

A Lonely Hero in *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Introduction

When *The Catcher in the Rye* was first published in 1951, the novel got much attention. Not only did the novel sell well in America but all over the world, and of course Japan. Now, it is said of this novel that without it, we cannot talk about the 50's in America. But since its publication, there have been many different critical opinions about it. Some of the criticism resulted from Salinger's use of profanity in the book. The book was banned in certain communities and condemned by some school boards, even in Australia and South Africa.

Why did this novel get such attention, and why are many readers, especially young people, enchanted by it even now? I want to investigate Holden Caulfield, the hero of this novel, his humanity, the people around him, especially women around him and sex, and his feelings of isolation.

Women around Holden and Sex

I think that the theme of sex is very important in Holden's wandering for three days.

First, I want to review the women whom Holden meets during his wandering for three days. He comes in contact with various women for three days, but he cannot meet Jane Gallagher, his old girlfriend whom he loves. He meets various women, but almost all the women are very 'phony' and have no charm. The only ones he shows great favor toward are three women, the first, the mother of one of his classmates. She is not young, but she is attractive. The contact is innocent enough, and it gives Holden a chance to be suave and sophisticated. The next women are two nuns, teachers from Chicago being transferred to a New York convent. They are very 'nice,' and Holden has a good time with them. Holden was deeply hurting until he met them, but thanks to them, he starts to feel better. On the negative side are three women who came from Seattle. Holden meets them at a club in a hotel, but they are very 'phony.' Their interests are only about famous people, and these women are vain. He spends some time dancing with them and leaves the club shortly after they do. Next he meets a girl named Lillian Simons, who had dated Holden's older brother D.B., presently a writer in Hollywood. She is with a naval officer and invites Holden to join them for a drink, but he tells her that he is just leaving. In a brief aside he comments on the absurdity of formal greetings with strangers; then he feels "It made me mad,

though ... People are always ruining things for you."¹

Next comes a girl named Sally Hayes with whom Holden has a date. Holden first regards Sally as very attractive and smart, but she is only interested in a nice man, fashion, and so on. Holden is as disappointed with her as with the other 'phony' women. For him the best woman is Jane Gallagher, but he cannot meet her, so his memory of her becomes even more idealized. But I think that he is relieved only by his memory of her.

Holden finally comes in contact with Faith Cavendish, who has an indecent job, and Sonny, who is also a prostitute. He comes to be even more conscious of sex by the appearance of these women. At the hotel, Maurice, the elevator operator, who promises to get him a prostitute, solicits Holden. Holden accepts and goes to his room to prepare himself. While describing his waiting, he makes a series of significant confessions. First, he admits that he is fairly nervous about sex. Then he confesses that he is actually a virgin. Holden tells us that he has had opportunities, but has just never gotten around to actually losing his virginity. Therefore, he thinks that perhaps now is a good time to get some practice. Sonny arrives, but Holden is too frightened and embarrassed to participate. She is all business. Holden says:

The trouble was, I just didn't want to do it. I felt more depressed than sexy, if you want to know the truth. She was depressing.²

Finally he sends the girl away.

Nevertheless, the young man Holden, who is seventeen years old, shows a deep interest in sex. Holden often says, "Sex is something I really don't understand too hot."³ I think sex is the greatest problem for Holden, but as he looks at some eccentric people next to the hotel, he is shocked. After looking at sexual scenes, he thinks that they are indecent and dirty; on the other hand, he is interested in these sexual scenes. In addition, Holden meets Carl Luce, who is well informed about sex. When Carl Luce says that eastern people regard sex as both a physical and a spiritual experience, Holden says:

So do I! So do I regard it as a wuddayacall it — a physical and spiritual experience and all. I really do.⁴

Holden regards sex as a bond of affection, not merely as a bodily pleasure. He thinks that spirit is very important.

In this way, Holden has pure and delicate sensibilities, and he is neither an adult nor a child now. He is on middle ground, and he hovers between being an adult and a child. Therefore, he is isolated, haunted by a feeling of isolation and

despair. What is this feeling of isolation and despair?

Holden's Feeling of Isolation and Despair

Holden is, so to speak, an outcast in society. He has disgust for 'phony' society and 'phony' adults. Ultimately he goes to a mental hospital after wandering for three days. Holden talks about himself in the following way:

I was sixteen, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's really ironical, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head — the right side — is full of millions of gray hairs.⁵

Keisuke Tanaka notes: "Holden remains in a marginal condition which is neither that of an adult or a child. When he sees the world under unique conditions, he sees an unusual world. At this time, he does not belong to the adult's world or child's world."⁶ Therefore, Holden loses his whereabouts, and the feeling of isolation grows in his mind more and more. But it is not true that Holden is fond of loneliness; on the contrary, Holden wants help from and communication with other people. But Holden is betrayed and hurt by everyone, so he cannot trust people.

Consequently, Holden is sensitive to words:

I'm pretty sure he yelled 'Good luck!' at me. I hope not. I hope to hell not. I'd never yell 'Good luck!' at any body. It sounds terrible, when you think about it.⁷

I think Holden is rebelling against silly and 'phony' people. Holden resigns himself to using such words. He often uses the words 'kill' and 'dead.' I think that these words symbolize his psychology.

Several times, ducks appear in Central Park. They relate to his feeling of isolation. Holden thinks about the ducks in Central Park during his wandering those three days:

I live in New York, and I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park, down near Central Park South. I was wondering if it would be frozen over when I got home, and if it was, where did the ducks go. I was wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away.⁸

It is important for Holden that somebody takes the ducks away or that the ducks fly away themselves. Shirou Nakamura comments: "Holden goes to Central Park to watch the ducks, but the ducks are not there. Did somebody take them away? Or did the ducks fly away themselves? The movement of the ducks pertains to Holden's dilemma. After all, Holden is thinking of going West by himself and starting a pure life without the phony."⁹ Keisuke Tanaka offers the following: "Even if he is driven into a corner, he does not want to think about himself like a fish that has no possibility to escape outside. He wants to think about himself like a duck that has wings, but these are different from a bird's. ... As for a duck and not a fish, possibly the duck will be able to escape outside when the lagoon gets all icy and frozen over. Holden wants to think about himself as a duck, not a fish."¹⁰ I think that Holden's weakness of mind shows. Holden averts his eyes from difficult problems from the first; in addition, he does not have the bravery to directly look at difficult problems. In the latter half of his wandering, Holden looks for the ducks in Central Park as crucial for his life, but he cannot find the ducks anywhere. He looks for the ducks, but in fact he is looking for himself. After that, he comes to feel his sense of isolation more and more. Holden is a refugee from society. He has so many things on his mind, for example, injustice of society and personal morality. Because Holden has delicate sensibilities, he detects bad flaws in the society in which he lives. For Holden, all these flaws are summed up in the one word, 'phony.'

Important Things for Holden

The only thing that Holden can believe in is his brother Allie, who died of leukemia, his sister Phoebe, and the museum that Holden used to go to in his childhood. All these are innocent aspects of life. Holden says about the museum:

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move.¹¹

Everything is changing in this world, but this museum does not change. Holden wants to retain everything. I think that Holden is afraid of and hates change, so Allie is important for him because Allie will never change.

On the contrary, these innocent worlds contrast with the society of adults. Holden regards the society of adults as 'phony' and unfair. He rebels, criticizes, and hates such a society, but Holden cannot protect the people he loves: Allie from dying and Jane Gallagher from Stradlater, who is Holden's roommate at Pencey. Only dirty people survive, so Holden suffers because of his powerlessness.

When Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to be, Holden answers:

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 — 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.¹²

Holden says that all he can do is protect innocent children from the dirty world. Holden wishes to stay a child forever, but he cannot. Every young person becomes an adult. Holden turns out to be in a mental hospital because he refuses to be an adult.

Holden comes to think about going west, but he gives up going west, and he makes up his mind to go back home. If he goes west, that is nothing but escape. The determination that Holden comes to is that he decides to live in the real world as he struggles against the 'phony.' It is not easy, but he says finally:

About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.¹³

Holden remembers good moments like those with Allie and Jane Gallger, but with equal intensity the bad moments like those with Maurice and the profanity on the school wall. Ultimately all distinctions between good and bad disappear. All experience becomes merely a part of himself. I think that Holden has already overcome many difficulties at this time. Young people are this way. But Holden is more exquisite than other people are, says David J. Borrows:

"Unable to realize for himself a function in life other than saving children from Allie's fate, and acutely aware of the relatedness of change to decay and death, Holden can, through his sister's love, find an alternative to those moments of memory and imagination, themselves static, cold, and deathlike. The responsibility he assumes toward her, as well as the freedom he realizes she requires, provides a starting point from which he can learn to accept the world's pervasive mutability."¹⁴

Even if Holden is troubled and goes to a mental hospital, he can at last become an adult.

The Reason Why This Novel Receives Much Attention, especially by Young People

Holden, the protagonist in this novel, is different from the usual hero who is brave and confronts difficult problem heroically. Holden tries to escape from many difficulties even if he hates and cannot accept the 'phony' society. Holden is not a

true hero, but this novel was a great hit, especially among young people. Why?

First, I think that this novel caught the atmosphere of the American 50's quite well. At that time in America, the generation gap had appeared everywhere. This novel reflected those times, so there were many young people who sympathized with Holden because he rebelled against society and adults. Holden caught the minds of young people, although Holden did not have anything special about him.

This novel is the story of an adolescent boy on the brink of adulthood. Holden was very worried about himself, the same as most young people. Young people are always worried about themselves, the future, friends, and a vast array of problems. Holden represents such young people.

Finally, the language Salinger used in the book caught the imagination of young people. Salinger uses colloquial language that teenagers of America used. There are many colloquial expressions, for example, 'I really did,' 'It really was,' 'and all,' 'or something.' There are also some profanities, for example, 'ass,' 'fart,' 'goddam,' 'damn.' Holden also uses many adjective, for example, 'lousy,' 'pretty,' 'crumbly,' 'terrific,' 'quite,' 'old,' 'stupid.' The novel was a work of great singularity at that time. This novel was different from other novels, so for these reasons it was very popular among young people.

Conclusion

I think that Jerome David Salinger is like Holden. Salinger has withdrawn more and more from society, the same as Holden did. Salinger has been called a strange person. Part of his contemporary legend is based upon his isolation and his conscious and intentional separation of himself from his society. Many of Salinger's stories are explorations of the same problem, but with various solutions. The most popular novel among his books is *The Catcher in the Rye*. Catcher shows everyone, especially young people, the importance of discovering oneself, and Holden shows its process.

I traveled to India by myself when I was nineteen years old. During the trip, I worried about the future and myself in the same way Holden did, so I could understand him well and could have sympathy with him. Everyone experiences much trouble in becoming an adult, as Holden did. I am also one of these troubled ones. I think this novel will continue to be read by many young people and will continue to enchant them.

Notes

1. J.D.Salinger. *The Catcher in the Rye*, New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1958, p.92, ll.22-23.
2. Salinger, p.101, ll.13-15.
3. Salinger, p.66, ll.30-31.
4. Salinger, p.152, ll.29-30.
5. Salinger, p.13, ll.22-26.
6. Keisuke Tanaka, *The World of The Catcher in the Rye*, Tokyo, Kaibun Publishers, 1994, p.25, ll.15-16.
7. Salinger, p.19, ll.33-35.
8. Salinger, p.17, ll.7-14.
9. Shirou Nakamura, *Comments on British and American Literature of the Twentieth Century*, Tokyo: Liber Publishers, 1998, p.19, ll.27-31.
10. Tanaka, p.109, ll.8-13.
11. Salinger, p.127, ll.22-24.
12. Salinger, p.179, ll.33; p.180, ll.17.
13. Salinger, p.220, ll.21-24.
14. Harold Bloom, ed. *Holden Caulfield*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990, p.86, ll.1-6.

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