

# Symbols in The Catcher in the Rye

**The Catcher in the Rye:** The novel's most important symbol is found in the title. Holden explains to Phoebe that all he wants to be is the catcher in the rye. He pictures himself wearing a giant mitt, ready to catch kids as they fall off a cliff while playing in the rye. The kids represent childhood. The field represents innocence. The fall from the cliff represents the fall from innocence. Holden represents the attempt to shelter kids from growing up, and more personally, represents his desire to avoid the harshness of adult life.

**The Catcher in the Rye, Part 2:** The symbol is ironic. Holden mistakes the words in the song, much in the same way he mistakes the cause of his torment--it comes from himself, not from others. He thinks the words are "if a body catch a body comin' through the rye." The actual words are "if a body meet a body comin' through the rye" and is a justification for casual sex. It is ironic, too, that Holden's avoidance of adulthood and his resistance to the "phony" adult world is setting himself up for a fall, as pointed out by Mr. Antolini.

**Allie's Baseball Mitt:** Holden chooses to describe his younger brother's baseball mitt, covered in poems, for the composition he writes for his roommate, Stradlater. Allie had died several years earlier and his death made a lasting impression on Holden. It represents innocence and goodness. Stradlater's anger at the description and Holden's subsequent ripping up of the composition serves as a reminder of Holden's isolation and his loss of childhood innocence.

**Holden's Red Hunting Hat:** Holden's hat symbolizes his independence. He mentions the hat every time he wears it, symbolic of his desire to mention how independent he is. The fact that he often takes it off when around people he knows highlights his conflict between wanting isolation and wanting companionship. It is inseparable from our image of Holden, with good reason: it is a symbol of his uniqueness and individuality. The hat is outlandish, and it shows that Holden desires to be different from everyone around him. At the same time, he is very self-conscious about the hat—he always mentions when he is wearing it, and he often doesn't wear it if he is going to be around people he knows. The presence of the hat, therefore, mirrors the central conflict in the book: Holden's need for isolation versus his need for companionship. It is worth noting that the hat's color, red, is the same as that of Allie's and Phoebe's hair. Perhaps Holden associates it with the innocence and purity he believes these characters represent and wears it as a way to connect to them. He never explicitly comments on the hat's significance other than to mention its unusual appearance.

**The Museum of Natural History:** Holden finds the museum appealing because everything in it stays the same. It represents Holden's desire to keep everything the same. Holden tells us the symbolic meaning of the museum's displays: they appeal to him because they are frozen and unchanging. He also mentions that he is troubled by the fact that he has changed every time he returns to them. The museum represents the world Holden wishes he could live in: it's the world of his "catcher in the rye" fantasy, a world where nothing ever changes, where everything is simple, understandable, and infinite. Holden is terrified by the unpredictable challenges of the

world—he hates conflict, he is confused by Allie's senseless death, and he fears interaction with other people.

**The Profane Graffiti:** Holden is shocked to see "F&^\* You" written on the walls of Phoebe's school. He rubs it out with his hand so the kids at the school won't be exposed to it and wonder what it means. He later finds it written in another part of the school and then again at the Museum of Natural History. It represents Holden's inability to prevent the loss of innocence in others. The taunting nature of the phrase represents his own inability to protect himself from the trials of adulthood.

**The Ducks in Central Park:** Holden's curiosity about where the ducks go during the winter reveals a genuine, more youthful side to his character. For most of the book, he sounds like a grumpy old man who is angry at the world, but his search for the ducks represents the curiosity of youth and a joyful willingness to encounter the mysteries of the world. It is a memorable moment, because Holden clearly lacks such willingness in other aspects of his life. The ducks and their pond are symbolic in several ways. Their mysterious perseverance in the face of an inhospitable environment resonates with Holden's understanding of his own situation. In addition, the ducks prove that some vanishings are only temporary. Traumatized and made acutely aware of the fragility of life by his brother Allie's death, Holden is terrified by the idea of change and disappearance. The ducks vanish every winter, but they return every spring, thus symbolizing change that isn't permanent, but cyclical. Finally, the pond itself becomes a minor metaphor for the world as Holden sees it, because it is "partly frozen and partly not frozen." The pond is in transition between two states, just as Holden is in transition between childhood and adulthood.

#### **Death:**

Holden also seems to have an obsession with death. Most people contemplate death, but his obsession with the subject seems disturbing. The first death he has to deal with is his brother, Allie's. Holden carries his dead brother's baseball mitt with him where ever he goes. He reads the [poetry](#) that Allie wrote on it before he died. Another death that Holden also has to deal with is his classmate's death. His classmate's name was James Castle. He doesn't even know this guy, but yet he lends his turtleneck to this guy.

#### **The Moral Values of Holden in Catcher in the Rye**

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger portrays Holden Caulfield as a teenager with definite moral values. Holden firmly believes in having respect for women, protecting the innocence of children, and being an honest and unpretentious person.

In the novel, Holden is shown as appreciating women and having a great respect for them. For example, when Holden realizes that Stradlater did not truly care about Jane and only wanted "to give her the time," he became quite angry. Holden said that, "... he (Stradlater) thought he could give the time to anybody he felt like" (44). During the incident when Jane began crying after Mr. Cudahy came out, Holden got very upset because he suspected Mr. Cudahy of somehow hurting Jane. His feelings of

hate towards what Cudahy may have done to Jane are seen when Holden said, " I asked her...if Mr. Cudahy...had ever tried to get wise with her. ...I wouldn't have put it past that Cudahy bastard" (79)

Throughout the book, Salinger emphasizes how much Holden wants to protect the innocence of children. One occurrence of this is when Holden went to Phoebe's school and found "fuck you" written on the wall. He was infuriated because he knew all the children would see it. He said, " Somebody'd written 'Fuck you' on the wall. It damn near drove me crazy" (201). Holden wiped it off because he wanted to protect the children from seeing it. In fact, the title of the book deals with Holden wanting to protect kids. Holden told Phoebe, "...I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff... I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (173). I believe the cliff represents innocence, and Holden wants to keep the kids from falling off and losing it.

Salinger stresses Holden's feelings about phony people and honesty more often than any other value Holden holds. Holden values people that act the way they really feel rather than being pretentious. He has negative feelings for anyone that acts otherwise. Throughout the book, Holden talks about being tired of phonies and wanting people to be honest. Of the many times Salinger shows these feelings, one is when Holden is discussing living out west in his own place. He hates phony people so much that he said, "If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn't stay" (205). When Holden is on his date with Sally and he begins to talk about George, he mentions "I could see them all sitting around in some bar, with their goddam checkered vests, criticizing shows and books and women in those tired, snobby voices" (128). These are the type of phonies that Holden says he despises because they only do things that make them look good.

The Catcher in the Rye clearly presents Holden's value system as being distinct and fairly unique. It is obvious that Holden feels having great respect for women, protecting children from the bad things in life, and being honest about who you are and how you feel are some of the most important things in life.

### **Manic-Depressive Behavior Exhibited in The Catcher in the Rye**

The Catcher in the Rye, by J.D. Salinger, portrays Holden Caulfield a New York City teenager in the 1950's as a manic-depressive. Holden's depression starts with the death of his brother, Allie. Holden is expelled from numerous schools due to his poor academics which are brought on by his depression. Manic depression, compulsive lying, and immaturity throughout the novel characterize Holden.

Events in Holden's life lead him to become depressed. Holden's depression centers on Allie. The manner that Holden sees himself and how he sees others leads him to be expelled from school. The speaker expresses, "One thing about packing depressed me a little," (51). Holden expresses these feelings when he packs his bags after being notified that he is expelled. Holden leaves [school](#) and heads for New York City, where he finds himself to be more lonely and depressed than ever. He is all alone and he laments, " What I really felt like

doing was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out of the window," (104). Holden says this while he is all alone in his motel room. He is too ashamed of himself to return home, he knows that his mother will be upset and his [father](#) will be angry with him. He also adds that "I wasn't feeling sleepy or anything, but I was feeling sort of lousy. Depressed and all, I almost wished I was dead," (90). Holden states this during one of the first nights that he is staying in New York. Holden expresses many thoughts of depression.

Compulsive lying is another characteristic that Holden exhibits. Holden would tell people lies just so they could not become closer to the real Holden. Holden tells lies on numerous occasions to gain. Holden pathetically tells Mrs. Morrow, "I have to have a tiny operation... it isn't very serious. I have this tiny [little](#) tumor on my brain" (58). She tells Holden that she is very sorry and she is hopeful that he shall be well soon. Holden then catches himself in a lie and he remarks, "Once I get started, I can go on for hours if I feel like it," (58). This compulsive lying shows that Holden is not satisfied with himself and that he feels that people will judge him critically.

Holden is also a very immature person. He becomes very jealous and he pretends that recess is everywhere. Holden shows his jealousy when he finds out that his roommate is dating Jane Gallagher. Jane is Holden's next door neighbor. He confessed, "I could hardly keep my voice from shaking all over the place. Boy, was I getting nervous" (42). Holden expresses these feelings to the reader while he is talking to Stradlater about Jane. The jealousy and immaturity of Holden leads them into a fight. Holden is also immature in the relationships that he has with females. He explains the cab ride to the theater with Sally, "We horsed around a little bit in the cab on the way over to the theater. At first she didn't want to, because she had her lipstick on and all, but I was being seductive as hell and she didn't have any alternative"(125). He continues to tell her how much he loved her and then he regrets saying that because he really does not.

Holden's depression, immaturity, and suicidal thoughts lead Holden to the rest home where he tells this story. The characteristics that Holden portrays lead him to being expelled from school, problems with his parents, and problems in his social life. Had Holden not been suicidal and immature he would.