

Teenager. Pessimist. Critic. Thinker. Mentor.

Prompt: Explain what *Catcher in the Rye* has to offer (why it shouldn't be banned).

There really is no argument that *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger is becoming outdated, nor is it inappropriate for today; on the contrary, it is arguably becoming ever more *relevant* to the lives we live today, and it deserves more than the casual perusal or banishment from schools. Much of this is due to the fabulous character Holden: teenager, smoker, drinker, pessimist, critic, realist, thinker¹. He is² not average. He is the one that *notices* the average. He is the one to *notice* the absurdities of life. He is the one to give us, the average citizens of the world, some insight on the life we don't know we live. And because our world is increasingly complex and the essence of life getting buried deeper into the stress of schoolwork or college or a career or money or family³, he reminds us through the mistakes and realizations in his experience what it means to *live*.

When one considers the way he thinks, it is difficult to find many items out of place. Here's a chair. There's a rock. Here's her FaceBook. There's Joe's post about eating worms for a dare. But if a foreigner sees that life, the perspective will be very different. That chair will be not so ordinary⁴. That rock, perhaps not so ordinary. That FaceBook, not so ordinary. And Holden does exactly that: he takes the time to pick up what we do not see and linger on it for the time that we do not bother spending in order to realize that it is *not so ordinary*.

As much as people try to deny it, many of them *are* phonies. While there are few hygiene-less, outwardly-sloppy Ackleys in the world we live in today, there are many others who are narcissistic, selfish people like Stradlater, people whose greatness is simply superficial. Similarly, when he meets his classmate Ernest Morrow's mother, he immediately labels her as the kind of lady who boasts the false greatness of their child and are easily impressed upon—⁵ in our world, this is simply the supportive, *average* "soccer mom." They put up their "social masks" as many people do nowadays in order to fit into society and "go with the flow." Holden, however, picks this to reveal the hidden layer of falsities. He knows that many people lie, but he doesn't understand *why*. Had he been in the world of today, he would have picked off the masks of anonymous social media users, and, with a screwdriver and magnifying glass at hand, taken apart these masks and examined them closely⁶. Or, perhaps he would have simply watched from the sidelines and watched the world fall apart as people get sucked into the machine of the Internet; as they get stripped of their guilt as they post pseudonymously; as they get protected from the evils of their dishonesties by modern technology. And who knows what else he might question about this life we live? What is strange about our lives? Holden would know.

On the other hand, he also notices when simpler people—⁵ for example, the nuns he enjoys talking to—speak more naturally and more honestly. Unlike many of the other characters, he *enjoys* speaking with them. Similarly, even as she gets angry at him for getting kicked out of school or planning to leave her life, Phoebe is another character that Holden truly

¹ asyndeton ⁵ em dash ⁹ anadiplosis
² anaphora ⁶ extended metaphor
³ polysyndeton ⁷ rule of three
⁴ epistrophe ⁸ alliteration

enjoys talking to because of her honesty—⁵ and, in return, she is one of the only people who trusts Holden. Even after he accidentally smashes the record she has been waiting for, there's no blame. She knows that it was solely an accident, a slight moment, an honest mistake⁷.

And with this fact, Salinger really focuses in on the idea of “love.” Phoebe is distinguished as being the one Holden loves most by his ever-positive descriptions of her, always hinting a bright future, always far from phony⁷. Similarly, Jane was his neighbor for many years, a girl he grew up with and treated as if she were family. And although he doesn't ostensibly believe it, he loves her and every detail of her—⁵ from the kings she always leaves in the back when playing checkers to the theater outings to the fact that she loved to read— just casual little facets that truly show personality. And this is another great problem of society today. With an increasing divorce rate and families that have decreasing value to the average person, Salinger is trying to remind us what love truly is. When Holden goes out to hook up with random girls or go out with his stubborn date Sally, he gets none of the content feeling he does when he thinks about his sister. Or Jane. Or even his beloved teacher, Mr. Antolini.

In actuality, love ties strongly back into the theme of phoniness. The way Holden portrays it to us, love is not something you have to *try* to reach, nor *can* you; no, it is something altogether different. ²Love is knowing a person, getting honest with them, understanding them¹⁷. ²Love is brutal truths, occasional arguments, difficult decisions¹⁷. ²Love is something to be felt, a sense of satisfaction and true happiness, a thing to sense at the back of your mind¹⁷. It is not so simple as the movies illustrate it, nor even the best authors of dramatic novels. It is the feeling of family and belonging and watching your sister ride around that carrousel and stay a child; and, ultimately, it is the happiness that throws Holden back onto his track of life and starts his wheels spinning⁶.

And “happiness” is the almighty goal of life, correct? Or perhaps the life goal of some is to “experience”—⁵ but this includes the twin feelings of sorrow and happiness. Life is the ultimate roller coaster of ups and downs, as Holden shows very clearly with his occasional positive comments to his “It killed me”s. He finishes strong, all the way up top, but only after quite a foolish thrill ride. This supports the idea that only with sorrow can happiness come— there is a downhill for every uphill, and ups and downs are all relative to where you came from⁶. And with his proximity to the edge of the rye field of childhood and the dark, dangerous, demonic¹⁷⁸ adults, he has left quite the emotional vacancy for true contentedness. But society, optimistically headed for perfection and great leaps in modern technology with few recent disasters, is soon bound to need a lesson in hardships and sorrow.

And *Catcher in the Rye* is that lesson. And a lesson demands a teacher⁹.

Holden is our teacher, much like Clarisse was to the Montag's devastated world of overused technology. If society scorches Salinger's story^{8—5} if it allows itself to succumb to the horrors of ignorance— what will be left to stop our self-induced demise? Who better to lead us than a boy who is *willing* to see the truth in life?

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