

Significance and Relevance of *Catcher in the Rye*

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The novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, written by J.D. Salinger and published in the year 1951, has gone down in history as an American classic. The present sample book report provided by Ultius will delve into the ongoing significance and relevance of *The Catcher in the Rye* even now, in the year 2016. The report will begin with a short overview of the novel itself. Then, it will proceed to consider the perennial relevance of the themes that are found in the book. From this point, though, the report will become more specific and consider three particular scenarios from this year in which *Catcher in the Rye* may be especially significant. These are: one, the presidential elections; two, the Black Lives Matter movement; and three, the ongoing proliferation of social media.

To start with, then, the simple point can be made that Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is about a deeply alienated young man named Holden Caulfield. The primary narrative of the book consists of Holden wandering around for a couple days in the city, attempting to find some semblance of meaningful human connection in a world that he deems to be almost irredeemably hollow—or, to use one of his own favorite words, phony. This portrayal of alienation is the signature of the novel as a whole, and it is one of the main reasons why Salinger faced many challenges when attempting to publish it. Banned Books Week, for example, has indicated that the book was considered too "filthy" to publish by many stakeholders at the time, not just because of the actual words in the book but also because of the generally pessimistic and even nihilistic worldview conveyed by the book.

The irony, however, is that Holden himself actually dreams of innocence, or a state of life and society in which the alienation he feels will no longer be a reality. The title of the novel itself, for instance, comes from the following fantasy that Holden entertains: "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

that cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day, I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (Salinger, 1951, p. 224). That is, Holden, for all the nihilism and "filth" of his worldview, actually dreams of being a kind of savior of the innocent; he wants to prevent the children from falling off the cliff over which he presumably sees himself to have fallen. This tension between grit on the one hand and innocence on the other is surely one of the things that is responsible for the basic charm of Salinger's novel.

The tension that has been described above is, in a way, of perennial significance and relevance. That is, Salinger's novel is significant in the year 2016 because it is essentially significant in any year, ever; it reveals something fundamentally important about the nature of the human condition. More specifically, the suggestion can be made that *The Catcher in the Rye* captures, like almost no other novel, the trauma that a sensitive adolescent may experience when he sees his own inherent idealism conflict violently with the nature of the empirical social world. Holden, far from being a kind of nihilist, actually has several deeply felt values; and the sense of nihilism within the novel emerges not from Holden himself but rather from the conflict through which Holden comes to see that his own values exist almost nowhere in the world outside of his own head. Again, this kind of realization is inherent to the experience of adolescence; and insofar there are still adolescents in the year 2016 like there were back in the year 1951, the suggestion can clearly be made that Salinger's work is just as relevant today as it must have been when it was first published.

This is not to say, however, that *The Catcher in the Rye* only has relevance for teenagers. On the contrary, adolescence must be understood in broader psychological terms, as a matter of trying to come to grips with social reality and one's own place within an increasingly changing

social reality. As Iyer has suggested, the assumption should not be made that most people have gone through this struggle and peacefully arrived at mature adulthood; rather, it would seem to be much more plausible that many people have simply put the struggle of adolescence into abeyance and decided to not engage with the matter in any sort of way (pp. 354-359). This means that in a way, *The Catcher in the Rye* is perennially relevant for anyone who feels somewhat out of home within society as a whole, or who feels that his own values are not being adequately reflected in the social order of things. Clearly, this would include a great many people who are ordinarily called adults.

The current presidential election cycle within the United States has revealed the ongoing relevance of *The Catcher in the Rye* in the year 2016 by showing the extent to which a very large number of Americans feel disenfranchised within their own society. Saunders, for example, has conducted a detailed discussion of the ways in which many Americans who have felt that their voice has been ignored by the political system as a whole have developed support for the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, on the basis of the belief that Trump is authentic and actually cares about their concerns like no one else does. Similarly, on the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders staged a campaign that with a highly unexpected level of success, primarily because younger voters and essentially had enough of a political system that apparently got nothing done and especially failed to address their own pressing concerns, such as student debt (see Douthat).

The relevance of Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* can be seen in these interesting political developments, if one bears in mind that the fundamental theme of the entire novel is the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement from society. In a way, the supporters of Trump on the one end and Sanders on the other have felt what Holden Caulfield felt: they have felt that

society as a whole is phony and that all its values are hypocritical, and that radical change will thus be needed in order to bring society into accord with higher values and ideals. An American people who were happy with their government would not have swung toward outsiders such as Trump and Sanders in the way that they have. Rather, this phenomenon can only be explained if one considers the widespread prevalence of the sense of social alienation that Salinger portrayed so effectively within his classic novel.

The social movement Black Lives Matter has risen up primarily in response to the string of police shootings of young Black men that has plagued the United States as of late. As Black Lives Matter itself has written: "#BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year-old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder. Rooted in the experience of Black people in this country who actively resist our de-humanization in this country, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action" (para. 1). In other words, these activists believe that the legacy of slavery and racism is still alive and well within America today, such that Black Americans are still routinely treated as second-class citizens and denied access to the basic rights that are guaranteed to all within a free and democratic society.

Of course, one common response to this social movement is that it is misguided due to the fact that not just Black lives but rather all lives matter. Salinger's theme of alienation and disenfranchisement, however, can help shed greater light on this matter. It has not been the purpose of the Black Lives Matter movement to deny that all lives matter; rather, the purpose has been for activists to express the widespread sentiment of Black people that within contemporary America, they are treated as if their lives do not matter (or at least, that their lives matter less than non-Black lives). This is the kind of outsider feeling that is exemplified by Holden's

worldview in the *Catcher in the Rye*; indeed, given the right context, it would actually be very easy to imagine Holden stating that he feels like a Black person, as a way of pointing toward the general alienation that he experiences vis-a-vis the dominant society. This sense of alienation is clearly not confined to Salinger's fiction, as the emergence of a movement such as Black Lives Matter shows very well.

In this day and age, life without social media has become almost unthinkable for many Americans, with it becoming almost difficult to tell what proportion of a given person's human interactions are done in actual physical space relative to what proportion is done in cyberspace. The net psychological effect of this, though, is that even as people are supposedly more connected with each other than ever, they may also feel more alienated from each other than ever as well. As Konnikova has suggested, for example, Facebook often makes users unhappy due to the fact that it invites them to compare their own messy lives with the idealized portrayals of others' lives that can be found on their social media pages. This dynamic tends to be self-perpetuating, culminating in a situation in which everyone is more or less unhappy but everyone keeps trying to impress each other with images of how happy they are.

One could easily imagine what Holden Caulfield would say about a state of affairs such as this one. Indeed, if he found social life phony back in the 1950s, then how much phonier would he find it today, with the widespread proliferation of social media and the accompanying mediation of virtual images across almost the entire field of social relations? Without an awareness of the kind of alienation portrayed by Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the modern person who is depressed by social media may simply think that this is his own personal idiosyncrasy and thus feel embarrassed about his own feelings. A novel such as the one written by Salinger, however, can give people the courage to take their own feelings about the state of

social relations seriously and even inquire into whether social relations perhaps have gotten as "phony" as Holden always insisted that they were. This is perhaps more relevant now in the year 2016 than ever before due to the ways in which technologically mediated self-presentation can now interfere with people actually getting to know each other.

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the ongoing relevance and significance of Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* in the year 2016. After introducing the novel itself and considering its perennial significance at the literary level, the essay proceeded to consider three cases of the novel's main themes being specifically relevant within present-day America. The main point that has been made here is that many Americans clearly feel a deep sense of alienation and disenfranchisement from society as a whole, as can clearly be seen in the current presidential election cycle, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the proliferation of social media. So, in addition to the perennial relevance of a novel documenting the struggle of adolescence, *The Catcher in the Rye* is especially relevant in these troubled and unstable times.

## References

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