

The Catcher In The Rye / J.D. Salinger - - Main Character -

Preface -

This book has been steeped in controversy since it was banned in America after its first publication. John Lennon's assassin, Mark Chapman, asked the former beatle to sign a copy of the book earlier in the morning of the day that he murdered Lennon. Police found the book in his possession upon apprehending the psychologically disturbed Chapman. However, the book itself contains nothing that could be attributed with leading Chapman to act as he did - it could have been any book that he was reading the day he decided to kill John Lennon - and as a result of the fact that it was 'The Catcher In The Rye', a book describing nervous breakdown, media speculated widely about the possible connection. This gave the book even more notoriety. So what is 'The Catcher In The Rye' actually about ? Superficially the story of a young man's expulsion from yet another school, 'The Catcher In The Rye' is in fact a perceptive study of one individual's understanding of his human condition. Holden Caulfield, a teenager growing up in 1950s New York, has been expelled school for poor achievement once again. In an attempt to deal with this he leaves school a few days prior to the end of term, and goes to New York to 'take a vacation' before returning to his parents' inevitable wrath. Told as a monologue, the book describes Holden's thoughts and activities over these few days, during which he describes a developing nervous breakdown, symptomised by his bouts of unexplained depression, impulsive spending and generally odd, erratic behaviour, prior to his eventual nervous collapse. However, during his psychological battle, life continues on around Holden as it always had, with the majority of people ignoring the 'madman stuff' that is happening to him - until it begins to encroach on their well defined social codes. Progressively through the novel we are challenged to think about society's attitude to the human condition - does society have an 'ostrich in the sand' mentality, a deliberate ignorance of the emptiness that can characterize human existence? And if so, when Caulfield begins to probe and investigate his own sense of emptiness and isolation, before finally declaring that the world is full of 'phonies' with each one put out for their own phony gain, is Holden actually the one who is going insane, or is it society which has lost its mind for failing to see the hopelessness of their own lives?

Holden's Personality -

There are 3 main aspects in Holden's personality :

1. His criticism toward the 'phony' things in society.
2. His perception that laws (Rules) are 'child's play' for the strong and a difficult struggle for the weak.
3. Respect for fellowman.

The criticism toward 'phony' things in society is expressed in the novel primarily by the word

'phony'. Holden is a representative of the world of childhood whose characteristics are the opposite values to those Holden calls 'phony'.

One of the things Holden often calls 'phony' is the world of movies and everything about it.

Examples of it are his anger toward his brother D.B. because he moved to Hollywood,

aversion of Sunny the prostitute who tells him she spends most of her time in film theaters and

derision to the three women he met at the bar who are only interested in movies and famous actors.

Another thing Holden calls 'phony' is the theater. He finds the theater 'phony' because he

thinks that instead of demonstrating reality as it is, the emphasis is put on polishing theatricality.

He says he has never seen so much 'phony' things like he saw in the theater.

Out of these examples and others we see that for Holden it is very important to be 'real',

honest and not 'phony', thus the criticism toward the 'phony' things in society is the most

significant aspect of his personality

Another important aspect in Holden's personality is that rules to him were meant to serve the

strong, whereas he belongs to the weak, thus he ignores them completely. His attitude toward

rules can be demonstrated by these examples : Ring Lardner's tells Holden a story in which a

married policeman fell in love with a girl who drove faster than the speed limit and eventually

was killed because of it. In this story laws (Rules) are mentioned twice :

1. The policeman fell in love with a girl while he was married and this means breaking social

laws.

2. The girl drove too fast and this means breaking traffic laws.

The outcome of this story is failure and death. From here we can learn of Holden's

personality because he likes this story very much and he thinks that these felonies don't require punishment.

Another example is Holden's talk with Mr. Spencer who tells him : "Life is a game boy. Life

is a game that one plays according to the rules... If you get on the side where all the hot-shots

are, then it's a game... But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it ?". Holden agrees with Mr. Spencer.

Actually, Holden has an ambivalent view of rules which is expressed in Holden's words : "I'm

always setting myself rules about sex and I immediately break them". Holden refers rules to

the world of the strong but he himself cannot avoid setting rules for himself, yet he never keeps them. So this is another contradiction in Holden's personality.

Another aspect of Holden's personality is the fact that Holden can't stand people who don't

respect fellowmen and don't listen to what they say. Holden thinks that it is very important to

listen to people and respect their privacy. Examples of this can be found in many parts of the story such as :

1. Holden's willingness to stop in the middle of the sexual act because of a girl's request when others wouldn't.

2. Holden's respect to the nuns.

3. Holden's respect to Jane : the willingness not to kiss her and comforting her when she cried.

In light of these examples and others we can conclude that fellowman is very important to

Holden. However, when people criticize him, he doesn't respect them at all. This can clearly

be seen in Holden's attitude toward Pheobe and Antolini.

Holden's attitude toward :

1. Teachers.

2. Friends.

3. Family.

4. Life.

1. Holden's attitude toward teachers is ambivalent : on the one hand he is instinctively against them because they are representatives of the laws he breaks. On the other hand he respects teachers like Antolini and Spencer.

2. Holden's friends are presented as negative and selfish characters such as Stradlater and

Ackley. Although Stradlater and Ackley are socially opposite, (Stradlater on the top and

Ackley in the bottom) they are both unfit for Holden and under the disguise of the handsome

successful athlete or the ugly rejected sloth, they are the same - selfish, hurt other people and obey laws.

3. Holden has an exceptional attitude toward his parents. On the one hand he wants to

please them and on the other hand he doesn't do anything to accomplish that so he disappoints them.

To his brother D.B, Holden has some respect accompanied with disappointment of him becoming commercialized all his life as a writer in Hollywood, of his girlfriend and of his car.

To his sister Pheobe, however, Holden has a special sentiment because she represents childhood, purity, innocence and understanding to Holden. Despite all this, Pheobe likes movies, participates in school plays and criticizes Holden. Allegedly, Holden should have hated her but he chooses to ignore these 'disadvantages'.

4. Holden's attitude toward life results from his attitude toward himself. His low self-esteem causes him to try to run away from life and from reality. When life is presented to him as a game with rules, he breaks the rules and leaves the game.

In Conclusion -

We see Holden as a constant character. As a person who refuses to accept reality and tries as much as he can to grasp childhood. He wants to become patron of the children in order to protect their purity and innocence.

And as a final remark I would like to say that when we are honest we can see within ourselves suppressed elements of the forces operating within Holden Caulfield, and because of that I would recommend this thought provoking novel as a fascinating and enlightening description of our human condition. However, beware ... for that very reason it is not comfortable reading.

