

# Pragmatic criticism in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* by

**Mobina Baghdar**

*Master of English translation, Islamic Azad University of Karaj, Iran*

\*Corresponding Author Email: [mobina.baghdar2020@gmail.com](mailto:mobina.baghdar2020@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** Pragmatic criticism is concerned, first and foremost, with the ethical impact any literary text has upon an audience. Regardless of arts other merits or failings, the primary responsibility or function of art is social in nature. *The Catcher in the Rye*, written by Jerome David Salinger, has been a controversial novel. So far in this article we are going to give some practical elements of this novel.

**Keywords:** *The Catcher in the Rye*, pragmatic, criticism, novel.

## INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic criticism is concerned, first and foremost, with the ethical impact any literary text has upon an audience. Regardless of arts other merits or failings, the primary responsibility or function of art is social in nature. Assessing, fulfilling, and shaping the needs, wants, and desires of an audience should be the first task of an artist. Art does not exist in isolation; it is a potent tool for individual as well as communal change. Though pragmatic critics believe that art houses the potential for massive societal transformation, art is conspicuously ambivalent in its ability to promote good or evil. The critical project of pragmatic criticism is to establish a moral standard of quality for art. By establishing artistic boundaries based upon moral/ethical guidelines, art which enriches and entertains, inspires and instructs a reader with knowledge of truth and goodness will be preserved and celebrated, and art which does not will be judged inferior, cautioned against, and (if necessary) destroyed. Moral outrage as well as logical argument have been the motivating forces behind pragmatic criticism throughout history. The tension created between this emotional and intellectual reaction to literature has created a wealth of criticism with varying degrees of success. Ironically, much like art's capacity to inspire diligence or decadence in a reader, pragmatic criticism encompasses both redemptive and destructive qualities.

Jerome David Salinger (1919–2010) is a very popular American author. He had not published any work in 34 years until 1999 when he published his new novel *Harper Watts*. He produced a lot of novels, short stories, and novellas, among which the most prominent is *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has been outstanding at three aspects: anti-tradition, first person technique, and stream of consciousness. Shortly after its publication, writing for *The New York Times*, Nash K. Burger called it “an unusually brilliant novel” (Burger, 1951), while James Stern wrote an admiring review of the book in a voice imitating Holden's. Up to the 21st century, *The Catcher in the Rye* has become a classic of contemporary American literature and has been selected as one of the hundred best English novels between 1993 and 2005. Over a long time, criticism is centered on the novel on the moral degeneration, nihilism, sex description, and excessive use of vulgar language, etc. An angry parent applies statistics to the foul language in the novel: There are 237 “Goddamn”, 58 “bastard”, 31 “Chris sake”, and 6 “fuck”. In the 1970s, several American high school teachers were forced to resign because of teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*. But time is the most impartial judge. Up to the 21st century, this book has become famous all over the whole world and the total sales of all versions of the book have been up to 65 million copies.

## J. D. Salinger – BIOGRAPHY

Jerome David (J. D.) Salinger was born in New York City on January 1, 1919. His father, Sol Salinger, was Jewish and his mother, Marie Jillich, was of Scotch Irish descent. Since his parents were of different religious backgrounds, one Christian and the other Jewish, theistic belief was never really emphasized. Salinger had only one sibling, a sister named Doris, six years his senior. The family was upwardly mobile and moved several times during Salinger's childhood to increasingly affluent neighborhoods.

Salinger's academic career could best be described as mediocre, for he was never really inclined toward academics. He was particularly weak in mathematics. He attended a public school on the upper West Side in Manhattan and spent his summers at Camp Wigwam in Harrison, Maine. At camp, he was involved in the theater, even though off stage he was a quiet and solitary young boy. At the age of thirteen, Salinger was enrolled in the McBurney School, but within a year flunked out and was sent to the Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania. While he was there, he became interested in writing. He produced his earliest short stories before he graduated in 1936.

After graduating from high school, Salinger was briefly enrolled in Ursinus College, where he wrote a humorous column for the campus newspaper. His father took him out of college to go to Vienna and learn the ham business as an apprentice. On returning to New York, Salinger turned toward more serious writing. He enrolled in Whit Burnett's well-reputed course in short-story writing at Columbia University.

Salinger was first published in *Young Folks* and *The New Yorker*, with his first story appearing in 1940. In 1942, Salinger was drafted into the U.S. Army and performed intelligence services in World War II. In 1946, Salinger was discharged from the army and returned to New York, where he resumed his writing of short stories. Several were published in *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Story*. *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's only novel, was published in 1951. In 1953, his first collection of short stories, entitled *Nine Stories*, was published and included the well-known "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." *Franny and Zooey*, published in 1961, is really two separate stories about different members of the Glass family. Another collection of previously published short stories was released in 1963.

Upon his return to New York from the army, Salinger turned towards oriental philosophy and the emerging culture of the "beat" generation. Although he lived with his parents on Park Avenue, he spent the majority of his time in Greenwich Village, where he began to follow the principles of Zen. At the end of the 40s and into the 50s, Salinger spent time in Tarrytown and Westport. He finally settled in Cornish in the New Hampshire hills. In 1953, he met and married Claire Douglas. Although they remained married and had two children, Matthew and Peggy, Salinger lived in almost total seclusion and self-imposed alienation away from his many followers.

Salinger became a devoted student of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, which preaches the concept of the four 'asramas' or stages of life. According to the philosophy, a person must divide his/her life into four portions, devoted to studies, household duties, retirement to the forest for the sake of meditation, and spirituality, in that order.

Salinger's work is essentially autobiographical and based on his real life experiences. It is ironic, however, that Salinger suggests the need to connect with and understand one another in *The Catcher in the Rye*; yet in his private life, he sets himself apart from the world.

### **The Catcher in the Rye**

*The Catcher in the Rye* has been one of the most celebrated American classics since its publication in 1951. This work has also been the magnum opus of J.D Salinger as a writer. Narrated in the perspective of Holden Caulfield, around the late 1940s or early 1950s, this novel tackles profound things about the psychological and identity crisis young people, represented by Holden, experienced back then as they journey through the reality of life.

J. D. Salinger's (January 1, 1919 – January 27, 2010) characters are always extremely sensitive young people who are trapped between two dimensions of the world: love and "squalor." The central problem in most of his fiction is not finding a bridge between these two worlds but bringing some sort of indiscriminate love into the world of squalor: to find a haven where love can triumph and flourish. Some characters, such as the young, mixed-up Holden Caulfield, adopt indiscriminate love to aid them in their journey through the world of squalor, while others, such as Seymour Glass, achieve a sort of perfect love, or satori, and are destroyed, in Seymour's case by a bullet through his head. Each of these characters is metropolitan in outlook and situation and is introverted: Their battles are private wars of spirit, not outward conflicts with society. The characters' minds struggle to make sense of the dichotomy between love and squalor, often reaching a quiet peace and transcending their situation through a small act.

The basic story of *The Catcher in the Rye* follows the adventures of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield, an independent, self-indulgent, idealistic, and sentimental figure of adolescent rebellion, during a forty-eight-hour period after he has been expelled from Pencey Prep, the latest of three expulsions for Holden. After confrontations

with some fellow students at Pencey, Holden goes to New York City, his hometown, to rest before facing his parents. During the trip he tries to renew some old acquaintances, attempts to woo three out-of-towners, hires a prostitute named Sunny, and copes with recurring headaches. Eventually, after two meetings with his younger sister, Phoebe, he returns home. At the beginning of the novel he has told us that he is in California recovering from an illness and that he is reconciled with his family. The entire story of Holden's exploits comes to us through a first-person narration, one that contains youthful phrasing and profanity and has many digressions, but one that has a mesmerizing flow to it.

Holden Caulfield is a confused sixteen-year-old, no better and no worse than his peers, except that he is slightly introverted, a little sensitive, and willing to express his feelings openly. His story can be seen as a typical growing process. As he approaches and is ready to cross the threshold into adulthood, he begins to get nervous and worried. His body has grown, but his emotional state has not. He is gawky, clumsy, and not totally in control of his body. He seeks to find some consolation, some help during this difficult time but finds no one. The school cannot help him, his peers seem oblivious to his plight, his parents are too concerned with other problems (his mother's nerves and his father's business activities as a corporate lawyer). His girlfriend, Sally Hayes, who has a penchant for using the word "grand" and whom Holden calls the "queen of the phonies," is no help, and his favorite teacher, Mr. Antolini, merely lectures him drunkenly. The only people with whom he can communicate are the two young boys at the museum, the girl with the skates at the park, and his younger sister Phoebe: All of them are children, who cannot help him in his growing pains but remind him of a simpler time, one to which he wishes he could return. Eventually, he does cross the threshold (his fainting in the museum) and realizes that his worries were unfounded. He has survived. At the end of the book, Holden seems ready to reintegrate himself into society and accept the responsibilities of adulthood.

Through Holden's picaresque journeys through New York City, he grows spiritually. He slowly begins to recognize the "phoniness" around him and the squalor that constantly presses down on him. Although he castigates himself for doing some of the phony things, lying especially, Holden does realize that what he is doing is incorrect: This understanding sets him above his fellows; he knows what he is doing. Holden never hurts anyone in any significant way; his lies are small and harmless. Conversely, the phony world also spins lies, but they are dangerous since they harm people. For example, Holden mentions that Pencey advertises that it molds youth, but it does not. He is angry with motion pictures because they offer false ideals and hopes. Yet, his lies help a mother think better of her son. Like Huck Finn, he lies to get along, but not to hurt, and also like Huck, he tries to do good. Near the end of the novel Holden dreams of fleeing civilization and building a cabin out west, something that belies his earlier man-about-town conduct.

By the end of the book, Holden has accepted a new position—an indiscriminating love for all humanity. He even expresses that he misses all the people who did wrong to him. Although not a Christ figure, Holden does acquire a Christlike position perfect love of all humankind, good and evil. He is not mature enough to know what to do with this love, but he is mature enough to accept it. In this world, realizing what is squalor and what is good and loving it all is the first step in achieving identity and humanity: Compassion is what Holden learns.

Recalling all the suffering and pain that he has witnessed, Holden develops a profound sense of the human condition and accepts Christ's ultimate commandment. In the passage regarding Holden's argument with his Quaker friend Arthur Childs, Holden argues that Judas is not in hell because Jesus would have had the compassion and love not to condemn Judas to hell. Also, Jesus did not have time to analyze who would be perfect for his disciples; thus, they were not perfect and would have condemned Judas if they had had the chance. In this discussion, Holden points out his own dilemma, not having time to analyze his decisions, and his belief in the perfect love that he embraces at the end of the book. Although not a would-be saint, Holden does become a fuller human being through his experiences.

The title symbol of the novel comes from Holden's misreading of a line from a song of Robert Burns. Holden's wish, as expressed to his sister, is to be a catcher in the rye, one standing beneath a cliff waiting to catch any child who falls over it: He seeks to spare children the pain of growing up and facing the world of squalor. He also hopes to provide some useful, sincere activity in the world. The catcher-in-thereye job is one that Holden realizes is impractical in the world as it is. Only by facing the world and loving it indiscriminately can anyone live fully within it and have any hope of changing it.

In the novel, Holden is also constantly preoccupied with death. He worries about the ducks in Central Park's lagoon freezing in the winter, about Egyptian mummies, and about his dead brother Allie. He cries to Allie not to let him disappear. This symbolizes Holden's wish not to disappear into society as another cog in the great machine, and his desire not to lose what little of himself he feels that he has. To Holden, the change from childhood to adulthood is a kind of death, a death he fears because of his conviction that he will become other than he is. This fear proves groundless by the end of the book. His name also provides a clue: Holden—hold on. His quest is to hold on to his adolescent self and to save other children from the pain of growth. His quest fails, but his compassion and the growth of his humanity provide him with better alternatives. Regarding sex, Holden tends to be puritanical. His trouble lies in the fact that he begins to feel sorry for the girls he dates, and he has too much compassion for them to defile their supposed virtue. This problem ties in with his

compassion: He tries to see people as they are and not as types. He looks quickly and may make rash judgments, but once he talks to or acquaints himself with someone, he sees him or her as an individual. His mentioning of the boring boy he knew in school who could whistle better than anyone is the perfect example: Holden cannot help but confront people as individuals. Again, this shows his growing compassion and indiscriminate love. He sympathizes with the girl's position, which is a very mature quality for a teenager. At Pencey, for example, he wants to protect a childhood friend named Jane Gallagher from Ward Stradlater, remembering that she always kept her kings in the back row in checker games and never used them.

*The Catcher in the Rye* also reflects the art of a maturing author. Although there is no indication that Holden will become a novelist, there are clues scattered throughout the novel that he has an artistic sensibility. His sensitivity, his compassion, his powers of observation, and his references to himself as an exhibitionist are several such clues.

Later, Salinger more fully develops the contrast between squalor and love in the world and reintroduces various elements of his Caulfield family saga in his grand design of charting the story of the Glass family. The compassion, the satire, the heights of perfect love, the love of the family unit, and the use of brilliant conversational language that characterized Salinger's great novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, will continue to set his fiction apart.

The normality of the characters in Salinger's stories is a primary attraction for readers. Holden Caulfield is no better or no worse than any young high school boy; he is merely a bit more articulate and honest in his appraisals, more open with his feelings. Even though the Glasses are brilliant, they are not cerebral or distanced from the reader because of their brilliance; and all the characters live in the same world and environment as the readers do. Their moments of pain and delight are the same as the readers', but Salinger's characters articulate these moments more naturally and completely.

Another element that draws readers into Salinger's world is his use of satire. The satire not only touches upon the characters' descriptions and reactions to the world but also touches on the characters themselves. Holden Caulfield's confrontation with Maurice, the brawny Edmont Hotel elevator operator/pimp, shows not only the ridiculousness of the antagonist but also Holden's stupidity for attempting to reason with him. Even if he does not realize it, Holden does many of the things that he tells readers he hates. He is critical enough, however, to realize that these things are wrong.

All of Salinger's work has also a strong focus on the family; it is held as an ideal, a refuge, and a raft of love amid a sea of squalor. Although the family does not provide the haven that Salinger suggests it might, it is through coming home that the character's flourish, not by running away. Holden Caulfield, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, never realistically considers running away, for he realizes that flight cannot help him. At the critical moment his family may not be ready to grant him the salvation that he needs, but it is his only security. If the world is a place of squalor, perhaps it is only through perfect love within the family unit that an individual can find some kind of salvation. It is important to notice that the family unit is never satirized in Salinger's fiction.

## SETTING

The novel is framed by the first and last Chapters, which take place somewhere in California in a psychiatric rest home. The main action of the novel takes place first at a boarding school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania and then mainly in New York City. The narrative is evocative of Manhattan in the 1950's, taking place at and around the various landmarks of New York City, such as Grand Central Station, Greenwich Village, Radio City Music Hall, and the famous Central Park.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

### Major Characters

#### Holden

The sixteen year-old narrator whose experiences form the action of the novel. He seems to have a history of expulsion and failure at various prep schools because of his inability to adjust to institutional life and the world in general. His recent expulsion from Pencey Prep and a series of other harrowing experiences lead him to an inevitable emotional breakdown.

#### Phoebe

Holden's younger sister, whom he loves and respects completely. She is ten, but very clever and passionate. Throughout the book, Holden thinks Phoebe is the only person in the world who understands and loves him completely. Towards the end of the plot, he is disappointed that Phoebe scolds him for being expelled from school

and questions what he is going to do with his life. She makes it up to him, however, when she packs her suitcase and wants to run away with him.

### **Minor Characters**

#### **Allie**

Holden's younger brother who died of leukemia on July 18, 1946. Allie was extremely close to Holden, and Holden believes that Allie was "about fifty times as intelligent" as anyone Holden has ever known. Allie had a fielder's mitt that he had written poems all over in green ink, to give him something to read when he was in the outfield all alone. Holden keeps the fielder's mitt with him wherever he goes.

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

Holden's older brother, a writer who once published a collection called 'The Secret Goldfish'. D.B. is now employed as a scriptwriter in Hollywood. This occupation, in Holden's eyes, is equivalent to prostitution. Holden speaks mostly of D.B.'s "selling out" to Hollywood.

#### **Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield**

Holden's parents who are unable to provide him with the parental understanding that he needs. is a corporation lawyer, and Mrs. Caulfield is a housewife? Very little is revealed about these two characters, and only Mrs. Caulfield is ever seen, and then only briefly.

#### **Mr. Antolini**

Holden's English teacher from Elkton Hills who is now teaching at New York University. Holden holds him in the highest regard and believes him to be a guardian of morality. In his hour of need, Holden goes to Mr. Antolini for help. Mr. Antolini is a sensitive man, about D.B.'s age, married to a wealthy older woman.

#### **Mrs. Antolini**

Mr. Antolini's wife, who is both more wealthy and older than her husband.

#### **Jane Gallagher**

Holden's childhood friend. Though they never actually dated, they used to hold hands. Jane is best remembered by Holden for the way she used to keep all her kings in the back row during checkers. She is never actually present in a scene, but is constantly in Holden's thoughts and memories. Holden seems to feel tremendous respect and affection for Jane, and holds her up as a pure and spotless friend and person.

#### **Sally Hayes**

A girl that Holden sometimes dates, though he thinks she is a "pain in the ass". She is sensible, practical, boring, and, in Holden's words, "phony as hell".

#### **Ward Stradlater**

Holden's roommate at Pencey Prep who is fairly conceited. He is a good-looking prep school athlete with a notorious history of having sex with girls. He has a date with Jane Gallagher in the beginning of the novel and fights with Holden when he returns from that date.

#### **Robert Ackley**

A boy who stays in the room next to Holden's at Pencey Prep. He is, according to Holden, a "terrific bore" and a "slob" in personal hygiene. However, Holden is in his own way quite sympathetic toward Ackley and at times even seeks his company.

#### **Carl Luce**

Holden's academic advisor from Whooton. He is the first person to introduce Holden to sex education. Holden considers him an "intellectual" and seeks his companionship while in New York even though he does not much care for him.

Many other names are mentioned in the narrative, but they are minor characters without much significance in an analysis.

## **CONFLICT**

### **Protagonist**

Holden Caulfield is the protagonist and narrator of the novel, and all the events in the plot revolve around him. He is a sixteen-year-old boy who has trouble fitting in and finding a place for himself in life. There is nothing heroic about Holden, and he is often considered an anti-hero.

### **Antagonist**

Holden's antagonist is his inability to fit into society. Throughout the novel, he is pitted against different characters, social situations, educational environments, technology, and the world in general. But Holden is really fighting himself, and until he learns who he is and finds a place for himself in the world, he cannot be at peace.

### **Climax**

This is a novel of progressive climax, where one high point in the plot leads up to the next, as follows:

#### **Climax One**

The first climax is reached when Holden ends up lying on the floor with a bleeding nose after his roommate Stradlater has beaten him in a fight that Holden started. Holden has lost his first battle against the world and escapes from Pencey.

#### **Climax Two**

When Holden has been beaten by the pimp Maurice at the end of Chapter Fourteen, he is once again lying on the floor incapacitated with the pain from the impact. His second direct confrontation has ended in defeat. With nowhere to go, he heads to Grand Central Station.

#### **Climax Three**

In his search for human connection, Holden gathers his courage, places a phone call to Sally, and sets a date with her for the afternoon. He tells her about his plan to run away out West and suggests that she join him. She scoffs at his foolishness and walks out, leaving him again rejected and in isolation.

#### **Climax Four**

The fourth climax occurs when Holden faces rejection from the one little person upon whom all his hopes are anchored--Phoebe. This has the most shattering impact on Holden, and he is forced to search elsewhere for understanding. Hence he goes to Mr. Antolini for help.

#### **Climax Five**

The fourth climax occurs when Holden is rejected by Mr. Antolini, the last person he has to turn to for help. He is sure that this man, above all others, will be able to understand his needs and accept him. To his horror, Mr. Antolini gives Holden an academic lecture about scholastic performance. Then he approaches Holden in the middle of the night, touching his forehead. Holden interprets his gesture as a sexual advance.

The actual climax is never viewed in the course of the novel, only foreshadowed by the mini-climaxes and proven by Holden's stay at a psychiatric hospital. Sometime after the close of action in the book, life amongst the "phonies" gets to be too much for Holden. The reader is forced to imagine the inevitable outcome of this story - the total mental breakdown of the protagonist, Holden Caulfield.

### **Outcome**

The novel ends in tragedy for Holden when he finally realizes he cannot win his battle. He returns home to his parents and is obviously sent to a psychiatric hospital to "rest" before retiring to the world that has defeated him.

### **SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a psychological novel based more on how events affect the hero's mind than on the events themselves; therefore, the actual plot is not as important as the psychological analysis behind the action. In truth, the plot is only a loosely strung set of incidents that are combined to reveal four days in the life of Holden Caulfield. The novel is episodic in nature, and the bulk of it is narrated in the form of flashbacks. The plot is also supplemented with a number of digressions, which help to reveal more about the various characters, especially Holden himself.

Holden's journey begins on a Saturday in December just before school closes for Christmas break. He has been informed of his expulsion from Pencey Prep School. What worries him most about being kicked out of school is his parents' reaction, for he has already been expelled from other educational institutions. He cannot bear to remain in the dormitory after he has been beaten up by his roommate Stradlater and on a whim, he decides to leave the same night. However, he does not want to face his parents until they have recovered from the news of the expulsion. He decides to stay in a cheap hotel in New York City, going home only on the day he was originally expected.

The novel charts Holden's experiences over a period of about forty hours, starting from the time he leaves Pencey Prep. Holden encounters a large number of people as he traverses the city of New York and goes into nightclubs. Lonely and desperate, he accepts the offer of the hotel elevator operator to find him a prostitute, but he fails to have sex with her and fights with her pimp. The next day, he calls an old girlfriend, Sally Hayes, takes her ice-skating, and tries to convince her to run away with him.

Holden looks for some degree of understanding and acceptance from all the characters he encounters, even taxi drivers, but he is denied his needs. As a result, Holden feels dislocated, as though he does not belong anywhere, and he is right. It becomes obvious through his encounters that he is in an entirely different orbit than the rest of the world. Each time Holden extends himself, he is rewarded with rejection, until he is finally driven to almost a schizophrenic state. With his mental health deteriorating, Holden returns to his parents' home, where things are no better for him.

Even his young sister, Phoebe, questions his negativism and asks him to name one thing he would like to be. Holden replies that he would like to be "The Catcher in the Rye" and explains that his job would be to prevent the children, who are playing nearby in a field of rye, from going over the cliff. More distressed than ever, Holden goes to see Mr. Antolini, his former English teacher. When the teacher makes sexual advances, Holden flees in horror. Returning home, Holden experiences a complete mental breakdown and is sent to a psychiatric center in California for treatment.

### **THEMES**

#### ***The Catcher in the Rye* Major Theme**

##### ***Alienation within a Society***

The major theme in *The Catcher in the Rye* is that of alienation within a society that is increasingly sacrificing its value system for the sake of monetary gain. It is also that of alienation within a society that is conformist, where no one has the courage to be true, honest, and different. Holden Caulfield is a solitary rebel who is alienated because he cannot conform. Holden perceives his loneliness and isolation and wants to break the confines of his seclusion by making some form of human connection. Unfortunately, all the people he reaches out to are unable to accept him. Holden is faced with denial and rejection from all quarters. Throughout the book, Salinger stresses the need for interaction and communication, which seem to be disappearing in the postwar America.

##### **Minor Themes**

##### ***Corruption of Society***

Salinger highlights the increasing degree of corruption that is an aspect of modern day existence. This corruption of society is represented by characters, such as Maurice, who lie, cheat, and bully to get what they want. There is also a horde of nameless people who seem take perverse pleasure in things like filling public walls with profane graffiti.

### ***The Difficulty of Growing Up***

Another theme that Salinger develops is the difficulty of adolescence. Growing up is often intolerable in a society that does not provide stability and values to the youth on the verge of adulthood. This is a recurring theme in Salinger's novels.

### ***Phoniness in Life***

Finally, Salinger paints a clear picture of the phoniness in life, where artists sacrifice their art for fame and mothers cry fake tears in movies. Holden Caulfield is totally disgusted at the phonies that people the world. Through Holden, Salinger is trying to make the reader see the need for honesty and integrity in the modern world.

### **Mood**

The mood in *The Catcher In The Rye* is dark, bleak, gloomy, and depressing. Holden is a troubled, searching, frustrated, and alienated youth; since he is the narrator of the story, his personal mood colors everything in the novel. There is even a sense of impending danger, doom, and death throughout the plot since everything around him seems to confirm Holden's troubled state of mind.

### **Literary Information**

*The Catcher in the Rye*, although an original work, bears resemblance to previous works by Salinger, as well as to works of other writers. To fully understand the novel, the reader must have the proper frame of reference. While *The Catcher In The Rye* is Salinger's only novel, he published a number of short stories. Seymour Glass is a protagonist of quite a few. Holden Caulfield resembles Seymour Glass, as well as all of Salinger's other protagonists, whose common trait is that they are all victims of the society they wish to rebel against. They are hypersensitive individuals who carry deep scars from interacting with the flawed world around them, a world characterized by "phoniness". Outside the Salinger canon, Holden Caulfield can be compared with the protagonist of Mark Twain's *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*. Like Huck Finn, Holden is also seeking, though metaphorically, a home, a place where he can be accepted and truly belong.

There is also a parallel between *The Catcher in the Rye* and William Saroyan's "The Human Comedy". There is an orthographic as well as metrical similarity between the names of the two protagonists, Holden Caulfield and Homer Macanlay. They also have similar ages, for Holden is sixteen, and Homer passes as sixteen. Both works also have an objectionable character called Ackley. Both boys have trouble finding a place in which to fit. Holden Caulfield, however, is much more well known than Homer Macanlay and becomes a symbol of sensitivity for the hippie cult movement in the 60's.

### **Overall Analysis**

### **Character Analysis**

#### ***Holden Caulfield***

Holden Caulfield is characterized as a young, impulsive, self-declared loner. He does not fit in anywhere, often not even trying to find a place for himself. He keeps failing in traditional roles: he has been sent away to school, probably because he is a difficult son; he flunks out of school after school, because he refuses to do his work or try; and he is liked by no one and has no real friends, male or female, because he is strange and isolates himself. From the beginning of the story, his lack of acceptance makes him feel alienated; in turn, he is angry, dissatisfied, and frustrated. Holden seeks to place the blame for his misery on outside people and things, which he normally judges as phony. He longs for honesty and integrity, but he seems to be the only authentic person he knows. He longs for connection, but no one understands him. He blames the world, with its phoniness and insensitivity, for bringing him down.

Running away from still another school, Pencey Prep, Holden spends time alone in New York City, where he meets with one defeat after another. He is unable to perform with a prostitute, is beaten up by a pimp, is laughed at and rejected by his date Sally. When he goes home to see Phoebe, the one person he has always felt he could count on, she even questions Holden.

Holden's search for meaning becomes a tragedy as he realizes over and over again that he will never find what he is a looking for. He is an idealist clinging to a vision of a society that he will never find. He is a loner looking for human connection that he will never find.



Holden is a tragic hero, not in the classic sense, but because he is a troubled teenager who cannot seem to do anything right in the eyes of a phony society or find a place where he can fit in. His downfall is not from some tragic flaw in his being or some low moral characteristic. In fact, Salinger portrays him as a sensitive youth that adores his little sister and treasures the baseball mitt of his dead brother. Although he is not religious, and even calls himself an atheist, he tries to pray and cares about the downtrodden and the underdog. He donates ten dollars to two nuns when he sees their shabby suitcases and then feels bad that he did not give them more, even though he is practically broke himself. In a desperate act, he tries personally to eradicate all the graffiti in New York City, so the children will not have to see the obscenities. In fact, when Phoebe questions him about what he wants to become in life, Holden says he wants to be "The Catcher in the Rye," protecting the children from falling off the cliff into a world of misery and phoniness. It is clear to see that Holden's downfall happens because he is unrealistic about himself and the world.

### ***Holden as an Antihero***

Holden can really be best defined as a modern day antihero. He is pictured as a weakling, easily beaten up by Stradlater and Maurice, who leave him bleeding and crying on the floor. He is pictured as a coward, who is afraid to go in a club when he sees two tough guys coming out and afraid to call Jane Gallagher because her parents might answer the phone. He is a failure, who flunks out of school and has no friends. Throughout the novel, Salinger shows Holden to be exposed and vulnerable time and time again. It is truly a pathetic picture, a teenager with no self-confidence and no direction who can find no place for himself in the world. Everything about Holden Caulfield is antiheroic.

### **Plot Structure Analysis**

The basic structure of *The Catcher in the Rye* follows the picaresque framework of episodic narration. The picaresque narrative derives its name from the Spanish 'pícaro', meaning rogue, and its typical story concerns the escapades of the hero. Picaresque fiction is realistic in manner, and often satiric in aim. Examples of such literature are Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

*The Catcher in the Rye* can be compared with the above works because its structural framework is a first person narrative that centers around a single individual whose loosely strung escapades are connected by the fact that they are events in the life of the protagonist and develop the same theme of loneliness and isolation.

There is a slight variation from the picaresque tradition in the novel, because Holden's escapades are not so much adventures as 'mis-adventures', the cumulative effect of which leads him to a sanitarium. While there is no dramatic change in Holden's personality nor has he reached a complete understanding of himself or the reasons for his breakdown, the reader can still detect a certain change of attitude in the young man while he is in the sanitarium. Holden the narrator, as opposed to Holden the picaresque hero, realizes his own failings from a retrospective stance. When Holden, upset with Sally's rebuff, tells her "you give me a royal pain in the ass," he also laughs at her. In retrospect, Holden is able to see his own fault in that failure and says, "All of a sudden I did something I shouldn't have. I laughed."

The novel is held together by tight time and place constraints. The events in the body of the novel take place within four days, basically in New York City. A single character, the protagonist Holden Caulfield, is central to all the action. Holden is also the center of the frame narrative, which takes place in an unnamed place in California. The frame begins after Holden's breakdown sometime in December and ends sometime before the following September. All of the action in the book is given in a series of flashbacks from Holden's point of view.

Even though Holden's story is told by him in retrospect, the plot is filled with rising action, leading to the climatic event of his breakdown. The first Chapter serves as an introduction to the main character and his basic problems. The next twenty-four Chapters present Holden's misadventures, which comprise the rising action of the plot. Each misadventure, or episode, has its own miniclimax leading to a defeat for Holden that is increasingly more traumatic than the last. After each tragic misadventure, Holden feels more rejected and isolated than ever. Since Holden's total breakdown is not presented in the book, making the reader imagine the actual climax of the plot, there is also no falling action. The final Chapter, the closing of the frame narrative, serves as the conclusion.

The novel is written in a realistic manner, and the character of the city of New York is accurately represented as a metaphor for the increasingly commercial world, devoid of feelings. In this respect, the novel might be considered satiric in nature since it is about the loss of human connectedness. A perfect example of this is when Holden tries to call Jane but is unable to because "the phone didn't answer". At the end of the novel, the plot has not reached a satisfactory resolution, for Holden's quest for connectedness has been fruitless; he has not found a home, a place to belong. He has sought ideal love and acceptance, but at the end of his journey, he is not at peace. Instead, he is in an asylum undergoing a "rest cure". The reader is left to wonder if Holden will ever find a place to belong.

Though the plot of the novel is driven by the quest motif and the protagonist undergoes a journey, which is both actual and metaphorical, Holden never finds his "holy grail." Neither is his quest noble or heroic. Instead, Holden experiences a series of misadventures each leaving him to feel more rejected and lonely than before.

### **Themes - Theme Analysis**

*The Catcher in the Rye* is concerned with the theme of alienation faced by the individual in an ever-changing environment. Salinger portrays the world as a place where basic human values of affection and compassion are being replaced by a love of money and power, known by the middle class as "success". Holden is an idealist clinging to a world that no longer exists.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a novel that exposes the loneliness and insanity inherent in modern day existence. Holden's confusion is blamed on the demented world he inhabits. Salinger presents the pathetic condition of the world through the imagery of falling. The metaphor of the Fall is introduced by Holden when he talks about his vision of being a catcher in the rye, preventing innocence from falling over "some crazy cliff" into the reality of life. Ironically, Holden is unable to prevent his own fall, which looms large over him. Even Mr. Antolini warns him that he is heading for "a terrible, terrible fall .... a horrible kind", where he will not be permitted "to feel or hear himself hit bottom". Holden wants desperately to be caught, but there is no one around to catch him.

It is essential to note that after Holden falls, he is given help at the sanitarium and some glimmer of hope is seen for him. It is not clear, however, whether he will be able to leave his idealistic notions behind. At least he is preparing himself to go to a new school and start again. It is symbolically relevant that Holden's fall occurs at the end of the year, during Christmas, and that the narrative leaves the reader with the possible hope of a new beginning, a fresh year for Holden Caulfield.

### **Author's Style**

Salinger presents *The Catcher in the Rye* through a first person point of view; however, the narrator, Holden Caulfield, is not wholly reliable in his understanding and reporting of events. First he is a youth, a young boy of sixteen who does not have much experience in living. Second, he is extremely depressed during the four days he is on his own in New York, and his mood colors everything. Third, Holden tells his story through flashbacks, and memory is never perfect. Because of these things, the reader has to make some assumptions and perform some interpretation on the story.

As opposed to an omniscient narrator, Holden Caulfield is a naive narrator. He is still a teenager, an innocent child, as evidenced in the scene with the prostitute. As a result of his innocence, the reader and the people surrounding Holden often see and understand more than he does, creating many moments of dramatic irony. Since Holden is looking for himself, seeking a place to fit into life, he tells about things that happen to him, without any comprehension. Even when he has moments of truth, he is often unable to articulate his thoughts because of his youth and depression. As a result, Holden evokes a strong sense of pathos as he desperately searches for and misses the meaning of life.

Holden's fumbling, halting speech adds authenticity to his character. Salinger presents him as a realistic teenager, given to digressions and obscenities typical of a boy his age. The swearing, however, is not employed by Salinger to show an attitude of daring, but to convey a deep-seated insecurity in his main character. Therefore, all of the language of the novel enhances thematic concerns as well as characterization. The result is that the reader fully understands Holden Caulfield and the trauma that he experiences.

### **Humor In The Novel**

Although *The Catcher in the Rye* is a depressing and gloomy book, there is also humor to be found in it. Much of the humor derives from the ridiculous situations that Holden finds himself in, especially when he interacts with strangers. Some of the lighter moments, however, border on 'black humor', a device often employed by writers to expose the absurdity of human existence. The perfect example of black humor is found in the men who were cursing as they unloaded the Christmas tree, even taking Christ's name in vain. Holden recognizes the pathetic nature of the scene when he sarcastically says, "It certainly was a gorgeous way to talk about a Christmas tree." Such phrases and other special use of language add more humor to the story; and the reader is often forced to laugh at Holden's frank, misguided, opinions.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## REFERENCES

- Anti-hero. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 11th ed. 1714 Costello, Donald P. "The Language of The Catcher in the Rye" *American Speech* 34 (1959): 45-53 Costello, Donald P., and Harold Bloom. "The Language of "The Catcher in the Rye." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: The Catcher in the Rye* (2000): 11–20. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Web. Dec 1, 2010.
- Alexaneder, Charlotte A. J. D. 1997. *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching&Research Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1997. *Postmodernism and Theories of Culture*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Longstreth, Morris. 19 July 1951 "Review of the Catcher in the Rye" *Christian Science Monitor*: 7.
- Rohrer, Finlo (June 5, 2009). "The why of the Rye". *BBC News Magazine* (BBC). Retrieved 2009-06-05.
- Salinger, J.D. 1958. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Penguin Books Inc.