

Many scholars and critics, including Kyle Mori, believe that Jerome David “J.D.” Salinger, one of the more popular writers in the 20th century, wrote his famous novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, after his life experiences as a young man. Similarities include being born in New York, getting kicked out of several universities for failing academically, and being fairly distant from public society. However, in my opinion, although Holden Caulfield is a fictional character, and despite Salinger having created the world in which Holden lived, Salinger did not pattern the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye* entirely after himself. This observation sparks curiosities about Salinger’s life experiences before and around the time he wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as about what he incorporated into his novel that was either similar to, or different from, Holden and his experiences. The more these life experiences are analyzed, the stronger becomes the answer as to whether or not *The Catcher in the Rye* counts as a true autobiographical piece by JD Salinger.

JD Salinger, originally called Sonny during his childhood, was born to a Jewish family on New Year’s Day of 1919 in Manhattan, New York. Originally, his mother, Miriam, went through two miscarriages and was diagnosed with pneumonia during her pregnancy with J.D. Doctors thought her ailments during the pregnancy meant the baby might not survive, but JD was born healthy, and Marie believed his birth was a huge blessing for her (M. Salinger 17).

When Salinger was thirteen, he flunked many of his classes in several schools in Manhattan, including McBurney School. In 1934, he dropped out and transferred to Valley Forge Military Academy. The urge to write was Salinger's real passion. Late one night at school, while resting under a blanket with a flashlight in his hand, Salinger started writing his first stories. In 1937, he spent a few weeks studying in New York University before flying off for the next five months to Vienna to learn more about slaughtering and cheese making. This was his father's profession and his father expected J.D. to grow into this occupation. When he returned to America the following year, he studied at Columbia University, where he took a writing class taught by White Burnett, editor of *Story* magazine. There, he was allowed to publish some of his stories for the March-April 1940 issue, including "The Young Folks" (Hamilton 56).

In spring of 1942, JD Salinger was drafted into the army and sent to Europe as part of the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division. He saw major action in the Normandy battle on Utah Beach in D-Day, as well as the battle of Hurtgenwald, where one fifth of the men in his company were killed. During his stay in France, he met writer Ernest Hemingway, who read his stories and gave a positive review of Salinger's work. Salinger returned home in 1945 due to a stress condition; doctors today call this condition "post-traumatic stress disorder," or PTSD. The war later inspired him to write his famous short story *For Esme – With Love and Squalor*, about an American soldier whose life changes upon meeting a young British girl before he entered the war.

After returning to New York, Salinger became more interested in perfecting his own writing, and started work on the final draft of what would become his famous novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger worked on the novel for a full ten years. The novel was finally published in 1951, meeting with huge critical acclaim and rising popularity and thrusting Salinger into the limelight of American society. Salinger became so inundated with the paparazzi that he decided to move to a farmhouse in Cornish, NH, so that he could avoid all chances of meeting the press or having to be part of the public view.

Since the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, readers and audiences have praised the novel for its moral of having to think about what is good about childhood and why we have to prepare ourselves for adulthood. Other critics feel the novel portrayed phoniness. For example, Holden roams through New York in search of the Holy Grail, and the “Holy Grail” is love in a phony world (Heisserman, Miller). Holden is portrayed as a typical American hero who was longing to look for what was right, and to be good was what Holden wanted. His desire – and activity if he ever wanted to (Salinger 172-173) – was to look after children playing in a rye field and to keep them from falling off the edge of a cliff. He was to be the “catcher in the rye.” This relates to Holden’s way of trying to protect children from leaving childhood behind and falling into the dangers of adulthood. Similarly, Heisserman compares Holden and his goal of finding his childhood with that of Huckleberry Finn. Both of the main protagonists were not only looking for their childhood, but they also both used language that matched their own time periods. Moreover, both

Holden and Huck felt isolated from the real adult world in which they were immersed. Heisserman and Miller concluded that when Holden commented how he thought it was funny that he started missing everybody, they believed that it was funny in a pathetic way. The only way Holden's world could be cured would be through his own righteousness.

The message of childhood in *The Catcher in the Rye* resonated with many later generations, and in the novel's fiftieth anniversary, Menand discussed the value of the novel amongst teenagers and nostalgic readers. When Menand discussed Salinger's real life experiences around the time of the novel's publication, he believed that Salinger's decision to keep himself private from the public world related to Holden's physical transformation in terms of his personal problems with the outside world. He then believed that Holden Caulfield was, in a way, "the sorrow king for teenagers" (Menand), and that when readers were introduced to the novel, especially in their middle or high school years, reading into the mind of Holden would be like looking at oneself in a mirror. This resembled – and was inspired by – the emotions of the average teenager upon reaching a certain age. Menand discussed the value of the work among nostalgic readers when he expressed his feelings that readers who read *The Catcher in the Rye* at an early age seemed to have outgrown their emotions over the novel as they aged; in other words, they had "fallen off the carousel" (Menand).

Even though most of the critics over the years were enthusiastic about *The Catcher in the Rye*, some critics were not at all pleased with certain aspects of the novel itself. Edward P.J. Corbett of the *National Catholic Weekly* commented on the

extreme use of language in *The Catcher in the Rye*, to the point that he suggested that it be taken away from younger readers and even immature teenage readers (Corbett). He also pointed out that the use of profanity in the novel, combined with Holden's habit of swearing, makes Holden look like "one of the boys," and that he recalled readers of *The Catcher in the Rye* pointing out that prep boys (in the 50's) do not talk the way Holden does in the novel. Plus, Corbett believed that the novel was infamous also for its overall inappropriateness, such as Holden getting together with a prostitute (Sunny), and that despite Holden saying in the novel that he felt surrounded by phonies – as if he was not one of them – he instead was one of the phonies due to his sarcasm and hypocrisy.

During JD Salinger's schooling at Valley Forge Military Academy, he experienced a few occasions that were somewhat similar to Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*. First, Salinger recalls the time when he formed the fencing team for the school, and also accidentally lost their equipment in the subway, similar to Holden losing the equipment of his own fencing team (M. Salinger 33). Then, on another occasion, Salinger remembers having a friend who committed suicide by jumping out of the window, similar to James Castle in *The Catcher in the Rye* (Grunwald 19).

Before World War II, Salinger had a relationship that was somewhat similar to one of Holden's former relationships in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger once dated an eighteen-year-old girl named Oona O'Neill, the daughter of famous playwright Eugene O'Neill. After they met, Salinger wrote to Oona almost daily, even during his time at the war. In the end, unfortunately, Salinger was devastated to

learn that Oona had an affair with famous actor Charlie Chaplin (who was 54 years old at the time), and they both married later, in spite of Oona's father's protests against his daughter marrying a man much older than her (Mori).

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden recalls dating a girl named Jane Gallagher. Holden felt uneasy about her when his roommate, Stradlater, started discussing her. Holden kept telling Stradlater about how he was planning to see her soon. Stradlater asked Holden to give her his regards. When Holden shared his backstory of what happened between him and Jane, he said that he had met her at their neighborhood in Maine, and they became so close that he showed her his dead brother's baseball mitt with very personal poems written in green ink (Salinger 77). Although Holden reflected on his time with Jane, she did not mean that much to him. Holden never did develop a close bond with any girl his age. Both relationships – JD Salinger/Oona O'Neill and Holden Caulfield/Jane Gallagher – involve the male counterpart being very close to his girlfriend, and both relationships were ruined by someone else who was older than the girlfriend.

Salinger went on to marry in his life, while it is uncertain if Holden would have ever allowed his relationships to go that far.

Holden Caulfield was born in a huge family, and besides his mother and father, whom he barely mentioned at all in the novel, he had his older brother, D.B., (who went away to Hollywood to continue screenwriting). His younger sister Phoebe (whose knowledge was complimentarily noted by Holden as exceeding his own), and his younger brother, Allie (who died of leukemia at a young age) were the

other siblings in the family. When Holden heard about his brother's death, he was grief-stricken and broke all the windows in the garage with his bare hands. He intended to smash the windows of the car as well, but his hands were too broken up and bloodied to do so (Salinger 39).

JD Salinger, on the other hand, was born in an average small family, and he was both the youngest child in the family and the only son. He had an older sister named Doris, who was eight years older than JD, and "buys dresses from Bloomingdale's department store" (French 21). No one in Salinger's family was either killed or died early, unlike Holden's family. *The Catcher in the Rye* would have been considered autobiographical only if Salinger composed more similarities between his family and Holden's family, but he did not.

Holden's own opinions of religion are dissimilar to Salinger's opinions of religion. Holden had an uncertain religious upbringing. When Holden was waiting at Grand Central Station, he met a couple of nuns who were walking by. Holden was unsure about whether to talk to them because of chances of them asking him if he's Catholic. Holden even stated that his father used to be Catholic before marrying his mother. Despite having indifference toward Catholics, Holden was still generous enough to give the nuns an extra ten bucks, and even apologized to them when he accidentally blew cigarette smoke in their faces (Salinger 113).

Salinger, unlike Holden, was much more of a religious man. When Salinger was only a little kid, he was raised and indoctrinated in a Jewish household, and was completely unsure about the true origins of his parents' religions, and thought they were Jewish, just like him. It was not until he reached his bar mitzvah (a Jewish

celebration honoring the person entering adulthood at the age of 13) that he learned about his mother being originally Catholic. His father, Solomon, was Jewish, and his mother changed her religion when she married Solomon. Miriam also changed her name, which was originally Marie Jillich, to Miriam Salinger. Salinger was unhappy with how, all this time, his parents lied to him and kept their true names and religions a secret from him.

In *The Catcher in The Rye*, Holden was kicked out of Pencey Prep for failing on all of his courses but English (Salinger 10) and stated that he flunked other schools before entering Pencey Prep, including Whooton School and Elkton Hills (Salinger 13). Although Salinger also flunked out of several schools in Manhattan, Salinger did remember fondly his time in Valley Forge Military Academy. He hung out with his friend and classmate Alton McCloskey after “lights-out” to snatch some beer taps, while McCloskey made sure Salinger went back in time for his studies (Grunwald 11-12). Afterwards, Salinger stayed in Valley Forge Military Academy, where he participated in several plays. In some plays, he starred as the female lead (Hamilton 21). He was also involved in several school clubs, and ended up receiving fairly good grades for most of his courses (French 22). Salinger’s time in school and fondness of his studies and extra-curricular activities were very different than those of Holden. J.D. finally graduated from school in June of 1936 with a diploma - the only one he would receive in his lifetime (Grunwald 12) - before moving to Europe.

When Holden and Sally were sitting at the skating rink in New York in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden asked Sally if she would like to settle down with him someday in places such as Massachusetts or Vermont (Salinger 132). Then he listed

everything they both could do together. Sally started arguing about how he could not just do what he wanted both of them to do. Once Holden insulted Sally for it, she left him (Salinger 133-134). In JD Salinger's relationships with women, he was never as demanding as Holden.

Although Holden's attempts to further his relationship did not end well, Salinger's approach with the women in his life was more successful. After *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, Salinger met his future wife, Claire, at a party in Manchester, Vermont (Grunwald 15-16). They started dating, but Claire broke up with Salinger to marry a "blue-suit from Harvard Business School" (Grunwald 15). Salinger, after expressing interest in the farmhouse in Cornish, NH, wrote to Claire and asked her to come and move with him, similar to Holden's attempt with Sally Hayes. This plea later caused Claire to divorce her Harvard husband, move in with Salinger on his 34th birthday, and they married in 1955. On December 10th of that same year, Claire gave birth to a daughter. Originally, Salinger suggested that they name her Phoebe, after Holden's little sister from *The Catcher in the Rye*, but Claire insisted that they name her Margaret Ann (M. Salinger 107). Once again, the final outcome between Holden and J.D. was quite different regarding their relationships with women.

The biggest difference to be noted between JD Salinger and Holden Caulfield was their methods of handling the outside world, their opinions about it, and their character.

Holden Caulfield shared his personal feelings about how he viewed the world on his journey through New York. He admitted that the world is full of "phonies," or

people who do immature or irresponsible activities. Despite Holden's pessimism, he was not rebellious because he was not "for anything" (Grunwald, xiii). Holden was instead mad because what he experienced in real life was unlike what he encountered in childhood, and, as a result, entering adulthood also meant entering a world of "phoniness." Occasionally, whenever Holden encountered something that he believed was phony, he would wear his red hunting hat backwards, where the loopy parts of the hat covered him. This represented his hatred of the adult American world and "phoniness", as well as his desire to return to his childhood, which he was leaving behind (Vanderbilt 298). At one point in the novel, Phoebe asked Holden to name one thing he liked after commenting on how he hated everything (Salinger 169). Holden replied that he liked Allie (Salinger 171), and went on to tell Phoebe about his wish to be the "catcher in the rye." Just as Holden was about to leave New York, he gave in and took Phoebe out of school to Central Park, where she rode on the carrousel. Holden was close to crying tears of joy when he saw the children, including Phoebe, having fun on the "potentially dangerous" carrousel. The carrousel represented the dangers of growing up in the real world. Despite his wishes to be the "catcher in the rye" for the sake of saving children from abandoning their childhood and entering adulthood, Holden knew that children who were allowed to experience the "dangers" of real life would learn from them and grow up.

JD Salinger was a perfectly normal young man with an overall appreciation for the world. He did have remorse for living in an environment that opposed Jewish people, since he was Jewish himself, or half-Jewish (Hamilton 22). In the face of

public society, he was a nice, gentle and humorous man, especially around his family and close friends. At other times, he was a loner who decided not to talk to anyone (Hamilton 43-44). Salinger cared about his mother enough, however, to dedicate *The Catcher in the Rye* to her. When he was eleven, Salinger went to Camp Wigwam in Harrison, Maine, where he played some sports like tennis, made some new friends there, and was even declared the "most popular actor of 1930" (Grunwald 11). In other words, he was more likeable around his peer group than Holden. Despite his hostile views of what his comrades were ordered to do in the war (Mori), Salinger's major involvement in World War II shows that he also had some patriotism for his country. Later, when *The Catcher in the Rye's* rise to popularity started to drag Salinger's name into the limelight, it sparked Salinger's desire to move away to Cornish, NH. This move gave him the chance to finally enjoy some peace and quiet in his life.

I do not consider *The Catcher in the Rye* as an autobiographical piece due to many of the real differences between the lives and natures of Holden and J.D. Salinger. The novel was not written for J.D. to create a mirror image of himself, but it was written for a purpose – it was written to entertain, to educate, to help, and to make a huge difference in everyone's lives. The difference it makes is to show the truth about how we cannot escape our entry into the adult world. There is no way to escape this act of growing up and becoming responsible, no matter how dangerous it is or how hard we try it; we have to live with it. JD Salinger applied clever use of his experiences throughout life and most of his childhood to bring Holden Caulfield -

who became famous for his opinions on phoniness in an adult lifestyle – to life. Regardless of whether the author and protagonist are similar to one another or different, it is the virtuous tasks they accomplished that make *The Cather in the Rye* one of the most cherished literary classics of the past century.

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