

Inspired or Intolerable?

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The Catcher in the Rye

J.D. Salinger

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Fiction

214 pages

Have you ever been told that a book is an inspired, profound piece of literature that sheds light on the many shortcomings of our society? Well don't always believe what people tell you. From the first time I heard about the book *The Catcher in the Rye*, I was told by many people that it was life changing, and the main character Holden Caulfield's views on our world were ingenious. I was excited to find out how great this book was when I started reading it. However, I slowly found myself not only disinterested in the plot, but utterly irritated by the constant droning and complaining of Holden Caulfield.

The plot of the title is essentially a memoir by Caulfield about a specific 4-5 day period. It starts with him getting kicked out of his private school, Pencey Prep. He knows he won't be returning after Christmas vacation, so he leaves a few days early after getting into a fight with his roommate. He takes a train to New York City and stays in a hotel because he wants to wait until his parents have had time to accept the fact he got kicked out. The rest of the book is Holden recounting his experiences that take place over the next few days. These experiences include him meeting new people, catching up with old acquaintances, or recalling other people he used to

know. In each of these cases one thing tends to happen quite often; Holden criticizes almost all of the people he talks about in the book.

The weakness of *The Catcher in the Rye*, for me, is definitely the character. However, being that the book is basically the character's opinions on society and people, it's a pretty prominent weakness. The character of Holden Caulfield is selfish, narrow minded, and worst of all hypocritical. He constantly gives his cynical perceptions of everyone being "phony"(a word that you literally cannot read three pages in the book without seeing), except for the few people he deems worthy enough to consider decent. In his mind, this group of people consists mostly of children, as they have a sort of innocence that he believes is destroyed as an adult. However, as much as he believes that others are selfish and fake, he makes so many childish choices that his criticisms of others are pretty much meaningless. " 'Oh I feel some concern for my future, all right. Sure. Sure, I do.' I thought about it for a minute. 'But not too much, I guess. Not too much, I guess.' " This is the first time he does something like this, when he fails out of school, putting in no effort to even try to do better, simply because he doesn't care. He sees almost everyone in the school as self-serving, and that somehow makes him not want to even try to pass a class, much less graduate.

What makes his selfishness even worse is that he is an ignorant brat. He constantly calls people out for being what he considers selfish and following the crowd. He doesn't understand that the concepts of qualitative good and bad or moral right and wrong are subjective, and even though he may see things as pointless or boring, others may not. This is also a point where his hypocrisy shows. For example, he mentions multiple times that he hates movies and shows, but there are points in the novel where he goes to see one of these things with someone. He says he hated them and that they were boring, but he could have just as easily done something else. "I'm

the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.” This line is a perfect example of his hypocritical nature. Throughout the story he talks about how he hates fake people, and he actually calls himself a liar. It doesn’t get any more on the nose than that.

In fairness to the character, he tells his story from a mental hospital, so he is not necessarily sane or reliable, but still the complaining gets old. The character somewhat relates to the writer, J.D. Salinger. Holden Caulfield seems to have been a vehicle through which Salinger expressed his views, as many characters are for their authors. Salinger, like Holden, was a very ambiguous person. He seemed to have written this novel that is considered a classic, and then pretty much go back to being unheard of. He wrote other novels, but none achieved nearly as much success as this one. After researching and finding this out, I found it strange because the only part of the novel that I really appreciated was how the writer was able to show himself through the character so well. In fact, that is the reason I think it is a classic, because while I may have found it to be boring and cynical, I did appreciate the value of the way the book was written, so when I discovered he did not write anything else that was notable, I was surprised.

I don’t think an average student would like to read this book for leisure. It probably would appeal to some people, but it is more of the kind of book you get forced to read and study, rather than a book you choose on your own. The character just has too much angst and blind judgment to enjoy reading the book. So my suggestion: don’t read *The Catcher in the Rye* unless you absolutely must, or you also believe everyone is self-serving and corrupt.