Holden’s Irony in Salinger’s THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

J. D. Salinger wrote what critic Robert Bennett in his article “An Overview of The Catcher in the Rye” calls “one of the most widely read and discussed works in the American literary canon” and introduced the world to an antihero who became a cult favorite with readers. Salinger found his voice in Holden Caulfield and was subsequently and unwillingly lauded as having given a voice to a generation. Holden was, and still is, held up as a cultural icon because he is not the stereotypical teen found in many novels. Holden is a boy bordering on being an adult who fights every step of the process with extreme emotions, bizarre reactions, and obsessive lying. Salinger invests Holden with a sensitivity that prevents him from finding his place in the world, a feeling to which many teenagers can relate. The irony of Holden is that the harder he tries to keep his family and friends at arm’s length, the closer he comes to making unexpected discoveries about them and even himself.

Holden is a young man who approaches all life situations on a deeper plane than most teens his age, making it almost impossible for him to relate
to anyone on a normal level. His efforts to connect with any stereotypical kid his age result in abject failure. Kicked out of yet another prep school, Holden decides to risk a lonely odyssey through New York City rather than admit to his parents that he has failed once again. Although Holden labels his parents phonies and representatives of everything wrong with society, and claims to want to have nothing to do with them, his trek can be seen as a means of not having to face their censure and disappointment over this new debacle. More important, they are part of the adult world from which he desperately wants to keep his distance.

Family has failed Holden. That is, all except his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe, who represents innocence and purity in a world that reeks of phoniness and corruption. She is the only family member with whom Holden wants to keep any kind of meaningful connection. Through his relationship with Phoebe, Holden longs for the innocence of childhood that will soon be lost to him. When he is watching his sister reach for the gold ring on the carousel, he has an epiphany: “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” (211). Holden’s innocence died with his brother Allie, and lying and avoidance have become the norm in his life, rather than the innocent invincibility of childhood.

Although he claims to want to be left alone, Holden wants more than anything to make a connection with someone, anyone. His numerous attempts through the novel prove how inept he is at accomplishing this goal. He longs for Jane, whom he admires for bucking the rules by keeping her kings in the back row when playing checkers because “she just liked the way they looked when they were all in the back row” (32); yet, he refuses to call her because he fears that she might not remember him as kindly as he does her. To consider that she might not remember him would be a crushing blow for someone as fragile as Holden. Sally, who embodies everything Holden despises, is treated to a whimsical marriage proposal because “I didn’t even like her, and yet all of a sudden I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her” (124; emphasis in original). He hits bottom by soliciting a prostitute just to have someone to converse with and is beaten up by her pimp for refusing to pay more money than originally negotiated. It seems Holden almost enjoys the physical beatings he provokes, earlier by antagonizing his roommate, Stradlater, and then again with the pimp, Maurice. He feels surprisingly free after these beatings, as though he knows he deserves them and is satisfied when the physical hurt happens.

Holden finds his only real solace in writing. It becomes obvious when Holden relates his violent reaction to Allie’s death that this event was the starting point of most of his problems. The essay he writes for his roommate, Stradlater, becomes a memorial to his dead brother. Anger, depression, sadness, and the idea that there is no one who truly understands drive him to
spill this angst out on paper. Instead of his peers seeing it as a way to mourn
his lost brother, Holden is ostracized for again rebelling against the rules and
not writing what was assigned. Holden becomes the voice that readers wish
they possessed. Holden can tell the truth because “Holden really does it,
without an apology or so much as a ‘by your leave’” (Pinsker 45; emphasis
in original).

When Holden calls Carl Luce, an acquaintance whom Holden hates, as
a last resort, he comes the closest to the truth about himself. By telling him
“your mind is immature” (147), Luce acknowledges that Holden is in need of
psychoanalysis or some such professional help, but, in true Holden fashion,
he laughs it off. Instead, Holden starts formulating the idea that he will solve
his problems by retreating to “a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made
and stay there for the rest of my life” (199). In contrast to this isolation, he
also dreams of becoming the “catcher in the rye” and protecting children from
falling into that terrible world of adulthood. If he is beyond help, he can save
others from the same dilemma.

*The Catcher in the Rye* became “a generation’s etiquette book and some-
times its bible, as Salinger’s name came to dominate bull sessions and to be
spoken of in the worshipful tones once reserved for Hemingway” (Pinsker
19), much to Salinger’s consternation. Holden is embraced by readers not as
a disturbed young man who does not fit into the world but as a tragic hero
who dares to flout society’s rules, acknowledging that there is nowhere for
him to go because “that’s the whole trouble. You can’t ever find a place that’s
nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any” (204). The irony of *The Catcher
in the Rye* is that Holden subconsciously longs to be accepted yet feels he
cannot make the connection. Yet he does by making Salinger the unwilling,
erstwhile guru to a generation of displaced teenagers who made Holden an
icon of their angst.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is not only the story of a young man’s sad spiral
into a nervous breakdown, but it is also about a boy who takes the chances his
readers do not feel capable of risking. His failure makes him all the more real
for these same readers.

According to Jack Salzman, in his foreword to *New Essays on* The Catcher
in the Rye, Salinger “allowed Holden to exist within the absurdity of his situ-
ation without gaining any answers” and, in the process, “his literary voice was
the strongest it could possibly be” (17–18). Holden makes it okay not only to
search for the answers and not find them but also to admit that he still feels.
His final words, “Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start miss-
ing everybody” (214), tell the world that he made connections and feels the
intensity of the emotions these connections bring up for him and that blissful
ignorance might have been the better choice. He is finally coming to grips
with himself.
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