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**The Search for Identity: An Analytical Response to Holden Caulfield’s Teenage Angst in J.D. Salinger’s: *The Catcher in the Rye***

Through experiences and relationships, one finds meaning in life. People are defined by their ability to cope with the irregular, incongruous tempo of the world and the bonds they form whilst they contend with the oppressive vicissitudes of life. Through actions and responses to testing stimuli, one can discover meaning in one’s life, whether it be through recognition or reward, power or prestige. Actions can bring about changes to one’s situation in life, and they determine one’s position and role in society. Through one’s relationships and connections with others, one can also find meaning. Finding meaning in one’s life is essentially congruous with realizing one’s identity and purpose, so relationships and connections not only give a reason for living, but they simultaneously help define a person. This can easily be demonstrated by the social trend for children to emulate their parents, the inclination for friendships to form based on commonalities, and the propensity among people to always “go with the flow” and follow widely accepted social norms.

Expressed by John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the philosophy of *tabula rasa* was a theory that humans were born a “blank slate”, and they gained cognitive ability and memory through sensory means. It promoted a sense that people have an enduring, indelible ability to dictate their own lives as they are born innocent and define themselves through their own instruments and means. However, although this philosophy is logically sound, it fails to take into account the relationships one is inherently born with, and it fails to address the fact that humans can never return to a state of *tabula rasa*. People are intrinsically born with relationships to parents, siblings, and relatives; nothing can take this away. Even without ever knowing one’s parents, eventually one will contemplate their origins and form an imaginary bond with one’s parents. The fact is, people will be affected by their familial relations. Whether it be marginally, moderately, or massively, their “blank slates” will forever be tainted or scarred with the memories, actions, and opinions of their relatives. Hence, *tabula rasa* can never truly exist.Also, once an experience is perceived through sensory means, that experience can never be forgotten. It is impossible to simply forget an experience as experiences are not only inexpungible, but life-shaping. Thus, one’s identity consists of the culmination of all experiences, acquaintances, and knowledge gained in one’s life, all ever-present, everlasting, and never ending.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, a profound illustration of the hectic journey through adolescence written by the reclusive J.D. Salinger, Holden Caulfield constructs his own way of life based upon the impediment of “phoniness”, essentially an ever-present characteristic of superficiality and shallowness in society (Steinle 98). This concept of “phoniness” grew in importance and significance to Holden through his observations of the “phonies” around him, which include his parents, teachers, and friends, and the relationships he gains when dealing with them. He finds purpose in his quest to purge his world from phoniness, which demonstrates the derivation of direction from experiences and relations. His attempt to flee from the social norms of superficiality and stupidity in hopes of overcoming the “phony” world helps him he gains a sense of purpose and identity (Lott and Latham 23). However, as it is impossible to completely shield oneself from the sins and “phoniness” in the world, Holden has a tarnished mindset which causes his actions to be somewhat inconsistent with his morals. Holden’s quest for liberation and understanding of society’s superficiality both parallels and illustrates the supposition that in the search for identity, people formulate their own codes of morals and doctrines to live by based on their experiences and relationships with those around them.

The core of one’s relationships and understanding of the world lies in one’s roots: family. Thus, Holden’s relationships to his family are powerful, perpetual, and permanent. They not only determine his mindset and opinions, but they also determine his eventual outlook on the world. However, when Holden objectively evaluates his parents as a teenager, he sees his parents as phony (Salinger 3). They constantly seek to fit in with the community, and to Holden, they come across as shallow and trivial. He notices their shortcomings and unconsciously blames them as he thinks it reflects badly upon him. On the other hand, Holden wholeheartedly admires his siblings, Allie and Phoebe. He sees their innocence and ignorance with respect to the “phoniness” in the world, and he draws happiness from watching them. This connection reflects Holden’s awakening “to the joy of life by observing another’s deep involvement in some form of release or reclamation” as he takes solace in watching and emulating his innocent siblings (Castronovo 115). However, the stark contrast between the “phoniness” of Holden’s parents and the innocence of his siblings puts his parents in a bad light, and Holden develops a subconscious dislike for his parents. Holden’s dislike can be extrapolated upon to reflect his abhorrence for pathetic people, and as he has no parents to turn to, he develops a strong affinity for independence and self-competency.

Although already spiteful and angry at the world, Holden goes through life-shaping experiences which further the descent of his character into eventually becoming the classically cynical, opinionated teenager, Holden. Holden was only thirteen when Allie died of leukemia, and he grew furious at the world (Salinger 38). With no one to comfort him, Holden hated his parents for not being there, and he hated the world for the unfairness of it all. After all, the world, a place filled with phonies and frauds, took the life of his innocent, intelligent brother rather than some other arbitrary idiot. Eventually, this hatred turned into reclusiveness, a form of teen angst when it becomes too hard to cope with the world (Nadel 17). The death of Allie, essentially Holden’s first exposure of the intrinsic unfairness of life, forever tainted Holden’s character with a black tint of spite and fiery red anger.

Furthermore, people gain knowledge and insight to draw from when faced with conflict. Generally, one develops intimate relationships with relatives, and there is a tacit informality and neglection of character about them. However, when conflict arises with strangers or peers, the air is more serious and calls for the watching of one’s etiquette and the upholding of one’s morals. Holden gets in a fight with Maurice, a bellboy, over a trifle, but ends up on the floor (Salinger 128). Holden had a moral dilemma: he could either stand up for himself and take a beating or let the bastard have his way. The fact that Holden takes the beating illustrates his growth of character. He feels a need to uphold his morals and this outweighs his natural tendency for self-preservation. Maurice was a bully, just another phony obstacle, and this conflict was essentially a test of Holden’s moral character.

While Holden’s conflict with others helps reinforce his morals, he has an ongoing internal conflict within himself: teen angst. He himself feels isolated from society and through his coping with solitude, his reclusive nature becomes apparent. Holden envisions a life free from “phoniness”: a life as an anonymous deaf mute living apart from society (Salinger 221). However elegant and attractive this solution to life may be, Holden never made it into a reality as he *real*ly epitomized the indecisive, bipolar teenager: always changing his mind and never committing to anything.

In addition to both internal and external conflict, all teenagers share common ground: sex. A teenager’s exposure to sex generally accelerates the loss of innocence and increases the rate of maturation. However, the amount of exposure is dictated by the teen’s interest in sex, which is usually quite high. Holden is no exception. He incessantly discusses sex as well as his own sexuality. Although he has never experienced it, sex gives meaning to his life (contradiction) as it is something he can look forward to. However, Holden’s encounter with Sunny shows his hesitance in committing to something potentially damaging, and his inability to have sex shows his hesitance at losing his innocence (Salinger 122). Holden’s character is greatly influenced by his sexual mindset, but as evinced by his abstinence, his rationality and fear overcome his sexual hunger. His sexuality partially defines him as a sex maniac, but simultaneously, his abstinence delineates him as a secretly fearful, insecure teenage boy.

Additionally, etiquette and manners play a large role in society, but Holden views them as phony but necessary “if you want to stay alive” (Salinger 114). He displays his refined etiquette mostly when in contact with girls, suggesting a budding interest. Partially, this interest can be attributed to his growing sexuality, but it is mostly out of his respect for them. Holden shows that with a loss of innocence comes a gain of chivalry. Children have no sense of chivalry towards women as they are too immature to understand the social importance of manners, but as they progress through adolescence, they gain the sense of chivalry (Whitfield 74). However, in order to gain the humility needed in order to be chivalrous, the sense of sexuality must also be prominent. Sexuality brings about insecurity and the associated humility. Teens are not only defined by their loss of innocence, but also by their gain of chivalry and humility.

The universal symbol of innocence and ignorance and the most greatly missed time of one’s life: childhood. A time of wonder, freedom, and no worries, childhood represents life through the eyes of an infant. Holden seeks to retain his innocence, yet he cannot (Cliffs). He feels as though he has lost his innocence, so he can only try to hang on to the innocent image of Phoebe. When Phoebe gets on the carousel and reaches for the golden ring, Holden comments on how innocent she is and how important it is to let the kids reach for the ring (Salinger 274). Holden demonstrates his longing and yearning for life as a child again, but he cannot have it. Walking down the street, when Holden sees the child singing a song about a catcher in the rye, the child is unknowingly singing a song about sex, reflecting the child’s innocence (Shmoop). Holden interprets the song as the saving of children from falling and losing their innocence. He realizes that he wants to be a “catcher in the rye.” This reflects his desire to preserve the innocence of children and the universal search for it.

People find meaning and purpose in their lives through experiences and relationships. They are defined by their actions and relationships, and it is impossible to escape this social norm. People are born innocent and free, but as there are powerful relationships formed through birth, no one can have a completely unique mentality; his or her beliefs will forever be tainted by the beliefs of his or her parents. In J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield’s gains knowledge and forms opinions based on his relationships and experiences with those around him. He eventually finds and celebrates his individuality in his quest for subduing the evil in the world (i.e. phoniness), but his actions are noticeably inconstant as he subconsciously emulates those around him. As an innocent child, Holden Caulfield was inadvertently sewn with the seeds of “phoniness” by the mindless actions of his parents and acquaintances, and his character reflects the bond. However, Holden embraces the very bonds that contradict his morals, and he contemplates the ugliness and beauty in the world. Through his assessment of his life, and to a greater extent, the universe, Holden Caulfield finds that the inevitability of physical growth is complemented by the eventual psychological growth of character, and although one’s life may be predetermined or set out for him or her, ultimately, it is one’s own ability and mindset that dictates his or her spiritual, intellectual, and psychological growth.