

The Catcher in the Rye: Exploring the Social Barriers

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Abstract

The Catcher in the Rye has garnered more literary accreditation than any other novel of its time. However, it still invites more scholarly debate and consideration. This paper examines the facets of the character Holden in his journey throughout the novel while looking at the phenomenon of social barriers and economic hierarchy as it relates to the time. In discussing these issues, this paper will expand on how Holden's journey through society as it became what it was due to the economic standing he was born into and the experiences he encountered.

Keywords: *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, social barriers, wealth, literature

The Catcher in the Rye: Exploring the Social Barriers

Introduction

Holden Caulfield has become known as one of America's classic literary protagonists. He recounts his experiences at a private school that expels him and his trip to New York City over the span of three days during the Christmas season. The novel provides a narrative from a teenager's perspective on life in an institution during the postwar era. *The Catcher in the Rye* has garnered more scholarly and critical attention than any other American novel of its time. Nevertheless, the story's social contexts always invite further consideration and possible explanations. Whitfield from the *New England Quarterly* aptly stated, "In examining Salinger's 1950s example of snobbery, privilege, class injury, and culture as a badge of superiority, *The Catcher in the Rye* mirrors the contradiction of bourgeois society." (1997). J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* explores the enduring social barriers of the early twentieth century that highlighted the unequal wealth distribution and limited economic mobility between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as seen within the journey of the character of Holden.

Historical Background

During the early twentieth century, American society saw a wave of expansion and progressivism, making it a better and safer place to live. Cities in America flourished as the allure of jobs and higher wages drew in more people. For the emerging middle class, this meant increased income and more free time. Cities offered the convenience of department stores and shopping centers as transportation improved, providing opportunities for leisure and entertainment. Still, the rising social hierarchy and class system were unjust. Filled with the hope of prosperity, many lower-class families came to cities to work in factories, only to find themselves with a diminished quality of life. With few city services to rely upon, the working

class found themselves living in overcrowding, inadequate water facilities, unpaved streets, and disease. Despite their efforts, their wages barely afforded a basic living with scarce opportunities to escape poverty from within the city (Library of Congress, 2024).

After the war, the United States underwent monumental changes, impacting every aspect of American life. Levine (2017) noted that many white Americans observed newfound social mobility, which had not escaped the notice of those who had been excluded from fully realizing the American Dream. As a result, they began to push back for their complete civil rights and freedoms. During the period following The Great Depression, the economy made significant improvements thanks to Roosevelt's New Deal programs and the financial gains from the war. As a result, the average household income more than doubled (United States Census Bureau, 2024).

Roosevelt's GI Bill of Rights provided opportunities for veterans returning home from war to attend college, purchase homes, and access other financial benefits for the first time, giving them opportunities that they would have otherwise never been able to afford (Library of Congress, 2024). America's threat of nuclear war from the Soviet Union sent shockwaves through society that led to a widespread movement where people everywhere began building bomb shelters in their backyards, preparing for a potential nuclear attack. It was a time that would be remembered for the war that aligned the country against fascism: a set of right-wing nation-states based around militarism, anti-communism, racism, and the violent hardening of existing social hierarchies (Vials, 2017). Influences of the political left in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, combined with the political nature of the enemy in its German, Italian, or Japanese guises, had little to do with the fear and confusion that dominated much of the historical background in which *The Catcher in the Rye* was written.

Literary Movement

During the time *The Catcher in the Rye* was written, authors drew on realism as a literary technique that involved the use of dialect, slang, class distinctions, and real-world implications to represent the situations they were accurately describing, coming at the tail end of the modernist literary era, which drew its inspiration from immigrant cultures and the experiences of first-generation American citizens. American readers were now getting accustomed to the writings of works that addressed class, gender, religion, and race in a redefined way, challenging social norms and breaking economic boundaries. Instead of hearing about the traditional American ideals, they began to read real stories of fragmented veterans who rebelled against America's core values. Writing began to reflect the broken spirit of the American economy influenced by rapid urbanization, industrialization, and social injustice (Eby & Reiss , 2011).

The Catcher in the Rye

Author

J.D. Salinger wrote many of his characters after himself or his upbringing. Salinger, like Holden, grew up in an upper-middle-class family. Always described as an introverted child, Salinger had a rough transition from Upper West Side public school to McBurny private school, which caused his parents to enroll him in Valley Forge Military Academy. Like his character, D.B., Salinger was a veteran, having served in World War II (Editors, 2021).

In 1946, Salinger created a short novella with the character Holden Caulfield. However, the publishing agreement fell through, turning the character into what we now know as *The Catcher in the Rye* five years later, in 1951. Salinger turned away from the success and adulation of the novel and became a recluse for nearly fifty years until he passed away at the age of ninety-one (Bickmore & Youngblood, 2014). Essentially, he seemed to fulfill Holden's desire to run

away: “I’d build me a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life” (Salinger, 1945, p. 258).

The Novel

Written in first person narrative, it was widely exalted for its expressive and disjointed interpretations of teenage angst. Repeatedly listed as one of the best novels of the twentieth century, it deals with themes of loss, innocence, belonging, class, and depression (Cioci, 2018). Upon *The Catcher in the Rye*’s initial publication, it was not an instant success. Many reviews were mixed when the novel was published on July 16, 1951, by Little Brown and Company. Critics were fairly consistent in the respect that they either praised it or criticized some aspects of it, including its seventeen-year-old narrator (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976).

The Catcher in the Rye has been translated into thirty languages worldwide and sold more than sixty-five million copies at the time of Salinger’s death (Krupnick, 2010). Each year, the novel continues to sell one million copies (Menand, 2001). Credited as one of the Times 100 best English language novels since 1923, it continues to win accolades decade after decade (Editors, 2021). Between the years of 1961 and 1982, it was the most censored book in high schools and libraries in the United States due to the vulgar language, sexual nature, blasphemy, and loose moral values Holden encourages throughout the novel (BlueBack Jr. & Corbin, 2014).

Holden struggles with his mental health while narrating the recent events in his life and his opinions on them in a disjointed manner that allows the reader to feel a certain kinship with the world he lives in, regardless of the era at the time. Holden begins the story by addressing the reader from a mental institution. He says, “I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me last Christmas just before I got run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.” (p.3). He takes the reader along on a journey from his prep school, where he has been

expelled, into New York City, where he has different exchanges with acquaintances and strangers alike, which leave different impressions on him and the world around him. The story concludes with him back at the present in the institution, reflecting on the people that he misses, tired from the experiences the world has placed upon him.

Analyzing Holden through Societal Class

In Holden's journey through the social class system, it is essentially realized that Holden seeks to find his own escape from wealth and middle-to-upper-class privilege. However, in his effort to find this escape from the class system he is privileged to be born into, he becomes the exemplification of the post-war generation of privileged schoolboys. When we met him at this stage in life, Holden had already been inundated with his own sense of socioeconomic status from his family and the values they instilled in him. These values can be seen in many ways, such as his speech, dress, residence, and ability to recognize social awareness, permitting him to anticipate experiences in the world around him (Pearlman, 1995). Holden's rejection of these values showcases his inability to come to terms with his socioeconomic class.

Red Hunting Cap

Holden employs the use of his hunting cap as a disguise of sorts, allowing him to blend seamlessly in and out of various encounters and giving him the freedom to transition between different socioeconomic statuses. In one example, "It only cost me a buck. The way I wore it...very corny, I'll admit, but I liked it that way." (p.24). He alludes to the cap being corny, out of fashion, and cheap. However, what he appreciates most about the cap is that it allows him to navigate society as someone he was not predetermined to be. When he changes back and forth between these two worlds, he tries to create a balance within his life, as most teenagers his age do. Holden's longing for something beyond superficial social inclusion speaks to an authentic

and intimate communication mirrored within the predicaments of the generation of youth that felt silenced and oppressed by contemporary ideals and ideologies that they had failed to connect with (Kinane, 2017).

In another situation, we see Holden in his dorm room with his friend Ackley,

“Up home, we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in for Chrissake,” he said. “That’s a deer shooting hat.” “Like hell it is.” I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it. “This is a people shooting hat,” I said. “I shoot people in this hat.” (p.30).

Going against the typical conformity of the societal norm is what Holden demonstrates in this context for teenagers his age. When Ackley makes fun of Holden for wearing the hat in an unusual context, Holden responds with a joke that takes a dark turn, suggesting that he would rather hunt humans instead of the typical deer. Holden’s joke seems deliberate, as if he is trying to unsettle Ackley in a satirical, almost threatening way to offset the unease that Holden feels.

In another scene, as Holden leaves Pencey for the city, the reader can see how he utilizes the cap as a familial object as a social mask. After his fight with Stradlater, he searches for the cap as a source of comfort. “I couldn’t find my hunting hat anywhere. Finally, I found it. It was under the bed. I put it on and turned the old peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then went over and took a look at my stupid face in the mirror. You never saw such gore in your life.” (p.59). He explains to the reader that he is a pacifist of sorts, having only been in two fights in his life. When he puts on the cap, it makes him feel better. Moreover, admittedly, the cap makes him feel differently from his dormmate, whom he sees views in another light after their altercation. Putting on the cap provides a societal mask of comfort and a barrier between him and

the other students at Pencey. When he feels down, the cap serves as the mask he needs to give him enough power and courage to leave Pencey.

When Holden checks into the Edmont Hotel, we see he has a preconceived notion of how people should act according to their social class. When he is in the cab, he says,

“I’d put on my hunting cap when I was in the cab, just for the hell of it, but I took it off before I checked in. I didn’t want to look like a screwball or something. Which is really ironic. I didn’t know then that the hotel was full of perverts and morons. Screwballs all over the place.” (p.79).

In examining Holden’s lack of the cap in this instance, it becomes clear how he often strives to portray himself as someone accustomed to the social status he was born into. Moreover, when Holden goes into the hotel, he understands that he does not completely comprehend all of the facets of adulthood, such as sex. Through different social interactions, he attempts to conceal the fact that he is one of the people who is “phony,” pretending their way through their social interactions with others as well as from himself.

Holden’s interaction with his sister Phoebe is seen as one of the few times he becomes vulnerable throughout the novel. “I took my hunting hat out of my coat pocket and gave it to her. She likes those kinds of crazy hats. She didn’t want to take it, but I made her. I’ll bet she slept with it on. She really likes those kinds of hats.” (p.233). Throughout the novel, Holden uses the cap as a social mask to navigate different social circles and as a source of comfort when he finds himself in uncomfortable situations. However, in this instance, we see him show his appreciation for his sister’s love and emotional support by giving her the one thing that brings him repeated comfort.

In the last chapter, Pheobe comes and takes the hunting cap and puts it back on his head. He responds by saying that it almost killed him (p.274). In this instance, Holden's use of the hunting cap symbolizes the full circle in his journey of realization in his newfound acceptance of the social consciousness and order of life.

“Phony”

Holden's largest criticism of the novel is that people are “phony.” Holden utilizes this word to imply that people are fake, bogus, inauthentic, superficial, or snobby (Dashti, 2015/03). He believes that most people in the world are phony, not only limited to specific social classes or adults but people from all sorts of walks of life. What often escapes Holden is his phoniness and its ramifications on his social engagements. By examining Holden's interaction with Mr. Spencer, it is seen how Holden rejects Mr. Spencer's belief that life must be approached as a game. When Mr. Spencer says, “Life is a game boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.” Holden's rebellion is in the response, “Game, my ass. Some game.” (p.12). Knowing that society's hierarchical views of class require people to play within a certain predisposed set of rules, this is the first time that Holden rebels against the status quo by showing his thoughts on the matter. Throughout the conversation, Holden tunes in and out, stating, “You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher.” (p.18), showing the reader his inauthenticity and phoniness. This demonstrates whether he is aware of it; he is already playing the perceived game Mr. Spencer is speaking of, regardless of his apparent desire to play.

Holden often becomes a victim of upper-class materialism, which he tries to distance himself from. For instance, when discussing the old headmaster, Mr. Haas, he states that he is the phoniest of them all. “Old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff.

It drives me crazy.” (p.19). Holden expresses his disgust for Haas, who sees people of lower socioeconomic status as inferior to him. Holden refers to Haas as “phony” because he believes that Haas’s social interactions are only meant to boost his social status. Combined with the portrayal of prep school as an environment of elitist, snobbish “hot-shots” who have a haughty view of higher education, it becomes something Holden wants to have no participation in.

Holden’s quest-like journey throughout the city takes him into low-brow activities that often occur in low-poverty or overly-populated areas. Through an intense need for companionship and his desire for something that is not “phony,” Holden begins to understand society’s need for social status and his own sensitivity to the world’s failures, compounded by his own self-disgust (Kumar, 2014). In one of the first scenes, where we see Holden’s inauthenticity, Holden meets Ernest Morrow’s mother. He battles with himself as he weighs his judgments over her and her son’s character, all while plying her with falsehoods. In feeding her the false stories of Ernest’s noble character, he does so only in an effort to satisfy his misguided sense of social estrangement from others, finding it easier to lie to them than show any signs of vulnerability. Holden’s compulsive lying becomes what he hates about others. However, in someone like Ernest’s mother, whom he genuinely likes, he still feels the undeniable need to project the image of an inauthentic mask. When Ernest’s mother offers for him to come to visit over Christmas break, he finds the thought so repugnant that he thinks up the most astounding lie he can think of so he will not have to deal with more social “phony” encounters which he has become in an effort to avoid people like Ernest Morrow.

Holden again does not realize how he has preconceived notions and judgments of others in the scene where he awaits Sally. He makes comments about the pretty women passing by, predicting that they will most likely marry boring men. This leads him to contemplate what it

means to be boring, and he reflects on his past roommate, whom he deemed boring. This critical perspective of the woman passing and the men they will marry shows his growing pessimism toward his own social phoniness and ingenuousness.

Sally and Holden's interactions show how Holden craves the desire for human contact. When he receives it from her, he resents her, deeming her "phony." He struggles to find common ground with her repeatedly, asking if she hates certain things and then describing how boys' schools are. Throughout the conversation, she remains the version of what he cannot stand in society. He continues his disillusion about the servility of his feelings for her, tumbling into a train of thought, hoping that if they ran away together, she may become what he idealistically would want her to be. When she begins to cry at his ravings, he feels a sense of relief, knowing he does not want to be with her. However, he later says, "I probably wouldn't have taken her even if she'd wanted to go with me. She wouldn't have been anybody to go with. That's the terrible part, though, is that I meant it when I asked her. That's the terrible part. I swear to God I'm a madman." (p.174). Even though he later realizes he never wanted her to go, his need for social conformity and proximity causes him to make such a rash proposal in the first place.

In one of the most pivotal chapters of the novel, Holden visits his former teacher, Mr. Antolini. Through this interaction, we see Holden's grasp on what society deems appropriate become uplifted and then shattered. When Holden and Mr. Antolini start discussing his recent expulsion from Pencey, he tries to impart some wisdom to Holden, stating that Holden is heading towards a type of fall. That the fall Holden is going towards is the kind that breaks men and makes them hit bottom. (p.243). He says that he can see Holden "dying nobly one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause." (p.244). He says that Holden's current views on society are putting him on a dangerous track that many others before him have felt. He explains

that he is not the first person to feel that people are ingenuine and inauthentic when they expect more out of society than what it is. It is only when you see everything as meaningless experiences that life truly becomes that way.

Mr. Antolini gives Holden a quote that reads, “The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.” (p.244). Mr. Antolini realizes that Holden is right to see that people are disingenuous and “phony” but that in his efforts to prove that everyone is “phony,” he will lose himself and his place in society in the process. When he tells Holden that he is not the first young person to feel this way, Holden feels relieved and appreciated for thinking that he is not alone. In saying to him, “You’re a student– whether the idea appeals to you or not. You’re in love with knowledge.” (p. 245) Holden finally sees that school is a hurdle, and he has always failed despite being very intelligent. Knowing that Mr. Antolini believes in him this way furthers his convictions that society may not be as singular as he initially thought. When they finish talking, he lies down and awakens to Mr. Antolini acting inappropriately. The drastic reversal shifts Holden's focus and thoughts of what Mr. Antolini has just said to him, returning Holden to his original train of thinking. Leaving him confused with the lasting impression that all people are “phony,” inherently insincere and driven by ulterior motives.

Holden’s Views on Wealth

Throughout the novel, we notice Salinger’s pointed use of different colloquialisms and vernaculars in a realistic portrayal of an intelligent, educated Northeastern American adolescent teenager of the time. Through his different speech patterns and interactions, we see Holden compelled to reinforce his sincerity and truthfulness in the “phony” world he interacts with (Costello, 1959).

In one of the first instances, Holden mentions his views on wealth and comments on how his brother D.B. has sold out to Hollywood. “He’s got a lot of dough, now. He didn’t use to. He used to be a regular writer when he was home...Now he’s out in Hollywood, D. B., being a prostitute.” (p.4). His views correlate with the wealth and materialism associated with the bourgeoisie, which he tries to disassociate himself from.

Holden goes through a variety of emotions in Chapter Three when it comes to wealth. At the beginning of the chapter, the reader learns about the dorms he lives in and how they got their names. Ossenburger, the guy the dorms named after, received his wealth from undertaking parlors. Holden states, “He probably just shoves them in a sack and dumps them in a river. Anyway, he gave Pencey a pile of dough, and they named our wing after him.” (p. 22). People who receive wealth and social hierarchy from the misfortune of others are one of Holden’s greatest issues regarding the order of socioeconomic class within the world.

In his quest through New York City, the reader sees his desire to experience a different economic class from the one he was born into. In Holden's exchange with Maurice and Sonny, his resentment of his wealth comes to light through the novel's different vernacular. Through his interactions with Sonny, he insinuates that she uses particular words and phrases such as “Like fun you are.” (p.123) instead of phrases that he thinks would be more likely suited to someone of her socioeconomic class and mobility. He further explains that she does not have manners, alluding to the fact that this is because she does not know any better, leaving the reader to believe that had she been raised at a better social status, she would not have been working as a prostitute. Holden's discontent with this encounter further shows how alienated he feels in his own social environment since he tried to converse with Sonny on a level he was comfortable with, but she did not accept.

After Sonny leaves and Maurice returns, Holden engages in more reckless behavior in his desire to fit into his version of what he thinks society should be. When Maurice does not hold up to the agreed-upon deal of five dollars, Holden risks bodily harm to stand his ground.

Throughout the novel, it can be seen how Holden has an apparent lassie fare attitude toward money when he says, in one instance,

“I don’t remember exactly what I had left, but it was no fortune or anything. I’d spent a king’s ransom in about two lousy weeks. I really had. I’m a spendthrift at heart. What I don’t spend, I lose. Half the time I sort of forget to pick up my change, at restaurants and night clubs and all. It drives my parents crazy. You can’t blame them.” (pg.139-140).

Alluding to the reader that money has no material meaning other than the material context it gives to others he sees exhibited in the world around him.

Often, he tries to remove himself from wealth even though he was born into it. When discussing his upbringing and his father, he says, “My father’s quite wealthy...I don’t know how much he makes—he’s never discussed that stuff with me – but I imagine quite a lot. He’s a corporate lawyer. Those boys really haul it in.” (p.140). However, whenever Holden is categorized as being wealthy, he tries to dissuade people from grouping him along with the other wealthy class people.

Further into the novel, Holden notices the nun's suitcases and is thrown into a memory of when he was at Elkton Hills and roomed with Dick Slagle. His expensive suitcases made him the subject of much criticism and great disdain. “He was always saying snotty things about them, my suitcases...Everything I had was bourgeois... Even my fountain pen was bourgeois.” (p.141). Holden expressed that the suitcases were expensive but that he did not care. Instead, he would have traded or thrown them out instead of listening to the ridicule of being bourgeois, which

shows Holden's contempt for the materialistic world around him. It becomes suggestive that the sight of a "cheap suitcase" elicits enough hatred from Holden to show his irrationality toward the material consumerism plaguing the world around him. Saying that his luggage "cost quite a pretty penny" (p.141), he shows that while he may be mildly aware of his wealth and social status, he makes every effort to remove himself from the corporate materialism the rest of the world is caught up in.

As Holden decides to put his suitcase under the bed, he prompts Slagle to bring his suitcase and put it on the rack to persuade others into thinking the Mark Cross set was his own, showing the social conflict between lower and upper-class systems. The symbolism of something as simple as a suitcase shows the portrayal of economic wealth between the two boys, eventually breaking their friendship and provoking them to seek different living situations. His shame in his wealth and economic status also enabled him later to donate money to the nuns, as he had done when he stored his suitcases. Holden's shame in his own economic mobility prompts his vulnerability in his social identity, prompting him to try to wear different masks and assert himself to escape the inevitable social order of the world around him.

Biblical Worldview

Throughout the novel, the reader is often left to ponder Holden's true feelings on God and religion. As with most things, he seems to have a certain ambivalence toward religion; in his description,

"I can't always pray when I feel like it. In the first place, I'm sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance. They annoy the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth.

They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while he was alive they were as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting him down.”

He continues by saying that in his conversation with a boy named Childs, in his belief, the Disciples repeatedly let Jesus down, finding them rather annoying. In this instance, it is seen how much Holden values the ideological core of religious belief. Furthermore, he states that his favorite character in the Bible next to Jesus was “that lunatic and all, that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones.” (p.130). Referring to Mark 5:1-20 in which Jesus restores the Demon-Possessed man Legion (King James Bible, 2020/1604). Holden sees himself as a troubled soul and identifies with the man from the tombs who cannot be tamed. In many ways, he sees himself as the madman in the story since the reader knows he narrates the story from a mental institution. At the core of its story, Holden feels the parallels to the evils of the world and that of Jesus being greater.

In this passage, Holden states that since he is an atheist, along with the other Caulfield children. His aversion to religion is not generated by religion itself but by religious organizational structures. He explains that part of his aversion to churches is with ministers who speak in “Holy Joe voices” (p.131). That if they were to only speak in their natural voices, they would not sound so “phony.” It is understandable that in Holden’s quest for what he deems to be socially acceptable, he seeks to find a religious leader who would adhere to the idealistic values of Jesus and not the overstated, materialistic society he sees around him. Holden’s oscillations between empathy and distress are signs of a man on a spiritual mission. (Mizruchi, 2015).

Conclusion

Holden’s journey in the novel revolves around his struggle for self-discovery and the pursuit of experiences that provide him with solace in a society where he feels alienated. As he

navigates through different social and economic settings, he adapts different societal personas in an effort to find his place. His belief in the individual nature of his challenges within the societal hierarchy becomes a source of solace as he endeavors to maintain his moral values by altering his outlook on the world. Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, the barriers ingrained in society serve to reinforce Holden's identity by keeping others at bay. These barriers are exemplified by the stark disparities in wealth and the restricted economic mobility between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

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