

Summary of the Work:

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger is a coming of age novel in which readers follow the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, through a pivotal three days in his unraveling teenage life. The novel is set in post-World War II Manhattan and Holden, who has been expelled from several prep schools, is struggling to find meaning and truth in a world he sees as full of “phonies.” Holden’s struggles with becoming a young adult make the book a particularly appropriate choice for high school readers.

Rationale:

Wikipedia: “partially published in serial form in 1945–1946 and as a novel in 1951. It was originally intended for adults but is often read by adolescents for its themes of [angst](#), [alienation](#), and as a critique of superficiality in society.^{[4][5]} It has been translated widely.^[6] About one million copies are sold each year, with total sales of more than 65 million books.^[7] The novel's protagonist [Holden Caulfield](#) has become an icon for teenage rebellion.^[8] The novel also deals with complex issues of innocence, identity, belonging, loss, connection, sex, and depression.”

Students will grapple with the theme of fear as it is developed in the novel, wrestling specifically with the consequences of making decisions based on fear and anxiety. Additionally, students will trace the themes of innocence and corruption, exploring the impact of corruption on our lives.

The novel works well in a senior-level English class (AP Literature; College Literature) not only for its themes but its technique. Initially, students react (often unfavorably) to protagonist Holden’s angst, whininess, and hypocrisy. But gradually, through Salinger’s powers of colloquial delivery, students take on deeper discussions of authentic voice, point of view, and symbolic meaning. For example, ask students to wrestle with why Holden worries about the ducks in Central Park. Then try to get them to think of Holden’s family situation and the question of who is really looking out for him. Then try to have them discern the juxtaposition of Holden and the ducks. Critic Amanda Parrish Morgan writes “Holden avoids his parents because he’s afraid he’ll be in trouble for failing out of Pencey, but that Holden’s real struggle is that he has no real home to which he *could* return in an emotionally meaningful way. I’m not sure if some students are taught, as D’Ambrosio theorizes, that Holden doesn’t go home because he’s avoiding parental consequences, but I do think D’Ambrosio is right to point out something central that’s often overlooked or left unsaid: that Holden’s expulsion, not just from Pencey, but from childhood itself means he never will have a place to go.”

Additionally, the concept of epiphany is another excellent angle by which to approach the text. Once students grasp the significance of the title and then Holden’s epiphany while watching sister Phoebe on the carousel at the end of the novel, they come to have a full appreciation of the themes and threads that make the Salinger’s classic universal to all readers.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Critic Charles D’Ambrosio claims what “makes *The Catcher in the Rye* something special, an intense and fierce and intimate look at a character who arouses in readers—me, let’s say—a level of sympathetic identification...” is that Salinger has enormous empathy for a character whose source of suffering is feeling “too much.”

“What’s salient in *The Catcher in the Rye*,” D’Ambrosio points out, “is that Holden achieves a fragile truce between hating himself and hating the world,” suggesting that Holden’s love for his little sister Phoebe and his deceased brother Allie [for starters] is how they both embody innocence.”

Critic Amanda Parrish Morgan:

“Holden’s expulsion from childhood *is* in some ways routine. The falseness of the adult world, the feeling of being alienated from both childhood and adulthood, and a simultaneous desire to mock and seek out human connection are hallmarks of adolescence. But, Holden’s expulsion from childhood is also circumstantial. His little brother dies of cancer. To write off Holden as an angsty adolescent is to misunderstand the real losses he’s suffered and to underestimate how torn he is between a desire to connect and the desire to separate.”

**Noted Distinction:
Readability**

- Lexile Score: 790

Learning Resources Guidelines

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

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Connection to the Curriculum:

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)