

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger

Book Information

J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye
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A cynical teenager explains the events following his expulsion from prep school and subsequent nervous breakdown.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Growing Up; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Allie Caulfield Holden's younger brother, whose death from leukemia left Holden depressed and full of anxiety

Carl Luce a former classmate of Holden from the Whooton School whom Holden questions about sex

D.B. Caulfield Holden's older brother who is a movie writer in Hollywood

Holden Caulfield the main character of the story; a sixteen-year-old boy who is dissatisfied with the hypocritical nature of society and has a mental breakdown after being expelled from school

James Castle a former classmate of Holden who committed suicide rather than take back a statement he made about a boy in his class

Jane Gallagher Holden's former girlfriend, who had an abusive family life; she goes on a date with Ward Stradlater

Mr. Antolini a teacher who offends Holden by touching him as he sleeps

Mr. Spencer an elderly teacher at Pencey Prep School whom Holden visits before leaving the school

Mrs. Morrow the mother of Ernie Morrow, one of Holden's classmates, whom Holden speaks with on the train to New York

Phoebe Caulfield Holden's younger sister, whom Holden loves and adores

Robert Ackley Holden's unkempt and obnoxious neighbor at Pencey Prep School

Sally Hayes Holden's attractive, yet shallow girlfriend in New York

Ward Stradlater Holden's popular and self-absorbed roommate at Pencey Prep School

Vocabulary

boisterous in a loud, violent, and undisciplined manner

digression a wandering from the main idea of a speech or conversation

harrowing distressing or surprising

Ivy League a league of colleges in the Northeastern United States; may also refer to the styles, attitudes, or behaviors of their students

pedagogical referring to the science of teaching

Synopsis

Holden Caulfield, the story's protagonist and narrator, tells the reader he is going to describe some of the "madman stuff" that happened to him during the time around the previous Christmas. It seems as though Holden is recovering from some sort of mental breakdown, and he proceeds to tell his story from a type of hospital or rest home near Hollywood.

He begins his story with his last night at Pencey Prep School, a prestigious boys' school that Holden claims is full of shallow, phony socialites. Holden is being expelled at Christmas vacation for failing all of his classes except English. After returning from a school fencing meet in New York City, Holden visits the home of Mr. Spencer, a caring teacher who lectures Holden about his lack of ambition. Holden leaves the Spencers' home feeling depressed and returns to his dormitory where he finds out his roommate, Ward Stradlater, is going on a date with Holden's former girlfriend, Jane Gallagher. Holden is disturbed by the thought of Jane Gallagher dating his sexually experienced roommate, but he nevertheless loans his good jacket to Stradlater and

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agrees to write an English composition for him. Holden writes a descriptive essay about his younger brother Allie's baseball mitt. Holden informs the reader that Allie had died from leukemia a few years earlier, and Holden was so hurt by this that he smashed all of the windows in the garage with his fists and needed to undergo psychoanalysis. When Stradlater returns from the date, Holden asks him if he gave Jane "the time" in the back of the car. Stradlater insinuates that he might have, and Holden furiously attacks Stradlater. The stronger Stradlater manages to sedate Holden, who decides that night to leave Pencey and spend a few days alone in New York before his parents find out about his expulsion from school.

Once in New York, Holden finds himself overcome by loneliness, boredom, and disgust with the world around him. He spends his first night in a bar, dancing with women whom he regards as superficial and ignorant. He then returns to his hotel, where he is beaten and loses ten dollars in an extortion scheme involving the elevator guy and a prostitute.

The following morning Holden calls an old girlfriend, Sally Hayes, and makes a date with her for later in the afternoon. He then meets two friendly nuns in a restaurant while eating breakfast, and he gives them ten dollars for charity. When he meets Sally, he is impressed by her good looks but is sickened by her phony charm and personality. Torn between his nagging loneliness and his aversion to most normal people, Holden asks Sally to run away with him to get married and live in a secluded cabin in Vermont. Sally says Holden has to go to college first, but Holden insists that college would just turn him into the business-class hypocrite he is trying to escape from. Sally refuses and Holden insults her.

Holden parts with Sally and makes arrangements to meet an acquaintance from his former school, Carl Luce, for drinks that night. Carl Luce meets Holden at a bar and insists that Holden's problems stem from his immaturity. Holden sees Carl as a source of vast sexual knowledge and eventually annoys Carl with personal questions about his sex life. Carl recommends that Holden see a psychoanalyst.

Holden leaves the bar drunk and decides to visit his parents' home to see if his little sister Phoebe is awake. Holden's parents are out, and Holden and Phoebe have a pleasant talk in which Holden reveals that his ideal job would be to stand in a giant rye field near a cliff and protect children who are playing from running over the edge. Holden then leaves his sister's room to visit Mr. Antolini, one of Holden's former teachers. Mr. Antolini lectures Holden about his poor choices in life but agrees to let Holden sleep on his couch. Holden is awakened from his sleep, however, to Mr. Antolini sitting next to him and stroking Holden's hair. Holden fears that Mr. Antolini may be making sexual advances towards him, and he leaves to sleep on a bench in Grand Central Station.

Holden spends the next day visiting the museum and looking for Phoebe. He seems to be becoming more unnerved, as he develops a sudden irrational fear of crossing the street. He fears that he will suddenly disappear, and he pretends to be talking to his dead brother to calm his mind. He has decided to run away from New York and fantasizes about living as a deaf-mute for the rest of his life. When he meets Phoebe to say goodbye to her, Phoebe insists that she is going with him. Holden becomes angry with her, but then decides not to run away and brings her to the park to ride the carousel. The story ends with Holden expressing uncertainty about his life and future.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

Why do you think Holden returns to New York after leaving Pencey, instead of running away to Colorado, Vermont, or Massachusetts like he often fantasizes?

Holden admits several times throughout the story that he is a coward. He also says that he is often lonely and sometimes even misses the company of people like Stradlater and Ackley, who usually annoy him. Holden has never been independent or poor, and he is not courageous enough to abandon the comfort of his family or the familiarity of New York in order to establish peace of mind.

Literary Analysis

Holden Caulfield is quick to judge other people in the story, but it is interesting to see how he evaluates himself. What is Holden's opinion of himself? Is he conceited and self-absorbed like Stradlater or honest and perceptive like Phoebe? Do you think he is as hypocritical as the people he says bother him?

In many cases, Holden is brutally honest with himself. He calls himself a liar, moron, and coward. He knows he is not strong, athletic, or in shape. Holden is constantly telling lies and making up excuses for his behavior, yet he faults most of the people he meets for being phonies and hypocrites. Some students may say that Holden is simply mimicking the phoniness surrounding him, while others may argue that he is a hypocrite for both embracing and condemning phony behavior.

Inferential Comprehension

Holden appears to lose control over his anxiety gradually until he is finally sent away to recover his mental stability. What do you think is the source of Holden's anxiety? What caused his condition to deteriorate to the point that it has?

There are many possible explanations for Holden's anxiety. One cause may be the pressures placed upon him by his upper-middle class family. Holden believes that he is expected to live up to the expectations of his father, a lawyer, and his older brother, who is a successful writer in Hollywood. Holden is not interested in being a successful capitalist, and he rebels against the bourgeois "molding" of his stuffy prep schools. Holden would like to hold on to the childhood innocence that he shared with his younger brother Allie, but Allie's death either prompted or reaffirmed Holden's fear that youth can disappear. This event most likely opened Holden's eyes to the deterioration of the world around him, and he develops a neurotic resistance to what he sees as the hypocritical American lifestyle.

Constructing Meaning

Holden is at a stage of his life when he can no longer call himself a child, but he is reluctant to step into the world of adulthood. He reacts to this inevitable loss of innocence by lashing out against the world and finding fault with nearly everything around him. Do you think Holden's behavior is normal for teenagers? Have you ever felt lonely and alienated because you were bored by adults but too old to play with children? What characteristics of Holden make him seem normal, and what characteristics show he might have a mental illness?

Students' answers may vary. Many teenagers may be able to relate to Holden's boredom with school and society. Holden's feelings of rebellion and isolation are common among teenagers. Others may feel that Holden is a little too extreme to be a "normal" teenager. Holden seems to be suffering psychological trauma because of his little brother's death, and his dark cynicism of the world may be abnormal.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Holden Caulfield is disturbed by the people in society who he sees as hypocrites and phonies. Holden even goes so far as to claim, "You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any." Have the students imagine Holden's ideal utopia, or perfect society. To do this, students will have to look for what Holden likes and dislikes about his current environment. Then have the students write a short story placed in this imaginary setting. Discussing the elements of science fiction or fantasy may help the students with this assignment. Do they think Holden could find peace in a world with no phonies (assuming the student is able to conceive such a place) or will his cynical nature continue to disturb his happiness?

Understanding the Author's Craft This book contains many literary and cultural references. Have the students research one of the people whom the book alludes to, such as Robert Burns, Isak Dinesen, Ring Lardner, Somerset Maugham, Thomas Hardy, Wilhelm Stekel, or Sir Laurence Olivier. The students may then prepare either an oral or written biography of the person. They should also formulate a theory of why J.D. Salinger probably chose to allude to this person in his novel and what Holden Caulfield may have thought of the person selected.

Extending Meaning *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most frequently banned books in the United States. Have the students research the Internet, magazine articles, or newspapers to find several cases in which this book was banned. Then have the students recreate one of these cases as a class debate. The students should split into three groups: those who wish to ban the book, those who wish to defend the book, and the school or library board who will decide the outcome of the debate. The students should research the reasons for the book's censorship and its defense and then add their own opinions to strengthen their debate.

Responding to Literature Holden's little brother Allie wrote poems inside his baseball glove so that he would "have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up to bat." Have the students read the poem "Comin' Thro the Rye" by Robert Burns. After you discuss the poem, assign each student in the class to write their own poem inspired by *The Catcher in the Rye*. You can then display the poems in the classroom by having the students write their poetry on a large paper cutout of Allie's baseball glove.