The Praises and Criticisms of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye

debate. Critics have argued the moral issues raised by the book and the context in which it is presented. Some have argued that Salinger's tale of the human condition is fascinating and enlightening, yet incredibly depressing. The psychological battles of the novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, serve as the basis for critical argument. Caulfield's self-destruction over a period of days forces one to contemplate society's attitude toward the human condition. Salinger's portrayal of Holden, which includes incidents of depression, nervous breakdown, impulsive spending, sexual exploration, vulgarity, and other erratic behavior, have all attributed to the controversial nature of the novel. Yet the novel is not without its sharp advocates, who argue that it is a critical look at the problems facing American youth during the 1950's. When developing a comprehensive opinion of the novel, it is important to consider the praises and criticisms of The Catcher in the Rye.

When studying a piece of literature, it is meaningful to note the historical background of the piece and the time at which it was written. Two J.D. Salinger short stories, "I'm Crazy" and "Slight Rebellion off Madison," were published in periodicals during the 1940's, and introduced Holden Caulfield, the main character of The Catcher in the Rye. Both short stories were revised for later inclusion in Salinger's novel. The Catcher in the Rye was written in a literary style similar to prose, which was enhanced by the teenage slang of the 1950's. It is a widespread belief that much of Holden Caulfield's candid outlook on life reflects issues relevant to the youth of today, and thus the novel continues to be used as an educational resource in high schools throughout the nation (Davis 317-18).

The first step in reviewing criticism of The Catcher in the Rye is to study the author himself. Before his novel, J.D. Salinger was of basic non-literary status, having written for years without notice from critics or the general public. The Catcher in the Rye was his first step onto the literary playing field. This initial status left Salinger, as a serious writer, almost unique as a sort of free agent, not bound to one or more schools of critics, like many of his contemporaries were. This ability to write freely, his status as a nobody in the literary world, was Salinger's greatest asset. Rather than to scope inside Salinger's mind and create a greatness for him, we are content instead to note him for what he is:

"a beautifully deft, professional performer who gives us a chance to catch quick, half-amused, half-frightened glimpses of ourselves and our contemporaries, as he confronts us with his brilliant mirror images" (Stevenson 217).

Much of Salinger's reputation, which he acquired after publication of The Catcher in the Rye, is derived from thoughtful and sympathetic insights into both adolescence and adulthood, his use of symbolism, and his idiomatic style, which helped to reintroduce the common idiom to American literature. While the young protagonists of Salinger's stories (such as Holden Caulfield) have made him a longtime favorite of high school and university audiences, establishing Salinger as "the spokesman for the goals and values for a generation of youth during the 1950's" (qtd. in Davis 317), The Catcher in the Rye has been banned continually from schools, libraries, and bookstores due to its profanity, sexual subject matter, and rejection of some traditional American ideals. Robert Coles reflected general critical opinion of the author when he called Salinger "an original and gifted writer, a marvelous entertainer, a man free of the slogans and clichés the rest of us fall prey to" (qtd. in Davis 317).

Obviously, the bulk of praise and criticism regarding any novel or piece of literature will come from published critical reviews. When a novel or any piece of literature is published in the United States, critics from newspapers, magazines, and various other sources flock to interpret the book and critique its style. The same was true for Salinger's novel. Noted book reviewers from across America critiqued The Catcher in the Rye, bestowing both praise and criticism at different levels. Each reviewer commented on different parts of the novel, from Holden's cynicism to the apparently homosexual Mr. Antolini. The novel, like any other, was devoured and picked apart piece by piece. It is the role of the researcher, therefore, to analyze the various reviews and develop a clear understanding of the novel.

One of the most widespread criticisms of The Catcher in the Rye deals with the adolescence and repetitive nature of the main character, Holden Caulfield. Anne Goodman commented that in the course of such a lengthy novel, the reader would weary of a character such as Holden. Goodman wrote

"Holden was not quite so sensitive and perceptive as he, and his creator, thought he was" (20).

She also remarked that Holden was so completely self-centered that any other characters who wandered through the book, with the exception of Holden's sister, Phoebe, had no authenticity at all. She wrote of Salinger's novel:

"The Catcher in the Ryeis a brilliant tour-de-force, but in a writer of Salinger's undeniable talent one expects something more" (21).

Goodman did have a point in the fact that Holden was something of an over-developed character. He described himself early in the novel, and with the sureness of a "wire recording," (Goodman 20) he remained strictly in character throughout. Salinger failed in his novel to address other characters with as much detail as Holden. This is due in part to the fact that Holden tells
his own story, and also to the idea that a story told by Holden Caulfield would never describe others, as he speaks only of himself.

Reviewer James Stern of the New York Times critiqued Salinger's novel by incorporating Holden's style of speech into his review. Stern tried to imitate Holden by using short, incomplete sentences with undeveloped ideas:

"That's the way it sounds to me, Hel said (a friend of the author), and away she went with this crazy book The Catcher in the Rye. What did I tell ya, she said the next day. This Salinger, he's a short story guy. And he knows how to write about kids. This book, though, it's too long. Gets kinds of monotonous. And he should have cut out a lot about these jerks and all at that crumby school. They depress me. They really do. Salinger, he's best with real children. I mean the ones like Phoebe, his kid sister. She's a personality. Holden and little Phoebe, Hel said, they kill me. This last part about her and this Mr. Antolini, the only guy Holden ever thought he could trust, who ever took any interest in him, and who turned out queer -- that's terrific. I swear it is" (5).

Stern's goal in this review was to critique the novel for its length and its melancholy nature. He saw The Catcher in the Rye as being too depressive to be of any redeeming value to the reader. Stern did praise him, however, when he commented on Salinger's ability to write about children. Other short stories by Salinger, such as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "Franny and Zooey," are also based around children and adolescents.

Some critics have argued that Holden's character is erratic and unreliable, as he possesses many of the middle-class values that he claims to reject. Later commentators, however, have praised the wry humor of the main character, his "technical virtuosity" (qtd. in Davis 318), and the skilled mockery of verbal speech by Salinger. These critics have commented that the structure of the novel personifies Holden's unstable state of mind. Alastair Best remarked:

"There is a hard, almost classical structure underneath Holden's rambling narrative. The style, too, appears effortless; yet one wonders how much labour went into those artfully rough-hewn sentences" (qtd. in Davis 318).

A larger field of critics at the time of The Catcher in the Rye's publication in 1951 took a positive view of the novel. For example, Chicago Tribune reviewer Paul Engle commented that the story was "emotional without being sentimental, dramatic without being melodramatic, and honest without simply being obscene" (3).

Engle also wrote of the authenticity of Holden's character, the idea that his voice was typical of a teenager, never childish or written down to that age level. He praised the book in noting that it was not merely another account of adolescence, complete with general thoughts on youth and growing up. Engle wrote:

"The effort has been made to make the text, told by the boy himself, as accurate and yet as imaginative as possible. In this, it largely succeeds" (3).

Engle's viewpoint is one that is echoed by many. The Catcher in the Rye is not simply a coming-of-age novel with usual twists and turns, but rather, the unique story of a unique child. It is rare to find a character, actual or fictitious, who is as dazzling and enticing as Holden Caulfield. As Engle wrote,

"The story is engaging and believable . . . full of right observations and sharp insight, and a wonderful sort of grasp of how a boy can create his own world of fantasy and live forms" (3).

Generally, critics view the novel as Holden Caulfield's melodramatic struggle to survive in the adult world, a transition that he was supposed to make during his years at preparatory school. Some critics will point to the fact that Holden has flunked out of three Pennsylvania prep schools, and use it to symbolize the fact that he is not truly ready for adulthood (Davis 318). David Stevenson commented that the novel was written

"as the boy's comment, half-humorous, half agonizing, concerning his attempt to recapture his identity and his hopes for playing a man-about-town for a lost, partially tragic, certainly frenetic weekend" (216).

Reviewer Charles Kegel commented that the novel could be read as Holden Caulfield's "quest for communicability with his fellow man, and the hero's first person after-the-fact narration indicates . . . he has been successful in his quest" (53).

Though considered by most to be a tragedy, The Catcher in the Rye is found by some critics to be humorous, witty, and clever. The use of Chaplin-like incidents serves to keep the story hovering in ambivalence between comedy and tragedy. Whenever a character is nearing the point of no return in a Salinger piece, it is usually done by route of the comic (Stevenson 216). Other commentators have noted that much of the humor in The Catcher in the Rye comes from Holden's misconceptions about adulthood. An example is shown in Holden's relationship with an old schoolmate, Luce. Although the older man is more experienced than Holden, he is not as mature as Holden believes him to be. After an attempt at communication with Luce fails, Holden flees to Phoebe, the only person he completely trusts (Davis 318). S.N. Behrman also noted that the literalness and innocence of Holden's point of view in the face of complicated and depraved facts of life makes for the humor of the novel: haggles with unfriendly taxi-drivers, futile conversations with a prostitute in a hurly, an intellectual discussion with a man a few years older than himself, and a completely hilarious date with Sally Hayes, an old girlfriend (74).
Holden is also labeled as curious and compassionate, a true moral idealist whose attitude comes from an intense hatred of phoniness, an idea under which he lumps insincerity, snobbery, injustice, callousness, and a lot more. He is a prodigious worrier, and someone who is moved to pity quite often. Behrman wrote:

"study in the spiritual picaresque, the joinery that for the young is all one way, from holy innocence to such knowledge as the world offers, from the reality which illusion demands and thinks it sees to the illusion which reality insists, at the point of madness, we settle for" (129).

Harvey Breit of The Atlantic Bookshelf wrote of Holden Caulfield:

"(He) struck me as an urban, a transplanted Huck Finn. He has a colloquialism as marked as Huck's . . . Like Huck, Holden is neither comical or misanthrope. He is an observer. Unlike Huck, he makes judgments by the dozen, but these are not to be taken seriously; they are conceits. There is a drollery, too, that is common to both, and a quality of seeing that creates farce" (82).

It is possible, in theory, to do an entire character study comparing Holden and Huck. Both are adolescents, runaways from society, seeking independence, growth, and stability in their lives.

Another character that Holden Caulfield is compared to, though to a lesser degree than Huck Finn, is Hamlet. Like Hamlet, as Charles Kegel wrote, Holden is a "sad, screwed-up guy" (54), bothered by words which only seem true, but are really quite phony. The honesty and sincerity that Holden cannot seem to find in others he tries to maintain within himself. Holden often makes a point of using the word "really" to assert the fact that something is really so, to prove to the reader that had not become a phony himself. Holden is distressed often by the occasional realization that he too, must be phony to exist in the adult world. With regard to the insincere "Glad to've met you" formula, he comments that "if you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though" (qtd. in 54-5).

It is evident by studying the reviews of The Catcher in the Rye that most critics enjoy picking apart the character of Holden Caulfield, studying his every action and the basis for that action. Reviewers of the novel have gone to great lengths to express their opinions on Salinger's protagonist. Some consider Holden to be sympathetic, others consider him arrogant, but the large majority of them find him utterly entertaining.

In her review of The Catcher in the Rye for the New York Herald Tribune, Virgilia Peterson commented on Holden Caulfield's innocence. Peterson wrote that Holden was on the side of the angels, despite his contamination by vulgarity, lust, lies, temptations, recklessness, and cynicism. "But these are merely the devils that try him externally," she wrote, "inside, his spirit is intact" (3). Holden does not tilt against the entire adult world, for he knows that some decent citizens still remain, nor does he loathe his worst contemporaries, for he often hates to leave them. Peterson commented:

"For Holden Caulfield, despite all the realism for which he is supposedly depicted, is nevertheless a skinless perfectionist."

In addition, Peterson wrote that Salinger speaks for himself as well as his hero when he has Holden say to little Phoebe:

"I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around- nobody big I mean- except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them . . . I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all [...]" (qtd. in 3; Salinger 173).

In essence, Holden Caulfield is a good guy stuck in a bad world. He is trying to make the best of his life, though ultimately losing that battle. Whereas he aims at stability and truth, the adult world cannot survive without suspense and lies. It is a testament to his innocence and decent spirit that Holden wouldplace the safety and well-being of children as a goal in his lifetime. This serves to only re-iterate the fact that Holden is a sympathetic character, a person of high moral values who is too weak to pick himself up from a difficult situation.

S.N. Behrman, in his review for The New Yorker, also took a sharp look at Holden's personality. Behrman found Caulfield to be very self-critical, as he often refers to himself as a terrible liar, a madman, and a moron. Holden is driven crazy byphoniness, an idea under which he lumps insincerity, snobbery, injustice, callousness, and a lot more. He is a prodigious worrier, and someone who is moved to pity quite often. Behrman wrote:

"Grown men sometimes find the emblazoned obscenities of life too much for them, and leave this world indecorously, so the fact that a 16-year old boy is overwhelmed should not be surprising" (71).

Holden is also labeled as curious and compassionate, a true moral idealist whose attitude comes from an intense hatred of
...hypocrisy. The novel opens in a doctor's office, where Holden is recuperating from physical illness and a mental breakdown. In Holden's fight with Stradlater, his roommate, he reveals his moral ideals: he fears his roommate's sexual motives, and he values children for their sincerity and innocence, seeking to protect them from the phony adult society. Jane Gallagher and Allie, the younger brother of Holden who died at age 11, represent his everlasting symbols of goodness (Davis 317).

A quote by Charles Kegel seems to adequately sum up the problems of Holden Caulfield:

"Like Stephen Dedalus of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Caulfield is in search of the word. His problem is one of communication: as a teenager, he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him; as a sensitive teenager, he cannot get through others of his own age" (54).

When critics consider the character of Holden Caulfield, many point to the novel's climactic scene, when Holden watches as Phoebe rides the Central Park carousel in the rain and his illusion of protecting the innocence of children is symbolically shattered. Critics regard this episode as Holden's transition into adulthood, for although the future is uncertain, his severed ties with the dead past have enabled him to accept maturity. James Bryan observed:

"The richness in the spirit of this novel, especially of the vision, the compassion, and the humor of the narrator reveal a phycsfe far healthier than that of the boy who endured the events of the narrative. Through the telling of the story, Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past" (qtd. in Davis 318).

S.N. Behrman noted in his critique of The Catcher in the Rye that the hero and heroine of the novel, Holden's dead brother Allie and Jane Gallagher, never appear in it, but they are always in Holden's mind, together with his sister, Phoebe. These three people constitute Holden's emotional frame of reference -- the reader knows them better than the other characters Holden encounters, who are generally, except for Phoebe, nonessential (71).

When asked for a final comment on the character of Holden Caulfield, John Aldrige stated that the innocence of the main character was a combination of urban intelligence, juvenile contempt, and New Yorker sentimentalism. The only challenge it has left, therefore, is that of the genuine, the truly human, in a world which has lost both the means of adventure and the means of love (130).

One of the most intriguing points in Holden's character, related to his prolonged inability to communicate, is Holden's intention to become a deaf-mute. So repulsed is he by the phoniness around him that he wishes not to communicate with anyone, and in a passage filled with personal insight he contemplates a retreat within himself:

"I figured that I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars. I didn't care what kind of job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody. I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversation with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone . . . I'd cook all my own food, and later on, if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we'd getmarried. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a piece of paper, like everybody else" (Salinger 198).

Caulfield's inability to communicate with others is also represented symbolically in the uncompleted phone calls and undelivered messages which appear throughout the novel . . . On fifteen separate occasions, Holden gets the urge to communicate by phone, yet only four phone calls are ever completed, and even those are with unfortunate results (Kegel 55).

The final step in the critical analyzing of The Catcher in the Rye is to look at what has occurred at or near the end of the novel. John Aldrige wrote that in the end, Holden remains what he was in the beginning- cyni cal, defiant, and blind. As for the reader, there is identification but no insight, a sense of"pathos but not tragedy." This may be Salinger's intent, as Holden's world does not possess sufficient humanity to make the search for humanity dramatically feasible (131).

Other critics, however, have taken a slightly more optimistic view of the novel's conclusion. For example, S.N. Behrman remarked that Holden knows that things won't remain the same; they are dissolving, and he cannot allow himself to reconcile with it. Holden doesn't have the knowledge to trace his breakdown or the mental clarity to define it, for all he knows is that "a large avalanche of disintegration is occurring around him" (75). Yet there is some sort of exhilaration, an immense relief in the final scene at Central Park, when we know Holden will be all right. Behrman quipped:

"One day, he will probably find himself in the mood to call up Jane. He may become more tolerant of phonies . . . or even write a novel. I would like to read it. I loved this one. I mean it- I really did" (75-6).

Charles Kegel wrote that Holden will not submit to the phoniness of life, but will attain an attitude of tolerance, understanding, and love which will make his life endurable. There is no doubt that when he returns home to New York, for he will return home, he will be in the mood to give "old Jane a buzz" (56).

In the end, The Catcher in the Rye will continue to be a point of great public and critical debate. One must remember, however, in the study and critique of the novel, particularly for a researcher or critic in 1996, that the story was written in a
different time. If originally published today, the novel would probably create little publicity and garner only average book sales. The fact that a novel of such radical social opinion and observation was written in a time of conservatism in America made it all the more controversial. Some critics scolded the novel as being too pessimistic or obscene, too harsh for the society of the 1950s. Others, however, nominated Salinger himself as the top-flight "catcher in the rye" for that period in American history (Peterson 3). They argued that Salinger's concerns represented an entire generation of American youth, frustrated by the phoniness of the world, just like Holden was. The popularity of the novel and debate over its redeeming social value have never faltered since its initial publication, due in no large part to the fact that J.D. Salinger is now a recluse. It would be conclusive to say that critics of The Catcher in the Rye have legitimate criticisms of the novel, while advocates and supporters of the story's message also have expressed veritable praise.

Works Cited


If he were still alive, JD Salinger, the world’s most famous literary hermit, would surely turn his back on any brouhaha surrounding his centenary in 2019. It’s not often an idiom coined in a novel becomes a catch-phrase, but Joseph Heller managed it with his madcap, savage and hilarious tour de force. War is the ultimate dead-end for logic, and this novel explores all its absurdities as we follow US bombardier pilot Captain John Yossarian. While Heller drew on his own experience as a WWII pilot, it was the McCarthyism of the fifties that fueled the book’s glorious rage. The Catcher in the Rye is the quintessential novel of the adolescent experience, captured in deathless prose. 31/40 The Big Sleep, Raymond Chandler. The Catcher in the Rye's. Analyzing Narrative Techniques Parts I & 2. Critical Essay Plan. TCITR Scrapbook.doc. 10 - catcher - studyguide. Symbolism in the catcher in the rye. Catcher in the Rye Study Guide.doc. Memento In Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield suffers because of. Catcher in the Rye Creative Project.doc. Catcher In The Rye Background Notes. The Board of Directors wishes to emphasize that GiveWell was, is. Introductions and Conclusions. Holden Caulfield as the Unreliable Narrator. Introduction to J.D. Salinger’s: The Catcher in the Rye. Patient-engaged human factors