

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapters 1–2

Summary: Chapter 1

Holden Caulfield writes his story from a rest home to which he has been sent for therapy. He refuses to talk about his early life, mentioning only that his brother D. B. is a Hollywood writer. He hints that he is bitter because D. B. has sold out to Hollywood, forsaking a career in serious literature for the wealth and fame of the movies. He then begins to tell the story of his breakdown, beginning with his departure from Pencey Prep, a famous school he attended in Agerstown, Pennsylvania.

Holden's career at Pencey Prep has been marred by his refusal to apply himself, and after failing four of his five subjects—he passed only English—he has been forbidden to return to the school after the fall term. The Saturday before Christmas vacation begins, Holden stands on Thomsen Hill overlooking the football field, where Pencey plays its annual grudge match against Saxon Hall. Holden has no interest in the game and hadn't planned to watch it at all. He is the manager of the school's fencing team and is supposed to be in New York for a meet, but he lost the team's equipment on the subway, forcing everyone to return early.

Holden is full of contempt for the prep school, but he looks for a way to “say goodbye” to it. He fondly remembers throwing a football with friends even after it grew dark outside. Holden walks away from the game to go say goodbye to Mr. Spencer, a former history teacher who is very old and ill with the flu. He sprints to Spencer's house, but since he is a heavy smoker, he has to stop to catch his breath at the main gate. At the door, Spencer's wife greets Holden warmly, and he goes in to see his teacher.

Summary: Chapter 2

“Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.”

Holden greets Mr. Spencer and his wife in a manner that suggests he is close to them. He is put off by his teacher’s rather decrepit condition but seems otherwise to respect him. In his sickroom, Spencer tries to lecture Holden about his academic failures. He confirms Pencey’s headmaster’s assertion that “[l]ife is a game” and tells Holden that he must learn to play by the rules. Although Spencer clearly feels affection for Holden, he bluntly reminds the boy that he flunked him, and even forces him to listen to the terrible essay he handed in about the ancient Egyptians. Finally, Spencer tries to convince Holden to think about his future. Not wanting to be lectured, Holden interrupts Spencer and leaves, returning to his dorm room before dinner.

Analysis: Chapters 1–2

Holden Caulfield is the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the most important function of these early chapters is to establish the basics of his personality. From the beginning of the novel, Holden tells his story in a bitterly cynical voice. He refuses to discuss his early life, he says, because he is bored by “all that David Copperfield kind of crap.” He gives us a hint that something catastrophic has happened in his life, acknowledging that he writes from a rest home to tell about “this madman stuff” that happened to him around the previous Christmas, but he doesn’t yet go into specifics. The particularities of his story are in keeping with his cynicism and his boredom. He has failed out of school, and he leaves Spencer’s house abruptly because he does not enjoy being confronted by his actions. Beneath the surface of Holden’s tone and behavior runs a more idealistic, emotional current. He begins the story of his last day at Pencey Prep by telling how he stood at the top of Thomsen Hill, preparing to leave the school and trying to feel “some kind of a good-by.” He visits Spencer in Chapter 2 even though he failed Spencer’s history class, and he seems to respond to Mrs. Spencer’s kindness. What bothers him the most, in these chapters and throughout the book, is the hypocrisy and ugliness around

him, which diminish the innocence and beauty of the external world—the unpleasantness of Spencer’s sickroom, for instance, and his hairless legs sticking out of his pajamas. Salinger thus treats his narrator as more than a mere portrait of a cynical postwar rich kid at an impersonal and pressure-filled boarding school. Even in these early chapters, Holden connects with life on a very idealistic level; he seems to feel its flaws so deeply that he tries to shield himself with a veneer of cynicism. *The Catcher in the Rye* is in many ways a book about the betrayal of innocence by the modern world; despite his bitter tone, Holden is an innocent searching desperately for a way to connect with the world around him that will not cause him pain. In these early chapters, the reader already begins to sense that Holden is not an entirely reliable narrator and that the reality of his situation is somehow different from the way he describes it. In part this is simply because Holden is a first-person narrator describing his own experiences from his own point of view. Any individual’s point of view, in any novel or story, is necessarily limited. The reader never forgets for a moment who is telling this story, because the tone, grammar, and diction are consistently those of an adolescent—albeit a highly intelligent and expressive one—and every event receives Holden’s distinctive commentary. However, Holden’s narrative contains inconsistencies that make us question what he says. For instance, Holden characterizes Spencer’s behavior throughout as vindictive and mean-spirited, but Spencer’s actions clearly seem to be motivated by concern for Holden’s well-being. Holden seems to be looking for reasons not to listen to Spencer.

Chapters 3–4

Summary: Chapter 3

“This is a people shooting hat,” I said. “I shoot people in this hat.”

Holden lives in Ossenburger Hall, which is named after a wealthy Pencey graduate who made a fortune in the discount funeral home business. In his room, Holden sits and reads Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* while wearing his

new hunting hat, a flamboyant red cap with a long peaked brim and earflaps. He is interrupted by Ackley, a pimply student who lives next door. According to Holden, Ackley is a supremely irritating classmate who constantly barges into the room, exhibits disgusting personal habits and poor hygiene, and always acts as if he's doing others a favor by spending time with them. Ackley does not seem to have many friends. He prevents Holden from reading by puttering around the room and pestering him with annoying questions. Ackley further aggravates Holden by cutting his fingernails on the floor, despite Holden's repeated requests that he stop. He refuses to take Holden's hints that he ought to leave. When Holden's handsome and popular roommate, Stradlater, enters, Ackley, who hates Stradlater, quickly returns to his own room. Stradlater mentions that he has a date waiting for him but wants to shave.

Summary: Chapter 4

Holden goes to the bathroom with Stradlater and talks to him while he shaves. Holden contrasts Stradlater's personal habits with Ackley's: whereas Ackley is ugly and has poor dental hygiene, Stradlater is outwardly attractive but does not keep his razor or other toiletries clean. He decides that while Ackley is an obvious slob, Stradlater is a "secret slob." The two joke around, then Stradlater asks Holden to write an English composition for him, because his date won't leave him with time to do it on his own. Holden asks about the date and learns that Stradlater is taking out a girl Holden knows, Jane Gallagher. (Stradlater carelessly calls her "Jean.") Holden clearly has strong feelings for Jane and remembers her vividly. He tells Stradlater that when she played checkers, she used to keep all of her kings in the back row because she liked the way they looked there. Stradlater is uninterested. Holden is displeased that Stradlater, one of the few sexually experienced boys at Pencey, is taking Jane on a date. He wants to say hello to her while she waits for Stradlater, but decides he

isn't in the mood. Before he leaves for his date, Stradlater borrows Holden's hound's-tooth jacket.

After Stradlater leaves, Holden is tormented by thoughts of Jane and Stradlater. Ackley barges in again and sits in Holden's room, squeezing pimples until dinnertime.

Analysis: Chapters 3–4

These chapters establish the way Holden interacts with his peers. Holden despises “phonies”—people whose surface behavior distorts or disguises their inner feelings. Even his brother D. B. incurs his displeasure by accepting a big paycheck to write for the movies; Holden considers the movies to be the phoniest of the phony and emphasizes throughout the book the loathing he has for Hollywood.

Unfortunately, Holden is surrounded by phonies in his circa- prep school. Preening Ackley and self-absorbed Stradlater act as his immediate contrasts. But, despite their flaws, he acts with basic kindness toward them, agreeing to write Stradlater's English composition for him in Chapter 4, even though Stradlater is out with Jane Gallagher, a girl Holden seems to care for very deeply. The pressure of adolescent sexuality—an important theme throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*—makes itself felt here for the first time: Holden's greatest worry is that Stradlater will make sexual advances toward Jane.

Stradlater and Ackley sound like appallingly unsympathetic characters, but this is completely the result of the tone in which Holden describes them. For instance, Holden indicates his awareness that Ackley behaves in annoying ways because he is insecure and unpopular, but instead of trying to imagine what Ackley wants or why he does things, he focuses on Ackley's surface—literally, his skin. By describing in minute detail Ackley's nail trimming and pimple squeezing, Holden makes him seem disgusting and subhuman.

[Holden](#)'s interactions also reveal how lonely he is. He describes Ackley as isolated and ostracized, but it's easy to see the parallel between Ackley's and Holden's situations. Holden notes that he and Ackley are the only two guys not at the football game. Both are isolated, and both maintain a bitter, critical exterior in order to shield themselves from the world that assaults them. In Ackley especially, we can see the cruelty of the situation. Ackley's isolation is perpetuated by his annoying habits, but his annoying habits protect him from the dangers of interaction and intimacy. Ackley's situation greatly illuminates Holden's own inner landscape: intimacy and interaction are what he needs and fears most.

Holden's new hunting hat, with its funny earflaps, becomes very important to him. Throughout the novel, it serves as a kind of protective device, which Holden uses for more than physical warmth and comfort. When he wears the hat, he always claims not to care what people think about his appearance, which might be a source of self-conscious embarrassment for Holden—he is extremely tall for his age, very thin, and, though he is only sixteen, has a great deal of gray hair. But it is also important to note when Holden does not wear the hat. Part of him seems to want to display his rebelliousness, but another part of him wants to fit in—or, at least, to hide his unique personality. Although he mentions the freezing temperature, Holden does not wear the hat near the football game or at Spencer's house; he waits for the privacy of his own room to put it on.

Chapters 5–6

Summary: Chapter 5

After a dry and unappetizing steak dinner in the dining hall, [Holden](#) gets into a snowball fight with some of the other Pencey boys. He and his friend Mal Brossard decide to take a bus into Agerstown to see a movie—though Holden hates movies—and Holden convinces Mal to let Ackley go with them. As it turns out, Ackley and Brossard have already seen the film, so

the trio simply eats some burgers, plays a little pinball, and heads back to Pencey.

After the excursion, Mal goes off to look for a bridge game, and Ackley sits on Holden's bed squeezing pimples and concocting stories about a girl he claims to have had sex with the summer before. Holden finally gets him to leave by beginning to work on the English assignment for Stradlater.

Stradlater had said the composition was supposed to be a simple description of a room, a house, or something similarly straightforward. But Holden cannot think of anything to say about a house or a room, so he writes about a baseball glove that his brother Allie used to copy poems onto in green ink.

Several years before, Allie died of leukemia. Though he was two years younger than Holden, Holden says that Allie was the most intelligent member of his family. He also says that Allie was an incredibly nice, innocent child. Holden clearly still feels Allie's loss strongly. He gives a brief description of Allie, mentioning his bright red hair. He also recounts that the night Allie died, he slept in the garage and broke all the windows with his bare hands. After he finishes the composition for Stradlater, he stares out the window and listens to Ackley snore in the next room.

Summary: Chapter 6

Home from his date, Stradlater barges into the room. He reads Holden's composition and becomes visibly annoyed, asserting that it has nothing to do with the assignment and that it's no wonder Holden is being expelled. Holden tears the composition up and throws it away angrily. Afterward, he smokes a cigarette in the room just to annoy Stradlater. The tension between the two increases when Holden asks Stradlater about his date with Jane. When Stradlater nonchalantly refuses to tell Holden any of the details, Holden attacks him, but Stradlater pins him to the floor and tries to get him to calm down. Holden relentlessly insults Stradlater, driving him crazy until he punches Holden and bloodies his nose. Stradlater then becomes worried that he has hurt Holden and will get into trouble. Holden

insults him some more, and Stradlater finally leaves the room. Holden gets up and goes into Ackley's room, his face covered in blood.

Analysis: Chapters 5–6

Holden's kindness to Ackley in Chapter 5 comes as a surprise after the disdain that Holden has displayed for him in the previous two chapters. Though he continues to complain about Ackley, the sympathy he feels for his next-door neighbor is evident when he convinces Mal Brossard to let Ackley join them at the movies. Equally surprising is Holden's willingness to go to the movies after his diatribes against their superficiality. Holden's actions are inconsistent with his opinions, but instead of making him seem like a hypocrite, this makes him more likable: he is kind to Ackley without commenting on it, and he shows himself capable of going to the movies with his friends like a normal teenager.

The most important revelation in these chapters comes about when Holden writes the composition for Stradlater, divulging that his brother Allie died of leukemia several years before. Holden idealizes Allie, praising his intelligence and sensitivity—the poem-covered baseball glove is a perfect emblem for both—but remaining silent about his emotional reaction to Allie's death. He alludes to his behavior almost in passing, saying that he slept in the garage on the night of Allie's death and broke all the windows with his bare hands, "just for the hell of it." He tried to break the car windows as well, but could not because his hand was already fractured from smashing the garage windows. Throughout the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that Allie's death was one of the most traumatic experiences of Holden's life and may play a major role in his current psychological breakdown. Indeed, the cynicism that Holden uses to avoid expressing his feelings may result from Allie's death.

[Holden](#) seems to feel increasing pressure as he moves toward leaving school, and Salinger manipulates the details of Holden's physical environment to match his protagonist's feelings. Holden cannot get a

moment alone; Ackley continues to barge in with his made-up sex stories, and when Holden writes the very personal composition about his brother Allie, Stradlater criticizes it and then taunts Holden about Jane. When Holden finally snaps and attacks his roommate, Stradlater easily overpowers him, and when he tries to seek refuge in Ackley's room, Ackley is so unpleasant that Holden cannot relax. He leaves abruptly, as though trying to escape the torment of his environment. What Holden does not yet realize, however, is that he carries his torment with him, inside himself.

Chapters 7–9

Summary: Chapter 7

Holden talks for a while with Ackley and then tries to fall asleep in the bed belonging to Ackley's roommate, who is away for the weekend. But he cannot stop imagining Jane fooling around with Stradlater, and he has trouble falling asleep. He wakes Ackley and talks with him some more, asking whether he could run off and join a monastery without being Catholic. Ackley is annoyed by the conversation, and Holden is annoyed by Ackley's "phoniness," so he leaves. Outside, in the dorm's hallway, he decides that he will leave for New York that night instead of waiting until Wednesday. After passing a few days there in secret, he will wait until his parents have digested the news of his expulsion before he returns to their apartment. He packs his bags, dons his hunting hat, and begins to cry. As he heads into the hallway, he yells "Sleep tight, ya morons!" to the boys on his floor before stepping outside to leave Pencey forever.

Summary: Chapter 8

Holden walks the entire way to the train station and catches a late train to New York. At Trenton, an attractive older woman gets on and sits next to him. She turns out to be the mother of his classmate, Ernest Morrow. He dislikes Ernest immensely but tells extravagant lies about him to his mother, claiming that he is the most popular boy on campus and would have been elected class president if he'd let the other boys nominate him.

Holden tells her his own name is Rudolph Schmidt, which is actually the school janitor's name. When she asks why he is leaving Pencey early, Holden claims to be returning to New York for a brain tumor operation.

Summary: Chapter 9

At Penn Station, Holden wants to call someone but cannot think of anyone to call—his brother, D. B., is in Hollywood; his sister, [Phoebe](#), is young and probably asleep; he doesn't feel like calling Jane Gallagher; and another girl, Sally Hayes, has a mother who hates him. So, Holden takes a cab to the Edmont Hotel. He tries to make conversation with the driver, asking him where the ducks in the Central Park lagoon go in the winter, but the driver is uninterested. In his room at the Edmont, he looks out across the hotel courtyard into the lighted windows on the other side and discovers a variety of bizarre acts taking place. One man dresses in women's clothing, and in another room a man and a woman take turns spitting mouthfuls of their drinks into each other's face. Holden begins to feel aroused, so he calls Faith Cavendish, a promiscuous girl recommended to him by a boy he met at a party, and tries to make a date with her. She refuses, claiming she needs her beauty sleep. She offers to meet him the next day, but he doesn't want to wait that long, and he hangs up without arranging to meet her.

Analysis: Chapters 7–9

The Catcher in the Rye is a chronicle of [Holden Caulfield](#)'s emotional breakdown, but Holden never comments on it directly. At no point in the story does he say that he is undergoing an emotional strain; he simply describes his increasingly desperate behavior without much explanation. Salinger cleverly manipulates Holden's narrative to signal to the reader that there is more to the story than what Holden admits or describes. In the previous sections, Holden exhibited a number of behaviors that might indicate a troubled mind: running through the snow to Spencer's house, writing Stradlater's English composition about Allie's baseball glove, attacking Stradlater for joking about Jane, leaving his dorm forever in the

middle of the night, and yelling an insult down the hallway on his way out. In this section, Holden's frantic loneliness and constant lying further the implication that he is not well mentally or emotionally.

As soon as he gets off the train in New York in Chapter 9, Holden wants to call someone and seems especially to want to call Jane, but he is apparently too nervous (he suspiciously claims not to "feel like it" and runs through a long list of people he could contact instead). This seems particularly strange given Holden's cynicism and evident dislike for most people; in Chapter 8, for instance, he describes enjoying the solitude of late-night train rides. His desire for human contact becomes even more intense as the section progresses: he begins to feel sexually aroused and tries to make a date with a stranger whose number he was given at a party, then goes to a nightclub to flirt with older women. Holden's constant lying, in this section and throughout the novel, is a mark of immaturity and imbalance. As soon as he meets Mrs. Morrow on the train, Holden begins telling ridiculous lies, claiming to be named Rudolph Schmidt and to be going to New York for a brain tumor operation. He feels guilty for lying, but the only way he can stop is to stop talking altogether. There is no particular rhyme or reason for the lies he tells Mrs. Morrow—his intentions toward her may be kind, or cruel, or simply careless. What does seem clear is that he lies to deflect attention from himself and what he is doing.

In his reactions to the other guests in the hotel, whom he refers to as "perverts," Holden reveals a great deal about his attitudes toward sex and toward what makes him uncomfortable about sexuality. He admits that he is aroused by the idea of spitting in someone's face and that the couple across the courtyard seems to be having fun. But he thinks that people should only have sex if they care deeply for one another, and "crumby" behavior such as this seems disrespectful. What bothers him is his perception that sexual attraction can be separate from respect and intimacy, and that sex can be casual or kinky. He knows this from his own experience with a former girlfriend, from observing Stradlater's mating

habits, and from watching his new neighbors. As he tells his story, Holden never seems particularly concerned about his own behavior or that of those around him. He often seems angry, but he rarely discusses his feelings. By combining what we know about Holden from his narration with his actions in the story, we can piece together the desperation, the pressure, and the trauma he endures during this difficult time in his life.

Chapters 10–12

Summary: Chapter 10

Still feeling restless, [Holden](#) changes his shirt and goes downstairs to the Lavender Room, the Edmont's nightclub. Before he leaves his room, he thinks again about calling his little sister, [Phoebe](#). Referring to her as “old Phoebe,” he gives a description of her character that is remarkably similar to the description he gave of Allie in Chapter 5. Like Allie, she has red hair and is unusually intelligent for her age. He recalls the time he and Phoebe went to see Hitchcock's *The Steps* (despite his professed loathing for the cinema, he has clearly seen many movies and has strong opinions about them). He notes Phoebe's humor and cleverness, and mentions that she writes never-ending fictional stories that feature a character named “Hazle” Weatherfield. According to Holden, Phoebe's one flaw is that she is perhaps too emotional.

In the Lavender Room, Holden takes a table and tries to order a cocktail. He explains that due to his height and his gray hair, he is often able to order alcohol, but, in this case, the waiter refuses. He flirts and dances with three women who are visiting from Seattle. They seem amused but uninterested in this obviously young man who tries to appear older and debonair. After tolerating him for a while, they begin to laugh at him; they also depress him by being obsessed with movie stars. When Holden lies to one of them about having just seen Gary Cooper, she tells the other two

that she caught a glimpse of Gary Cooper as well. Holden pays for their drinks, then leaves the Lavender Room.

Summary: Chapter 11

As he walks out to the lobby, Holden reminisces about Jane. Their families' summer homes in Maine were next door to one another, and he met her after his mother confronted her mother about a Doberman pinscher that frequently relieved itself on the Caulfields' lawn. Holden and Jane became close—Jane was the only person to whom Holden ever showed Allie's baseball glove. One day, Jane's alcoholic stepfather came out to the porch where Holden and Jane were playing checkers and asked Jane for cigarettes; Jane refused to answer him, and, when he left, she began to cry. Holden held her, kissing her face and comforting her. Apart from that incident, their physical relationship was mild, but they used to hold hands constantly. When you held Jane's hand, Holden reminisces, "all you knew was, you were happy. You really were." Holden then feels suddenly upset, and he returns to his room. He notices that the lights in the "perverts" rooms are out. He is still wide awake, so he heads downstairs and grabs a taxi.

Summary: Chapter 12

Holden takes a cab to a Greenwich Village nightclub called Ernie's, a spot he used to frequent with D. B. His cab driver is named Horwitz, and Holden takes a liking to him. But when Holden tries to ask him about the ducks in the Central Park lagoon, Horwitz unexpectedly becomes angry. At Ernie's, Holden listens to Ernie play the piano but is unimpressed. He takes a table, drinks Scotch and soda, and listens to the conversations around him, which he finds depressing and phony. He encounters an obnoxious girl named Lillian Simmons, whom D. B. used to date, and is forced to leave the nightclub to get away from her.

Analysis: Chapters 10–12

By this point in the novel, it's clear that loneliness is at the heart of Holden's problems. When he arrives in New York, it is already quite late in the evening, but he embarks on an almost manic quest for interaction. His call to Faith Cavendish in Chapter 9 hinted at Holden's desperation—calling a girl you've never met in the middle of the night is not quite normal—but here we see the depth of Holden's feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Despite his independent nature, Holden demonstrates how badly he needs companionship. In these chapters especially, his thoughts are always of other people. He thinks about Phoebe, he repeatedly remembers Jane, and he mentally ridicules the people at surrounding tables. But Holden never mentions himself. He avoids introspection and reflection on his own shortcomings and problems by focusing on the world around him, usually through a dismissive and critical lens. His focus on other people reveals the extent to which he longs for companionship, love, and compassionate interaction to help him through a difficult period in his life.

Through his nostalgic memories of Jane, we gain insight into the type of companionship [Holden](#) wants. He mentions that he knew he was happy when he was with Jane—this is a certitude that he is lacking at the present moment. His memories of Jane are especially touching because he describes a very deep emotional connection. Additionally, their moments of intimacy were subtle and extremely personal, free of any sort of posturing or phoniness.

The key moment of Jane and Holden's relationship bears a curious resemblance to Holden's present situation. After her stepfather's intrusion, Jane is overwhelmed by a pain she cannot articulate, a deep sadness that she cannot put into words. Holden, full of silent compassion and understanding, knows what to do to help her through hard times. Now, he finds himself in a similar situation, struggling with a pain that he can't talk about with anyone in the book, including the reader. He desperately needs the same deep, compassionate connection he says he once experienced with Jane.

Holden's self-delusion and unreliability as a narrator continue to grow. When he enters the Lavender Room, he depicts himself as a wise-beyond-his-years, debonair playboy. But because the waiter refuses to serve him alcohol, and because the girls laugh at his advances, we doubt that Holden's self-description is accurate. Holden rationalizes the girls' dismissal of him by saying that they are silly tourist hicks. Although there does seem to be a bit of provincialism in their character, it's fairly clear that the girls are amused by the situation and that they indulge Holden in his flirtation out of pity combined with a touch of mockery. Holden likes to imagine that he is a mature individual who perceptively sees all the hidden details around him, but in actuality he's just a kid. Once again, Holden's inability to understand the world around him—or, perhaps, his unwillingness to acknowledge the world around him—reveals his profound disconnection and isolation.

Chapters 13–15

Summary: Chapter 13

Feeling like a coward for leaving Ernie's, [Holden](#) walks the forty-one blocks from the nightclub back to the hotel. Along the way, he thinks about his gloves, which were stolen at Pencey. He imagines an elaborate confrontation with the unknown thief, but he acknowledges that he is a coward at heart, afraid of violence and confrontation. When he reaches the Edmont, he takes the elevator up to his room. The elevator operator offers to send him a prostitute for five dollars, and Holden, depressed and flustered, accepts. While waiting in his room, he again thinks about his cowardice, because he feels that his lack of aggression has prevented him from ever sleeping with a woman. Women, Holden believes, want a man who asserts power and control. As he broods, the prostitute, Sunny, arrives. She is a cynical young girl with a high voice. Holden becomes flustered, especially so when she removes her dress. She sits on his lap and tries to seduce him, but he is extremely nervous and tells her he is unable to have sex because he is recovering from an operation on his

“clavichord.” He finally pays her the five dollars he owes and asks her to leave. She claims that the price is ten, but he refuses to pay her more, and she leaves in a huff.

Summary: Chapter 14

Holden sits in his hotel room and smokes for a while. He remembers an incident shortly before Allie’s death when he excluded Allie from a BB-gun game—he still feels guilty for having left Allie out. Eventually, he goes to bed. He feels like praying, but his distaste for organized religion prevents him from following through on his inclination. Suddenly, there is a knock at his door. In his pajamas, Holden opens the door to face the burly elevator operator, Maurice, who has returned with Sunny to collect the extra five dollars Sunny demanded. Holden tries to refuse, but Maurice pins him against a wall while Sunny takes the money from his wallet. Maurice snaps his finger into Holden’s groin, and Holden starts to insult him in response. Maurice slugs Holden in the stomach and leaves him crumpled on the floor. Holden imagines himself as a movie character, taking his revenge on Maurice after having been plugged in the gut with a gangster’s bullet. Finally, he manages to get into bed and go to sleep.

Summary: Chapter 15

The next morning, Holden calls Sally Hayes and makes a date with her for later that afternoon. He checks out of the hotel and leaves his bags in a locker at Grand Central Station. He worries about losing his money and mentions that his father frequently gets angry when Holden loses things. He also describes his mother a bit, noting that she “hasn’t felt too healthy since my brother Allie died.” Holden worries that the news of his expulsion will particularly distress his fragile mother, for whom he seems to care a great deal.

Holden goes to eat breakfast at a little sandwich bar, where he meets two nuns who are moving to Manhattan to teach in a school. Holden thinks about the superficial money-driven world of the prep school he has just left.

Then he talks to one of the nuns about Romeo and Juliet. Despite his earlier expression of distaste for organized religion, he forces them to take ten dollars as a charitable contribution. After they leave, although he realizes he needs money to pay for his date with Sally, he begins to regret having given only ten dollars. He concludes that money always makes people depressed.

Analysis: Chapters 13–15

During his previous expeditions around town, Holden maintained a distance from the people he was with, dismissing them with scorn. As a result, he was able to protect his vision of an ideal world: instead of dealing with real people and situations, he daydreams about [Phoebe](#)'s innocence and Jane's warmth. Up to this point, Holden has been able to avoid a clash between his real and his ideal worlds, but in these chapters, the conflict becomes unavoidable, and Holden is caught in a moment of crisis and danger.

Sunny represents another of Holden's attempts at female companionship, but she could not be more different from the idealized Jane for whom Holden yearns. Whereas Holden's relationship with Jane brought him emotional satisfaction, his relationship with a prostitute can only be superficial, sexual, and devoid of emotion. But Jane appears only in Holden's memory, while the prostitute appears in his room. She concretizes Holden's continual conflict, representing something he both wants and doesn't want, something he needs yet fears.

Chapters 13–15

page 2 of 2

The tension between [Holden](#)'s growing sexuality and his fragile innocence grows much stronger throughout this section. He wants to live in a beautiful world, but the pressure of his emerging sexuality and the demands of his loneliness compel him to enter into encounters with people like Maurice

and Sunny. Such encounters are so far removed from the idealized encounters he fantasizes about that he departs from them much more hurt and wounded than before. Scared of the adult world, Holden clearly shies away from intimacy and is terrified of his burgeoning sexuality: he is too scared both to call Jane and to sleep with Sunny. He takes refuge in isolation, but this isolation only deepens the pain of alienation and loneliness.

While the harm Maurice and Sunny cause Holden is obvious, there are much more subtle reasons why his encounter with the nuns leaves him feeling hurt and wounded. Holden has constructed a simplistic divide between childhood, which he sees as innocent and good, and adulthood, which he finds superficial and evil. This worldview allows him to maintain his cynical barrier of defense: he is able to rationalize his loneliness by pretending that every adult around him is phony and annoying. In a way, Holden's encounter with Maurice and Sunny helps Holden by reaffirming his understanding of a cruel and senseless adult world. But the nuns are kind, intelligent, and sympathetic. They don't conform to his stereotyped understanding of organized religion, nor do they seem to have the phoniness that Holden expects of anything institutionalized. He is surprised that one nun loves *Romeo and Juliet* and that they can have a conversation about it.

Chapters 16–17

Summary: Chapter 16

After breakfast, [Holden](#) goes for a walk. He thinks about the selflessness of the nuns and can't imagine anyone he knows being so generous and giving. He heads down Broadway to buy a record called "Little Shirley Beans" for [Phoebe](#). He likes the record because, although it is for children, it is sung by a black blues singer who makes it sound raunchy, not cute. He thinks about Phoebe, whom he considers to be a wonderful girl because, although she's only ten, she always understands what Holden means when he talks to her. He sees an oblivious little boy walking in the street, singing,

“If a body catch a body coming through the rye.” The innocence of the scene cheers him up, and he decides to call Jane, although he hangs up when her mother answers the phone. In preparation for his date with Sally, he buys theater tickets to a show called “I Know My Love,” which stars the Lunts.

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was.

Holden wants to see Phoebe, and he goes to look for her in the park because he remembers that she often roller-skates there on Sundays. He meets a girl who knows Phoebe. At first, she tells him that his sister is on a school trip to the Museum of Natural History, but then she remembers that the trip was the previous day. Nevertheless, Holden walks to the museum, remembering his own class trips. He focuses on the way life is frozen in the museum’s exhibits: models of Eskimos and Indians stand as though petrified and birds hang from the ceiling, seemingly in mid-flight. He remarks that every time he went to the museum, he felt that he had changed, while the museum had stayed exactly the same.

Summary: Chapter 17

At two o’clock, Holden goes to meet Sally at the Biltmore Hotel; she is late but looks very attractive, so he immediately forgives her tardiness. They make out in the taxi on the way to the theater. At the play, the actors annoy Holden because, like Ernie the piano player, they are almost too good at what they do and seem full of themselves. During intermission, Sally irritates Holden by flirting with a pretentious boy from Andover, another prep school, but he nonetheless agrees to take her ice-skating at “Radio City” (Radio City Music Hall is part of Rockefeller Center, where there is an ice-skating rink) after the show. While skating, Holden speculates that Sally only wanted to go ice-skating so she could wear a short skirt and show off her “cute ass,” but he admits that he finds it attractive. When they take a break and sit down indoors, Holden begins to unravel. Oscillating between shouting and hushed tones, he rants about all the “phonies” at his prep

schools and in New York society, and talks about how alienated he feels. He becomes even more crazy and impetuous, saying that he and Sally should run away together and escape from society, living on their own in a cabin. When she points out that his dreams are ridiculous, he becomes more and more agitated. The quarrel builds until Holden calls Sally a “royal pain in the ass,” and she begins to cry. Holden starts to apologize, but Sally is upset and angry with him, and, finally, he leaves without her.

Analysis: Chapters 16–17

Things go from bad to worse for Holden in these chapters. His behavior during his date with Sally is the surest sign yet that he is heading toward emotional collapse. Throughout his tirade, Sally asks Holden to stop yelling, and he claims not to have been yelling, indicating that he is unaware of his own extreme agitation. His attempt to convince a shallow socialite like Sally to run away with him to a cabin in the wilderness also shows his increasing distance from reality—or, at least, his inability to deal with the reality in which he finds himself.

Though Holden admits his behavior is odd when he says, “I swear to God I’m a madman,” he doesn’t do much to explain its significance. Salinger continues to drop hints—like Sally’s requests for Holden to stop yelling—to signal that the story behind Holden’s narration is darker and more troubling than it might at first appear. His mood swings with Sally serve a similar purpose. When he first sees her, he is convinced he is in love with her. He then alternates between annoyance and rapturous passion for the duration of their date, until he finally tells her that she gives him “a royal pain in the ass.” Sally’s coldness and her lack of compassion are reflective of the greater world’s lack of concern about Holden’s plight. Except for Jane and Phoebe, no one in his world seems to care how he feels, so long as he observes social norms. Only when his actions violate those norms does anyone notice his disturbed state, and even then, their usual response, like Sally’s, is to criticize him. Despite the fact that Sally is obviously not a good

match for him, Holden claims that at the moment he proposed that they run away together, he did truly love her. His feelings are irrational, but they indicate how desperate he is to find love.

This desperate need for love is counterbalanced by his inability to deal with the complexities of the real world. Like his encounter with the nuns in Chapter 15, his date with Sally demonstrates how ill-equipped he is to deal with actual people. Sally does not seem to be a very complex character, but Holden cannot connect with her at all. His wild proposals are not the kind of thing Sally is interested in, and he displays callousness when he insults her. As Holden proposes impossible schemes only to lash out when their ridiculousness is made apparent, his oversimplified, idealized fantasy world begins to seem less endearing and more dangerous.

After the fiasco with Sally, [Holden](#) retreats into nostalgic desires to return to childhood. In recalling his visits to the Museum of Natural History, Holden indicates that he wants life to be like the tableaux he loves: frozen, unchanging, simple, and readily comprehensible. He says that he wishes that everything in life could be placed inside glass cages and preserved, like in the museum. His encounter with Sally shows that he cannot deal with the complexity, conflict, and change of real life. In the museum's world, communication is unidirectional: Holden can judge the exhibits, but the exhibits cannot judge him back. After he upsets Sally, he feels terrible and tries desperately to set things right, but he fails, and he cannot tolerate the stressful situation in which he has enmeshed himself. Isolation, he finds, is simpler than the stress that accompanies conflict.

Holden's nostalgic love of the museum is rather tragic: it represents his hopeless fantasizing, his inability to deal with the real world, and his unwillingness to think about his own shortcomings. He mentions that every time he returns to the museum, he is disturbed because he has changed while the displays have not. But he is unwilling to probe further. He readily admits that he can't explain what he means, and probably wouldn't want to even if he could. Holden is unwilling to confront his own problems,

protecting himself with a shell of cynical comments and outlandish behaviour.

Chapters 18–20

Summary: Chapter 18

After leaving the skating rink, [Holden](#) goes to a drugstore and has a Swiss cheese sandwich and a malted milk. Once again, he thinks about calling Jane, but his mind begins to wander. He remembers the time he saw her at a dance with a boy Holden thought was a show-off, but Jane argued that the boy had an inferiority complex. Holden decides that girls always say that as an excuse to date arrogant boys. Finally, he calls Jane, but no one answers. He then calls a boy named Carl Luce, whom he used to know at the Whooton School, and Luce agrees to meet him for drinks later that night.

To kill time, Holden goes to see a movie at Radio City Music Hall. He finds the Rockettes' Christmas stage show ridiculous and superficial, but it makes him remember how he and Allie used to love the kettledrum player in the Radio City pit orchestra. The man was an unnoticed, minuscule part of the show, but he seemed to take joy and pride in what he did. After the show, the movie begins, which Holden claims to find boring as well. When it is over, he begins walking to the Wicker Bar, where he is supposed to meet Luce. The movie was about the war, so Holden thinks about the army. Based on what D. B. has told him, Holden decides that he could never be in the military. He would rather, he says, be shot by a firing squad or sit on top of an atom bomb.

Summary: Chapter 19

At the Wicker Bar, located in the posh Seton Hotel, Holden thinks about Luce. Luce is three years older than Holden and now a student at Columbia University. At the Whooton School, Luce used to tell the younger boys about sex. Holden says that he finds Luce amusing, even though he is

effeminate and a phony. When Luce arrives, he treats Holden coolly, and Holden pesters him with questions about sex. Luce refuses to be drawn into the kind of sex discussion that they had had at Whooton, and he suggests that Holden needs psychoanalysis. Holden remembers that Luce's father is a psychoanalyst, but Luce is evasive when Holden asks whether Luce's father ever analyzed his own son. Annoyed by Holden's juvenile comments and questions, Luce departs.

Summary: Chapter 20

After Luce leaves, Holden stays at the bar and gets very drunk. He stumbles to the phone booth and makes an incoherent late-night call to Sally Hayes, angering both her and her grandmother. He then tries to make a date with the lounge singer, an attractive woman named Valencia. When that fails, he tries, with no more success, to make a date with the hat-check girl.

He decides to walk to the duck pond in Central Park to see if the ducks are still around. Along the way, he becomes quite upset when he drops and breaks the record he had bought for [Phoebe](#). Because he had splashed water in his hair at the hotel in an attempt to sober up, his hair begins to freeze and fill with icicles. At the duck pond, he worries about catching pneumonia and imagines his funeral. He missed Allie's funeral, he says, because he was in the hospital after breaking the garage windows with his bare hands. He remembers going to Allie's grave with his parents. He becomes disgusted and sad, because the idea of placing flowers on the grass that covers the stomachs of the dead disturbs him.

Holden wants to talk to Phoebe, and he is running low on money, so he decides to risk going home. He expects his parents to be asleep, which will allow him to sneak in, speak with Phoebe, and then leave without being heard. He leaves the park and begins the long walk home.

Analysis: Chapters 18–20

Holden's off-kilter ramblings in Chapter 18 about being killed by an atom bomb sound like the bravado of a frightened, threatened boy. We have seen Holden's bravado throughout the novel—when he worries that he is a coward, when he screams at Maurice, when he imagines himself as a vengeful movie character seeking justice through extreme force. But bravado is most important in this section because Holden's interaction with the effeminate Carl Luce causes him to exhibit a subtle vein of homophobia that will be important later in the novel. Like many adolescent boys, Holden is uncomfortable with sexuality and especially uncomfortable with the idea of homosexuality. Though Luce seems to prefer women, Holden finds him slightly "flitty," and Luce brings out an unpleasant lewdness in Holden's behavior.

Holden aggressively questions Luce about sex and seems to feel titillated throughout their conversation. Holden clearly wants Luce to give him some kind of guidance and insight into adult sexuality, but his attempts to raise the subject are clumsy and immature, and Luce refuses to interact with Holden on the same footing that they had at Whooton. When Luce leaves, Holden feels depressed and uncomfortable, and we get the sense that he is disappointed in himself—that despite his protestations that Luce is a phony, he wanted to connect with him and failed. With each successive interaction, Holden loses more faith in himself. He withdraws deeper into his cynicism, while at the same time feeling more and more desperate to break out of his loneliness. After Luce departs, Holden gets extremely drunk and acts completely unhinged. He hits on Valencia and the hat-check girl and then senselessly breaks into tears before walking through the freezing cold to the duck pond.

Though Holden does not acknowledge his imbalances, we again see how little control Holden has over both himself and his worsening situation. Holden's lack of introspection deepens our sense of the danger in which he finds himself. His thoughts as he walks to the pond reveal what may lie at the root of his manic behavior: he is upset and miserable at the memory of Allie's death. His memory of leaving flowers on Allie's grave leads him to

another one of his defensive understatements. He was obviously shaken by the trips to the cemetery, but all he says in his narration is that he used to go with his parents, but he stopped accompanying them because he “certainly didn’t enjoy seeing him in that crazy cemetery.” The conjunction of Allie’s memory with the image of the duck pond helps to explain Holden’s preoccupation with the pond and establishes it as one of *The Catcher in the Rye*’s key symbols. Allie is gone forever, and Holden does not believe in afterlife; his atheism was mentioned in Chapter 14. Now, Holden is troubled by unexplained disappearances. He is anxious to know where the ducks have gone, since he feels extremely threatened by the idea that people and things just vanish, as Allie did. The pond itself becomes a minor metaphor for the world as Holden sees it. It is “partly frozen and partly not frozen,” in a transitional state just like Holden himself and the world he inhabits. Holden’s curiosity about the ducks also demonstrates an appealingly childlike quality: his willingness (shared with his siblings) to pay attention to details that are conventionally ignored. Holden’s interest in the kettledrum player at Radio City is another of these details. Holden associates adulthood with an unwillingness to explore subtle and mysterious questions, but there are many difficult questions that he himself is unwilling to explore. He never ponders what the duck pond means to him, why memories of Allie’s death trouble him so much, or why he is having such difficulty dealing with the world around him.

Chapters 21–23

Summary: Chapter 21

Holden takes the elevator up to his family’s apartment. Luckily for him, the regular elevator operator is gone, and he is able to convince the new one, who doesn’t recognize him, that he wants to visit the Dicksteins, who live across the hall from the Caulfields.

Holden sneaks into his family’s apartment and looks for **Phoebe**, but she isn’t in her room. Holden tiptoes to D. B.’s room, because Phoebe likes to sleep there when D. B. is in Hollywood. He finds Phoebe sleeping

peacefully, and he remarks that children, unlike adults, always look peaceful when they are asleep. As he watches Phoebe sleep, he reads through her schoolbooks. She has signed her name “Phoebe Weatherfield Caulfield,” even though her middle name is Josephine. He enjoys reading the notes to friends, the curious questions, and the random imaginative jottings she has scribbled on the pages.

He finally wakes Phoebe, and she is overjoyed to see him. Bursting with energy, she talks feverishly about one thing after another: her school play (in which she plays Benedict Arnold), a movie she has just seen, a movie D. B. is working on, a boy at school who bullies her, and the fact that their parents are at a party and won't come home until later. But after her enthusiastic flurry of conversation, she realizes that Holden is home two days early and must have been kicked out of school. Over and over, she repeats that their father will “kill” him. Holden tries to justify his behavior, but she refuses to listen and covers her head with a pillow. Holden leaves the room to get some cigarettes.

Summary: Chapter 22

Holden returns to Phoebe's room and eventually gets her to listen. He tries to explain why he fails his classes and tells her all the things he hates about school. She responds by accusing him of hating everything. He tries to refute her claim, and she challenges him to name one thing he likes. He becomes preoccupied, thinking about the nuns he met at breakfast. He also thinks about James Castle, a boy he knew at Elkton Hills School who jumped out of a window to his death while being tormented by other boys.

He finally tells her that he likes Allie, and she reminds him angrily that Allie is dead. She asks what he wants to do with his life, and his only answer is to mention the lyric, “If a body catch a body comin' through the rye.” Holden says that he imagines a gigantic field of rye on a cliff full of children playing. He wants to stand at the edge of the cliff and catch the children when they come too close to falling off—to be “the catcher in the rye.” Phoebe points out that Holden has misheard the words—the actual lyric, from the Robert

Burns poem, “Coming Thro’ the Rye,” is “If a body meet a body coming through the rye.”

Summary: Chapter 23

Holden leaves Phoebe’s room for a moment to call [Mr. Antolini](#), an English teacher he had at Elkton Hills. Mr. Antolini is shocked that Holden has been kicked out of another school and invites Holden to stay the night at his house. Holden mentions to us that Mr. Antolini was the only teacher who approached James Castle’s body after his death, the only one who demonstrated any courage or kindness in the situation. Holden goes back into Phoebe’s room and asks her to dance. After a few numbers, they hear the front door open—their parents have come home from their dinner party. Holden tries to fan away his lingering cigarette smoke and jumps in the closet. His mother comes in to tuck Phoebe in, and he hides until she leaves. He then tells Phoebe goodbye, letting her know of his plan to leave New York and move out west alone. She loans him the Christmas money she’d been saving, and he leaves for Mr. Antolini’s. On the way out, he gives Phoebe his red hunting hat.

Analysis: Chapters 21–23

The scene in which [Holden](#) watches [Phoebe](#) sleep and reads through her notebooks is one of the most famous in the book, one of the few moments of respite Holden finds from the brutality of the outside world. As he says, adults “look lousy” when sleeping, but kids “look all right.” After Phoebe wakes up, however, things become more difficult. Her insistence in Chapter 22 that Holden tell her something he likes sends his mind skittering away from the question, and he remembers the violent death of James Castle, who committed suicide in a turtleneck he borrowed from Holden. After remembering the death of this young boy, the only thing Holden can think to tell Phoebe he likes is “Allie.” His mind is increasingly preoccupied with childhood and childhood death; he thinks to call [Mr. Antolini](#) when he

remembers the teacher picking up James Castle's broken body in his coat. He grows increasingly emotional and unstable; Phoebe's unaffected kindness when she loans him her Christmas money causes him to break into tears.

And 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 the cliff. . . .

One of the most important passages in the novel comes when Holden tells Phoebe he would like to be the catcher in the rye, saving little children from falling off the cliff. This passage elucidates the novel's metaphoric title. The rye field is a symbol of childhood—the rye is so high that the children cannot see over it, just as children are unable to see beyond the borders of their childhood. Standing on the precipice that separates the rye field of childhood from the cliff of adulthood, Holden wants to protect childhood innocence from the fall into disillusionment that necessarily accompanies adulthood. Trapped between states, with his innocence in jeopardy, Holden wants to be a “catcher in the rye,” a savior of the innocence missing in the world around him, a world that has let him fall over the cliff into adulthood alone.

Holden's mistake about the line from the Robert Burns song—his substitution of “catch a body” for “meet a body”—is highly significant, as its placement in the novel's title suggests. Burns's song “Comin' Thro' the Rye” exists in several versions, each with somewhat different lyrics. In some versions, the song is about a woman who has gotten her clothes wet while she was out in a rye field, while in other versions the speaker of the song is a woman discussing being out in a rye field. All versions of the song ask the question: is it wrong to “kiss” and “greet” someone you are attracted to if you meet them out in the fields, even if you don't tell the rest of the world about it and you aren't committed to that person? Implicitly, the song asks if casual sex, in the sense of sex without a commitment, is always wrong. Thus, in Burns's song, “meeting” means encountering a potential sex partner, and the word itself may even connote having sex with

that person. Casual sex is precisely the kind of sex that Holden finds most upsetting throughout the novel. By “catching” children from falling off a cliff, he really wants to protect them from the fall out of innocence into the adult world. In Chapter 25, Holden is quite explicit that he specifically wants to protect children from knowledge of sex. He rubs the words “fuck you” off the school wall because he worries that someone will explain to the children what it means. Thus, what the lyric means to Holden is almost the exact opposite of what the song is about.

Chapter 24

Summary

When [Holden](#) arrives at [Mr. Antolini's](#), Mr. Antolini and his wife have just wrapped up a dinner party in their upscale Sutton Place apartment. Glasses and dishes are everywhere, and Holden can tell that Mr. Antolini has been drinking. Holden takes a seat, and the two begin talking. As Mrs. Antolini prepares coffee, Mr. Antolini inquires about Holden's expulsion from Pencey Prep. Holden reveals that he disliked the rules and regulations at Pencey Prep. As an example, he mentions his debate class in which students were penalized for digressing from their subject. Holden argues that digressions are more interesting. Instead of offering complete sympathy, Mr. Antolini gently challenges Holden, pointing out that digressions are often distracting, and that sometimes it is more interesting and appropriate to stick to the topic. Holden begins to see the weakness of his argument and becomes uncomfortable. But Mrs. Antolini cuts the tension, bringing coffee for Holden and Mr. Antolini before going to bed. *“I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall.”*

After this respite, Mr. Antolini resumes the discussion on a much more serious note. He tells Holden that he is worried about him because he seems primed for a major fall, a fall that will leave him frustrated and embittered against the rest of the world, particularly against the sort of boys he hated at school. At this suggestion Holden becomes defensive and

argues that he actually, after a while, grows to semi-like guys like Ackley and Stradlater. After an awkward silence, Mr. Antolini further explains the “fall” he is envisioning, saying that it is experienced by men who cannot deal with the environment around them. But he tells Holden that if he applies himself in school, he will learn that many men and women have been similarly disturbed and troubled by the human condition, and he will also learn a great deal about his own mind. Holden seems interested in what Mr. Antolini has to say, but he is exhausted. Finally, he is unable to suppress a yawn. Mr. Antolini chuckles, makes up the couch, and, after some small talk about girls, lets Holden go to sleep.

Suddenly, Holden wakes up; he feels Mr. Antolini’s hand stroking his head. Mr. Antolini claims it was nothing, but Holden believes Mr. Antolini is making a homosexual advance and hurries out of the apartment.

Analysis

At first, Mr. Antolini seems to offer Holden his only chance of making a sympathetic connection with an adult. Holden respects his teacher’s intelligence and seems legitimately interested in Mr. Antolini’s lecture about finding “what size mind you have.” It is significant that Holden consistently refers to his former teacher as “Mr. Antolini,” whereas he refers to Mr. Spencer as “old Spencer” or “Spencer.” But a subtly menacing undercurrent runs through Holden’s description of his time at the Antolinis’: the unwashed glasses from the dinner party, Mrs. Antolini’s unattractive appearance without her makeup, and Mr. Antolini’s excessive drinking all contribute to a feeling of discomfort that Holden never explicitly acknowledges. When Holden wakes to find Mr. Antolini stroking his head, he snaps. The pressure of his surging sexual feelings, combined with the nervous homophobia he exhibited around Carl Luce, make Mr. Antolini’s gesture more than he can handle, and he leaves Mr. Antolini’s apartment awkwardly and hastily.

The question of whether Mr. Antolini really made a homosexual advance on Holden is much more complicated than Holden implies. Holden might be right—Antolini’s inquiries about Holden’s girlfriends and the fact that he calls Holden “handsome” as he wishes him goodnight could be read as flirtatious advances. But it seems far more likely that Mr. Antolini’s gesture was simply a tipsy sign of affection for a student in obvious pain, a student in whom Mr. Antolini sensed something fragile and genuine. But, as with everything else, Holden is rash and uncompromising in his interpretation of his teacher’s behavior, and, with that rash interpretation, all of Holden’s trust and faith in Mr. Antolini vanish. Mr. Antolini is clearly a more complex and multidimensional character than Holden makes him out to be. But, as we have already seen, what little stability Holden has left depends on his maintaining an oversimplified worldview—he cannot tolerate motives that are at all ambiguous. Throughout the scene, we remain as puzzled as Holden is as to what is really going on, which allows us to empathize with Holden in the crisis he experiences as a result of the encounter.

The fact that Mr. Antolini is trying to prevent Holden from “a fall” obviously parallels Holden’s image of the “catcher in the rye.” Yet, Mr. Antolini is a very different kind of catcher from the one Holden envisioned, and the type of fall he describes is different from the one Holden imagines. Holden fantasizes about protecting children from adulthood and sexuality (see Chapter 25), but Mr. Antolini describes the more frightening fall that will come if Holden himself refuses to grow up. Holden maintains an idealized view of childhood, and simplified view of adulthood, in order to justify his withdrawal from society. He resists intimacy because the complexities of real-world relationships collapse his simplistic perspective. Mr. Antolini’s trenchant criticism forces Holden to see his own problems, while the ambiguity of his motives force him to encounter the complexity and ambiguity of the adult world. As such, he is beginning to see the trap of painful loneliness and isolation he has created for himself with his largely self-imposed alienation.

Chapters 25–26

Summary: Chapter 25

After leaving Mr. Antolini's, Holden goes to Grand Central Station and spends the night sleeping on a bench in the waiting room. The next day, he walks up and down Fifth Avenue, watching the children and feeling more and more nervous and overwhelmed. Every time he crosses a street, he feels like he will disappear, so each time he reaches a curb, he calls to Allie, pleading with his dead brother to let him make it to the other side. He decides to leave New York, hitchhike west, and never go home or to school again. He imagines living as a hermit, never talking to anybody, and marrying a deaf-mute girl.

He goes to Phoebe's school and writes her a note telling her to meet him at the Museum of Art so he can return the money she lent him. As he wanders around his old school, he becomes even more depressed when he finds the words "fuck you" scrawled on the walls.

While waiting at the museum, Holden shows two young kids where the mummies are. He leads them down the hallway to the tomb exhibit, but they get scared and run off, leaving Holden alone in the dark, cramped passage. Holden likes it at first, but then sees another "fuck you" written on the wall. Disgusted, he speculates that when he dies, somebody will probably write the words "fuck you" on his tombstone. He leaves the exhibit to wait for Phoebe. On the way to the bathroom, he passes out, but he downplays the incident.

Phoebe arrives at the museum with a suitcase and begs Holden to take her with him. He feels dizzy and worries that he will pass out again. He tells her that she cannot possibly go with him and feels even closer to fainting. She gets angry, refuses to look at him, and gruffly returns his hunting hat. Holden tells her he won't go away and asks her to go back to school. She angrily refuses, and he offers to take her to the zoo.

They walk to the zoo, Holden on one side of the street, Phoebe following angrily on the other. After looking at some animals, they walk to the park, now on the same side of the street, although still not quite together. They come to the carousel, and Holden convinces Phoebe to ride it. He sits on a park bench, watching her go around and around. They have reconciled, he is wearing his red hunting hat, and suddenly he feels so happy he thinks he might cry.

Summary: Chapter 26

Holden concludes his story by refusing to discuss what happened after his day in the park with Phoebe, although he does say that he went home, got sick, and was sent to the rest home from which he now tells his story. He says he is supposed to go to a new school in the fall and thinks that he will apply himself there, but he doesn't feel like talking about it. He wishes he hadn't talked about his experiences so much in the first place, even to D. B., who often comes to visit him in the rest home. Talking about what happened to him makes him miss all the people in his story.

Analysis: Chapters 25–26

Holden's breakdown reaches its climax in Chapter 25. As the chapter begins, Holden feels surrounded on all sides by ugliness and phoniness—the profanity on the walls, the vulgar Christmas-tree delivery men, the empty pomp of Christmas—and his recent interactions with Phoebe and Mr. Antolini have left him feeling completely lonely and alienated. As he wanders the streets of New York, he looks at children and prays to Allie to keep him from disappearing as the ducks disappeared and as Allie himself disappeared. It's clear that Mr. Antolini was, at least in part, correct: Holden does not feel connected to his environment. He imagines that he is an ephemeral presence that will instantaneously vanish. Not only does he feel that he cannot relate to anybody, but he doesn't know how to deal with adult encounters, because they don't fit neatly into the worldview

he has constructed for himself. As a result, he makes the only decision that seems logical in such a situation: he decides to run away. Unable to deal with the world around him, and realizing that his cynical view of the world is not grounded in reality, he decides to leave.

Phoebe demands to go with Holden, but it is unclear whether she needs him or whether she worries that he needs her. Despite her young age, it's safe to assume that she has a clearer perspective on the situation than Holden, so the latter explanation seems more likely. Nevertheless, Holden sees the effect his plans have on someone he cares about—a first sign of true maturity. He begins to come out of his shell, demonstrating concern for Phoebe and a willingness to love people around him. After Holden makes the decision to stay and Phoebe forgives him, she returns his hunting hat, reciprocating his gesture of kindness. It is the only moment of reciprocal interaction that Holden experiences in the book: from Stradlater to Sally Hayes, most characters just want to take things from him or use him for a specific purpose. The few characters who try to give Holden something, like Mr. Spencer or Mr. Antolini, find that Holden is unwilling to reciprocate. He remains suspicious of accepting their advice and unwilling to communicate. But here, he and Phoebe demonstrate true interaction, both selflessly giving and humbly taking from each other. It is the kind of intimacy Holden has been longing for and sorely missing.

When Holden watches Phoebe go around and around on the carousel, he finds himself deliriously happy as he participates in a scene of childhood joy and innocence. With Phoebe, he seems to have found the human contact he was looking for. The implication is that now, perhaps, he can begin the process of introspection and healing that he needs.

In Chapter 26, despite his refusal to talk any more about his story, Holden nevertheless fills in some key missing details: he went home; he was sent to a rest home to recover from the breakdown; he's in psychotherapy; and he'll go to a new school in the fall. Holden's defensively cynical tone continues throughout the chapter, which raises the question of whether the

novel's ending is tragic. He says he plans to apply himself in school next year and seems contemplative, but he is unable to express his feelings and says that he wishes he hadn't told so many people his story.

The novel's ending is ambiguous. It is unclear whether Holden will fulfill the promise of recovery that is suggested as he watches the carousel. Holden's final statement—"Don't tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody"—suggests that he is still shackled by the same problems he has dealt with throughout the book. He still seems scared and alone, and he continues to dread communication. On the other hand, his final words suggest that he has begun to shed the impenetrable skin of cynicism that he had grown around himself. He has begun to value, rather than dismiss, the people around him. His nostalgia—"missing everybody"—reveals that he is not as bitter and repressed as he was earlier in the book.

Key Facts

Full title · *The Catcher in the Rye*

Author · J. D. Salinger

Type of work · Novel

Genre · Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)

Language · English

Time and place written · Late 1940s–early 1950s, New York

Date of first publication · July 1951; parts of the novel appeared as short stories in *Collier's*, December 1945, and in *The New Yorker*, December 1946

Publisher · Little, Brown and Company

Narrator · [Holden Caulfield](#), narrating from a psychiatric facility a few months after the events of the novel

Point of view · Holden Caulfield narrates in the first person, describing what he himself sees and experiences, providing his own commentary on the events and people he describes.

Tone · Holden's tone varies between disgust, cynicism, bitterness, and nostalgic longing, all expressed in a colloquial style.

Tense · Past

Setting (time) · A long weekend in the late 1940s or early 1950s

Setting (place) · Holden begins his story in Pennsylvania, at his former school, Pencey Prep. He then recounts his adventures in New York City.

Protagonist · Holden Caulfield

Major conflict · the major conflict is within Holden's psyche. Part of him wants to connect with other people on an adult level (and, more specifically, to have a sexual encounter), while part of him wants to reject the adult world as "phony," and to retreat into his own memories of childhood.

Rising action · Holden's many attempts to connect with other people over the course of the novel bring his conflicting impulses—to interact with other people as an adult, or to retreat from them as a child—into direct conflict.

Climax · Possible climaxes include Holden's encounter with Sunny, when it becomes clear that he is unable to handle a sexual encounter; the end of his date with Sally, when he tries to get her to run away with him; and his departure from [Mr. Antolini's](#) apartment, when he begins to question his characteristic mode of judging other people.

Falling action · Holden's interactions with [Phoebe](#), culminating in his tears of joy at watching Phoebe on the carousel (at the novel's end he has retreated into childhood, away from the threats of adult intimacy and sexuality)

Themes · Alienation as a form of self-protection; the painfulness of growing up; the phoniness of the adult world

Motifs · Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality; loneliness; lying and deception

Symbols · the "catcher in the rye"; Holden's red hunting hat; the Museum of Natural History; the ducks in the Central Park lagoon

Foreshadowing · At the beginning of the novel, Holden hints that he has been hospitalized for a nervous breakdown, the story of which is revealed over the course of the novel.