

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE: A CRITIQUE OF HUMAN NATURE THROUGH THE EYES OF A TEENAGER

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ABSTRACT

Teenagers are generally full of vitality and energy. This advantage allows them to conquer the world literally, experience new insights, gain wisdom, and acquire knowledge. J.D. Salinger's teenage protagonist Holden Caulfield, goes through a similar ordeal as he explores the complex human world through his teenage eyes.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* revolves around Holden's encounters with people belonging to different backgrounds, professions, age, and gender. Holden does a meticulous analysis of the people he comes across, and in the process, notices the general psychological characteristics, feelings, and behavioral traits of mankind. He divides the people around him into two categories, the 'phonies,' and the authentic. Holden refers to a phony as someone who is superficial, hypocrite, fake, or has manifestations of conformity. A person's age, gender, and occupation, play an important role in how Holden interacts with them. He alters and modifies his own identity, tone, style, and behavior according to the personality and background of the person he is interacting with. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how a teenager of sixteen years old forms his generalized opinions on human nature based on his observations on particular people around him. Since Holden himself is the narrator of the novel, his thoughts and views on people are expressed to the reader through interior monologue.

Keywords: 'phony', human nature, superficiality, perspective

AIM:

The aim of this paper is to present a teenager's perspective of looking at the people around him and his anatomization of human nature.

OBEJCTIVE:

The objective here is to explore the nature of human beings belonging to different categories.

LITERARY REVIEW

Narrating the story of a young man coming of age, trying to understand the human failings of those around him, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is not only the writer's claim to fame, but also one of the most celebrated teenage classics since its publication in 1951. Ever since its publication the novel has been constantly scrutinized by both lovers and haters alike. The work on the one hand has been praised for being ahead of its time, for depicting issues that the readers can relate to, while on the other hand the novel has been listed as the number four most banned books in the United States by *Time Magazine*. People who are critical of the book being taught in school point to the work's language and questionable morals. The novel along with being the most popular is also the most controversial work. The cynics have gone as far as to link the novel to the assassination attempt on President Reagan and the killing of John Lennon, supposedly inspiring those troubled readers in their unspeakable tasks. However, famous or infamous *The Catcher in the Rye* has become more than a novel, it has become its own literary device. While many praise the protagonist's sardonic and realistic expression of human condition as genuine, even self-reflective portrait, others criticize him for being too pessimistic about life and people due to his own depressed state. Jennifer Schuessler in her article, 'Get a Life, Holden Caulfield', writes, Harcourt Brace, the publishing house that originally solicited 'The Catcher in the Rye,' turned it down, saying it wasn't clear whether Holden was supposed to be crazy. Later highbrow critics like Joan Didion and George Steiner mocked his moral shallowness and 'relatability.'

She declares Holden as an irrelevant hero for the present and upcoming generations, as "Today's pop culture heroes, it seems, are the nerds who conquer the world like Harry [J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter] not the beautiful losers who reject it" (Schuessler). Some other critics also share her viewpoint, for example, Stephanie Savage, an executive producer of the 'Gossip Girl' television series, who said in an interview with National Public Radio, that in Holden's world "you can either go to the carousel in Central Park, or you can choose the Wicker Bar. You can have a skating date, or you can have a prostitute come up to your hotel room. There's really not that sense of teen culture that there is now." Regarding Holden's value judgments on people, Barbara Feinberg, an expert on children's literature who has attended numerous class discussions of *The Catcher in the Rye*, writes, "Holden is somewhat a victim of the current trend in applying ever more mechanistic approaches to understanding human behavior." The book has been criticized from various other perspectives; some argue that it is depressing, plotless, while others think that the book is vulgar, irrelevant, and negative, showcasing a cynical and unhealthy protagonist.

Amanda Parrish Morgan, on the other hand, comes to the book's defense and writes in her essay, 'In Defense of The Catcher in the Rye', "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." The book has also been praised by many for being an enlightening and fascinating tale of human condition.

One can go on and on and find numerous arguments in favor of and against the content of the novel. Yes it is a novel dealing with teenage issues with which many young readers can relate to, and yes it is depressing to read and has some vulgar language too, but what everyone fails to notice or overlooks, is the interpretation of basic human nature done by a teenager. Readers, teenagers and adults alike will realize as they read the novel that Holden has an ability to survey and form accurate estimations of the personality and behavior of different types of humans, and many readers would even agree with his conclusions. It is interesting

to note that Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, besides dealing with the obvious teenage issues of frustration, alienation, rebellion, and depression, is also a useful scrutiny of human nature.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following research has been done by using the method of qualitative analysis. With the help of textual analysis, this paper brings to surface one of the lesser discussed approaches made towards the novel. The type of textual analysis used here is content analysis as the research has been done by analyzing and studying existing information available in essays, books, articles and discussions. The research hypotheses of this paper has been designed after going through a process of serious critical thinking and thoughtful reflection. By using empirical method of critical thinking and in-depth study of the novel, this project sheds light on one of the major but neglected themes of the novel, that is, a teenager's examination of human nature.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.D. Salinger: The Literary Recluse

"I almost always write about very young people"

--J.D. Salinger

Jerome David Salinger (1919-2010) was one of the literary giants of modern American literature. Despite his slim body of work and solitary lifestyle, Salinger was one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. His works, especially his landmark novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, left a mark on the minds of the American readers and set a new course for literature in post-World War II America. His short stories, many of which were published in the *New Yorker*, motivated writers such as John Updike, Philip Roth and Harold Brodkey to take up literary careers.

Salinger—or Sonny as he was known as a child—was born in Manhattan, New York on January 1st 1919. His father, Sol Salinger was Jewish who ran a flourishing cheese and ham import business; and his mother, Miriam was Scotch-Irish. Despite being intelligent young Salinger was not much of a student. His father enrolled him at Valley Forge Military Academy near Wayne, Pennsylvania in 1934 after he flunked out of the McBurney School near his home in New York's Upper West Side. Salinger actively participated in a number of extracurricular activities during his stay at the Academy—he is also credited with composing the words to the school's anthem. He graduated from Valley Forge in June 1936. In 1938, Salinger joined Ursinus College at Pennsylvania where he kept his literary interests alive by contributing a humorous column to the college's weekly newspaper. However, being an intelligent and sensitive man, Salinger did not adjust well to the rules and regulations of a college life and education and therefore left college after only one semester. His outlook and attitude towards the system of education is reflected in much of his writing, where one can find a pattern throughout his work of impatience with formal learning and academic types.

Nevertheless, he attended Columbia University in 1939, where he participated in a class on short story writing taught by Whit Burnett (1899-1973). Whit Burnett, a writer and the editor of *Story* brought a huge change in Salinger's life. It was in the *Story* that Salinger's first story, 'The Young folks' was published in 1940. Encouraged by the success of this effort, Salinger continued to write and soon his works started appearing not just in *Story*, but in other big-name publications like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Just when his career had started to take off, World War II interrupted his life. Salinger, like many other young Americans entered military service in 1942 and served until the end of the war. He continued to write and publish while in the army, carrying a portable typewriter with him in the back of his jeep. After returning to the U.S., Salinger's career as a serious fiction writer soared. In 1946, the *New Yorker* published his story, 'Slight Rebellion off Madison', which was later written to become a part of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The Catcher in the Rye, published in 1951, turned out to be a huge success. In 1953, with the publication of *Nine Stories*, a collection of previously published short stories Salinger began to attract serious critical attention. The same year Salinger retired to a secluded, ninety-acre place in Cornish, New Hampshire. There, Salinger did his best to cut-off contact with public and significantly slowed his literary output.

In the early 1960s, two collections of his work, 'Franny and Zooey' and 'Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters'—all of which had appeared in the *New Yorker*—were published in book form. In the June 19, 1965 edition of the *New Yorker* nearly the entire issue was dedicated to a new short story, 'Hapworth 16, 1924.' To the dismay of many anxious readers, 'Hapworth' was the last Salinger piece ever to be published while he was still alive. Salinger died of natural causes at his home in New Hampshire on January 27, 2010.

One of the most distinguishing features of Salinger's writing is his language, especially his energetic, realistically sparse dialogue. He understood and identified closely with his characters, and used techniques such as interior monologue, letters and extended telephone calls to display his gift of writing effective dialogues. Alienation, isolation, loss of innocence and death are some of the recurring themes in Salinger's works.

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE: A SYNOPSIS

J.D. Salinger's masterpiece *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is a classic novel of teenage angst and rebellion.

The protagonist-cum-narrator of the novel is a sixteen year old American boy named Holden Caulfield. The story of the novel is set around the 1950s and is in the form of a flashback. Holden, currently in psychiatric care, recounts what happened to him last Christmas, although clearly stating at the very beginning of the novel that he does not intend the novel to serve as his life story. In the rest of the novel Holden gives a detailed two-day account of his life after he was expelled from prep school.

The story begins with Holden at Pencey Prep School on his way to the house of Mr. Spencer, his history teacher to say goodbye. Holden informs his readers that he has been expelled from school for failing most of his exams. After visiting Spencer, he returns to his room in the hostel, where he encounters his roommate, Ward Stradlater. Stradlater asks Holden to write an essay for him for his English class while he goes on a date with one of Holden's longtime friend, Jane Gallagher. Having agreed, Holden writes about the baseball glove of his younger brother, Allie, who had died of leukemia. However Stradlater disapproves of the essay. Holden gets angry at this and it gets worse when Stradlater refuses to tell Holden whether he had sex with Jane. Troubled and angry at the day's events, Holden storms out and leaves Pencey for New York City, a few days earlier than planned for Christmas break.

However on arriving in New York, Holden does not go to his home as his parents do not know yet about his expulsion from school. Instead, he wanders around the city of New York, staying in hotels and visiting nightclubs and bars. During this expedition, he goes through varied experiences and comes across different varieties of people, including teachers, prostitutes, nuns, old friends, etc. "Confused and disillusioned, Holden searches for truth and rails against the 'phoniness' of the adult world" (Lohnes).

After his adventures in the city, Holden sneaks into his family's apartment one night to visit his little sister, Phoebe. Phoebe gets upset when she hears of Holden's expulsion. It is at this point that Holden describes to his sister his fantasy of being "the catcher in the rye," which was inspired by a song he heard a little boy singing: "If a body catch a body comin' through the rye." Phoebe corrects him and tells him that the words are "if a body meet a body coming through the rye," from a poem by Robert Burns. Soon Holden sneaks out of the house as they hear their parents come home after a night out. Holden then spends the night at the house of his former English teacher, Mr. Antolini. However he leaves his house in disappointment and heads to Grand Central Station, where he spends the rest of the night.

On awakening Holden goes to Phoebe's school and leaves a note telling her that he plans to run away and asking her to meet him at a museum during lunch break. Phoebe arrives with a packed bag and insists on going with him. He refuses to do so and instead takes her to the zoo, where he watches her ride the carousel in the pouring rain. This is where the flashback ends. His exhausted and emotionally unstable state lands him in psychiatric care which is where the novel starts in the beginning. The novel closes with Holden explaining that he has fallen 'sick' but is expected to go to a new school in the fall.

As its title indicates, the main message of *The Catcher in the Rye* is the protection of innocence, especially of children. For most of the book, the protagonist sees the innocence of young generation as a primary virtue which he feels needs to be protected from the 'phoniness' of the adult world.

INTRODUCTION

Going through adolescent age is the most challenging part of anyone's life. This is the phase of our life where we are stuck in an 'in-between' zone, counted neither among the children nor among the adults. During this period of metamorphosis teenagers not only go through a lot of physical and emotional change, but also begin to see the world and the people around them in a new light. Teenagers start noticing minute details of people's character and their behavior, and form their own views and opinions about their nature. They start seeing human beings for what they really are; and through this process they get their first taste of adulthood.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger explores this teenage view of the world and the nature of humans living in it, through the eyes of his teenage protagonist, Holden Caulfield. *The Catcher in the Rye*, even after sixty years of its publication remains one of the most acclaimed as well as one of the most criticized works of American Literature. Jennifer Schuessler in her editorial, 'Get a Life, Holden Caulfield,' writes that *The Catcher in the Rye* 'has lost favor' with teens these days, as the youth today can no longer connect or sympathize with Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of the novel. Though it is true that the time and environment in which teenagers now live and grow has drastically changed, a teenager's outlook on other human beings is still the same. Even today adolescents, in an effort to understand the world in which they live, judge the people around them by their looks, age and behavior and estimate basic human nature. *The Catcher in the Rye* is still relevant not only because it is a novel of 'teenage angst and rebellion' but also an important study of human nature by a teenage.

Over the ages, the ancient Greeks, the world religions, the European Enlightenment thinkers of the 1600's and 1700's, and modern-day scientists have all presented their theories on human nature. However, human nature still remains a complex thing and is not easy to define. It is typically defined as the tendency of humans to behave in certain ways in certain situations, that is, to act according to their surroundings. In simple terms, 'human nature' refers to the essence of humanity, that is, what it is to be a human; it refers to the patterns of behavior that are typical of our species or our kind. Now, as humans grow, their nature seems to change. The environment in which the person grows, his/her occupation, age, gender, and upbringing determine the physical and emotional characteristics of that person, his/her views and reactions to particular situations, or simply, his nature. Therefore people from a certain age group or occupation might behave in a particular way and those from a different age group or occupation might react in a completely distinct manner. Robert Greene in his book, *The Laws of Human Nature* (2018) provides different aspects of humanity through the lens of history, philosophy, psychology, and wisdom to explain how people behave. Greene states that human nature is composed of both good and evil—as kind, sympathetic, caring, but at the same time, we are deceptive, trying to appear generous, nice, and polite to hide the mean-spiritedness, and when we aim to please, it is often out of greed or weakness—and Greene through his book ensures that if humans face facts and learn to act on what they observe, they can make greatness out of basic human flaws.

Holden Caulfield, though a teenage, makes a true assessment of the way of the world and presents a veracious evaluation of the nature of human beings belonging to different categories through the course of the novel.

ANALYSIS THE 'PHONY' NATURE OF HUMANS

'Phoniness,' which is probably the most famous phrase in *The Catcher in the Rye*, is one of Holden Caulfield's favorite concepts. It is his catch-all for describing the superficiality, hypocrisy, pretention, and shallowness that he encounters in the world around him.

Throughout the novel Holden meets and interacts with distinct individuals and concludes in every case that, humans are by nature capricious, pretentious, and conceited. For instance, he finds repugnant the difference between the manner in which his teachers act in a classroom and how they conduct themselves in other settings. While wandering through the gleaming city of New York, Holden comes across different varieties of girls and makes careful notes on them, "Girls with their legs crossed, girls with lousy legs, girls that looked like swell girls, girls that looked like bitches if you knew them" (Salinger 160). He makes a careful observation of the boys as well, "Guys that always talk about how many miles they get to a gallon in their goddam cars. Guys that get sore and childish as hell if you beat them at golf, or even just some stupid game like ping-pong. Guys that are very mean. Guys that never read books. Guys that are very boring – [...]" (Salinger 160).

Holden also surveys different types of cab drivers and categorizes them into two distinct groups, those who are lousy and least interested in striking a conversation, and others who are irascible, inarticulate, too touchy but better at conversation. Through a series of disillusioning experiences, Holden discovers dumb, showy people who "always clap for the wrong things" (Salinger 110), crooked, phony people who act like they are innocent and kind, and "morons that laugh like hyenas in the movies at stuff that isn't funny" (Salinger 110).

Like almost all of Salinger's protagonists, Holden is clearly superior to his surroundings; he functions by dint of his pure sight, his innocence and sensibility, as initiate in and conscience of the world of the novel. Allowing for the exaggerations of innocence, [one] can generally accept Holden's value judgments of people and places as the judgment of the novel. (Bloom 66)

Holden pities the bogus world where one human deceives the other human by saying, "nice to meet you," at the end of every meeting, not because he actually feels that way but because it is important to be in contact with other humans and to be alive in this world. The whole novel when seen from a certain point, is nothing but a detailed analysis of different varieties of humans from the perspective of the novel's protagonist, that is, Holden Caulfield.

• Holden's Observation of old people

Holden Caulfield's thoughts on old people are revealed in his encounter with his history teacher, Mr. Spencer. Old people, according to Caulfield, get "a bang out of things," that is, they get excited and get a lot of enjoyment from small things, "You take somebody old as hell, like old Spencer, and they can get a big bang out of buying a blanket" (Salinger 10). In Holden's view old people live a futile existence. Their life is awful as they struggle to carry out even their daily chores.[...] what the heck was he still living for. I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him. That's awful in my opinion. (Salinger 10) Everything about old people reminds him of death and decay. He pities the old people and finds their life unbearable. Their whole demeanour and attitude appears grotesque to Holden. [...] there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops. [...] I don't much like to see old guys in their pajamas and bathrobes anyway. Their bumpy old chests are always showing. And their legs. Old guys' legs, at beaches and places, always look so white

and unhairly. (Salinger 11) He carefully observes his old teacher's activities and infers that as people get old they lose all sense of manners and care less about what others might think of them. They yell whenever they want to, wear whatever they feel like, and give long lectures about anything without considering whether the other person is interested or not. He [Spencer] also started picking his nose. He made out like he was only pinching it, but he was really getting the old thumb right in there. I guess he thought it was alright to do because it was only me that was in the room. I didn't care, except that it's pretty disgusting to watch somebody pick their nose. (Salinger 14) Here, Holden is not being gratuitously malicious; he is passing what amounts to be a moral judgment on the nature and habits of people. Spencer, according to Holden is just like the other 'phonies' as he is "platitudinous and self-indulgent, interested less in Holden than in pontificating before a captive audience" (Bloom 67).

Holden comes across an old man of about sixty-five years in one of the hotels who works there as a bellboy. He finds the old man depressing, "He was one of those bald guys that comb all their hair over from the side to cover up the baldness" (Salinger 80). Then there are other old people mentioned in the novel like Holden's grandmother who is rich and jolly, and Mr. Antolini, Holden's teacher, who is too witty and charming for his age. Holden commiserates the withered condition of old people and feels sorry for their poignant life; but at the same time he holds the opinion that old people do not represent wisdom but spiritual blindness and physical corruption. Holden notes that old people are childish, they need pampering, and get offended easily when someone blames them for something. They get excited by small things and sometimes get irritated by the same things.

• Holden's Notes on his Prep School Contemporaries

While staying in the hostel at Pencey, Holden comes across all types of teenagers, whom he carefully observes and makes his assessment of them. Some adolescents are like Robert Ackley—his hostel mate—peculiar and slob, and some are like Ward Stradlater—his roommate—tidy, nice, sticking to the rules, but 'bastard.' Robert Ackley, as Holden notices is one of those people who have a 'terrible personality.' He is slovenly, annoying, nose-y, irritating, and always disturbing others. Holden detests such people as they 'bring out the sadist in him.' His [Ackley's] teeth were always mossy-looking, and his ears were always dirty as hell, but he was always cleaning his fingernails. [...] He always picked up your personal stuff and looked at it. Boy, could he get on your nerves sometimes. (Salinger 27-30) He is the type of person who doesn't understand when someone is sarcastically addressing him. Even when Holden constantly drops hints that he doesn't want him in his room, Ackley shamelessly sticks around and fiddles with his and his roommate's belongings. However Holden does feel sorry for Ackley as "That guy had just about everything. Sinus trouble, pimples, lousy teeth, halitosis, crumbly fingernails [...]" (Salinger 51). Then there are boys like Ward Stradlater who is a slob too, but 'more of a secret slob.' He fits into the category of people who believe in keeping their homes clean, but not their neighborhood, "He always looked all right, [...] but [...] you should've seen the razor he shaved himself with. It was always rusty as hell and full of lather and hairs and crap" (Salinger 35). Holden secretly admires him because he is friendly and nice, but he also despises him because he is like one of those people who are 'madly in love' with themselves, "He [Stradlater] thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere" (Salinger 36). Stradlater according to Caulfield is conceited and just like the other 'phonies' of the world. He thinks of himself as very handsome just like those people who believe that, "Just because they are crazy about themselves, they think you're crazy about them, too, and that you're just dying to do them a favor" (Salinger 36). However, Stradlater, unlike Ackley is uninterested and doesn't ask too many questions. Holden further reveals that Stradlater 'was a very sexy bastard.' For instance, when Holden shares his childhood memories of him and Jane Gallagher, Stradlater doesn't show any interest; but when Holden talks about how Jane's step-father used to run around the house naked, with Jane around, Stradlater is all ears. Holden also informs the readers of the habits of some of his other schoolmates. One of them is Earnest Morrow, sensitive, but "the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey, in the whole crumbly history of the school" (Salinger 71). Holden notes that he is the kind of kid who acts all good and innocent in front of his parents, when in reality he is someone who is "always snapping their towel at people's asses—really trying to hurt somebody with it— [...]" (Salinger 74). Then there are some crooks in hostels who steal other people's property and straightaway deny doing it. Caulfield also comes in contact with a weird, but funny boy, Dick Slagle, who has cheap suitcases, therefore he hides them under the rack so that people would think that Holden's bags—which were expensive and of good quality—were his! All things considered Holden infers that his high school mates are all typical teenagers who are busy in exhibitioning, thinking highly of themselves and leading dual lives.

• Holden's Evaluation of the people in hotels and bars

Holden finds the outside world equally fake and conceited as the inner world of Pencey, "If the world of Holden's school was a muted purgatory, the world of his New York hotel is an insistent hell" (Bloom 69). The hotel at which Holden stays in New York is filled with 'morons' of all kind. The window of his room provides him with a view of the other rooms in the hotel. In one of the rooms, he sees a man dress himself in women's clothes, and in another, a man and woman who "delight (sexually) in squirting water at each other from their mouths." These views excite Holden but at the same time depress him. Holden realizes the empty and hollow standards of the adult world, where people engage themselves in silly activities as they have nothing constructive to do, "This is the 'real' world, with its respectable shade lifted, which fascinates and seduces Holden by its prurience" (Bloom 69).

Adults, Holden discovers, wear a mask of order and respectability to ascertain their superiority over children, when on the inside they are as irresponsible and insensible as teenagers, "[...] that hotel was lousy with perverts. I was probably the only normal bastard in the whole place [...]" (Salinger 81). Once while Holden is on his way to his room, Maurice, the elevator guy of the

hotel, offers Holden a prostitute to spend the night with, charging five bucks for a 'throw' and fifteen bucks till noon. Holden accepts, but when he meets Sunny (the prostitute), he doesn't feel like doing anything with her and lets her go, paying her the five bucks as agreed. However Sunny starts demanding him five bucks more and later brings Maurice with her to extract the same from Holden. Maurice, although clearly stated in the elevator that it was five bucks for a 'throw,' lies and states that he said it was ten bucks! Despite Holden's protests, Maurice and Sunny harass him, beat him and take the money from his wallet. Holden's experience with the prostitute Sunny and Maurice, makes him realize that people will do anything for a little bit of extra money, even go to the extent of lying, cheating and beating others.

In the bars and clubs across New York too, Holden comes across all types of 'phonies.' He finds some bar attendants who won't talk to you unless you are popular; then there are some artists like Ernie, the piano player who thinks he is too good and doing a great job, when all he was doing was, "putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other very tricky stuff [...]" (Salinger 110), and the Lunts who overdid their acting; Holden expresses his disdain over the 'morons' in clubs who clap at such bogus display.

He notices that bars and clubs are like breeding grounds for all types of jerks and 'dopey' fellows—guys who wear stupid Ivy League jackets and roam around like they own the place, girls who imagine themselves to be the center of attraction, weirdoes who tell their terrific looking date suicide stories while 'giving her a feel' under the table, or funny looking boys who bore their dates by telling them about some pro football game that she is not even interested in, and then there are the strong, stiff guys who "think they're being a pansy if they don't break around forty of your fingers when they shake hands with you" (Salinger 113).

Holden's adventures and encounters in New York, lead him to believe that human nature is deceptive and superficial by default.

- Holden's take on the Opposite Gender

The Catcher in the Rye has been time and again criticized for being a 'sexist' novel, because of the protagonist's views on the female sex. Holden engages in complicated relationships and conversations with different types of girls/women in the course of the novel. He "shows a black and white view of women through his thoughts and actions. He breaks down the complex personalities of women until they fit into two distinct categories: virgins or whores" (*"The Treatment of Women by Holden Caulfield"*). He adjusts his behavior and tone according to the age and personality of the woman he is interacting with. For instance, while travelling in a train, he lies to a woman who is of her mother's age, just so that he can flirt with her, as she is very good-looking. Holden confesses, "Women kill me. They really do. I don't mean I'm oversexed or anything like that—although I am quite sexy. I just like them, I mean" (Salinger 70). In one of the clubs, Holden entertains three women of around thirty years old. Their conversation makes Holden believe that women are ignorant and 'phony'—just like the 'dopey guys' in clubs and bars—as they are more interested in catching a glimpse of some movie star or being 'air heads' than concentrate on meaningful dialogue.

He holds the view that all it takes for a girl to fall in love is physical contact such as kissing or sex. He feels sorry for 'ugly' girls, as according to him, 'ugly' girls have it tough as they have to struggle to get the things that they want. After noticing the attitude and behavior of various types of women and girls, he concludes that the female sex is basically dumb, immature, fickle, shallow and avaricious, "I mean most girls are so dumb and all. After you neck them for a while you can really watch them lose their brains" (Salinger 121). Holden comes across many such girls, like Sunny the prostitute, who forcefully extracts money from Holden, Lillian Simmons—his brother's friend—who is irritating, nosey and "keeps you standing up for hours," girls like Sally Hayes who get away with their "very loud, embarrassing voices," because they are so "damn good-looking," and over aged women who polish their faces with ample makeup and sit in clubs looking for celebrities and don't even offer to pay for their own drinks. Although Holden considers himself a charmer and maintains an inferior view of women, he does show enough respect for them like human beings unlike those around him. He believes that men should respect women's feelings—a mature point of view for his age and for the time period, "I think if you don't really like a girl, you shouldn't horse around with her at all" (Salinger 81). Holden despite his biased views on women, likes them, but feels bad for them because he believes women are silly and always end up with bad men. In the novel, there are only two female characters that Holden genuinely admires, Jane Gallagher, his old friend and Phoebe, his kid sister. Throughout the novel Holden seems to have a contradicting view of women. He sees them as materialistic and simplistic for the majority but also has a respect for women that most people around his age, do not. (Tobin)

- Holden's Outlook on Religious People

Holden is an atheist. Although he believes in God and all, but does not like being ostentatious about it, by going to the church, or lighting candles and praying all the time. In fact Holden hates ministers, The ones they've at every school I've gone to, they all have these Holy Joe voices when they start giving their sermons. God, I hate that. I don't see why the hell they can't talk in their natural voice. They sound so phony when they talk. (Salinger 131)

Several boys in the schools Holden attended were Catholics, who were overtly pretentious about being religious, “[...] when I was at the Whooton School ...this boy...lived down the corridor, Arthur Childs. Old Childs was a Quaker and all, and he read the Bible all the time” (Salinger 130).

Holden, whose father is an ex-Catholic, feels that Catholics in general tend to form cliques. Religious people, Holden notices, are always trying to find out whether other people are religious or not. I knew this one boy, Louis Shaney, when I was at the Whooton School...He and I were sitting in the first two chairs outside the goddam infirmary, the day school opened, waiting for our physicals, and we sort of struck up this conversation about tennis....He was enjoying the conversation about tennis and all, but you could tell he would've enjoyed it more if I was a Catholic and all. (Salinger 146-147) and they have this very bad habit of judging people who are not. They are always trying to include more and more people in their 'spiritual' circle and try to use religion as a means to threaten others. Holden although “[...] admires the Biblical Jesus and in many respects thinks of himself as a messiah figure, he is disgusted by the phony and hypocritical Christianity of people like the philanthropist-undertaker Ossenburger” (Bloom 47). Ossenburger, in the novel is an alumnus of Pencey Prep School who during his speech, makes 'corny' jokes so that people will think he is a down-to-earth kind of person; he then goes to give a long evangelical speech about Jesus, [...] he [Ossenburger] started telling us how he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down on his knees and pray to God. He told us we should always pray to God—talk to Him and all—wherever we were. He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all. He said he talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car. That killed me. I can just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiff. (Salinger 23). However, Caulfield still has some regard and reverence for the holy people. His memorable account of his breakfast with the travelling nuns in Grand Central Station proves this point. Holden admires the nuns' maternal qualities as well as their virginal innocence. One can tell that Holden admires and appreciates their simple way of living, selfless attitude, their polite and nice nature, and their distance from the 'phoniness' of the world.

Holden's opinion of Intellectual Folks

Holden from his experience of highbrow people infers that the so-called 'intellectuals' of the human species are not only as frivolous as the other 'phonies', but in fact the biggest nincompoops that the human race produces. Intellectuals, as maintained by Caulfield, unnecessarily consider themselves to be superior to the rest and want others to take their word as the word of Gospel! They claim that they know anything and everything and “never want to discuss anything serious unless they feel like it” (Salinger 187-188). Holden's inference on the attitude and behavior of intellectuals is based on his encounters with several humans of that kind, out of which the most important one is Carl Luce—who was once Holden's senior in the Whooton School. When we were at Whooton, he'd [Luce] make you describe the most personal stuff that happened to you, but if you started asking him questions about himself, he got sore. These intellectual guys don't like to have an intellectual conversation with you unless they're running the whole thing. They always want you to shut up when they shut up, and go back to your room when they go back to their room. [...] He [Luce] always wanted everybody to go back to their own room and shut up when he was finished being the hot shot. The thing he was afraid of, he was afraid somebody'd say something smarter than he had. (Salinger 191) Holden detests such plaster saint kind of people as he believes that they are arrogant, insecure, and think very highly of themselves.

- Holden's Estimation of Parents

Holden's own parents make little or no appearance in the novel. His father is a corporation lawyer and is quite wealthy, and his mother is a housewife. In the beginning of the novel Holden informs the reader that his parents are very touchy and would “have two hemorrhages apiece” (Salinger 3) if anything personal is said about them, especially Mr. Caulfield.

On the basis of his evaluation of parents, Holden notes that mothers are usually hysterical, anxious, and nervous all the time. They always worry about their children

no matter what; they are dramatic as they make a fuss out of small things and worry too much about unnecessary things, “Mothers are slightly insane” (Salinger 72). Through his conversation with Mrs. Morrow—mother of Holden's schoolmate—Holden realizes that mothers, “...all they want to hear about is what a hot-shot their son is” (Salinger 73). Holden pities Mrs. Morrow as she doesn't know what a 'bastard' her son really is. Instead she feels proud when Holden weaves a story about how his son is “one of the most popular boys at Pencey” (Salinger 73), and Holden, delighted with his ability to lie so perfectly to the point where he was able to keep Mrs. Morrow 'glued' to her seat remarks, “Mothers aren't too sharp about...stuff” (Salinger 74).

Fathers on the other hand, Holden infers, are mostly cold, distant, domineering, and inapproachable. In Holden's view mothers are 'psychic,' as they always know about anything and everything, and also mothers are more attentive and concerned than fathers, “You can hit my father over the head with a chair and he won't wake up, but my mother, all you have to do to my mother is cough somewhere in Siberia and she'll hear you. She's nervous as hell” (Salinger 206).

According to Holden, all parents are disciplinarians, always telling them to do this or not to do that, not to waste time, not to waste money, sometimes caring for their children too much and at other times, neglecting them altogether. Holden himself is a victim of neglected parentage. He can't confide in either of his parents. His father, aside from being wealthy enough to send him to multiple schools, seems to care little about giving Holden the attention he needs. His mother is unable to cater to his needs as she is still trying to overcome her grief of Allie (Holden's younger brother)'s death. Even though Holden remains distant from his parents, he does care for them.

- Holden's Thoughts on children

The adult world with its falseness, insincerity, superficiality, hypocrisy, and cruelty, fails Holden miserably, leaving him disappointed and disillusioned. His critique of the nature of humans from different categories leads him to the conclusion, that children, in their innocence of the world are the only genuine human species.

Holden observes, through his experience with children that kids are gentle, curious, inquisitive, receptive, sweet, and filled with a sense of childhood exuberance. In the novel, he frequently talks about his younger siblings, Allie and Phoebe, whom he idolizes. He describes them as nice, responsible and smart children, "He [Allie] was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent...But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways" (Salinger 49-50). Holden's kid sister Phoebe, in the opinion of Holden, is the paragon of goodness and honesty among children, "You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life...I mean if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about....when Allie and I were having some conversation about things in general, old Phoebe'd be listening. Sometimes you'd forget she was around, because she was such a little kid, but she'd let you know...She'd give Allie or I a push or something, and say, 'Who? Who said that? Bobby or the lady?'" And we'd tell her who said it, and she'd say, "Oh," and go right on listening and all....she was somebody you always felt like talking to on the phone. (Salinger 89-90) Though, only a child of ten years old, Phoebe is quite responsible, "... very neat, for a child...she doesn't just throw her stuff around...She's no slob" (Salinger 207), understanding, and mature. Whatever Holden is not able to share with his parents, he shares with Phoebe, who then gives him her words of advice, and Holden actually listens to her. Towards the end of the novel, it is because of Phoebe, Holden drops his plan of running away from home.

Contrary to popular belief that 'children don't understand things,' Holden Caulfield thinks that children are a storehouse of knowledge and potential; they observe, listen, think, and are very attentive to everything that happens around them and interpret the situations in their own way. Children sometimes come out with the best possible solution to a problem, as they see the world as a place where everything is possible.

Throughout the novel, Holden emphasizes his love for childhood innocence and feels like he is somehow responsible for protecting that innocence, "I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all....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..." (Salinger 224).

The category of children among humans is the only one that appeals to Holden. Children are the only humans who are exactly as they appear, free from any pretensions, falsity, or superficial mask. Holden admires the spontaneity, kindness, and candor of children. He feels that children are pure, uncorrupted, and virtuous as they are untainted by the way of the world.

CONCLUSION

Holden Caulfield learns about various aspects of human nature as a young prep school student prone to often outrageous risk taking and exploring adulthood as he finds himself in humorous and unexpected situations. He is a student of human nature and as a result comes to know himself and what he wants in life. During his wanderings through the city, Holden navigates the timeless misgivings of human nature--identity, superficiality, alienation, and corruption. He [Holden] knows disappointingly much about people, he knows, for example, that a grown-up looks at a sixteen-year-old from his grown-up tower and completely refuses even to attempt to comprehend what is happening in a sixteen-year-old's infinitely wounded soul, which is so full of ferment and confusion. (Bloom 61) The novel is frequently compared to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Holden is often recognized as the modern American descendant of Huck. However, Unlike Huck, who learns from Jim and from shrewdly observing everyone he encounters....Holden scarcely is able to learn anything in the course of this book, because he cannot invest his trust in anyone who is not an image of innocence and he knows that only the dead and the very young are innocent. (Bloom 8) Salinger's teenage rebel, Holden Caulfield, at a very young age unravels the mysteries of human nature and the way of the world, which leaves him crestfallen, frustrated, and in a terrible mental state.

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