

Catcher in the Rye

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

Alienation as a Form of Self-Protection

- Holden's alienation is his way of protecting himself
- Uses his isolation as proof that he is better than everyone else around him and therefore above interacting with them
- Alienation is both the source of Holden's strength and the source of his problems

The Painfulness of Growing Up

- *The Catcher in the Rye* is a bildungsroman, a novel about a young character's growth into maturity
- Holden Caulfield is an unusual protagonist for a bildungsroman because his central goal is to resist the process of maturity itself
- Holden 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

The Phoniness of the Adult World

- "Phoniness," which is probably the most famous phrase from *The Catcher in the Rye*, is one of Holden's favorite concepts
- Describes the superficiality, hypocrisy, pretension, and shallowness that he encounters in the world around him
- However, 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 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
- 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

Relationships, Intimacy, and Sexuality

- Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality are also recurring motifs relating to the larger theme of alienation
- They represent what he fears most about the adult world: complexity, unpredictability, and potential for conflict and change
- He wraps himself in a psychological armor of critical cynicism and bitterness

Lying and Deception

- Lying and deception are the most obvious and hurtful elements of the larger category of phoniness
- He seems to reserve the most scorn for people who think that they are something they are not
- Ironically, through his lying and deception, Holden proves that he is just as guilty of phoniness as the people he criticizes

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

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

Imagery occurs when an author uses an object that is not really there, in order to create a comparison between one that is; a set of mental images or pictures.

Allegory a poem, play, picture, etc, in which the apparent meaning of the characters and events is used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning.

The “Catcher in 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

- It is a symbol of his uniqueness and individuality
- The hat is outlandish and different – doesn’t wear it around everyone
- He is self conscious about it too – mirrors his need for isolation versus companionship
- Red like Allie and Phoebe’s hair

The Museum of Natural History

- The museum’s displays appeal to him because they are frozen and unchanging
- a world where nothing ever changes, where everything is simple, understandable, and infinite
- 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
- Duck’s mysterious perseverance in the face of an inhospitable environment
- The ducks prove that some vanishings are only temporary
- Pond - 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.

The Mummies

- Holden draws a distinction between death and disappearing, and that's why he's so into the mummies
- Or the mummies but are more about lifeless shells – bodies without spirit, frozen physical forms, much like the fish, stuck in the frozen lake and absorbing nutrients through their pores.
- Maybe this is even how Holden sees himself.

Death

- Holden has experienced death on a personal level more than once
- He is plagued with thoughts of death
- Others may find solace in religion - Holden does not.

Ossenburger

- The wealthy alumnus who paid for the dorm Holden lived in at Pencey Prep
- Earned the money from bargain funeral parlors – death is everywhere

James Castle (Mr. Antolini's Quote warning Holden not to die nobly for an unworthy cause)

- James Castle, a classmate that killed himself
- James insulted a (deserving) guy by calling him conceited, and instead of taking it back when threatened and/or abused, he jumped out the window. Sounds like he died nobly for an unworthy cause – exactly what Holden has to be careful not to do.

The Little Shirley Beans Record

- Why is Holden into a record that sounds Dixieland and whorish, especially since he's buying it *for his little sister* and is troubled by the thought of sexuality invading the world of children?
- He is avoiding phoniness
- Holden figures that most people, if singing a record for little children, would cheese it up, make it cute, mushy, and phony because they think that's what little kids are into
- Think about at what point in the novel the record breaks, and what Phoebe does when Holden reveals the broken pieces

Phoebe's Notebook

Holden states that "kids notebooks kill him"

Phoebe's notebook is the least phony expression of thought we've seen so far in the novel

Holden himself is a "phony," think about the presentation of his narrative in *The Catcher in the Rye*: it's completely honest. While he lies to others about his age, he openly admits to us things like, "I have a lousy vocabulary" and "I act quite young for my age sometimes." (If he does lie to us, it doesn't feel manipulative or intentional, rather subconscious and accidental.) So, in a way, Holden's narrative is like Phoebe's notebook. It's just what some kid happens to be thinking.

The "F--- you" Signs On the Walls

Holden is bothered by all the F – you signs on the walls at Phoebe's school in the museum
Places that remind him of childhood and happiness

While he does come to the realization that trying to rub out all the "f - you"s in the world would be an impossible task (as there are just too many), he doesn't make the important connection that it would be futile anyway. Children *will* grow up and experience sex, whether he likes it or not.

Phoebe, the Carousel, and the Gold Ring

Holden declares himself to be really happy

- 1) Holden decided that, after all, he's not going to run away,
- 2) Phoebe put his hunting hat back on his head, which we've already talked about as being caring and kind
- 3) just maybe, Holden has realizes that growing up isn't the worst thing in the world

The gold ring is something we don't have any more on carousels. The gig was that you were supposed to reach for the gold ring when you passed it on your horse. Usually, if you grabbed it, you got a free ride. When Holden concludes that you have to just let a kid reach, even though they might get hurt doing so, he might be saying admitting (although he probably doesn't realize it himself) that growing up is in fact necessary – for Phoebe and for himself; you can't really protect a kid from it, so it's better to just accept it as it is. Or he could just be talking about a gold ring.