Context

Jerome David Salinger was born in New York City in 1919. The son of a wealthy cheese importer, Salinger grew up in a fashionable neighborhood in Manhattan and spent his youth being shuttled between various prep schools before his parents finally settled on the Valley Forge Military Academy in 1934. He graduated from Valley Forge in 1936 and attended a number of colleges, including Columbia University, but did not graduate from any of them. While at Columbia, Salinger took a creative writing class in which he excelled, cementing the interest in writing that he had maintained since his teenage years. Salinger had his first short story published in 1940; he continued to write as he joined the army and fought in Europe during World War II. Upon his return to the United States and civilian life in 1946, Salinger wrote more stories, publishing them in many respected magazines. In 1951, Salinger published his only full-length novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which propelled him onto the national stage. Many events from Salinger’s early life appear in *The Catcher in the Rye*. For instance, Holden Caulfield moves from prep school to prep school, is threatened with military school, and knows an older Columbia student. In the novel, such autobiographical details are transplanted into a post–World War II setting. *The Catcher in the Rye* was published at a time when the burgeoning American industrial economy made the nation prosperous and entrenched social rules served as a code of conformity for the younger generation. Because Salinger used slang and profanity in his text and because he discussed adolescent sexuality in a complex and open way, many readers were offended, and *The Catcher in the Rye* provoked great controversy upon its release. Some critics argued that the book was not serious literature, citing its casual and informal tone as evidence. The book was—and continues to be—banned in some communities, and it consequently has been thrown into the center of debates about First Amendment rights, censorship, and obscenity in literature.
Though controversial, the novel appealed to a great number of people. It was a hugely popular bestseller and general critical success. Salinger’s writing seemed to tap into the emotions of readers in an unprecedented way. As countercultural revolt began to grow during the 1950s and 1960s, *The Catcher in the Rye* was frequently read as a tale of an individual’s alienation within a heartless world. Holden seemed to stand for young people everywhere, who felt themselves beset on all sides by pressures to grow up and live their lives according to the rules, to disengage from meaningful human connection, and to restrict their own personalities and conform to a bland cultural norm. Many readers saw Holden Caulfield as a symbol of pure, unfettered individuality in the face of cultural oppression.

In the same year that *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared, Salinger published a short story in *The New Yorker* magazine called “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which proved to be the first in a series of stories about the fictional Glass family. Over the next decade, other “Glass” stories appeared in the same magazine: “Franny,” “Zooey,” and “Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters.” These and other stories are available in the only other books Salinger published besides *The Catcher in the Rye*: *Nine Stories* (1953), *Franny and Zooey* (1961), and *Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963). Though *Nine Stories* received some critical acclaim, the critical reception of the later stories was hostile. Critics generally found the Glass siblings to be ridiculously and insufferably precocious and judgmental.

Beginning in the early 1960s, as his critical reputation waned, Salinger began to publish less and to disengage from society. In 1965, after publishing another Glass story (“Hapworth 26, 1924”) that was widely reviled by critics, he withdrew almost completely from public life, a stance he has maintained up to the present. This reclusiveness, ironically, made Salinger even more famous, transforming him into a cult figure. To some degree, Salinger’s cult status has overshadowed, or at least tinged, many readers’ perceptions of his work. As a recluse, Salinger, for many, embodied much the same spirit as his precocious, wounded characters,
and many readers view author and characters as the same being. Such a reading of Salinger’s work clearly oversimplifies the process of fiction writing and the relationship between the author and his creations. But, given Salinger’s iconoclastic behavior, the general view that Salinger was himself a sort of Holden Caulfield is understandable.

The few brief public statements that Salinger made before his death in 2010 suggested that he continued to write stories, implying that the majority of his works might not appear until after his death. Meanwhile, readers have become more favorably disposed toward Salinger’s later writings, meaning that *The Catcher in the Rye* may one day be seen as part of a much larger literary whole.

**Plot Overview**

The Catcher in the Rye is set around the 1950s and is narrated by a young man named Holden Caulfield. Holden is not specific about his location while he’s telling the story, but he makes it clear that he is undergoing treatment in a mental hospital or sanatorium. The events he narrates take place in the few days between the end of the fall school term and Christmas, when Holden is sixteen years old.

Holden’s story begins on the Saturday following the end of classes at the Pencey prep school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. Pencey is Holden’s fourth school; he has already failed out of three others. At Pencey, he has failed four out of five of his classes and has received notice that he is being expelled, but he is not scheduled to return home to Manhattan until Wednesday. He visits his elderly history teacher, Spencer, to say goodbye, but when Spencer tries to reprimand him for his poor academic performance, Holden becomes annoyed.

Back in the dormitory, Holden is further irritated by his unhygienic neighbor, Ackley, and by his own roommate, Stradlater. Stradlater spends the
evening on a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl whom Holden used to date and whom he still admires. During the course of the evening, Holden grows increasingly nervous about Stradlater’s taking Jane out, and when Stradlater returns, Holden questions him insistently about whether he tried to have sex with her. Stradlater teases Holden, who flies into a rage and attacks Stradlater. Stradlater pins Holden down and bloodies his nose. Holden decides that he’s had enough of Pencey and will go to Manhattan three days early, stay in a hotel, and not tell his parents that he is back.

On the train to New York, Holden meets the mother of one of his fellow Pencey students. Though he thinks this student is a complete “bastard,” he tells the woman made-up stories about how shy her son is and how well respected he is at school. When he arrives at Penn Station, he goes into a phone booth and considers calling several people, but for various reasons he decides against it. He gets in a cab and asks the cab driver where the ducks in Central Park go when the lagoon freezes, but his question annoys the driver. Holden has the cab driver take him to the Edmont Hotel, where he checks himself in.

From his room at the Edmont, Holden can see into the rooms of some of the guests in the opposite wing. He observes a man putting on silk stockings, high heels, a bra, a corset, and an evening gown. He also sees a man and a woman in another room taking turns spitting mouthfuls of their drinks into each other’s faces and laughing hysterically. He interprets the couple’s behavior as a form of sexual play and is both upset and aroused by it. After smoking a couple of cigarettes, he calls Faith Cavendish, a woman he has never met but whose number he got from an acquaintance at Princeton. Holden thinks he remembers hearing that she used to be a stripper, and he believes he can persuade her to have sex with him. He calls her, and though she is at first annoyed to be called at such a late hour by a complete stranger, she eventually suggests that they meet the next day. Holden doesn’t want to wait that long and winds up hanging up without arranging a meeting.
Holden goes downstairs to the Lavender Room and sits at a table, but the waiter realizes he’s a minor and refuses to serve him. He flirts with three women in their thirties, who seem like they’re from out of town and are mostly interested in catching a glimpse of a celebrity. Nevertheless, Holden dances with them and feels that he is “half in love” with the blonde one after seeing how well she dances. After making some wisecracks about his age, they leave, letting him pay their entire tab.

As Holden goes out to the lobby, he starts to think about Jane Gallagher and, in a flashback, recounts how he got to know her. They met while spending a summer vacation in Maine, played golf and checkers, and held hands at the movies. One afternoon, during a game of checkers, her stepfather came onto the porch where they were playing, and when he left, Jane began to cry. Holden had moved to sit beside her and kissed her all over her face, but she wouldn’t let him kiss her on the mouth. That was the closest they came to “necking.”

Holden leaves the Edmont and takes a cab to Ernie’s jazz club in Greenwich Village. Again, he asks the cab driver where the ducks in Central Park go in the winter, and this cabbie is even more irritable than the first one. Holden sits alone at a table in Ernie’s and observes the other patrons with distaste. He runs into Lillian Simmons, one of his older brother’s former girlfriends, who invites him to sit with her and her date. Holden says he has to meet someone, leaves, and walks back to the Edmont.

Maurice, the elevator operator at the Edmont, offers to send a prostitute to Holden’s room for five dollars, and Holden agrees. A young woman, identifying herself as “Sunny,” arrives at his door. She pulls off her dress, but Holden starts to feel “peculiar” and tries to make conversation with her. He claims that he recently underwent a spinal operation and isn’t sufficiently recovered to have sex with her, but he offers to pay her anyway. She sits on his lap and talks dirty to him, but he insists on paying her five dollars and showing her the door. Sunny returns with Maurice, who
demands another five dollars from Holden. When Holden refuses to pay, Maurice punches him in the stomach and leaves him on the floor, while Sunny takes five dollars from his wallet. Holden goes to bed.

He wakes up at ten o'clock on Sunday and calls Sally Hayes, an attractive girl whom he has dated in the past. They arrange to meet for a matinee showing of a Broadway play. He eats breakfast at a sandwich bar, where he converses with two nuns about Romeo and Juliet. He gives the nuns ten dollars. He tries to telephone Jane Gallagher, but her mother answers the phone, and he hangs up. He takes a cab to Central Park to look for his younger sister, Phoebe, but she isn’t there. He helps one of Phoebe’s schoolmates tighten her skate, and the girl tells him that Phoebe might be in the Museum of Natural History. Though he knows that Phoebe’s class wouldn’t be at the museum on a Sunday, he goes there anyway, but when he gets there he decides not to go in and instead takes a cab to the Biltmore Hotel to meet Sally.

Holden and Sally go to the play, and Holden is annoyed that Sally talks with a boy she knows from Andover afterward. At Sally’s suggestion, they go to Radio City to ice skate. They both skate poorly and decide to get a table instead. Holden tries to explain to Sally why he is unhappy at school, and actually urges her to run away with him to Massachusetts or Vermont and live in a cabin. When she refuses, he calls her a “pain in the ass” and laughs at her when she reacts angrily. She refuses to listen to his apologies and leaves.

Holden calls Jane again, but there is no answer. He calls Carl Luce, a young man who had been Holden’s student advisor at the Whooton School and who is now a student at Columbia University. Luce arranges to meet him for a drink after dinner, and Holden goes to a movie at Radio City to kill time. Holden and Luce meet at the Wicker Bar in the Seton Hotel. At Whooton, Luce had spoken frankly with some of the boys about sex, and Holden tries to draw him into a conversation about it once more. Luce grows irritated by Holden’s juvenile remarks about homosexuals and about
Luce’s Chinese girlfriend, and he makes an excuse to leave early. Holden continues to drink Scotch and listen to the pianist and singer.

Quite drunk, Holden telephones Sally Hayes and babbles about their Christmas Eve plans. Then he goes to the lagoon in Central Park, where he used to watch the ducks as a child. It takes him a long time to find it, and by the time he does, he is freezing cold. He then decides to sneak into his own apartment building and wake his sister, Phoebe. He is forced to admit to Phoebe that he was kicked out of school, which makes her mad at him. When he tries to explain why he hates school, she accuses him of not liking anything. He tells her his fantasy of being “the catcher in the rye,” a person who catches little children as they are about to fall off of a cliff. Phoebe tells him that he has misremembered the poem that he took the image from: Robert Burns’s poem says “if a body meet a body, coming through the rye,” not “catch a body.”

Holden calls his former English teacher, Mr. Antolini, who tells Holden he can come to his apartment. Mr. Antolini asks Holden about his expulsion and tries to counsel him about his future. Holden can’t hide his sleepiness, and Mr. Antolini puts him to bed on the couch. Holden awakens to find Mr. Antolini stroking his forehead. Thinking that Mr. Antolini is making a homosexual overture, Holden hastily excuses himself and leaves, sleeping for a few hours on a bench at Grand Central Station.

Holden goes to Phoebe’s school and sends her a note saying that he is leaving home for good and that she should meet him at lunchtime at the museum. When Phoebe arrives, she is carrying a suitcase full of clothes, and she asks Holden to take her with him. He refuses angrily, and she cries and then refuses to speak to him. Knowing she will follow him, he walks to the zoo, and then takes her across the park to a carousel. He buys her a ticket and watches her ride it. It starts to rain heavily, but Holden is so happy watching his sister ride the carousel that he is close to tears.
Holden ends his narrative here, telling the reader that he is not going to tell the story of how he went home and got “sick.” He plans to go to a new school in the fall and is cautiously optimistic about his future.

**Character List**

**Holden Caulfield** - The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Holden is a sixteen-year-old junior who has just been expelled for academic failure from a school called Pencey Prep. Although he is intelligent and sensitive, Holden narrates in a cynical and jaded voice. He finds the hypocrisy and ugliness of the world around him almost unbearable, and through his cynicism he tries to protect himself from the pain and disappointment of the adult world. However, the criticisms that Holden aims at people around him are also aimed at himself. He is uncomfortable with his own weaknesses, and at times displays as much phoniness, meanness, and superficiality as anyone else in the book. As the novel opens, Holden stands poised on the cliff separating childhood from adulthood. His inability to successfully negotiate the chasm leaves him on the verge of emotional collapse. Read an in-depth analysis of Holden Caulfield.

**Ackley** - Holden’s next-door neighbor in his dorm at Pencey Prep. Ackley is a pimply, insecure boy with terrible dental hygiene. He often barges into Holden’s room and acts completely oblivious to Holden’s hints that he should leave. Holden believes that Ackley makes up elaborate lies about his sexual experience.

**Stradlater** - Holden’s roommate at Pencey Prep. Stradlater is handsome, self-satisfied, and popular, but Holden calls him a “secret slob,” because he appears well groomed, but his toiletries, such as his razor, are disgusting unclean. Stradlater is sexually active and quite experienced for a prep school student, which is why Holden also calls him a “sexy bastard.”

**Jane Gallagher** - A girl with whom Holden spent a lot of time one summer, when their families stayed in neighboring summer houses in
Maine. Jane never actually appears in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but she is extremely important to Holden, because she is one of the few girls whom he both respects and finds attractive.

**Phoebe Caulfield** - Phoebe is Holden’s ten-year-old sister, whom he loves dearly. Although she is six years younger than Holden, she listens to what he says and understands him more than most other people do. Phoebe is intelligent, neat, and a wonderful dancer, and her childish innocence is one of Holden’s only consistent sources of happiness throughout the novel. At times, she exhibits great maturity and even chastises Holden for his immaturity. Like Mr. Antolini, Phoebe seems to recognize that Holden is his own worst enemy.

Read an in-depth analysis of Phoebe Caulfield.

**Allie Caulfield** - Holden’s younger brother. Allie dies of leukemia three years before the start of the novel. Allie was a brilliant, friendly, red-headed boy—according to Holden, he was the smartest of the Caulfields. Holden is tormented by Allie’s death and carries around a baseball glove on which Allie used to write poems in green ink.


**Sally Hayes** - A very attractive girl whom Holden has known and dated for a long time. Though Sally is well read, Holden claims that she is “stupid,” although it is difficult to tell whether this judgment is based in reality or merely in Holden’s ambivalence about being sexually attracted to her. She is certainly more conventional than Holden in her tastes and manners.

**Mr. Spencer** - Holden’s history teacher at Pencey Prep, who unsuccessfully tries to shake Holden out of his academic apathy.

**Carl Luce** - A student at Columbia who was Holden’s student advisor at the Whooton School. Luce is three years older than Holden and has a great deal of sexual experience. At Whooton, he was a source of knowledge
about sex for the younger boys, and Holden tries to get him to talk about sex at their meeting.

**Mr. Antolini** - Holden’s former English teacher at the Elkton Hills School. Mr. Antolini now teaches at New York University. He is young, clever, sympathetic, and likable, and Holden respects him. Holden sometimes finds him a bit too clever, but he looks to him for guidance. Like many characters in the novel, he drinks heavily.

Read an in-depth analysis of Mr. Antolini.

**Maurice** - The elevator operator at the Edmont Hotel, who procures a prostitute for Holden.

**Sunny** - The prostitute whom Holden hires through Maurice. She is one of a number of women in the book with whom Holden clumsily attempts to connect.

**Holden Caulfield**

The number of readers who have been able to identify with Holden and make him their hero is truly staggering. Something about his discontent, and his vivid way of expressing it, makes him resonate powerfully with readers who come from backgrounds completely different from his. It is tempting to inhabit his point of view and revel in his cantankerousness rather than try to deduce what is wrong with him. The obvious signs that Holden is a troubled and unreliable narrator are manifold: he fails out of four schools; he manifests complete apathy toward his future; he is hospitalized, and visited by a psychoanalyst, for an unspecified complaint; and he is unable to connect with other people. We know of two traumas in his past that clearly have something to do with his emotional state: the death of his brother Allie and the suicide of one of his schoolmates. But, even with that knowledge, Holden’s peculiarities cannot simply be explained away as symptoms of a readily identifiable disorder.
The most noticeable of Holden’s “peculiarities” is how extremely judgmental he is of almost everything and everybody. He criticizes and philosophizes about people who are boring, people who are insecure, and, above all, people who are “phony.” Holden carries this penchant for passing judgment to such an extreme that it often becomes extremely funny, such as when he speculates that people are so crass that someone will probably write “fuck you” on his tombstone. Holden applies the term “phony” not to people who are insincere but to those who are too conventional or too typical—for instance, teachers who “act like” teachers by assuming a different demeanor in class than they do in conversation, or people who dress and act like the other members of their social class. While Holden uses the label “phony” to imply that such people are superficial, his use of the term actually indicates that his own perceptions of other people are superficial. In almost every case, he rejects more complex judgments in favor of simple categorical ones.

A second facet of Holden’s personality that deserves comment is his attitude toward sex. Holden is a virgin, but he is very interested in sex, and, in fact, he spends much of the novel trying to lose his virginity. He feels strongly that sex should happen between people who care deeply about and respect one another, and he is upset by the realization that sex can be casual. Stradlater’s date with Jane doesn’t just make him jealous; it infuriates him to think of a girl he knows well having sex with a boy she doesn’t know well. Moreover, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by women whom he doesn’t respect or care for, like the blonde tourist he dances with in the Lavender Room, or like Sally Hayes, whom he refers to as “stupid” even as he arranges a date with her. Finally, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by kinky sexual behavior—particularly behavior that isn’t respectful of one’s sex partner, such as spitting in one’s partner’s face. Although Holden refers to such behavior as “crumby,” he admits that it is pretty fun, although he doesn’t think that it should be.
A brief note about Holden’s name: a “caul” is a membrane that covers the head of a fetus during birth. Thus, the caul in his name may symbolize the blindness of childhood or the inability of the child to see the complexity of the adult world. Holden’s full name might be read as Hold-on Caul-field: he wants to hold on to what he sees as his innocence, which is really his blindness.

Phoebe Caulfield

Before we meet Phoebe, Holden’s side of the story is all we’ve been given. He implies that he is the only noble character in a world of superficial and phony adults, and we must take him at his word. There seems to be a simple dichotomy between the sweet world of childhood innocence, where Holden wants to stay, and the cruel world of shallow adult hypocrisy, where he’s afraid to go. But Phoebe complicates his narrative. Instead of sympathizing with Holden’s refusal to grow up, she becomes angry with him. Despite being six years younger than her brother, Phoebe understands that growing up is a necessary process; she also understands that Holden’s refusal to mature reveals less about the outside world than it does about himself. Next to Phoebe, Holden’s stunted emotional maturity and stubborn outlook seem less charming and more foolish. Phoebe, then, serves as a guide and surrogate for the audience. Because she knows her brother better than we do, we trust her judgments about him. Our allegiance to the narrator weakens slightly once we hear her side of the story.

Phoebe makes Holden’s picture of childhood—of children romping through a field of rye—seem oversimplified, an idealized fantasy. Phoebe’s character challenges Holden’s view of the world: she is a child, but she does not fit into Holden’s romanticized vision of childlike innocence. Although she never explicitly states it, Phoebe seems to realize that Holden’s bitterness toward the rest of the world is really bitterness toward himself. She sees that he is a deeply sad, insecure young man who needs
love and support. At the end of the book, when she shows up at the museum and demands to come with him, she seems not so much to need Holden as to understand that he needs her.

Mr. Antolini

Mr. Antolini is the adult who comes closest to reaching Holden. He manages to avoid alienating Holden, and being labeled a “phony,” because he doesn’t behave conventionally. He doesn’t speak to Holden in the persona of a teacher or an authority figure, as Mr. Spencer does. He doesn’t object to Holden’s calling him in the middle of the night or to Holden’s being drunk or smoking. Moreover, by opening his door to Holden on the spur of the moment, he shows no reservations about exposing his private self, with his messy apartment, his older wife with her hair in curlers, and his own heavy drinking.

Mr. Antolini’s advice to Holden about why he should apply himself to his studies is also unconventional. He recognizes that Holden is different from other students, and he validates Holden’s suffering and confusion by suggesting that one day they may be worth writing about. He represents education not as a path of conformity but as a means for Holden to develop his unique voice and to find the ideas that are most appropriate to him.

When Mr. Antolini touches Holden’s forehead as he sleeps, he may overstep a boundary in his display of concern and affection. However, there is little evidence to suggest that he is making a sexual overture, as Holden thinks, and much evidence that Holden misinterprets his action. Holden indicates in Chapter 19 that he is extremely nervous around possible homosexuals and that he worries about suddenly becoming one. We also know that he has been thinking about sex constantly since leaving Pencey. Finally, this is not the only scene in which Holden recoils from a physical approach. He is made very uncomfortable when Sunny pulls off her dress and sits in his lap. Even when his beloved sister puts her arms around him, he remarks that she may be a little too affectionate sometimes.
Holden regrets his hasty judgment of Mr. Antolini, but this mistake is very important to him, because he finally starts to question his own practice of making snap judgments about people. Holden realizes that even if Mr. Antolini is gay, he can’t simply be dismissed as a “flit,” since he has also been kind and generous. Holden begins to acknowledge that Mr. Antolini is complex and that he has feelings.

**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**

**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**ALIENATION AS A FORM OF SELF-PROTECTION**

Throughout the novel, Holden seems to be excluded from and victimized by the world around him. As he says to Mr. Spencer, he feels trapped on “the other side” of life, and he continually attempts to find his way in a world in which he feels he doesn’t belong.

As the novel progresses, we begin to perceive that Holden’s alienation is his way of protecting himself. Just as he wears his hunting hat (see “Symbols,” below) to advertise his uniqueness, he uses his isolation as proof that he is better than everyone else around him and therefore above interacting with them. The truth is that interactions with other people usually confuse and overwhelm him, and his cynical sense of superiority serves as a type of self-protection. Thus, Holden’s alienation is the source of what little stability he has in his life.

As readers, we can see that Holden’s alienation is the cause of most of his pain. He never addresses his own emotions directly, nor does he attempt to discover the source of his troubles. He desperately needs human contact and love, but his protective wall of bitterness prevents him from looking for such interaction. Alienation is both the source of Holden’s strength and the
source of his problems. For example, his loneliness propels him into his date with Sally Hayes, but his need for isolation causes him to insult her and drive her away. Similarly, he longs for the meaningful connection he once had with Jane Gallagher, but he is too frightened to make any real effort to contact her. He depends upon his alienation, but it destroys him.

THE PAINFULNESS OF GROWING UP

According to most analyses, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a bildungsroman, a novel about a young character’s growth into maturity. While it is appropriate to discuss the novel in such terms, *Holden Caulfield* is an unusual protagonist for a bildungsroman because his central goal is to resist the process of maturity itself. As his thoughts about the Museum of Natural History demonstrate, Holden fears change and is overwhelmed by complexity. He wants everything to be easily understandable and eternally fixed, like the statues of Eskimos and Indians in the museum. He is frightened because he is guilty of the sins he criticizes in others, and because he can’t understand everything around him. But he refuses to acknowledge this fear, expressing it only in a few instances—for example, when he talks about sex and admits that “[s]ex is something I just don’t understand. I swear to God I don’t” (Chapter 9).

Instead of acknowledging that adulthood scares and mystifies him, Holden invents a fantasy that adulthood is a world of superficiality and hypocrisy (“phoniness”), while childhood is a world of innocence, curiosity, and honesty. Nothing reveals his image of these two worlds better than his fantasy about the catcher in the rye: he imagines childhood as an idyllic field of rye in which children romp and play; adulthood, for the children of this world, is equivalent to death—a fatal fall over the edge of a cliff. His created understandings of childhood and adulthood allow Holden to cut himself off from the world by covering himself with a protective armor of cynicism. But as the book progresses, Holden’s experiences, particularly his encounters with *Mr. Antolini* and *Phoebe*, reveal the shallowness of his conceptions.
“Phoniness,” which is probably the most famous phrase from *The Catcher in the Rye*, is one of Holden’s favorite concepts. It is his catch-all for describing the superficiality, hypocrisy, pretension, and shallowness that he encounters in the world around him. In Chapter 22, just before he reveals his fantasy of the catcher in the rye, Holden explains that adults are inevitably phonies, and, what’s worse, they can’t see their own phoniness. Phoniness, for Holden, stands as an emblem of everything that’s wrong in the world around him and provides an excuse for him to withdraw into his cynical isolation.

Though oversimplified, Holden’s observations are not entirely inaccurate. He can be a highly insightful narrator, and he is very aware of superficial behavior in those around him. Throughout the novel he encounters many characters who do seem affected, pretentious, or superficial—Sally Hayes, Carl Luce, Maurice and Sunny, and even Mr. Spencer stand out as examples. Some characters, like Maurice and Sunny, are genuinely harmful. But although Holden expends so much energy searching for phoniness in others, he never directly observes his own phoniness. His deceptions are generally pointless and cruel and he notes that he is a compulsive liar. For example, on the train to New York, he perpetrates a mean-spirited and needless prank on Mrs. Morrow. He’d like us to believe that he is a paragon of virtue in a world of phoniness, but that simply isn’t the case. Although he’d like to believe that the world is a simple place, and that virtue and innocence rest on one side of the fence while superficiality and phoniness rest on the other, Holden is his own counterevidence. The world is not as simple as he’d like—and needs—it to be; even he cannot adhere to the same black-and-white standards with which he judges other people.

**Motifs**
Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

LONELINESS

Holden’s loneliness, a more concrete manifestation of his alienation problem, is a driving force throughout the book. Most of the novel describes his almost manic quest for companionship as he flits from one meaningless encounter to another. Yet, while his behavior indicates his loneliness, Holden consistently shies away from introspection and thus doesn’t really know why he keeps behaving as he does. Because Holden depends on his isolation to preserve his detachment from the world and to maintain a level of self-protection, he often sabotages his own attempts to end his loneliness. For example, his conversation with Carl Luce and his date with Sally Hayes are made unbearable by his rude behavior. His calls to Jane Gallagher are aborted for a similar reason: to protect his precious and fragile sense of individuality. Loneliness is the emotional manifestation of the alienation Holden experiences; it is both a source of great pain and a source of his security.

RELATIONSHIPS, INTIMACY, AND SEXUALITY

Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality are also recurring motifs relating to the larger theme of alienation. Both physical and emotional relationships offer Holden opportunity to break out of his isolated shell. They also represent what he fears most about the adult world: complexity, unpredictability, and potential for conflict and change. As he demonstrates at the Museum of Natural History, Holden likes the world to be silent and frozen, predictable and unchanging. As he watches Phoebe sleep, Holden projects his own idealizations of childhood onto her. But in real-world relationships, people talk back, and Phoebe reveals how different her childhood is from Holden’s romanticized notion. Because people are unpredictable, they challenge Holden and force him to question his senses of self-confidence and self-worth. For intricate and unspoken reasons, seemingly stemming from Allie’s death, Holden has trouble dealing with this
kind of complexity. As a result, he has isolated himself and fears intimacy. Although he encounters opportunities for both physical and emotional intimacy, he bungles them all, wrapping himself in a psychological armor of critical cynicism and bitterness. Even so, Holden desperately continues searching for new relationships, always undoing himself only at the last moment.

LYING AND DECEPTION

Lying and deception are the most obvious and hurtful elements of the larger category of phoniness. Holden’s definition of phoniness relies mostly on a kind of self-deception: he seems to reserve the most scorn for people who think that they are something they are not or who refuse to acknowledge their own weaknesses. But lying to others is also a kind of phoniness, a type of deception that indicates insensitivity, callousness, or even cruelty. Of course, Holden himself is guilty of both these crimes. His random and repeated lying highlights his own self-deception—he refuses to acknowledge his own shortcomings and is unwilling to consider how his behavior affects those around him. Through his lying and deception, Holden proves that he is just as guilty of phoniness as the people he criticizes.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

THE “CATCHER IN THE RYE”

As the source of the book’s title, this symbol merits close inspection. It first appears in Chapter 16, when a kid Holden admires for walking in the street rather than on the sidewalk is singing the Robert Burns song “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye.” In Chapter 22, when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life, he replies with his image, from the song, of a “catcher in the rye.” Holden imagines a field of rye perched high on a cliff, full of children
romping and playing. He says he would like to protect the children from falling off the edge of the cliff by “catching” them if they were on the verge of tumbling over. As Phoebe points out, Holden has misheard the lyric. He thinks the line is “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye,” but the actual lyric is “If a body meet a body, coming through the rye.”

The song “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye” asks if it is wrong for two people to have a romantic encounter out in the fields, away from the public eye, even if they don’t plan to have a commitment to one another. It is highly ironic that the word “meet” refers to an encounter that leads to recreational sex, because the word that Holden substitutes—“catch”—takes on the exact opposite meaning in his mind. Holden wants to catch children before they fall out of innocence into knowledge of the adult world, including knowledge of sex.

HOLDEN’S RED HUNTING HAT

The red hunting hat is one of the most recognizable symbols from twentieth-century American literature. 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 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 DUCKS IN THE CENTRAL PARK LAGOON

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.