

## Concept/Vocabulary Analysis for

# ***THE CATCHER IN THE RYE***

By J.D. Salinger

**Organizational Patterns:** The text is divided into 26 chapters. The chapters vary in length, but they are all relatively short. Stylistically, the author writes the way a teenager would actually speak: very candidly, but not articulately. As a result, Salinger uses very short sentence structure and frequent repetition of certain words and phrases.

### **Issues Related to the Study of Literature:**

**Themes:** The central theme of the novel is essentially **finding your place in the world** through the painful and fearful realities that accompany growing up. Holden finds himself caught between childhood and adulthood in the sticky situation of adolescence. Unlike most characters in a coming of age tale, however, Holden desperately wants to avoid maturity and finds himself craving the childhood innocence he has already lost. There are several sub-themes that play off of this main theme throughout the novel.

**Alienation and Isolation:** Holden's behavior forces a barrier between himself and other people. He refuses to try in school, insults people who should be his friends, and keeps his family shut out of his life. He is constantly depressed and lonely, yet his situation is completely self-inflicted. Perhaps as a result of Allie's death, Holden pushes everyone so far away that he will never have to feel the pain of loss again.

### **Pressure to Conform/Resistance to Conformity:**

Throughout the entire novel Holden's favorite word to describe the adult world is "phony." Holden refuses to "play by the rules" in the game of life. It is for this reason that he is flunking out of Pencey even though he is extremely bright and has potential to do well. This is evident when Holden talks with old man Spencer and Mr. Antolini, teachers who recognize his potential and cannot understand his delinquent behavior. Holden also tries to resist the world through his abhorrence of the movies and anything dealing with Hollywood, and through making plans to escape to the West and live as a deaf-mute. Holden

tries to stand out as a unique figure in every situation.

**Setting:** The bulk of the novel takes place in New York City just after World War II, with a few initial scenes occurring in Agerstown, Pennsylvania, where Holden is attending Pencey Prep School.

**Symbols: The Catcher in the Rye:** The title of the novel also acts as an important symbol throughout the text. The author first introduces us to the idea when Holden hears a little boy singing the Robert Burns song "Comin' Thro' the Rye." Holden mixes up the lyrics and misunderstands the meaning of the song. As a result, he fantasizes himself as a rescuer of children. While children play on top of a cliff, he will catch them so they will never fall. Symbolically, he wants to save children from entering the harsh realities of an adult world by protecting their innocence. This is why Holden tries to scratch out the obscenities he sees in Phoebe's elementary school and why he is so disgusted with the profanity he also sees in the Museum.

**The Ducks and Lagoon:** Throughout the entire novel Holden shows concern for the ducks in Central Park. He wonders where they go in the wintertime when the lagoon freezes over. He thinks about the ducks, asks cab drivers about the ducks, and yes, he even goes to the lagoon to look for the ducks himself. This symbol is important on various levels. First of all, it provides an example of Holden's ability to remain fascinated with a childish question. While Holden questions more adult matters of sex, death, and identity in other parts of the novel, clinging to the matter of the ducks is evidence of Holden clinging to childhood. Also, the ducks are symbolic of Holden himself in that they are forced to endure a harsh situation just as Holden is encountering the harsh realities of looming adulthood. Furthermore, the pond is in a transition state because it is not fully frozen. Holden is also in such a state because he is in between childhood and adulthood. Lastly, when Holden visits the pond he reflects a great deal on Allie's death. It is partly because of Allie's death that Holden has such an intense fear of change. Yet, the ducks leaving and returning with the change of the

seasons suggests the possibility of change not being the end, but that life will go on.

**The Red Hunting Hat:** A hat that everyone but Holden and Phoebe seems to find ridiculous, the red hat is a dual symbol. First of all it is an indicator of Holden clinging to a youthful nature. The hat also acts as a symbol of Holden's uniqueness and his resistance to conformity. He wears a hat everyone else finds atrocious for the same reason he hates the movies and flunks out of school: he doesn't want to just "fit in"; he wants to be different.

**The Museum:** The museum is emblematic of what Holden wishes the world would be like: unchanging. Holden remarks that the museum hasn't changed since he visited there as a kid. He is depressed to realize, however, that *he* has changed.

**Chronological Organization:** We learn more about the reasons behind Holden's behavior as the novel progresses. Holden will frequently say "there was this one time" and recall a brief memory from his past. This is how we learn more about the effect of Allie's death on Holden, as the emptiness he feels because of the loss of his brother is revealed. We also learn about past situations that have convinced him of the "phony" state of the world.

**Point of View/Narrative Voice:** The story is told in first person narration by Holden, the main character, who is a seventeen-year-old struggling to come to grips with the world. In the tradition of the new realism, the narration is very true to life and sounds like a teenager is actually doing the talking. Holden is very matter-of-fact and blunt in saying just how he feels about things, while also communicating his inability to figure out why he feels the way he feels. To me, this is one of the reasons the novel is brilliant.

**Irony:** In a way, Holden does escape the world at the conclusion of the novel. It is ironic, however, that this escape comes in the form of confinement to a mental institution. Another irony in the text is Holden's obsession with rejecting all of the "phonies" in the world, even though he is a self-admitted compulsive liar, making him a "phony" himself in a great deal of cases.

**Affective Issues:** In reading the novel students will be able to identify their own adolescent struggles with those of Holden.

Students will also be able to reflect on the realities of depression, the death of a loved one, and social pressure. Students will question what it means to "grow up" as well as what it means to be an individual in a society that often pushes conformity.

**Vocabulary Issues:** The biggest vocabulary issue in the book is what has made the novel such a censorship issue: profanity. The book is full of it, so it will be important to warn students about the use of language before reading begins. Make sure students understand that Holden's use of profanity is just one piece of evidence regarding his loss of innocence, and that he wants to shelter Phoebe and other children from this. Other vocabulary issues are a result of the age of the novel. Because it is set just after WWII, there will be many words and phrases that students may not be familiar with. A brief discussion of 1940s teen jargon might be necessary in order to ensure understanding.

**Major Concepts:** One of the main concepts of the novel is isolation and depression. Holden is clearly a depressed individual and this may be a touchy subject with some students. Teen depression is a very real thing, and something that will need to be addressed. Sexuality and relationships are also emphasized in the novel. Holden is a virgin and clearly believes relationships need to be more than just physical. At one point in the novel he discusses sex as "a physical and spiritual experience" with Luce. He only wants to *talk* to the prostitute who comes up to his room. He feels incredibly protective of Jane and prays Stradlater didn't take advantage of her. Also, the relationships between Holden and his family are important in the novel, particularly with Allie and Phoebe. The concept of death and loss of a loved one will also need to be addressed when teaching the novel.

**Background Knowledge:** The biggest thing students will need to understand is the cultural climate in which the novel takes place. Some discussion of the 1940s New York scene would be very helpful. Understanding of the different dance styles Holden refers to would be a great place to start. Also, students will need to know what a prep school is. In order to understand the significance of one of the concluding chapters, students will need to know what a gold ring on a carousel ride is as well. Some background information on Salinger would also be helpful, particularly since some of the novel is based on his adolescent experiences. Plus, Salinger's odd, reclusive nature

is interesting to note when reading discussing the author's relationship to the text.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:** Especially with the issue of conformity being a huge theme throughout the novel, students of various backgrounds may find it empowering to see a character unwilling to change to appease the majority. Also, Holden takes pride in his unique nature, another empowering characteristic of the text. The slang language may prove difficult for English-language learners, something that will need to be taken into consideration while teaching.

**Gender Issues:** Parts of the text can seem a bit degrading towards women. Holden's respect for women, however, should be taken into account when discussing these issues. He idolizes his younger sister, and he is constantly fretting over Jane Gallagher. Also, Holden specifically expresses how bad he feels when girls are taken advantage of.

**Things I Want Students to Remember:** For starters I want them to remember how they *felt* when they read it. This book has a special place in my heart because when I read it now I remember how I *felt* the first time I read it. One thing about this book—people either love it, or they hate it. I want students to either see a bit of themselves in Holden and embrace him as a character, or see everything they hate and be able to explain why. I want students to realize that growing up *is* hard and see something in Holden to which they can relate.

**Central Question/Enduring Issue:**

- ❖ What does leaving childhood really mean?
- ❖ What does it mean to be unique/an individual?
- ❖ How can we move on from tragedy?

There may not be a right or wrong answer to these questions, but the book addresses them all. This novel gives students an opportunity to discuss relevant and tough issues.

**Project Ideas:**

**Text to Text Connections:** While students are reading the novel, bring in other novels and stories, or a TV or film clip that addresses some of the issues found in the *Catcher in the Rye* (like reaching maturity, non-conformity, etc). Seeing these issues portrayed in a modern setting might help students connect more to the text.

**The Soundtrack:** Design a soundtrack CD for the film version of *The Catcher in the Rye*. For each song or musical piece, write out the lyrics or describe the music; then, each song

should have a paragraph of in-depth analysis. In your paragraph, explain the music's connection to the novel, using literary evidence such as: themes, symbols, motifs, and situations that Holden and the novel explored. Use quotes from the novel to explain your decisions. Make cover art for your CD and be creative!

**Journal Response:** Have students write about where they think Holden will be in ten years. Have them write their ideas in first person, with a Holden-esque flair.

**Capture Catcher on Film:** Write a screenplay and make a movie depicting a scene or two from the novel. (It can be a serious or humorous interpretation.) Be sure to include quotes from the book. Write up an explanation of what symbols, motifs, or thematic elements are in the section you chose.

**Can't Get Enough of Salinger:** Expose students to some of Salinger's short stories. Have the students compare the elements in these texts with those found in the novel.

**Holden's "Scrapbook":** Compile a scrapbook of memorabilia that Holden might have collected or come across during the novel. Include at least 10 artifacts with a caption explaining where he got it, its significance to him, and the page you found it on. Think of the images that keep recurring in the novel, the places to which Holden travels, and anything he collects. Each item should have at least a paragraph explaining its significance. Use quotes from the text to support the inclusion of your items: you will demonstrate where it was found and then explain the significance.

(Note: Many of these project ideas were taken from Ms. Gokturk at <http://www.surfturk.com/composition/cirfinalproject.html>)

#### **Research Issues:**

- ❖ Teen Depression
- ❖ J.D. Salinger, his life and writing
- ❖ The association of *The Catcher in the Rye* with John Hinckley (who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan in 1981) and Mark David Chapman (who murdered John Lennon in 1980). Hinckley told the court that his defense could be found in the novel's pages, while Chapman had asked Lennon to sign his copy of the book earlier in the same day he killed him. It would be interesting to find out the novel's involvement with both situations, and to discuss why the novel would appeal to a criminal mind.

❖ Censorship and *The Catcher in the Rye*

**Informational/Functional Texts:**

1. Historical texts to enhance understanding of the post WWII time period.
2. Biography of Salinger (The one written by his daughter is supposed to be especially good).
3. Magazine/newspaper images from the time period (It would be great to watch for some of the same terminology Holden uses throughout the novel.)

-Katie Reese, 2006