

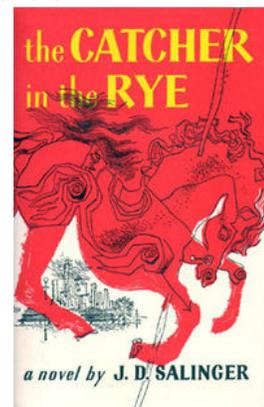
A Thematic Analysis of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* Cole Phillips

Throughout J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, we are, as readers, expected to follow the story and themes knowledgably, and based on content provided by the author's lead. The content, as it is in Salinger's seminal coming-of-age text, is relatable to its audience in large part because of its contemporary status as a high school classic. What its status as such allows for, as well, is a character and a thematic novel which are easily understood by an audience composed of students and readers going through similar experiences in life. Themes ring cogent and comprehensive, content has been cemented as perennially relatable, and the novel exists as a classic for its ability to teach life lessons in and of itself. But what, really, is the point of '*Catcher*'?

Holden Caulfield is, at times, pitiable, at times enviable, he is glib, he is thorough, he is manic, he is an eternal curmudgeon, but the character exists to personify relatability with every late teen to twenty-something in the US. What is important is to dig deeper, and beyond the issues of relation. If the reader is to come to a comprehensive understanding of the book's point, past its reputation, which masquerades almost exclusively as duplicitous, then he or she must recognize the book from beginning to end. The book deliberately begins at the end, I mean to say.

We are to understand, right from that aforementioned end at the beginning, that it is more than general laziness that has institutionalized Mr. Caulfield. Through Holden's angst-riddled eyes, the world has lost its luster in the wake of his late brother's demise, and the benefits (or lack thereof) of growing up in an ever-changing society, which his sister, Phoebe, is too innocent to realize and to which his parents are embittered. In this way, Holden plays the role of every single adolescent in history, contemplative and analytical to the point whereby the world is crumbling to its foundation, but this is not the focal point of Salinger's text. At this point, describing '*Catcher*' as a novel about growing up, or about being rebellious, is trite, but after combing through a mess of hackneyed analyses which are comparative to the contrary, we can come to the conclusion that Salinger's message is one of the dire need for preservation of innocence. Innocence is the focal theme of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Every major contemporary publication, or publication in history, for that matter, of the novel depicts the pivotal carousel on its cover, a refulgent beacon of innocence straight from a scene that is focused on the novel's poster girl for such themes, Phoebe Caulfield. And if visuals aren't conviction enough, then turn to the other aspect of the cover, right above Salinger's name. The title of the book is derived from the book's most resonating and remembered quote which defines the novel as being one of overwhelmingly innocent intent, "*Anyway, 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. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I*



*know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be.” J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*.*

From Holden denying the basest roots of rebellion in the form of prostitution, or reminiscing of enveloping his distraught, female, former friend's face in consolation kisses, and only kisses, to losing his mind at the sight of heavy cursing, Caulfield's attempts at baddassery are all *but* verisimilitude when considering his character's deepest reflective periods. In the climax of the novel, after Holden has effectively spied on his sister enough to get his fix of a naïve outlook, his former teacher makes a move on him that is, debatably, amorous. He promptly leaves, becomes debilitatingly sick, and assumes the role of openly hysterical, overly tired, overly exerted kid falling victim to the perversity of the world. These are the commonly cited, pivotal moments of the text. These are the most obvious implications of the author's thematic intentions. These are the reasons that anyone who has ever posited that *The Catcher in the Rye* is anything but a novel about a kid looking to grow younger, not older, is, simply, mistaken. '*Catcher*' is a novel about having to grow up, certainly, but '*Catcher*' is, moreover, a book about wanting to grow down.

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