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The Catcher in the Rye

by

J. D. Salinger



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

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.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Holden Caulfield - 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

Phoebe - Holden's younger sister, whom he loves and respects completely. She is ten, but very.....

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.....

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.....

Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield - Holden's parents who are unable to provide him with the parental understanding that he needs. Mr. Caulfield is a corporation lawyer, and

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..... (many other characters listed)....

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.....

Antagonist - Holden's antagonist is his inability to fit into society. Throughout the novel, he.....

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

Mini-Climax One - The first climax is reached when Holden ends up lying on the floor with.....

Mini-Climax Two - When Holden has been beaten by the pimp Maurice at the end of

Outcome

The novel ends in tragedy for Holden when he finally realizes he cannot win his battle. He returns.....

PLOT(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

THEMES

Major Theme - 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.....

Minor Themes - Salinger highlights the increasing degree of corruption that is an aspect of.....

MOOD

The mood in *The Catcher In The Rye* is dark, bleak, gloomy, and depressing. Holden is a

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

J.D. SALINGER - Jerome David 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.....

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.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Chapter 1

Summary

The novel opens with the first-person narrator, Holden Caulfield, speaking directly to a psychoanalyst or psychologist. Because he has had a complete mental breakdown, Holden has been sent to this "rest home" for treatment. As he talks, his mind frequently wanders and, therefore, his story is often filled with

digressions. The first digression is about D.B., Holden's older brother who is a writer. He feels that D. B. has "sold-out" in his literary career, for he is now in Hollywood writing screenplays, like a "prostitute".

Holden quickly establishes the time frame which he wants to discuss, beginning with the day he leaves Pencey Prep, one of the many schools from which he has been expelled. The remainder of the Chapter is a flashback to the time of his expulsion; it is a Saturday just a few days before Christmas vacation. In the flashback, Holden is going to visit his history teacher. Before he reaches the teacher's house, Holden stands on a hill overlooking Pencey, searching for a sense of closure; he wants to have one positive farewell thought. He then recalls an early evening football game with two friends. Satisfied that the memory is a pleasant one with which he can leave, he continues on his way to the history professor's home.

Notes

The Catcher in the Rye is structured as a first person narrative that makes use of direct address, flashback, and digression. An example of the narrator's direct address is found in the opening line of the novel when Holden says, "If you really want to hear about it. . ." Holden is actually speaking to the psychoanalyst in the story, but at the same time, he appears to be directly addressing the reader. In this first Chapter, Holden also employs the technique of flashback, where he quickly shifts to a time in the past. As he speaks to the therapist, Holden begins to tell about the day he left Pencey Prep, just a few days before Christmas. Holden is also guilty of digression in this opening Chapter, as seen in his references to his brother D. B. Throughout the novel, Holden, as the narrator, will employ direct address, flashback, and digression, sometimes rather erratically, to tell his story. The effect of the constant use of these techniques is an air of confusion, reflective of Holden's tormented state of mind. His life, and what is happening to him, does not make sense; therefore, Holden is incapable of sorting things out and telling them in a strictly chronological or orderly way.

This first Chapter clearly establishes the youth of Holden Caulfield. He is a young man who has just been kicked out of another prep school. As the narrator, he speaks a typical teenage language, filled with exaggeration, slang, and curse words. This authentic language helps to establish Holden's personality and voice. It also helps to establish him as a credible narrator, for the story is about a troubled teenager.

Holden also has many individualized characteristics in his speech. He constantly substitutes nouns for adjectives, as in the phrase, "David Copperfield kind of crap". He is often unable to find precise words for many of his thoughts, so he awkwardly stops in mid-thought and hesitates. These tendencies, coupled with the fact that Holden ends many of his sentences with phrases like "and all," indicate that the speaker is confused and self-conscious. In fact, his narration becomes almost a stream-of-consciousness narrative, where things happen inside the narrator's head and then appear to be quickly written down.

In this Chapter, Holden makes it clear that he is not in the hospital because of poor physical health, but because of a nervous breakdown. This information is important, for it helps to establish the mood and point of view of the narrator. The fact that Holden is in a psychiatric hospital certainly influences the way the story is told, read, and understood. In other words, the setting in this first Chapter, which serves as the front-end of a frame narrative, is extremely important.

It is important to notice that when Holden flashes back to the day he left Pencey Prep, he is pictured alone, standing on top of a hill. He has risen above the pettiness of Pencey and looks down on it, both literally and figuratively. He wants to leave town with a positive thought about the school, even though he has been expelled. He thinks hard to come up with a pleasant memory and recalls an evening football game

with friends. He is satisfied that this recollection is positive enough. As a result, he can proceed on this wait to call on his history teacher.

Chapter 2

Summary

Holden visits Mr. Spencer, and their conversation inevitably turns to Holden's failure in school and his pitiful career as a student. As the visit progresses, Holden grows increasingly impatient and annoyed with old Mr. Spencer for pointing out all of his shortcomings. Mr. Spencer forces Holden to listen as he reads aloud from one of Holden's most recent papers, which is a shoddily written, half-done report on mummies. Mr. Spencer then reads the note that Holden has written on the bottom of the report, apologizing for his failure to perform well on the paper. In the note, Holden reassures the professor that he is not a bad teacher. The failure rests in Holden alone. Nonetheless, Holden is mortified by what has transpired at this meeting. He feels worse than when he came and cannot wait to escape Mr. Spencer's house.

Notes

Much is learned about Holden in this Chapter. First, he expresses admiration for the elderly teacher, who "if you thought about him just enough and not too much, you could figure it out that he wasn't doing too bad for himself". Evidently he respects the old man enough to pay him a visit on a Saturday night. While visiting with the teacher, it is apparent that Holden is simply not a student. The teacher criticizes his lack of effort and even reads from one of Holden's reports, which is unacceptably completed. It is significant that Holden himself writes a note on the bottom of the work, which reveals his sensitive side. He apologizes for not doing well on the report and confirms that he is to blame for his failure, not the teacher. In other words, Holden is very aware of his own lack of effort, but does nothing to correct it. In schoolwork, like in life, Holden seems bored and unchallenged.

In a stream-of-consciousness manner, Holden's mind begins to wander in this scene. Instead of concentrating on Spencer's words, he begins thinking about where the ducks in Central Park go when the water freezes. The imagery is symbolic, because Holden can identify himself with the ducks--hemmed in and freezing. His wandering thoughts are also an effort to avoid Spencer's questions, especially when he asks, "How do you *feel* about all this?" The truth of the matter is that Holden, even though he is constantly thinking, is trying desperately not to feel anything. This avoidance is the first foreshadowing that Holden is heading toward a breakdown. He does not want to feel, because it hurts too much; but running from his feelings creates desperation and resolves nothing.

This scene marks the first of many in the novel where Holden becomes disillusioned with someone. Many of the people whom Holden has once admired, such as Spencer, become suddenly pathetic and phony to him. To indicate Holden's negative attitude toward Spencer, the boy notices, as if for the first time, that the teacher is aging and ill; he is also filled with unpleasant smells and sounds, an image of death and destruction approaching. Holden is suddenly repulsed by and alienated from Spencer. The rest of the book will be filled with similar images of Holden's sense of repulsion, alienation, and doom.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTERS

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..... r

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.....

PLOT & STRUCTURE

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.....

THEMES

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.....

TECHNIQUE & 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

HUMOR

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.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Would you define Holden Caulfield as the modern day tragic hero? Explain with examples from the text.
2. Discuss the relationship of Holden and Phoebe and show how Phoebe is the more

End of Sample MonkeyNotes for *The Catcher in the Rye*