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December 8, 1999
GENG 248 Kamau

*The Catcher in the Rye*¹ is one of the most well known books of the twentieth century. It is also one of the most influential and controversial books. J.D. Salinger does a remarkable job telling of teenager Holden Caulfield and his adventures over three short days, yet the impressions the story has left on the collective heart of the world is immeasurable. Although *The Catcher in the Rye* is a wonderful story, its themes work together well in an artistic effort that make this more than just another story about a troubled teenager. From the New York City backdrop to Holden's relationships with his family and friends to the central theme of maturation, *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most powerful books to be produced this century and will be one of the few that will not be forgotten.

“Where I want to start telling is the day I left Pencey Prep. Pencey Prep is this school that is in Agerstown, Pennsylvania” (2) is how the story begins. He describes his school (the most recent in a string of prep schools he has been kicked out of) as a place full of phonies. His teachers, especially his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, the headmaster, Mr. Thurmer, and all of the other students were phony. Pencey advertises that “Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men” (2). Holden explains that this statement couldn't be further from the truth. Pencey doesn't do any more molding than any other school he has attended.

That Saturday late at night, Holden decides he has had enough of Pencey and packs his bags and leaves for good. He takes the train back home to New York City and

decides he will take a little mini vacation before going home and telling his parents that he has “gotten the ax” at *another* school. New York City is a good environment that most Americans can relate to. Everyone recognizes names like Radio City and Central Park and knows what each is. In addition to being recognizable, there is always something to do in New York City, the original city that never sleeps. Holden checks into the Edmont, a second-rate hotel full of perverts and sees himself as “the only normal bastard in the whole place—and that’s not saying much” (62). Since he is not tired, he goes downstairs to The Lavender Room, a nightclub in the hotel lounge. It is pretty empty, with the exception of “a few pimpy-looking guys, and a few whory-looking blondes” (69) but Holden still tries to meet some of the women, and dances with three of them, who have all come to New York from Seattle to see movie stars. All they could talk about was when they saw Peter Lorre the night before, and that he’s cute. Although Holden was impressed by their dancing skills, he was not interested in the women or the setting. When the club closed, even though it was very late Holden wasn’t tired and needed a change of scenery and pace.

So he took a cab to Ernie’s, a nightclub in Greenwich Village, that Holden’s older brother, D.B. used to go to before he moved to Hollywood. Ernie plays the piano, but he doesn’t talk to anyone unless the person is a hotshot or a celebrity, worthy of his time. Ernie knows he is a good piano player and even plays like he is too good for everyone. Ernie’s is also full of phonies and jerks, and one of them spots Holden. Lillian Simmons, a girl that used to date D.B., recognizes Holden and excitedly wants to know how D.B. is doing nowadays. Lillian, “strictly a phony” (86) inadvertently forces Holden to leave

¹ All references will be made to The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger. Little, Brown and Company edition. 1991

Ernie's because she insists he sit with her and her boyfriend. He can't stand the idea and says he was leaving to meet someone, so he has no choice but to leave.

Almost all of the settings depressed Holden. They were usually full of phonies. The only places that Holden liked were Central Park, which was where all the children would play, and at the museums that the children would go to on Saturday mornings. His memories were full of happier times and places. The summers spent in Maine playing tennis and golf, the times he would go to Radio City Music Hall with his siblings.

The relationships Holden has with the other characters fall into one of two categories. He either has total respect for them, or he doesn't have any respect for them but can at least admire their good qualities, if they have any. The people he really admires are those that are childish and innocent. All adults have fallen off the cliff of innocence and he has lost respect for them. He used to admire his older brother and some others but he couldn't trust them anymore because of their phoniness. He doesn't like mostly all the adults because as long as he has known them they have always tried to impress him or act superior.

Those people that Holden truly admired were few. Pencey Prep's headmaster's daughter, Selma Thurmer, although only mentioned once, gives a good outline of what Holden admires in people, "What I liked about her, she didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy her father was. She probably knew what a phony slob he was" (3). Jane Gallagher, who plays a major role in the story as an old friend whom Holden remembers. He likes the idea of her as the innocent girl that he knew. When he finds out his roommate, Stradlater is taking her out on a date, Holden reminisces about the summers they spent together, and especially the games of checkers they always

played. Upon Stradlater's arrival home from the date, Holden wants to know how she is and what they did on their date. Stradlater wouldn't go into details, and only says that they stayed in the car the entire time. Holden can't stand the idea of his roommate giving "her the time in Ed Banky's goddam car"(43) and taking her innocence, which is what keeps him from calling her for the rest of the story. He still wants to remember her as the girl that always kept her kings in the back row.

The other two people Holden truly admired were Allie and Phoebe. Allie was Holden's younger brother that died in July of 1946 of leukemia. He was only two years younger than Holden but "he was about fifty times as intelligent"(38). His teachers always said what a joy it was to have him in their class. He never got mad at anyone and was the nicest kid Holden ever knew. Allie would think of something funny at the dinner table and would laugh so hard he would fall out of his chair. He was full of innocence and only eleven when he died. Holden's most valuable possession was Allie's baseball glove. It had poems written all over it so he would have something to read while he was out in the field, and no one was up at bat. After his first night back in New York City, Holden starts talking out loud to Allie. "I do that sometimes when I get very depressed" (98). He tells Allie to get his bike and meet him in front of Bobby Fallon's house. Holden and their neighbor in Maine, Bobby, were going to go to Lake Sedebego with their BB guns and try and shoot something. In an effort to protect Allie, Holden wouldn't let him go with them, because "he was a child"(99). Holden wished he had let Allie go with them that day, and so when he talks to him now, he lets him come along. Talking to Allie calms Holden and brings a smile to his face, and works as a therapy, when the world around Holden is bringing him down.

Phoebe is Holden's younger sister, his favorite person in the world. She was only ten but she was great because she wasn't fake—"somebody with sense and all"(66). Holden always liked her and knows everyone else would like her too. She was smart, affectionate, and cute. Her childish innocence is one of the only things that consistently makes Holden happy. He can always talk to her about anything and she will always tell you what she is thinking. Holden really likes that she always knows if something is good or bad:

I mean if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about. I mean you can even take her anywhere with you. If you take her to a lousy movie, for instance, she knows it's a lousy movie. If you take her to a pretty good movie, she knows it's a pretty good movie (67).

He values his relationship with Phoebe more than any other relationship. After a night of drinking and more depressing events, Holden goes to Central Park to try and cheer himself up. But just as he gets there he drops a record he had bought for Phoebe earlier that day. "Tin Roof Blues" was an old song, and he found the record on Broadway and was very excited to give it to her, because he knows she would love it. He hangs onto the envelope full of the record's pieces to give to her anyway. It is very cold, and Holden thinks he'll probably catch pneumonia and die. He starts to think how Phoebe would feel if he should die, and how close they are, and decides he'll sneak home and see her, "in case I died and all"(156). Phoebe is the most important person in Holden's life, and he'll do anything to protect her.

The other group of people that Holden deals with are all the phonies. He uses that word frequently throughout the book. All of the phonies are the adults and peers—almost everyone he meets—who act the way they do just to impress everyone else. He

regretfully includes D.B. in this category. Although he loves D.B. dearly, he admits that D.B. has turned into a phony:

He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home...Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me (1-2).

Holden never has a problem admitting when one of these phonies has an admirable quality, but he still doesn't usually enjoy their company. Sally Hayes, a girl Holden knows, is very fake in everything she does from gushing over the play they go to see together on a date to insisting Holden should come over to her house on Christmas Eve to help trim the tree. She is a socialite whose main goal is to be popular and attractive. She succeeds in her efforts and Holden acknowledges it when one of her few qualities surfaces. When they go ice skating at Radio City she rents one of those short skating skirts so she can show off her body:

She really did look damn good in it, though. I have to admit it. And don't think she didn't know it. She kept walking ahead of me, so that I'd see how cute her little ass looked. It did look pretty cute, too. I have to admit it (129).

Holden knows he is turning into an adult, but he can't stand the idea. He never wants to be a phony, but it is getting harder and harder to avoid the inevitable. Which leads to the central theme of the book.

Holden struggles with taking the leap into adulthood. He knows he is no longer an innocent child but doesn't want anyone else to make the same mistake he made by growing up. His red hunting hat, worn backwards is one of his final attempts to stay a child. Knowing he can't ever be an innocent person anymore, he wants to be a catcher in the rye and protect other children from growing up and becoming phony. Then when he

takes Phoebe to the Carrousel in Central Park he realizes that he can't protect everyone from growing up.

When Holden is in New York City early Saturday morning with the fencing team, before the story begins, he buys a red hunting hat. He wears it often and carries it with him everywhere. He wears it when he is horsing around, and it serves as one last toy. While Ackley, his suitemate at Pencey, comes in to bother him the last day he's at Pencey, Holden starts to play to keep from getting bored:

What I did was, I pulled the old peak of my hunting hat around to the front, then pulled it way down over my eyes. That way I couldn't see a goddam thing. "I think I'm going blind...Mother darling, everything's getting so dark in here" (21).

The hat makes an appearance every time Holden acts like a child, is horsing around, or trying to keep warm. When he wears it to keep warm though, he always comments on how ridiculous he looks but doesn't care what anyone thinks, a sign that he hasn't become a phony.

When Holden sneaks into his apartment to talk with Phoebe, she asks him if there is anything he really likes, or would like to be since he got kicked out of another school and doesn't like school. He starts to explain what he wants to be (and also the central theme of the book):

You know what I'd like to be? I mean if I had my goddam choice?...I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all—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'd 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 (173).

Holden wants to protect all the innocent children he meets from the harsh reality that awaits them. When he goes to Phoebe's school to have a note sent to her to meet him during her lunch break, he notices something that drives him crazy, and makes him want to protect the children even more:

Somebody had written "Fuck you" on the wall...I thought how the little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant....I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it (201).

By this point, Holden has already begun to accept that he can't be the catcher in the rye and protect all the children from the phony world. He knows that "if you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* the 'fuck you' signs in the world. It's impossible"(202). When he meets Phoebe during her lunch, he takes her to the carousel in Central Park, a symbol of carefree days and childhood memories. He buys her a ticket to ride the carousel and wants to watch her enjoy herself. She begs him to ride with her but he knows he is too old for the carousel. Phoebe picks a horse and when the carousel starts up she reaches for the golden ring, along with the rest of the kids. Holden is afraid she might fall, but his attitude has changed. Now instead of trying to protect her, Holden realizes that if kids "want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off"(211). He has accepted that kids need to grow up and that they should simply enjoy their childhood while they can.

J.D. Salinger does an amazing job of telling a story with so many intertwined themes. All of the elements are crucial to the story. Holden has fallen into adulthood and has accepted it. His relationship with Phoebe is better than ever, and he no longer is constantly worrying about the children he sees. He knows everything is going to work out in the long run. The artistic efforts Salinger puts into this story might not be

appreciated after simply one general reading. Upon closer reading, the audience will pick up something new every time a passage is read, and how it relates to the entire story. J.D. Salinger's brilliance is appreciated by the world, and *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most important works in contemporary American Literature.