

# Holden Caulfield and the troubles of growing-up

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**Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i filozofije**

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**Holden Caulfield and the Troubles of Growing-up**

**Završni rad**

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## **Summary**

J.D. Salinger became famous world-wide owing to his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. *The Catcher in the Rye* is Salinger's best work in which he depicts Holden Caulfield, a teenager with lots of problems. He is kicked out from school, he lost his brother, he does not have close relationship with his parents and this all influences him. Holden has many psychological problems and he does not know how to deal with them and because of it he falls deeper and deeper in those problems. Holden tries to solve his problems with violence, sex, alcohol and later on he even becomes totally depressed. Salinger made effort to show that not only grownups have problems but also young adolescents who are seeking attention and love. Salinger uses Holden as a symbol of problems in the 1950s and he tries to solve those problems by bringing them closer to people.

**Key words:** J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, problems of growing-up, relationships with family members, children's innocence in contrast to adulthood

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## Introduction

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a 1951 novel written by J. D. Salinger. It was pronounced one of the hundred best English-language novels of the 20th century. The novel is J.D. Salinger's first literary work and it is said that it was his greatest achievement. He was writing short stories before that and was best known for his reclusive nature. Although he did not have many popular works he was still one of the most influential writers in the 20th century. The novel has aroused lots of arguments and debates because of the controversy and moral issues in the novel. Some critics argued that *The Catcher in the Rye* is a fascinating but yet really depressing story. The plot of the novel, which includes incidents of depression, nervous breakdown, impulsive spending, sexual exploration, vulgarity, and other erratic behavior, leads readers into controversial world of Holden Caulfield. Originally, the novel was published for adults, but it has since then become popular with adolescent readers for its themes of teenage confusion, anger, alienation and language. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a psychological novel based more on how events affect the hero's mind than on the events themselves. The plot is supplemented with a number of digressions, which help to reveal more about the complex character, Holden Caulfield.

“One of the most popular means by which *The Catcher in the Rye* is critiqued is through the comparison of Holden Caulfield to other literary characters. The novel is often compared to traditional period literature, particularly Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both works feature naive, adolescent runaways as narrators, both commenting on the problems of their times, and both novels have been recurrently banned or restricted” (Lomazoff 1).

## 1. Holden Caulfield

Holden Caulfield has been criticized a lot, but despite criticism *The Catcher in the Rye* is Salinger's greatest novel which exposes taboos and real life dealing with real problems of adolescents. In this novel there are many examples of Holden's struggle with life. Therefore, the complexity of the main character and the psychological analysis behind his actions are the most important through the whole novel. The novel attempts to show the reader the life of a regular boy with troubles on his mind.

The main character, Holden, is actually a good boy but unfortunately he is stuck in a bad and cruel world:

He is trying to make the best of his life, though ultimately losing that battle. Whereas he aims at stability and truth, the adult world cannot survive without suspense and lies. It is a testament to his innocence and decent spirit that Holden would place the safety and well-being of children as a goal in his lifetime. This serves to only re-iterate the fact that Holden is a sympathetic character, a person of high moral values who is too weak to pick himself up from a difficult situation. (Lomazoff 1)

Holden Caulfield is the rich and troubled child with many problems which are common in adolescence. Holden feels the absence of love, which causes him to suffer emotionally. His parents are quite wealthy and want Holden to become successful in life, but they do not pay enough attention to Holden nor do they love him as much as he thinks he needs. In addition, "Holden is a rebel and all that – 'the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life', 'probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw' -- but he's a softy at heart" (Yardley). He needs direction in his life, like every other teenager. His problem is that he constantly struggles to find the meaning of life. His inability to focus makes everything even worse.

## **2. Holden's problems**

Holden Caulfield is a lonely, frustrated person who is caught in a world of banalities and restricting conformity. The lack of love, attention and faith in life makes him afraid of adulthood. He does not want to be part of that frightening world. He looks for answers and tries to find himself and stop being stuck in between childhood and adulthood. Holden thinks that childhood represents innocence and honesty without any problems adults have. On the other hand, adulthood is unknown place full of lies, corruption and dishonesty. A lot of pressure is put on him, which is another reason for Holden to escape and leave everything behind. Furthermore, he is not aware of his psychological defect, caused by a severe lack of control in his life.

Holden seems to be like any other 16-year-old boy, but, unfortunately, it turns out that Holden is a really complex and unhappy person. He is coping with the real world around him, thinking that life does not make sense. "Holden's awareness creates a powerful tension in his character and in the novel as a whole; he is conscious of being trapped in the no-man's land between his beautiful but impossible ideals and a sordid but inescapable reality" (Harper 69). The first step in Holden's typical adolescent insanity is him being kicked out from school. Later on, J.D Salinger describes how a lonely teenager, Holden Caulfield, deals with alcohol, sex, and violence.

### **2.1. Alcohol**

Holden starts to drink as a result of not knowing how to cope with his problems. Yet, from his perspective alcoholism turns out to be the only way out. Various situations are shown where Holden tries to find his way out with drinking alcohol. He drank to make himself feel

better but it just made him angrier. Drinking problem arises as a consequence of Holden's loneliness because he does not have anyone to turn to. Later on, alcohol becomes just one of Holden's social problems. Holden's drinking is just a way to show other people that he is more mature than he looks and he wants others to see that too. Holden views himself older than he really is, which is his main concern, because he wants to be seen as more mature. Another example from the book is when the bartender refuses to serve him drink because he is minor. This is one of the many examples from the book in which the world around him clashes with the view of the world he has created in his mind.

## **2.2. Sex**

Throughout the novel, Holden talks about sex and gets acquainted with it. He is concerned with the fact that people can take sex for granted and that is why he cannot understand that people can have sex with ones they do not love:

Upon seeing a couple through their hotel room window spitting their drinks at each other, laughing and playing in a sexual manner suggesting that they are going to have sex, Holden shows his confusion about the adult world reflected in the way it treats casual sex by saying, "Sex is something I really don't understand too hot." (Cassel 1)

Holden admits that he does not understand sex just as he does not understand many other "grown-up" things. He is a child but still somehow coveting for adult's life. He thinks a lot about sexual intercourse and he wants to try it just to show that he is mature enough. Holden thinks that people can just interact in sexual way, because he did not have the opportunity to learn what kind of feelings people can show or experience. He would like to have sex with different women thinking that it is right thing to do. He wants to have sexual relationships with Faith Cavendish,



Sunny, Sally and many others but he never manages to do so. Holden thinks sex without responsibility makes people a part of adulthood. Unfortunately, Holden does not understand sexuality at all. He is actually confused by the fact that sex does not have to be connected with emotions and because he is attracted to girls he does not love. One more reason for Holden's confusion is impression that he does not get the amount of love that he needs. The only thing Holden ever wanted is guidance and support which he never got from his closest friends and family. Holden falls into the jaws of sexuality not even thinking about the consequences. He even gets into relationship with a prostitute: "Anyway, I kept walking around the room, waiting for this prostitute to show up. I kept hoping she'd be good-looking. I didn't care too much, though. I sort of just wanted to get it over with" (Salinger 93). He jumps on the opportunity, but does not commit the sexual act. That is just the beginning of his deep and serious problems. Not only did he interact with girls in a sexual way but he started to act rough and violent.

### **2.3. Violence**

Holden does not know how to release his worries and feelings, and then he tries to manage everything with violence. Violence becomes severe problem because Holden does not have boundaries; he starts to beat every person who finds fault with him. Becoming a rebellious and confused adolescent seems like the only right thing to do for Holden. One of the best examples of Holden's violence is the conflict with Stradlater. Holden wants to help Stradlater by writing him the school report. He decides to write about his brother Allie's baseball glove. His brother Allie passed away from leukemia which made it even more difficult for Holden to write about such a delicate thing. After giving the report to Stradlater, all he gets from him is a criticism about his work, which makes Holden furious and violent:

“God damn it.” He was sore as hell. He was really furious. “You always do everything backasswards.” He looked at me. “No wonder you’re flunking the hell out of here,” he said. “You don’t do one damn thing the way you’re supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing.” “All right, give it back to me, then,” I said. I went over and pulled it right out of his goddam hand. Then I tore it up. (Salinger 80).

This paragraph shows Holden’s inability to control himself and his violence. He is really sensitive and everything can wake his anger, especially if it is about his dead brother Allie.

### **3. Holden's Relationship with Brothers and a Sister**

#### **3.1. Holden's Relationship with Brother Allie**

The real reason for Holden's violence is his love for his dead brother Allie. Holden never managed to get over his brother's death, which is another potential background for all his problems. When Allie died, Holden died also in some way because he never managed to get used to the fact that his brother is not alive anymore. He was really close with his brother and he always looked at his brother as an innocent child full of joy and happiness: "But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody" (Salinger 89). His brother was a very intelligent child and Holden was always proud of him and then suddenly, one day, he lost Allie. He was left alone to deal with all the problems in life without help of his beloved brother. Allie's death left a huge impact on Holden's life and his whole personality. He becomes depressed because of his brother's death. Holden always describes his brother as nothing less but a perfect person without any flaws. Allie was the only person who ever understood Holden and the complexity of his life. Now, Allie is gone and Holden keeps the guilt locked up inside himself because he feels guilty for Allie's death: "Boy, I felt miserable. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed. I keep telling him to go home and get his bike and meet me in front of Bobby Fallon's house" (Salinger 98).

Allie will always have the substantial place in Holden's life and his loss will always be felt in Holden's heart and life. Holden sometimes acts as if Allie is still alive. The scene which best exemplifies this is when Holden goes to cemetery with his parents and unexpectedly the rain starts to fall. Holden becomes agitated because Allie is dead and cannot go with them in the car or in a restaurant: "All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then

go someplace nice for dinner--everybody except Allie. I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there" (Salinger 295).

### **3.2. Holden's Older Brother D.B**

Holden has older brother, but he does not find anything in common with him because D.B. is a grownup. D.B writes short stories and screenplays for Hollywood movies. Holden thinks that his brother is a prostitute in a way because he prostitutes his talents by writing for those Hollywood movies. Holden ascribes those traits to grownups because they do everything for benefits, and they do not do things because they like doing them but because of price they get for their work. Holden wants to avoid adulthood precisely for reason like that one. Holden idolizes his younger brother Allie who unlike his older brother D.B. will never leave the child's innocent world and become part of the corrupt adulthood.

### **3.3. Holden's Relationship with Sister Phoebe**

For Holden, the only person worth fighting for is his little sister, Phoebe. He sees himself through Phoebe because she is an innocent child who does not have any concerns and worries. Holden wants to be just like Phoebe, not depressed and lost in between childhood and adulthood. He yearns for those days. He knows he will never be a little child again and the only thing he can do is to rescue Phoebe from growing-up. Even though she is little, he can talk to her and it seems to him as if she understands him: "Old Phoebe didn't say anything, but she was listening. She always listens when you tell her something. And the funny part is she knows, half the time, what

the hell you're talking about" (Salinger 167). Holden likes Phoebe's innocence and infancy, and he wants to be just the same as she is. Phoebe is the only person who could help Holden in some way, she is the only one there for him. For Holden Phoebe is an example showing that children are totally in contrast to adults, in contrast to their corruption and phoniness. Holden sees Phoebe as someone to consult, confide in, ask for advice and a shoulder to cry on. Actually, Phoebe is the only person who is hopeful that Holden will finish school and be a good older brother. When he admits her that he got kicked from school she is astonished and in shock: "But she was listening, at least. If somebody at least listens, it's not too bad. 'Daddy's going to kill you. He's going to kill you,' she said" (Salinger 328).

Phoebe is shocked but she is still there for Holden, even though she wants to know his real motives and feelings. She knows he is kicked out from school because he did something on purpose and she is afraid because she thinks their parents will not understand Holden the way she does. Holden is struggling with lots of problems and fears and that is why Phoebe advises him to confront his real problems and feelings about the death of their brother because losing a loved one is the most painful loss a person can face. After Allie's death the only thing Holden needed is someone to comfort him. He needed his mother to be there for him, he needed someone to talk to. Yet, "his mother plays only minor role: Holden feels sorry for her because she is grieving about his younger brother's death and because she has frequent splitting headaches" (Bloom 18). Despite all the attempts to draw mother's attention, he just did not manage to get her love and support. Obviously, Holden's mother loses her wish and power to go on after Allie's death and she forgets that she has two more children who desperately want her love and affection.

#### **4. Alienation**

After losing his brother Allie, Holden becomes a reserved person who cannot show his feelings. For him the only way to show his pain, depression and dissatisfaction is through violence. It is better for him to be hurt physically than emotionally, because physical wounds can heal easily as opposed to his broken heart and depression. Holden used to alienate from the world and later on that alienation led him to alienation from himself. He considers alienation the protection because throughout the novel Holden thinks he does not belong to this world and although he is trying to find his own way he does not succeed in that mission. He is alienated and therefore he falls prey to violence, drugs and alcohol. Despite his problems he thinks he is much better than the rest of the world and that is why he does not give anybody his attention. But beneath the surface Holden is so scared and lost that alienation gives him stability in some way.

## **5. Fear of Growing-up**

Holden does not want to grow up because he thinks that grownups are just a bunch of “phonies”. What is more important, grownups are not aware of this feature at all. Actually, Holden is just scared of growing up, he still looks for attention, he still wants to have problems like other children and therefore he strongly resists growing up. “More than anything else Holden fears the biological imperatives of adulthood - sex, senescence, and death” (Bloom 32). Holden has huge wish to understand everything around him, for instance sex, but unfortunately he cannot understand everything and not everything can be easily dealt with. Because of his fears and concerns about the adulthood he makes up his own imaginary world about the adults. He thinks they are mean and insincere.

## 6. Lack of Attention

Holden wants a lot of attention which he does not get and thus desperately uses other methods which make him exactly the opposite of a good child. Holden wants to draw attention of his family and friends, but does not know how to do it in a good manner. He is a really lonely boy and this can be seen throughout the novel. He desperately wants a friend, a companion that he obviously cannot have because his so called friends are only using him. Holden's loneliness results in great pain and makes him insecure about everything he does or wants to do. One example will suffice: "She looked at me like I was a madman. 'What the heck ya wanna talk about?' she said. 'I don't know. Nothing special. I just thought perhaps you might care to chat for a while.' She sat down in the chair next to the desk again. She didn't like it, though, you could tell" (Salinger 182).

Holden feels so lonely that he asks a prostitute to talk with him; in doing so, he reaches a rock bottom because he tries to find somebody who would want to listen to him and in this case that someone is a prostitute. He wants his parents' love, comfort and a sense of security and he cannot find any of them in his parents. His parents are often busy with unimportant things, not worth trying for, but on the other hand, their children are certainly worth that effort. They spend very little or no time with Holden and his younger sister. Their parents should sit with them, talk and give them all the attention they need. More importantly, parents must try to help their children to solve their problems. Those things would surely give children the feeling that there is someone to care for them. Holden cannot reveal his true feelings and show his real face because of his fear of change and changes that adulthood brings. He is still a child because of his desperate desire for attention. One obvious example, and his shrill attempt to get attention, is getting kicked out from school. He hopes that his parents will give him a little more attention and



that they would finally start to talk with him and care for him. Yet, the only thing they ever did for Holden was to send him to private school far from them. Holden's English teacher Mr. Antolini tries to help him. He tries to encourage him, but sadly, he fails. Holden thinks that there is no way out from his situation and that he will never stop being depressed and scared.

## **7. Holden's Parents**

Holden Caulfield has a distant relationship with his parents: "Holden's parents, seemingly absent and distant, do not know how to deal with him so they send him to private schools and numerous psychoanalysts. His parents, an upper-class family, are probably a stereotypical post World-War II family that Holden does not resent, but they are part of his troubles" (Sivels 1).

Holden's problems were huge, mostly because his parents did not care. His parents are a great mystery for him because they are never there for Holden when he needs them. If there was a little bit more attention, Holden would not try to do something that was not right just to get attention of his parents. Holden's problems with violence, alcohol and getting kicked out from school are all attempts to get his parents' attention. None of those attempts seem to be working because his parents think of him as a failure and they do not show or give him love that he deserves.

## **8. Fear of Losing Innocence**

After the death of his brother Allie, Holden starts to hide from himself and his true feelings. He thinks that if he starts to change he will be just as his beloved brother who passed away at early age and that he will have the same destiny his brother had. He becomes obsessed with death and feels great fear of death. That is also one reason why Holden wants to be always young and innocent and never to die. He thinks that the less innocent and pure he gets, the closer he is to death. Furthermore, Holden thinks that his best moments in life are the moments from childhood and the moments he spent with his brother Allie. He was so happy then, without any worries and concerns until it all changed in a blink of an eye. When his brother left him, he became so scared and lost that he starts to think that he will certainly die if he grows up.

### **8.1. The Meaning of *The Catcher in the Rye***

Every person faces obstacles during a great change from child to adult. Growing-up has advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes it can be a tragedy, sometimes a triumph, happiness or heartache, but still, all of them are parts of growing-up. Holden cannot fight those complex problems and he just permits depression to get hold of him. J.D. Salinger creates a great metaphor for the main character and the book itself. Holden Caulfield imagines being in a big field of rye among thousands of little children, and he is standing on the cliff trying to help those children who do not look where they are going. This metaphor shows the significance of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger mentions problems of growing-up and through Holden he manages to elaborate those problems. Holden is standing on a cliff of change, the change between childhood and adulthood. He is helping young children not to fall from a cliff and abandon

childhood because Holden thinks that no child should become an adult. Adulthood really frightens Holden and he states he is rescuing endangered kids from falling off that cliff. In addition, another metaphor can be found in the name of Holden Caulfield concerning the change of growing-up. His name could be interpreted as “the one who holds in caul field” which also makes reference to his rescuing the endangered kids: he is preventing those kids from becoming adults. Holden thinks that when you once become a grownup you must do all the boring things and that you can never again become free and happy like a little child. Furthermore, depression becomes a part of Holden’s life and he cannot, or does not want, to experience happiness anymore. Holden lacks any motivation; he is too stubborn to see the obvious and to take his life in his hands. Instead of that he gives up life before he even starts it. He does not possess things that could help him deal with problems in his life, and does not even want to try harder to find those things. He just wants to be forever young because of his aversions related to grownups.

## Conclusion

Looking through all the problems Holden deals with, it can be seen that he is actually a real hero trying to fight with unfair and harsh life. He does not want to surrender but in the end his problems seem to be bigger than he is. Holden was trying to find his own identity throughout the novel but he fails to do that and remains a young boy with lost identity, which leads to depression and wild behavior. Maybe all his problems could be solved and that was all just an adolescent identity crisis but he did not have strength and patience to wait for better and happier days.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a really complex novel showing how big the problems of one teenager can be. Holden is a strong young man, but occupied with too many worries and with no one around him. Holden is presented as a young person who cannot deal with real world; he runs away from growing-up as if he ran away from reality. He is alienated, in his imaginary world, dreaming about life he would want to have. The reasons are to be looked for in his inability to cope with social and psychological problems which almost ruined his life. His inability to cope with the loss of his brother, lack of affection and parents' love made him go wrong way. He falls prey to his inner struggles not wanting to fight against them. He lost his little brother, he never had real family and the only thing that was left was his sister Phoebe. However, that was not enough to help him in his battle because his life was slowly but surely falling apart.

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