a form known as "stream of consciousness." While the book proceeds in a rough chronological order, the events are related to the reader as Holden thinks of them. Wherever his mind wanders, the reader follows. Notice how his language often appears to be more like that of a ten-year-old than that of a smart six-

teen-year-old. This is a continuing demonstration of Holden's unwillingness to grow up and join the hypocritical adult world that he despises. Holden's conversation in the Wicker Bar with Luce demonstrates this reluctance aptly, when Luce expresses annoyance at Holden's immaturity.

#### Setting

The settings for *The Catcher in the Rye*—Pencey Prep and New York City—were the settings for J. D. Salinger's early life as well, although the novel is not strictly autobiographical. Through his description of Holden's history teacher, Mr. Spencer, and his portrayals of Holden's fellow students, Salinger recreates the stifling atmosphere of a 1940s prep school, where a sense of alienation often resulted from not conforming to narrow social standards. The New York City where Holden spent his nightmare weekend is the same Manhattan where Salinger grew up—smaller, a little homier, and a lot less glitzy than the New York City of today. And Holden's home and family are similar to those of Salinger. However, Salinger had only one sibling, a brother. From the taxi ride, to the seedy hotel where Holden stayed, to Rockefeller Center to Central Park, Holden's New York is tangible, real, and plays an active role like any other character in the book. The descriptions of places and events are colorful and immediate. Salinger entices us into Holden's world whole and without resistance. He is a master of vivid story telling.

#### Symbolism

The book is rich in symbolism. The author drops hints of the meaning of its title twice before we find out what it is. The first time, Holden hears a little boy in New York sing-songing "If a body meet a body comin' through the rye," an Americanization of Robert Burns's poem and the song it inspired. The second time, Holden is with Phoebe and brings up the topic, referring to the song as "If a body *catch* a body comin' through the rye." Phoebe corrects him. But Holden's dream of being a catcher in the rye (derived from the second line of the poem) persists. He will save the children from adulthood and disillusionment.

Holden's red hat is an abiding symbol throughout the book of his self-conscious isolation from other people. He dons it whenever he is insecure. It almost becomes his alter ego. After he gives it to Phoebe, she gives it back to him. We do not know at the end of the book whether he still needs this equivalent of a security blanket.

## Historical Context

### Postwar Prosperity

The events in *The Catcher in the Rye* take place in 1946, only a year after the end of World War II. Adults at this time had survived the Great Depression and the multiple horrors of the war. Paradoxically, the war that wounded and killed so many people was the same instrument that launched the nation into an era of seemingly unbounded prosperity. During the postwar years, the gross national product rose to \$500 billion, compared with \$200 billion in prewar 1940. In unprecedented numbers, people bought houses, television sets, second cars, washing machines, and other consumer goods. No wonder the nation wanted to forget the past and to celebrate its new beginnings. The celebration took the form of a new materialism and extreme conservatism. Traditional values were the norm. People did not want to hear from the Holden Caulfields and J. D. Salingers of the era. They were in a state of blissful denial.

Holden has withdrawn from this society enough to see it from a different perspective. He abhors the banality and hypocrisy he sees in the adult world and is therefore reluctant to participate in it, so his behavior, while that of an adolescent trying to affirm his own identity, also symbolizes the perceived shallowness of people and society. Most of the things Holden fears peak in the 1950s, when conservatism, rigid morality, and paranoid self-righteousness held the nation in a tight grip. Small wonder that 1950s parents assailed Salinger's novel when it hit book stores and libraries in 1951. It undermined the foundations of their beliefs and threatened to unsettle their placid but pleasant existence, which was sustained by their hatred of an outside enemy—communism.

### Cold War Concern

Despite the materialistic prosperity of the 1950s, many people were concerned about what appeared to be a troubling future. The Soviet Union acquired nuclear technology soon after the war, and the successful launch of the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, in 1957 appeared to give the Russians a threatening advantage over the United States. Americans also questioned the success of their educational system, which had failed them in the space race. The fear of nuclear war became so pervasive that students were regularly drilled on how to "duck and cover" in the case of an attack, and many families built bomb shelters in their back-

yards and stocked them with food and other supplies to survive a possible holocaust.

### Education

In 1950 about ten percent of all children were educated in Catholic schools, which at the time received federal funding. This became a topic for debate as people disputed whether or not private institutions should receive taxpayer money. Public schools that employed Roman Catholic nuns as teachers also became a target of debate, as some states, such as Wisconsin, denied these schools public support. Such actions were supported by the National Education Association, which took a strong antireligious stance. On the other hand, the National Catholic Educational Association argued that Catholic citizens supported public schools, and so it was unfair to deny parochial schools funding when they were meeting the same educational goals. Religion was more prevalent in public schools during the 1950s; religious topics were routinely taught in public schools: students listened to Bible readings (which were required in twelve states and the District of Columbia), and many students were given "released-time" breaks, during which they were allowed to leave school for one hour a week to attend religious classes.

### Pressure to Conform

Social pressures to conform were intense in the 1950s, not only in politics but also within the nation's educational system, which enjoyed multiple infusions of government funds. A college education became the passport to prosperity, especially after the G.I. bill of 1944 helped pay for war veterans' higher education. Corporations grew rapidly to meet the increasing demands of consumers and sopped up the growing number of skilled employees. Dress codes and embedded company cultures muted individualism. Jobs for white males were secure, while women stayed home and raised the many children ushered in by the postwar "Baby Boom."

### The Growing Generation Gap

The "Baby Boom" caused Americans to pay more attention to the younger generation. While *Catcher in the Rye* was somewhat before its time in this regard, the subject had particular relevance in the years after its publication. Lifestyles began to change dramatically as teenagers began to date and become sexually active at a younger age. Teenagers became more rebellious, a trend that their parents viewed to be strongly influenced by a

## Compare & Contrast

- **1950s:** Religion is an integral part of many classrooms. Bible readings and regular lessons about religious topics are included in course plans.

**Today:** The separation of Church and State is rigorously upheld and children do not study religious texts; prayer in schools becomes a burning issue, and there is growing pressure from religious factions to have educators teach creationism to counterbalance lessons in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

- **1950s:** Only about 58% of students finish high school, but jobs are so plentiful that employment rates remain high. Employer loyalty is the norm, and employees often remain with one company until they retire.

**Today:** Most employers that offer jobs with living-wage incomes require employees to have college degrees, even for low-level positions. Routine layoffs and downsizing largely eliminate company loyalty, and it becomes common for workers to switch jobs and even careers.

- **1950s:** Classroom curricula focus on basic skills, including reading, writing, and arith-

metic, but the inclusion of science in classes becomes a growing priority as the educational system tries to prepare students for the needs of a more technology-oriented world.

**Today:** Educators aim to give students well-rounded educations that include sex education and an emphasis on multicultural studies; parents become concerned that children are not being taught the basics and that high school students are graduating without knowing how to read. Educators recognize the need to train students in the use of computers, which become common equipment in classrooms and libraries.

- **1950s:** Postwar prosperity brings with it a preoccupation with material goods as the middle-classes enjoy unprecedented buying power; children begin to rebel against this crass materialism and conservatism, and nonconformist icons like actor James Dean become popular.

**Today:** Adults who were the rebellious children of the 1950s and 1960s long for a return of the "family values" of the 1950s; "family values" becomes a campaign buzz phrase for politicians as the American people return to conservative beliefs.

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new, decadent form of music called rock 'n' roll. This new attitude of rebelliousness was typified by Hollywood actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando, the bohemian lifestyle of the beatniks, and later in the literature of Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg. Juvenile delinquency became an alarming problem and was considered a major social issue. Teens were skipping classes and committing crimes, and parents were alarmed by their children's lack of respect for authority.

### Critical Overview

Mixed reviews greeted J. D. Salinger's first novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, published on July

16, 1951. *New York Times* critic Nash K. Burger, for example, lauded the book as "an unusually brilliant first novel," and *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Paul Engle called the novel "engaging and believable." In contrast, T. Morris Longstreth stated in the *Christian Science Monitor* that "the book was not fit for children to read." Regarding Holden Caulfield, the book's teenage narrator and protagonist, Longstreth wrote: "Fortunately there cannot be many of him yet. But one fears that a book like this given wide circulation may multiply his kind—as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art of good intention." In the novel's defense, critic James Bryan wrote in *PMLA*: "The richness of spirit in



Lever House on Park Avenue, a typical 1950s office in New York City.

this novel, especially of the vision, the compassion and the humor of the narrator, reveal a psyche far healthier than that of the boy who endured the events of this narrative. Through the telling of his story, Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past.”

It can be argued that *The Catcher in the Rye* is as much a critique of society as a revelation of the rebellion and angst of a teenage boy. The book takes potshots at a post-World War II society full of self-righteousness and preoccupied by the pursuit of the “American Dream” of everlasting prosperity. Salinger depicts this goal as being empty and meaningless. Commented the great American novelist William Faulkner, who praised Salinger’s novel, “When Holden attempted to enter the human race, there was no human race there.”

The reader never finds out how Holden turns out. Will he compromise with the realities of people and society, becoming like the people he despised? Will the banality of everyday events engulf his reluctant coming of age, leaving him a tormented misfit for the rest of his life? Or will he become a superhero, leading others out of the slough of the ordinary and into a more enlightened view of life? The reader will never know unless Salinger writes a sequel. His most recent novel, *Hapworth 16, 1924*, released in the spring of 1997, is a re-

publication of a long short story that appeared in the *New Yorker* in the 1960s. The featured character in the new book is Seymour Glass, member of another well-to-do fictional New York family depicted in a number of Salinger short stories. For some readers and critics, however, the endless saga of the eccentric Glass family eventually wore out its welcome. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Hapworth 16, 1924* are the only two novels Salinger has thus far written. But he did write a wealth of short stories for such magazines as the *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Collier's*.

If *The Catcher in the Rye* were introduced as a new book today, it would certainly not be considered as shocking now as it was in the 1950s. But it would still be viewed as a true and vivid portrait of adolescent angst. It can therefore rightly take its place among the literary classics of the twentieth century.

## Criticism

### Robert Bennett

In the following essay, Bennett, a doctoral candidate at the University of California—Berkeley, argues that despite its status as a “minor” classic, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a work with literary sig-

## What Do I Read Next?



- *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) by Carson McCullers tells of an awkward young girl living in a southern town as she suffers the pangs of growing up and feelings of isolation.
- In her influential first novel, *The Outsiders* (1967), S. E. Hinton writes of how two gangs—the Socs, who are teens from well-off families, and the Greasers, who come from lower-income homes—come to blows that lead to murder. Hinton, who was a teenager when she wrote the novel, creates remarkable, sympathetic portraits of the troubled teens in the Greasers gang.
- In Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* (1976), a disturbed teenager comes to grips with the events underlying his attempted suicide with the help of his psychotherapist.
- *Three Friends* (1984), by Myron Levoy, in which an intelligent fourteen-year-old boy who enjoys chess and psychology becomes involved with Karen, a feminist activist, and her artistic friend, Lori; all three consider themselves outsiders and develop complex and troubled relationships with each other.

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nificance that rewards the reader with several types of interpretations.

Even though *The Catcher in the Rye* is usually considered only a “minor” classic of American fiction, it is a very popular novel that frequently provokes strong reactions—both positive and negative—from its readers. In fact, *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most widely read and discussed works in the American literary canon. Despite its widespread popularity and significant reputation, however, some critics argue that it is too vulgar, immoral, and immature to be considered serious literature. Moreover, a few teachers and parents have censored the novel because they feel that it will corrupt children who read it. While there are undoubtedly subversive, or corrupt elements in the

novel, arguments for censoring it generally misrepresent its more nobler intentions and greatly exaggerate its subversive designs. Putting aside the overinflated claims of the novel's most extreme critics and supporters, the diversity and intensity of readers' reactions to *The Catcher in the Rye* suggest that the issues it raises are significant ones. Consequently, it seems likely that readers will continue to have heated discussions about this “minor” classic for a long time to come.

One of the issues that has been debated ever since the novel's initial publication is whether or not it qualifies as a significant work of literature. Does it offer significant insights into the complexities of human existence and the development of American culture, or does it simply appeal to vulgar adolescent minds with its obscene language, complaining about everything without developing any positive insights of its own? While some of the initial reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* were negative, critics later acknowledged it as a significant literary work and demonstrated how the novel's narrative structure, themes, and character development resemble other great works of literature. For example, Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller's essay, “J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff,” helped establish the literary significance of *The Catcher in the Rye* by showing how it belonged to the long tradition of epic quest narratives in western literature. Similarly, Charles Kaplan's essay, “Holden and Huck: The Odysseys of Youth,” points out similarities between *The Catcher in the Rye* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Both novels are about a young man who tells the story of his own personal odyssey using his own comical wisdom and colloquial everyday language. Critic Lilian Furst compares *The Catcher in the Rye* to Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*. Helen Weinberg compares it to Franz Kafka's novels in *The New Novel in America* while John M. Howell in his essay “Salinger in the Waste Land,” compares it to T. S. Eliot's poetry.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect about *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, is that it redefines the focus of the literary text. Instead of focusing primarily on plot development like most traditional novels, *The Catcher in the Rye* focuses more on character development. In fact, most of the plot is mundane and uneventful; it only becomes interesting because Salinger makes the character of Holden and the perspective through which Holden narrates the story interesting. Consequently, when reading *The Catcher in the Rye* it is important to pay atten-

tion to how Salinger represents Holden's character, language, and world view. While some critics simply dismiss Holden's character as purely negative, vulgar, whining, and cynical, a more balanced reading of the novel could indicate that there is something more to Holden than his academic failures and adolescent cynicism: He is perceptive, sensitive, creative, and even intelligent in his own way.

There are several ways that critics have attempted to describe Holden's positive characteristics, including rather obvious childlike innocence. This quality is evident in a number of passages, including when Holden expresses his desire to be a catcher in the rye who protects little children from falling over the edge of a cliff, his fight with Stradlater for making sexual advances to Jane Gallagher, his inability to have sex with a prostitute, and his tender dance with his sister. In his essay "The Saint as a Young Man," Jonathan Baumbach, as other critics have, notes that Holden acts like a saint or savior of the innocent. It is this sensitive, innocent, and childlike side of Holden that makes him a complex and endearing character in spite of his vulgarity and immaturity.

Another way that critics have tried to show the positive side of Holden is by focusing on his demonstrated ability to use language creatively. After all, the one course that Holden passes is English. Not only does Holden write a good essay for himself but he also writes a good one for his roommate Stradlater. In addition to writing, Holden is a natural actor and storyteller. He is often seen imitating his classmates or mimicking roles from the movies. In fact, A. Robert Lee goes so far as to argue in his essay "Flunking Everything Else Except English Anyway" that Holden continually performs himself by endlessly putting on a new mask and new identity for each new situation. In the train scene for example, Holden makes up stories about one of his classmates in order to please his classmate's mother; he not only adopts a new identity for himself, but he also fabricates a whole new fictional history of life at Pencey. Speaking is another area of importance. Even if Holden may not amount to much else, he is always a smooth talker who can keep the reader interested simply by the way in which he creatively tells his story using the vernacular slang that American teenagers used in the early 1950s.

While such positive interpretations of Holden correct reductive interpretations that simply dismiss Holden as an immature cynic, Duane Edwards's essay, "Holden Caulfield: Don't Ever Tell Anybody Anything," advances an even more com-

plex interpretation of Holden. Instead of trying either to redeem Holden as a saint or to condemn him as a pessimist, Edwards argues that Holden is an ironic character who critiques his phony culture but ends up participating in the same phony culture that he condemns. His argument becomes even more interesting when readers remember that Holden is the novel's narrator. By making such an unorthodox and unreliable character as Holden the narrator, Salinger subtly suggests that maybe readers cannot completely trust everything Holden tells them about himself and the world in which he lives. Obviously, the perspective of a cynical failure like Holden cannot be trusted completely as an accurate description of the way things really are, but neither can his compassionate wit be dismissed entirely. Consequently, the reader must always read between the lines like a detective looking for hints and clues that might help explain which of Holden's insights are valid and which are as phony as the phoniness he condemns.

Moving beyond purely literary interpretations, *The Catcher in the Rye* can also be interpreted from the perspective of the social sciences. In particular, many critics have advanced psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel because it repeatedly explores questions relating to death, sexuality, and processes of both psychological development and psychological breakdown. In general, these psychoanalytic interpretations usually try to get beneath the surface of Holden's psyche to discover some hidden force that explains why Holden thinks and acts the way that he does. One way to uncover the hidden layers of Holden's mind is to look back on his childhood in order to find some significant or traumatic event that might explain his current state of being. Clearly, one of the most traumatic, formative moments in Holden's childhood was the death of his brother Allie. Throughout the novel, Holden repeatedly thinks about his dead brother. For example, when Holden agrees to write a paper for his roommate Stradlater, he writes about Allie's baseball mitt. Or when Holden starts to have a breakdown while walking around New York City, he pleads in his mind with Allie to protect him. Perhaps as a result of this traumatic childhood experience involving death, Holden seems to be somewhat obsessed with it. For example, when Phoebe asks Holden to name people that he enjoys, the only people other than Phoebe that he can think of are all dead: Allie and James Castle, a boy who died at Holden's school. This obsession with death, therefore, might be one clue that can offer insight into the inner workings of Holden's mind.

Another place where one might find clues about Holden's psychological make-up is in his relationships with other people and especially in his sexual or almost sexual relationships with women. Throughout the novel, Holden is continually obsessed with women, but he rarely does anything about it. He likes Jane Gallagher, but they never get beyond holding hands. He even orders a hooker to his hotel room, but he decides that he only wants to talk. Instead of developing sexual or even intimate relationships with women, Holden seems to focus most of his emotional energy on his younger sister, Phoebe. While some critics have interpreted this as evidence of Holden's repressed incestual desires and psychological immaturity, others have interpreted it as simply an affectionate bond between siblings that demonstrates Holden's innocence. While the novel may not provide any definitive explanation of Holden's sexuality, sexuality is clearly an important and interesting aspect of his character.

A final way to interpret *The Catcher in the Rye* is to read it from a sociological perspective. Instead of simply analyzing Holden's individual psychological make-up, a sociological analysis probes deeper into the social and economic contexts that shape Holden's personality. Carol and Richard Ohmann's essay, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," offers an excellent example of such an interpretation. In their Marxist analysis, the Ohmanns argue that critics' narrow focus on moral issues causes them to overlook how these moral issues are related to broader social and economic contexts. By situating the novel in its broader historical context at the beginning of the cold war, the Ohmanns argue that the novel is less about the morality of Holden's internal psychological character than it is about the capitalist economic system that produces Holden's character. As the Ohmanns point out, the people who Holden criticize are virtually all representatives of a corrupt capitalist society: Mr. Haas is the phony headmaster who gets money for the school by kissing up to wealthy parents while ignoring poorer parents; Mr. Ossenburger is the phony funeral parlor owner who makes money off of personal tragedies; and the majority of Holden's classmates are simply the spoiled children of similar bourgeois money-grabbers. As the Ohmanns demonstrate, Holden consistently directs his strongest criticisms against the evils of capitalism: the commercialization of culture, class-based social hierarchies, exploitative sexuality, phony image-minded people, etc. From a socioeconomic perspective, therefore, *The Catcher in the Rye* portrays the manners and follies of the rising

American bourgeois class during the post-World War II era of rapid capitalist expansion, and Holden represents a sensitive social critic who reveals the evils of this phony bourgeois society.

**Source:** Robert Bennett, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997.

### **Susan K. Mitchell**

*In the following excerpt, Mitchell considers the significance of Holden Caulfield being an unreliable narrator.*

In the work, Holden has analyzed his family as a representative slice of society and has concluded that adult society is phony and corrupt. But can we really trust his observations of his family after he has told us that he lies? Is he not, like the Cretan who declared that all Cretans were liars, a person declaring that all people are phony? If everyone is phony, then he is phony, too! Although Holden has claimed that he is a liar, he does not always realize whether he is lying or telling the truth. The distinctions between truth and falsehood become blurred as he often adds the phrase "to tell you the truth" onto whatever he is saying. But does this catch phrase ensure that his words are any more truthful? This unambiguous rhetorical statement is restated in an even more paradoxical way when Holden tells Sally that he loves her and then comments to the reader, "It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I *meant* it when I said it." Again we are forced to read the work, as de Man suggests [in his essay "Semiology and Rhetoric," appearing in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Robert C. Davis, 1986], in "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible" ways. Is he lying, or does he "mean" it? First we may claim that Holden is telling the truth: he is a liar, people are phony, society is corrupt. Or we may claim that Holden is lying: he is truthful, people are genuine, and society is untainted.

There are obvious problems with both sides of this paradox. Can Holden, people, and society be entirely unchanging—always lying, always corrupt, always phony? Or are there internal forces within each that cause them to change (un)willingly? Holden would argue that each is unchanging, labeled forever. In fact, this is how he presents his information to us. He may go out with Sally, but he does not harbor any hope that she will cast off her phoniness. He may loan Stradlater his coat, but he still believes Stradlater is a phony.

Because we view all of the events in the book through the eyes of one narrator, our observations

are necessarily biased. Holden is an unreliable narrator not only because he is a self-proclaimed liar but also because he perceives reality in a simplistic way. In his work *S/Z* [1974], Roland Barthes outlines two ways of perceiving reality: *readerly* and *writerly*. Barthes explains these ideas in terms of reading books. He claims that the only way to read a different story is to reread the same book. By rereading, a person can learn how this book differs from itself rather than how it differs from other books. When a reader rereads a work, he is perceiving writerly. When a reader refuses to reread, Barthes maintains that he is condemned to "read the same story everywhere." Holden refuses to reread as he perceives reality readerly, seeing only the surface differences between people, not the underlying differences within each person. To perceive a person readerly would be to perceive in terms of overt, easily distinguishable differences.

Because Holden avoids investigating deeply, he sees the same story everywhere. Everyone is phony, he insists. But can we honestly believe him? Is he telling the truth? Even so, he is not passing on false or limited information since he has not gone to the trouble to read one story well. To approach accuracy, Holden would have to perceive a person writerly, to judge the fragmentation, the differences within the person, the covert, often contradictory intentions that war within and cause overt actions. We can draw conclusions only from the data which Holden perceives and selects to reveal to us (and he does select carefully as when he refuses to discuss his childhood or his parents); hence, we must be astute readers indeed lest we miss the multidimensionality of the characters that he develops. His readerly perception creates blinkers for the reader.

Throughout the novel, Holden tries to lull us into accepting his view of surrounding life as he makes statements that seem to make sense, but which, upon closer inspection, do not bear up to a writerly view. This simplistic mode of perception is revealed particularly through his description of his family. First of all, the Caulfield parents are described in such a way as to cause the blinkered reader to view them uncompromisingly as irresponsible, alienated, skittish parents. For example, the parents are off at work away from their children, who are scattered throughout the country: D. B. in Hollywood, Allie dead, Phoebe at home, and Holden at Pencey Prep. Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield seem to be isolated characters. The reader never meets Mr. Caulfield and only hears Mrs. Caulfield when Holden is hiding in Phoebe's room. Holden

will not tell much about his parents beyond his veiled opinion that they both are phony hypocrites. The reader is not even told their first names. From the beginning we are led to believe that they are hypersensitive about Holden's revealing their personal life because they want to protect their created image of conformed perfection. Because Mrs. Caulfield is a nervous woman who has smoked compulsively ever since Allie's death, Holden avoids confrontation about his being kicked out of Pencey Prep. He therefore hides from her as he stays in a hotel or in Mr. Antolini's apartment. Each of these examples appears to show that Mrs. Caulfield does not really communicate with her children. On the other hand, Mr. Caulfield is a lawyer. Holden makes no bones about his opinion of lawyers: they "make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" and are phony but can't know it.

Holden's warped view of his parents denigrates them without even considering that the Caulfields may be blameless. Can we really trust Holden's view of his parents? Isn't he unethically stacking the deck so that we are prohibited from obtaining an objective view of them? We are given so few facts and scenes to describe them that we have trouble refuting Holden, except that we know he is holding something back from us. No couple could merit such a denunciation from a son. If what he has revealed about the Caulfields is true, carefully selected though the information may be, can we blame them for their anger, hysteria, and desire for privacy? These would be logical reactions if an offspring were so apathetic as to be kicked out of several reputable schools and then became anxious to write a book about his family while recovering from insanity. And what is wrong about working hard to support children, to enable them to have the best education possible? What exactly is phony about being a lawyer? Even though Holden's vagueness works well for him, making his parents appear base, mercenary, isolated, distant, and careless, it denies any redeeming qualities that would upset Holden's persuasive thesis that adult society is corrupt.

According to Holden, D. B. represents wholehearted acceptance of society's norms. In Holden's caustic terms, D. B. is a "prostitute" who lives in Hollywood, where he makes buckets of money producing popular movies, such as the Annapolis love story, which might prevent him from joining the family at Christmas. D. B. appears to symbolize the successful all-American man since he lives in Hol-



lywood, one of the most prestigious areas of the country, displays a noticeable sign of wealth by owning a Jaguar, and has a "good-looking" albeit affected English girlfriend. However, D. B.'s own name is revealing of both society's worst qualities and his embracing of its values. Like many of the movies that he is writing, D. B.'s name is abbreviated, easy to remember, and void of significant meaning. The very fact that D. B.'s name is compressed into two initials makes one wonder what lies behind them. Just as his name used to mean something, he used to have something to say. But now as D. B. apparently bows to society's pressure and to his desire to pursue the American Dream, he loses the meaning in his life and therefore cannot communicate the message he once had, the message he once published in his short story, "The Secret Goldfish," one of Holden's favorites.

After being bombarded with these loaded examples of D. B.'s phoniness, we must ask certain questions to reveal whether Holden is right to condemn his brother. For instance, we should ask why it is wrong to display signs of wealth. Don't the signs reveal a truth about D. B.—that he is indeed wealthy? Also, does his meaningless name necessarily mean that he has no message of truth and beauty? D. B. is actually an unselfish, caring brother, as demonstrated by his numerous visits ("practically every week") with a recovering Holden. He does have other commitments, a girlfriend and work, that do keep him from devoting himself wholeheartedly to his immediate family; it is to his credit that he finds as much time as he does to visit his family. However, to prove his thesis, Holden holds fast, emphasizing that because D. B. has rejected an accepted art form and taken up the mass media that a technological society promotes, he has become visibly corrupt. But what is so corrupt about writing movies? Is it the medium that makes the difference? Can paper itself be any more artistic than celluloid? And is Holden really as against movies as he claims to be? If so, why does he volunteer to see so many? By seeing movies, Holden embraces that which he says he rejects. Although he distinguishes between "good" movies and "lousy" movies, he still claims that they are all phony. But what is the difference between a good movie and a good book? Holden does not answer our question. He doesn't follow his proclaimed norms; he is phony.

In Holden's readerly view, Allie represents immunity from the dangers of society. Allie is dead, escaped from the clutches of a culture that ultimately requires that children give up their inno-

cence and individuality. Fascinated with Allie's solution to the problem, Holden defies him, preserving him in his memory by carrying Allie's uniquely poem-laden baseball mitt, praying aloud to him, and remembering his good-natured innocence. At the beginning of the novel, Allie is Holden's ally, his closest friend and kin. Holden *wants* to ally himself with Allie, to lie down, subside, become extinct, to simply leave this corrupted Eden. Throughout the novel, Holden contemplates physical death in innumerable scenes, such as when he writes about Egyptian mummies in his history class, when he asks what the ducks do during winter, and when he remembers the suicide of James Castle.

However, does he want to unite himself with Allie because Allie truly is perfectly pure, or simply to assuage free-floating feelings of guilt associated with Allie's death? His guilt seems to arise primarily from an incident that occurred when Allie was alive. Holden and a friend decided to have a picnic and shoot their BB guns, and Allie wanted to go with them. However, Holden called him a child and would not let him come along. Now that Allie is dead, whenever Holden gets depressed, he does penance, telling Allie out loud, "Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up." Holden's recurring feelings of guilt distort his (and our) image of Allie. Did Holden refuse to allow Allie to join him on the expedition because Allie was not perfect? Looking back on the incident, Holden states, "[Allie] didn't get sore about it—he never got sore about anything—but I keep thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed." Or was Holden the guilty party by refusing without a good reason to allow Allie to come along? In his guilt, Holden paints Allie larger than life.

Phoebus, the name of Apollo, means the genius of poetry. This association is not lost on Phoebe as she writes a synthesized gothic-detective thriller in which her protagonist, Hazle Weatherfield, is an orphan detective who has a father. Holden believes that Phoebe is also an orphan who has parents, but because they are alienated, they do not offer the example, guidance, and support that true parents should. Of course Holden proves this neglect as he chooses to tell us that although Phoebe is to play Benedict Arnold in "A Christmas Pageant for Americans," her father plans to fly to California on that day anyway. Also, her mother, instead of lecturing Phoebe when she admits to smoking, simply closes the subject with the irrelevant question "Do you want another blanket?" Because Phoebe is still young and alive, Holden trans-

fers many of his guilt feelings about Allie to her, causing her to grow, in Holden's perception, more and more innocent and uncorrupted. She trusts Holden wholly as she gives him her Christmas money and packs a suitcase to run away with him. In spite of his guilt over Allie, he commits the same guilt-inducing act with Phoebe as he refuses to allow her to accompany him on the new expedition.

As pure as Holden makes Phoebe appear, she has a wisdom that belies her years. She shrewdly sees through Holden's facade of well-being, realizing that he doesn't like anything. When she tests him to prove her theory, he cannot name anything "really" that he likes. She is also a very literate young lady. She is able to identify Holden's song as belonging to Robert Burn's poem and to correct the miswording in it. She perceives reality writerly, as shown when she writes the same story over and over again. When her mother smells smoke and assumes that Phoebe has been smoking cigarettes, Phoebe is too quick—she, like Holden, lies about the truth, saying that she only took one puff of the cigarette when it was actually Holden who had been smoking. Again, when Mrs. Caulfield complains of a headache, Phoebe promptly supplies the remedy: "Take a few aspirins." Does Phoebe's covert wisdom support Holden's premise that society is corrupt? Does the thesis prove truer than he wants it to be? Holden wants to hold out for children, to proclaim their Edenic innocence. However, his flawed readerly perception blinds him to the writerly truth: not all is as easily categorizable as it appears.

Naturally, Holden is the only character shown to be heroically struggling with exactly how to relate to society. He is locked into a self that desires to be genuine but finds no way to return to the pastoral ideal. He believes that he is holed in, trapped by the games of phoniness that society requires its citizens to play. He tries to escape this trap by flunking out of school and by searching for a quiet retreat, only to discover that there is no pure retreat on earth—log cabins are distant and lonely, deserted museum rooms are corrupted with permanent obscenities, private hotel rooms lure prostitutes and pimps. Frustrated by the readerly evidence which he has gathered to support his thesis, Holden is himself fragmented and ravaged by the warring forces within him. For instance, within Holden, the desire to reject others conflicts with the desire to be accepted by others; he doesn't want to lend Stradlater his coat, but his overt actions belie this covert, warring want; he despises Ackely, but he invites him to see a movie; he hates movies, be-

lieving them to foster phoniness in society, but during the three days of the book he sees or talks about several; he craves truth, but he tells blatant lies. Despite his own inherent writerliness or differences within, Holden still perceives only readerly. He views himself as a liar, but he refuses to acknowledge that this means that he is phony, too....

What does this mean for us? What is Salinger trying to prove? Perhaps by making Holden unreliably readerly, he is saying that society is both phony and necessary. Holden's unreliability forces us to question everything about the subject: Holden's view, society's view, our own view as readers. The apparently stable themes are radically unstable; Holden does change, and society can, too, for society is neither entirely phony nor wholly pastoral. Instead, it is both one and the other. It cannot be placed in a fixed category since it is writerly.

[Although some critics believe] that there is a coherent, knowable meaning of a work, they refuse to analyze why the meaning varies so radically from one critic to the next. Of course, some of them would rationalize that one critic may not be as intelligent or educated as another. This is possible but does not really answer the fundamental question satisfactorily. Therefore the meaning is ultimately undecidable. Since this is a writerly text, a text that splits down the middle into positive and negative factions, the ultimate meaning of it is undecidable. The reader's expectations of having an orderly, coherent world of meaning are unraveled by the thread that holds the work together. Salinger places his story *en abyme*, to use [J. Hillis] Miller's term [as quoted from "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," in *Georgia Review*, 1976], so that it becomes undecidable. Society now appears genuine, now phony, now genuine again, and so on endlessly. There is an endless freeplay of meaning because the book lacks a genuine center—the apparent center of the book is actually phony. Therefore, the meaning of *The Catcher in the Rye* can never be totalized.

Source: Susan K. Mitchell, "To Tell You the Truth..." in *CLA Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, December, 1992, pp. 145–56.

### Jonathan Baumbach

In the following excerpt, Baumbach explores the meaning of "innocence" in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

J. D. Salinger's first and only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), has undergone in recent years a steady if overinsistent devaluation. The more it becomes academically respectable, the

more it becomes fair game for those critics who are self-sworn to expose every manifestation of what seems to them a chronic disparity between appearance and reality. It is critical child's play to find fault with Salinger's novel. Anyone can see that the prose is mannered (the pejorative word for stylized); no one actually talks like its first-person hero Holden Caulfield. Moreover, we are told that Holden, as poor little rich boy, is too precocious and specialized an adolescent for his plight to have larger-than-prepschool significance. The novel is sentimental; it loads the deck for Holden and against the adult world; the small but corrupt group that Holden encounters is not representative enough to permit Salinger his inclusive judgments about the species. Holden's relationship to his family is not explored: we meet his sister Phoebe, who is a younger version of himself, but his father never appears, and his mother exists in the novel only as another voice from a dark room. Finally, what is Holden (or Salinger) protesting against but the ineluctability of growing up, of having to assume the prerogatives and responsibilities of manhood? Despite these objections to the novel, *Catcher in the Rye* will endure both because it has life and because it is a significantly original work, full of insights into at least the particular truth of Holden's existence. Within the limited terms of its vision, Salinger's small book is an extraordinary achievement; it is, if such a distinction is meaningful, an important minor novel.

Like all of Salinger's fiction, *Catcher in the Rye* is not only about innocence, it is actively for innocence—as if retaining one's childness were an existential possibility. The metaphor of the title—Holden's fantasy-vision of standing in front of a cliff and protecting playing children from falling (Falling)—is, despite the impossibility of its realization, the only positive action affirmed in the novel. It is, in Salinger's Manichean universe of child angels and adult "phonies," the only moral alternative—otherwise all is corruption. Since it is spiritually as well as physically impossible to prevent the Fall, Salinger's idealistic heroes are doomed either to suicide (Seymour) or insanity (Holden, Sergeant X) or mysticism (Franny), the ways of sainthood, or to moral dissolution (Eloise, D. B., Mr. Antolini), the way of the world. In Salinger's finely honed prose, at once idiomatically real and poetically stylized, we get the terms of Holden's ideal adult occupation:

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. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy.

Apparently Holden's wish is purely selfless. What he wants, in effect, is to be a saint—the protector and savior of innocence. But what he also wants, for he is still one of the running children himself, is that someone prevent *his* fall. This is his paradox: he must leave innocence to protect innocence. At sixteen, he is ready to shed his innocence and move like Adam into the fallen adult world, but he resists because those no longer innocent seem to him foolish as well as corrupt. In a sense, then, he is looking for an exemplar, a wise-good father whose example will justify his own initiation into manhood. Before Holden can become a catcher in the rye, he must find another catcher in the rye to show him how it is done.

Immediately after Holden announces his "crazy" ambition to Phoebe, he calls up one of his former teachers, Mr. Antolini, who is both intelligent and kind—a potential catcher in the rye.

He was the one that finally picked up that boy that jumped out of the window I told you about, James Castle. Old Mr. Antolini felt his pulse and all, and then he took off his coat and put it over James Castle and carried him all the way over to the infirmary.

Though Mr. Antolini is sympathetic because "he didn't even give a damn if his coat got all bloody," the incident is symbolic of the teacher's failure as a catcher in the rye. For all his good intentions, he was unable to catch James Castle or prevent his fall; he could only pick him up after he had died. The episode of the suicide is one of the looming shadows darkening Holden's world; Holden seeks out Antolini because he hopes that the gentle teacher—the substitute father—will "pick him up" before he is irrevocably fallen. Holden's real quest throughout the novel is for a spiritual father (an innocent adult). He calls Antolini after all the other fathers of his world have failed him, including his real father, whose existence in the novel is represented solely by Phoebe's childish reiteration of "Daddy's going to kill you." The fathers in Salinger's child's-eye world do not catch falling boys—who have been thrown out of prep school—but "kill" them. Antolini represents Holden's last chance to find a catcher-father. But his inability to save Holden has been prophesied in his failure to save James Castle; the episode of Cas-

tle's death provides an anticipatory parallel to Antolini's unwitting destruction of Holden.

That Antolini's kindness to Holden is motivated in part by a homosexual interest, though it comes as a shock to Holden, does not wholly surprise the reader. Many of the biographical details that Salinger has revealed about him through Holden imply this possibility. For example, that he has an older and unattractive wife whom he makes a great show of kissing in public is highly suggestive; yet the discovery itself—Holden wakes to find Antolini sitting beside him and caressing his head—has considerable impact. We experience a kind of shock of recognition, the more intense for its having been anticipated. The scene has added power because Antolini is, for the most part, a good man, whose interest in Holden is genuine as well as perverted. His advice to Holden is apparently well-intentioned. Though many of his recommendations are cleverly articulated platitudes, Antolini evinces a prophetic insight when he tells Holden, "I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall"; one suspects, however, that to some extent he is talking about himself. Ironically, Antolini becomes the agent of his "terrible, terrible fall" by violating Holden's image of him, by becoming a false father. Having lost his respect for Antolini as a man, Holden rejects him as an authority; as far as Holden is concerned, Antolini's example denies the import of his words. His disillusionment with Antolini, who had seemed to be the sought-for, wise-good father, comes as the most intense of a long line of disenchantments; it is the final straw that breaks Holden. It is the equivalent of the loss of God. The world, devoid of good fathers (authorities), becomes a soul-destroying chaos in which his survival is possible only through withdrawal into childhood, into fantasy, into psychosis....

Obliquely searching for good in the adult world, or at least something to mitigate his despair, Holden is continually confronted with the absence of good. On his arrival in the city, he is disturbed because his cabdriver is corrupt and unsociable and, worst of all, unable to answer Holden's obsessional question: where do the Central Park ducks go when the lake freezes over? What Holden really wants to know is whether there is a benevolent authority that takes care of ducks. If there is one for ducks, it follows that there may be one for people as well. Holden's quest for a wise and benevolent authority, then, is essentially a search for a God-principle. However, none of the adults in Holden's world has any true answers for him. When he checks into

a hotel room, he is depressed by the fact that the bellboy is an old man ("What a gorgeous job for a guy around sixty-five years old"). As sensitized recorder of the moral vibrations of his world, Holden suffers the indignity of the aged bellhop's situation for him, as he had suffered for Spencer's guilt and Ackley's self-loathing. Yet, and this is part of his tragedy, he is an impotent saint, unable either to redeem the fallen or to prevent their fall....

After his disillusionment with Antolini, who is the most destructive of Holden's fathers because he is seemingly the most benevolent, Holden suffers an emotional breakdown. His flight from Antolini's house, like his previous flights from school and from the hotel, is an attempt to escape evil. The three are parallel experiences, except that Holden is less sure of the justness of his third flight and wonders if he has not misjudged his otherwise sympathetic teacher.

And the more I thought about it, the more depressed I got. I mean I started thinking maybe I *should've* gone back to his house. Maybe he *was* only patting my head just for the hell of it. The more I thought about it, though, the more depressed and screwed up about it I got.

The ambivalence of his response racks him. If he has misjudged Antolini, he has wronged not only his teacher, but he has wronged himself as well; he, not Antolini, has been guilty of corruption. Consequently, he suffers both for Antolini and for himself. Holden's guilt-ridden despair manifests itself in nausea and in an intense sense of physical ill-being, as if he carries the whole awful corruption of the city inside him. Walking aimlessly through the Christmas-decorated city, Holden experiences "the terrible, terrible fall" that Antolini had prophesied for him.

Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can't imagine. I started sweating like a bastard—my whole shirt and underwear and everything.... Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him.

Like Franny's prayer to Jesus in one of Salinger's later stories, Holden's prayer to Allie is not so much an act of anguish as an act of love, though it is in part both. Trapped in an interior hell, Holden seeks redemption, not by formal appeal to God or Jesus, who have in the Christmas season

been falsified and commercialized, but by praying to his saint-brother who in his goodness had God in him.

Like so many heroes of contemporary fiction—Morris' Boyd, Ellison's Invisible Man, Malamud's Frank, Salinger's Seymour—Holden is an impotent savior. Because he can neither save his evil world nor live in it as it is, he retreats into fantasy—into childhood. He decides to become a deaf-mute, to live alone in an isolated cabin, to commit a kind of symbolic suicide. It is an unrealizable fantasy, but a death wish nevertheless. However, Holden's social conscience forces him out of spiritual retirement. When he discovers an obscenity scrawled on one of the walls of Phoebe's school, he rubs it out with his hand to protect the innocence of the children. For the moment he is a successful catcher in the rye. But then he discovers another such notice, "scratched on, with a knife or something," and then another. He realizes that he cannot possibly erase all the scribbled obscenities in the world, that he cannot catch all the children, that evil is ineradicable.

This is the final disillusionment. Dizzy with his terrible awareness, Holden insults Phoebe when she insists on running away with him. In his vision of despair, he sees Phoebe's irrevocable doom as well as his own, and for a moment he hates her as he hates himself—as he hates the world. Once he has hurt her, however, he realizes the commitment that his love for her imposes on him; if he is to assuage her pain, he must continue to live in the world. When she kisses him as a token of forgiveness and love and, as if in consequence, it begins to rain, Holden, bathed by the rain, is purified—in a sense, redeemed.

A too literal reading of Holden's divulgence that he is telling the story from some kind of rest home has led to a misinterpretation of the end of the novel. Holden is always less insane than his world. The last scene, in which Holden, suffused with happiness, sits in the rain and watches Phoebe ride on the merry-go-round, is indicative not of his crack-up, as has been assumed, but of his redemption. Whereas all the adults in his world have failed him (and he, a butter-fingered catcher in the rye, has failed them), a ten-year-old girl saves him—becomes his catcher. Love is the redemptive grace. Phoebe replaces Jane, the loss of whom had initiated Holden's despair, flight, and quest for experience as salvation. Holden's pure communion with Phoebe may be construed as a reversion to child-like innocence, but this is the only way to re-

demption in Salinger's world—there is no other good. Innocence is all. Love is innocence.

The last scene, with Holden drenched in Scott Fitzgerald's all-absolving rain, seems unashamedly sentimental. Certainly Salinger overstates the spiritually curative powers of children; innocence can be destructive as well as redemptive. Yet Salinger's view of the universe, in which all adults (even the most apparently decent) are corrupt and consequently destructive, is bleak and somewhat terrifying. Since growing up in the real world is tragic, in Salinger's ideal world time must be stopped to prevent the loss of childhood, to salvage the remnants of innocence. At one point in the novel, Holden wishes that life were as changeless and pure as the exhibitions under glass cases in the Museum of Natural History. This explains, in part, Holden's ecstasy in the rain at the close of the novel. In watching Phoebe go round and round on the carousel, in effect going nowhere, he sees her in the timeless continuum of art on the verge of changing, yet unchanging, forever safe, forever loving, forever innocent.

**Source:** Jonathan Baumbach, "The Saint as a Young Man: A Reappraisal of *The Catcher in the Rye*," in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, December, 1964, pp. 461—72.

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