

ANALYSIS

Catcher in the Rye (1951)



J. D. Salinger

(1919-2010)

“Our youth today has no moorings, no criterion beyond instinct, no railing to grasp along the steep ascent to maturity. This is the importance of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and it is upon the integrity of his portrait of a so-called privileged American youth that Mr. Salinger’s novel stands or falls.... Like most of his literary predecessors—that host of sad twigs being arbitrarily bent to make twisted trees—Holden Caulfield is on the side of the angels. Contaminated he is, of course, by vulgarity, lust, lies, temptations, recklessness, and cynicism. But these are merely the devils that try him externally; inside, his spirit is intact. Unlike so many of his literary predecessors, however, he does not oversimplify his troubles. He is not tilting against the whole adult world (there are some decent adults); nor does he altogether loathe his worst contemporaries (he hates to leave them). He sees the mixtures, the inextricably mingled good and bad, as it is, but the very knowledge of reality is what almost breaks his heart. For Holden Caulfield, despite all the realism with which he is supposedly depicted, is nevertheless a skinless perfectionist....

Had Ring Lardner and Ernest Hemingway never existed, Mr. Salinger might have had to invent the manner of his tale, if not the matter. *The Catcher in the Rye* repeats and repeats, like an incantation, the pseudo-natural cadences of a flat, colloquial prose which at best, banked down and understated, has a truly moving impact and at worst is casually obscene. Recent war novels have accustomed us all to ugly words and images, but from the mouths of the very young and protected they sound particularly offensive. There is probably not one phrase in the whole book that Holden Caulfield would not have used upon occasion, but when they are piled upon each other in cumulative monotony, the ear refuses to believe.... Before it is possible to nominate Mr. Salinger as the top-flight catcher in the rye for the year or the day, it would be interesting and enlightening to know what Holden Caulfield’s contemporaries, male and female, think of him. Their opinion would constitute the real test of Mr. Salinger’s validity. The question of authenticity is one to which no parent can really guess the reply.”

Virgilia Peterson
The New York Herald Tribune
(15 July 1951) 3

“This Salinger, he’s a short story guy. And he knows how to write about kids. This book though, it’s too long. Gets kind of monotonous. And he should’ve cut out a lot about those jerks and all at that crumby school.”

James Stern
“Aw, the World’s a Crumby Place”
New York Times
(15 July 1951) 5

“The final scene in *The Catcher in the Rye* is as good as anything that Salinger has written, which means very good indeed. But the book as a whole is disappointing, and not merely because it is a reworking of a theme that one begins to suspect must obsess the author. Holden Caulfield, the main character who tells his own story, is an extraordinary portrait, but there is too much of him. He describes himself early on and, with the sureness of a wire recording, he remains strictly in character throughout.... In the course of 277 pages the reader wearies of this kind of explicitness, repetition and adolescence, exactly as one would weary of Holden himself. And this reader at least suffered from an irritated feeling that Holden was not quite so sensitive and perceptive as he, and his creator, thought he was. In any case he is so completely self-centered that the other characters who wander through the book—with the notable exception of his sister Phoebe—have nothing like his authenticity. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a brilliant tour-de-force, but in a writer of Salinger’s undeniable talent one expects something more.”

Anne L. Goodman
New Republic
(16 July 1951) 21

“[*The Catcher in the Rye*] is not fit for children to read.... Indeed, one finds it hard to believe that a true lover of children could father this tale.... [Holden’s] conduct is a nightmarish medley of loneliness, bravado, and supineness.... [His] dead-pan narrative is quick-moving, absurd, and wholly repellent in its mingled vulgarity, naivete, and sly perversion. *The Catcher in the Rye* purports to be the *Seventeen* of our times, though it is as remote in conception from the Tarkington masterpiece, still much alive, as the television age from Indiana in 1916.... [Holden] suffers from loneliness because he has shut himself away from the normal activities of boyhood, games, the outdoors, friendship.... He is alive, human, preposterous, profane and pathetic beyond belief. Fortunately, there cannot be many of him yet. But one fears that a book like this given wide circulation may multiply his kind—as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intention.”

T. Morris Longstreth
Christian Science Monitor
(19 July 1951) 5

“Phoebe is one of the most exquisitely created and engaging children in any novel.... The literalness and innocence of Holden’s point of view in the face of the tremendously complicated and often depraved facts of life make for the humor of this novel....one of the funniest expeditions, surely, in the history of juvenilia.... Holden’s contacts with the outside world are generally extremely funny. It is his self-communications that are tragic and touching—a dark whirlpool churning fiercely below the unflagging hilarity of the surface activities. Holden’s difficulties affect his nervous system but never his vision. It is the vision of the innocent.... [T]here is an exhilaration, an immense relief in the final scene of this novel, at the Central Park carrousel with Phoebe (‘I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around.’) Holden will be all right. One day, he will probably find himself in the mood to call up Jane. He will even become more tolerant of phonies—it is part of the mechanics of living.... He may even, someday, write a novel. I would like to read it. I loved *this* one. I mean it—I really did.”

S. N. Behrman
New Yorker
(11 August 1951) 73-76

“Holden Caulfield struck me as an urban, a transplanted Huck Finn. He has a colloquialism as marked as Huck’s.... Like Huck, Holden is neither comical nor misanthropic. He is an observer. Unlike Huck, he

makes judgments by the dozen, but these are not to be taken seriously; they are conceits. There is a drollery, too, that is common to both, and a quality of seeing that creates farce. What is crucial is where Huck and Holden part company. T. S. Eliot once pointed out that we see the world through Huck's eyes. Well, we do not see it through Holden's. We see Holden as a smiling adult sees a boy, and we smile at his spectral, incredible world. I think that is the decisive failure: whatever is serious and implicit in the novel is overwhelmed by the more powerful comic element. What remains is a brilliant *tour de force*, one that has sufficient power and cleverness to make the reader chuckle and—rare indeed—even laugh aloud.”

Harvey Breit
Atlantic
(August 1951) 82

“A somewhat inconclusive story of a New York schoolboy of lively and honest mind who for one reason or another, perhaps as much through excess of adolescent sensibility as anything else, looks like turning into a neurotic or delinquent. The tale is presented in the sixteen-year-old's first person recital of events, which superimposes upon a crude and undifferentiated American vernacular a restricted schoolboy idiom. Altogether, though a little showy in effect, the style of the book is quite a performance.... In the event, we are asked to believe, he [Holden] discovers how mean the world is and falls straight on the psychiatrist's sofa. Intelligent, humorous, acute and sympathetic in observation, the tale is rather too formless to do quite the sort of thing it was evidently intended to do.”

R. D. Charques
The Spectator
(17 August 1951) 224

“Holden Caulfield is friendly, ‘democratic,’ well-bred, and snobbish in ways peculiar to adolescence. He has the beginnings of taste; ‘corny’ is a term frequent in his speech. A virgin, he never knows exactly what any girl may be expecting of him and is afraid to make love to the prostitute supplied by an obliging bellhop. He mistakes whatever is spontaneous in his behavior for madness: ‘But I'm crazy. I swear to God I am’; if he acts on impulse he feels guilty, though also boastful: ‘I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.’ Bravado and buffoonery imperfectly disguise his conviction of madness and guilt.... With his alienation go assorted hatreds—of the movies, of night clubs, of social and intellectual pretension, and so on. And physical disgust: pimples, sex, an old man picking his nose are all equally cause for nausea....

After every other human being has failed him, Caulfield still has his loving ten-year-old sister to love; she embodies the innocence we all hope we have preserved and the wisdom we all hope we have acquired. The skill with which all this has been worked into 277 pages is most ingenious. But as it proceeds on its insights, which are not really insights since they are so general, *The Catcher in the Rye* becomes more and more a case history of all of us. Radically this writing depends on the reader's recollection of merely similar difficulties; the unique crisis and the unique anguish are not re-created. These emotional ups and downs become increasingly factitious—so much must be included to elicit memories of so many callow heartbreaks—and though always lively in its parts, the book as a whole is predictable and boring.”

Ernest Jones
The Nation
(1 September 1951) 176

“It's a mad melange of ice-skating at Radio City, interviewing a prostitute in his [Holden's] hotel room, escaping from a homosexual, and so on. Not only do some of the events stretch probability, but Holden's character as iconoclast, a kind of latter-day Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, is made monotonous and phony by the formidably excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language.”

The Catholic World
(November 1951) 154

“Original, first rate, serious and beautiful....sensitive eye...incredibly great ear, and something I can think of no word for but grace.... Mr. Salinger is a very serious artist... His novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*,

was good and extremely moving, although—for this reader—all its virtues can be had in a short story by the same author, where they are somehow more at home.”

Eudora Welty
The New York Times Book Review
(5 April 1953) 4

“It is clear that J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* belongs to an ancient and honorable narrative tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction.... It is, of course, the tradition of the Quest. We use the medieval term because it signifies a seeking after what is tremendous, greater than the love of a woman. The love of woman may be part of the seeking, part even of the object sought, for we have been told that the Grail has gender and Penelope did wait in Ithaca. But if the love of woman is essential to the seeking or to the object sought, we must call the search a romance. These two terms (quest and romance) distinguish thematic patterns, and have nothing to do with tragic or comic effects. Furthermore, the same plots, characters, and idioms might be employed inside either pattern. But somewhere upon the arc of the Quest, the love of woman must be eschewed or absorbed: the hero must bind himself to the mast, or must seek his Ducalinda because she is Virtue, not because she is Female....

The protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, is one of these American heroes, but with a significant difference. He seems to be engaged in both sorts of quests at once; he needs to go home and he needs to leave it. Unlike the other American knight errants, Holden seeks Virtue second to Love. He wants to be good. When the children are playing in the rye-field on the cliff-top, Holden wants to be the one who catches them before they fall off the cliff. He is not driven toward honor or courage. He is not driven toward love of woman. Holden is driven toward love of his fellow-man, charity—virtues which were perhaps not quite virile enough for Natty Bumppo, Ishmael, Huck Finn, or Nick Adams. Holden is actually frightened by a frontier code of masculinity—a code which sometimes requires its adherents to behave in sentimental and bumptious fashions. But like these American heroes, Holden is a wanderer, for in order to be good he has to be more of a bad boy than the puritanical Huck could have imagined. Holden has had enough of both Hannibal, Missouri, and the Mississippi; and his tragedy is that when he starts back up the river, he has no place to go—save, of course, a California psychiatrist’s couch.

So Salinger translates the old tradition into contemporary terms. The phoniness of society forces Holden Caulfield to leave it, but he is seeking nothing less than stability and love. He would like nothing better than a home, a life embosomed upon what is known and can be trusted; he is a very wise sheep forced into lone wolf’s clothing... To be a catcher in the rye in this world is possible only at the price of leaving it. To be good is to be a ‘case,’ a ‘bad boy’ who confounds the society of men. So Holden seeks the one role which would allow him to be a catcher, and that role is the role of the child. As a child, he would be condoned, for a child is a sort of savage and a pariah because he is innocent and good.... In childhood he had what he is now seeking—non-phoniness, truth, innocence. He can find it now only in Phoebe and in his dead brother Allie’s baseball mitt, in a red hunting cap and the tender little nuns. Still, unlike all of us, Holden refuses to compromise with adulthood...

Everyone able to love in Salinger’s stories is either a child or a man influenced by a child. All the adults not informed by love and innocence are by definition phonies and prostitutes.... Holden is the kind of person who feels sorry for the teachers who have to flunk him. He fears for the ducks when the lagoon freezes over, for he is a duck himself with no place to go. He must enter his own home like a crook, lying to elevator boys and tiptoeing past bedrooms. His dad ‘will kill’ him and his mother will weep for his incorrigible ‘laziness.’ He wants only to pretend he is a deaf-mute and live as a hermit filling-station operator in Colorado, but he winds up where the frontier ends, California, in an institution for sick rich kids. And we can see, on the final note of irony in the book, that the frontier west which represented escape from ‘sivilization’ for Huck Finn has ended by becoming the symbol for depravity and phoniness in our national shrine at Hollywood....

The depth of Holden’s capacity for love is revealed in his final words, as he sits in the psychiatric ward musing over his nightmarish adventures.... ‘Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.’ We agree with Holden that it is funny, but it is funny in a pathetic kind of way. As we leave Holden alone in the room in the psychiatric ward, we are aware of the book’s last ironic incongruity. It is

not Holden who should be examined for a sickness of the mind, but the world in which he has sojourned and found himself an alien. To 'cure' Holden, he must be given the contagious, almost universal disease of phony adultism; he must be pushed over that 'crazy cliff'."

Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr.
"J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff"
Western Humanities Review X
(Spring 1956) 129-37

"Where Huck was the typical American democrat, Holden is a snob who criticizes his friends for the shabby suitcases they carry. Where Huck lived in the rich heartland of America, Holden is the product of an exclusive New York City. Salinger himself seems almost the typical New Yorker, and his short stories emphasize the emotional starvation and brittleness of the city life, which his novel only suggests. Yet his New York and its problems are perhaps as central to modern America as Mark Twain's Mississippi River was to the pioneer nineteenth century. The quality which makes Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield brothers under the skin—and which runs through all the best of these novels—is a common hatred of hypocrisy and a search for integrity. And this emerges in spite of—or perhaps as a reaction against—the love of play-acting which is a natural and inevitable aspect of all adolescence.... *The Catcher in the Rye*...describes an older boy who confronts the problems of sex which Huck never faced, and...describes an America which also had reached 'an end to innocence'."

Frederic I. Carpenter
"The Adolescent in American Fiction"
The English Journal XLVI
(September 1957) 313-19

"*The Catcher in the Rye*...is a kind of *Huckleberry Finn* in modern dress.... Each of these experienced boys knows all about fraud and violence but retains the charity of an innocent heart. Each is a measure of the need and possibility for human love in his society.

Holden Caulfield, intensely troubled, escapes initially from the stupid constraints and violence of his prep school life. Like Huck, he enters a jungle world, New York City, where he knows his way around but from which he is alienated. There for two hectic days and nights he steers his course through battering adventures with fearsome 'dopes,' 'fakers,' 'morons,' and sluggers. On this journey Holden's Jim is primarily the recurring image of Jane Gallagher, an old friend who needs love and whom he loves with strange unawareness. Holden's Jim is also all little children, whom he would save from adult sexuality. Like Huck, Holden has a conflict.... After a secret visit home, he plans to lead a hermit's life in the West, but is reconciled to the city by the love of his little sister Phoebe... He is last seen recuperating in a sanitarium. Clearly Mark Twain and Salinger present parallel myths of American youth confronting his world—Huck Finn over many months, when time was expendable; Holden over two days when, Salinger seems to imply, time is rapidly running out....

Although Holden keeps his innocent heart, his adolescence has riddled the innocence of mind, that naivete, which Huck in good measure still possesses. What Holden's heart seeks and responds to, his mind sees is violated every where by the mere fact of human maturity. Adult activities become expressive masks for adult sexuality.... Certainly if Huck's vision reveals both the limitations and promises of democracy—the hope and despair—Holden's, in direct descent from Huck's, focuses upon the despair. In the predatory wasteland of the city, Holden can foresee no future refuge or good. (Is it by accident that some lines of weary futility from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' are echoed in Holden's words to Sally Hayes: "It wouldn't be the same at all. You don't see what I mean at all'?) If he and Sally were married, Holden knows he would be an office worker 'making a lot of dough, and riding to work in...Madison Avenue buses...' He accurately describes the commercialized Christmas spirit as something over which 'old Jesus probably would've puked if He could see it.' He damns the competitive drive for status....

Everyone can remember the brutal and degenerate persons Huck encounters and some of the dozen or more corpses that bloody up his story. Holden's society holds far more possibilities for horror and depravity, and on a massive scale. Feverishly, obsessively on the move, it has more irritants and fewer profound satisfactions than does Huck's. Holden's cherished memory of one little duck pond in Central

Park replaces Huck's Jason's Island and lazy days on the Mississippi.... The sparkling metropolis Holden sees looming over the forlorn duck pond is inescapable, portentous. The life Huck explores, despite its evil and treachery, is still daring and redemptive, not just sodden, mean and self-destructive.... Like the Central Park ducks in winter, Holden is essentially homeless, frozen out.

But Huck, although an outcast, is a true home-maker wherever he is. Allie's baseball mitt is all that is left to Holden of Allie's love, and unlike Huck, he seems unable to break through the ring of hostility to find new sources of affection. Deprived of real opportunity for the sort of soul-shaking sacrifice Huck makes for Jim, Holden expresses his love for Phoebe by the gift of a phonograph record—which breaks. Of greater significance, Huck has Jim; but Holden, so desperately in need of love, is one of the loneliest characters in fiction. Obviously Huck is not as critically wounded as Holden. He has far more resilience, a stronger power of renewal... Both boys are rebels—with a difference. Huck can often go naked, but Holden can defy convention only by wearing his 'corny' red hunting cap. Capable of making a free choice, Huck outwits his enemies and rises above the compulsions within. He is a practical rebel like Thoreau. He runs away to confront and modify reality, and thereby he proves, for his day, the explosive force of individual ethical action. Holden runs off too, but his actions are usually ineffective, and the path of escape leads him deeper into the mire of his personal difficulties.

Supremely ironical, then, is our last glimpse of Holden making recovery and adjustment in the sanitarium—a prelude to compromise in the outside world.... Holden says: 'I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody'.... No wonder Holden wants to remain forever the catcher in the rye—his free Territory—oblivious to the trap that maturity finally springs. His recessive traits suggest that the logical, perhaps desirable, end for him and his civilization is the pure silence of death, the final release from imperfect life....

Beneath the appealing and often hilarious humor, comparable to some of the best of Mark Twain's, life is felt in this book fundamentally as a ceaseless, pushing round of activity that one would be well rid of. Holden carries with him a dim sense of the eternal and transcendental. He is something like a soul unknowingly striving to rise from the muck of this world to the peace of nirvana. Jane Gallagher is always beyond his reach; he must settle for Sally Hayes, the 'queen of the Phonies'.... Salinger's social criticism, it would seem, has a mystical base, a support more profound than mere belief in Holden's Christian virtues, though that belief is present too. It constantly implies a religious feeling, possibly a conviction, that dimly hints a way out of the life-trap....

To conclude, the two novels are clearly related in narrative pattern and style, characterization of the hero and critical import... The relationship argues the continuing vitality of Huck's archetypal story, absorbed by generations and still creatively at work in contemporary thought and art. *The Catcher in the Rye* takes its place in that literary tradition—spreading beyond Anderson, Lardner, Hemingway, Faulkner—that has one of its great sources in *Huckleberry Finn*.... Fundamentally these books are brothers under the skin because they reflect a slowly developing but always recognizable pattern of moral and social meaning that is part of the active experience of young Americans let loose in the world, in this century and the last."

Edgar Branch
"Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity"
American Quarterly IX
(Summer 1957) 144-58

"*The Catcher in the Rye* is a sensitive psychological study of a prep-school boy, Holden Caulfield, whose parents live in New York. Holden in many ways exaggerates the normal tendencies of adolescence: he is hard-boiled and sophisticated in his own reveries but immature when confronted with a practical situation, he is basically good-hearted, even tender, but gruff and matter-of-fact on the outside, and he has a typical adolescent attitude toward sex; theoretically he is cynical and all-knowing, but in practice he is naïve and chaste. His real difficulty, the reason he does not fit easily into the life of the Pennsylvania prep school, is that he is more sensitive and idealistic than the boys around him; this makes him bitter and unhappy, and to his teachers and others he seems a trouble-maker and a misfit. In the eighth chapter of the

novel he runs away from the school and goes to New York, with only a vague notion in mind of what he is going to do; actually he is homesick, and half-afraid to approach his parents for fear of their disapproval. Arriving in the city, he registers at a hotel and is fleeced of his money by a prostitute and a cynical bellboy, who recognize him as a runaway and know he cannot complain to the police against them.

After various other unsatisfactory experiments in New York high-life he secretly steals into his parents' apartment and visits his small sister Phoebe, for whom he feels a deep and protective affection, although he does not fully admit this to himself since it does not fit in with his outward pose of callousness. He also visits an old teacher, Mr. Antolini, the one adult in the world who understands and likes him; but the visit turns into a tragedy through what is most probably a misunderstanding, and Holden flees under the impression Antolini has made homosexual advances to him. The next day he arranges to meet Phoebe at a museum, but she arrives with a suitcase, determined to run away with him because she instinctively understands he is unhappy. Touched by this, 'so damn happy' and at the same time 'damn near bawling,' Holden decides to go home with her instead. In a brief epilogue (Chapter 26) he is in an institution recovering from an illness, probably a mental breakdown. Salinger's ending promises no happy future for Holden, and leaves him still struggling with the muddle of his adolescent temperament.

This novel, written in the first person, is a masterpiece of extended monologue; it is all related in Holden's own defiant, ungrammatical slangy, and cryptic way of talking, and yet manages to express great subtlety and insight. The relations between Holden and Phoebe are masterfully depicted; Holden never specifically analyzes his emotions toward his sister, yet the reader clearly sees his mixture of patronizing superiority and tender brotherly protectiveness. The dominant theme of *The Catcher in the Rye* is the helplessness of the adolescent—half child, half adult—in an adult society. Holden is too old for childish amusements, yet is punished cruelly when he tries to force his way into the adult world. He is punished as well for his finer qualities, his sensitivity; tenderness, fastidiousness, and insight are not virtues that are highly regarded by the normal inmates of prep-schools. The red hunting-hat which Holden wears through most of the novel is a symbol to him of defiant yet childish bravado in the face of the conventions of the adult world."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 282-83

"Salinger's stories in the *New Yorker* had already created a stir. In undergraduate circles, and particularly in the women's colleges, this fresh voice, which plainly showed its debt to Ring Lardner, but had its own idiom and message, began to sound prophetic. Salinger was the spokesman of the Ivy League Rebellion during the early Fifties. He had come to express, apparently, the values and aspirations of college youth in a way that nobody since Scott Fitzgerald (the other major influence in his work) had done as well. He is interesting to read for this reason, and because he is a leading light in the *New Yorker* school of writing. (He is probably their *ultimate* artist.)...

The rebellious young hero ends up being 'sorry' for all the jerks, morons, and queers who seem to populate the fashionable and rich preparatory school world.... The very human hero of *The Catcher*, who is a physical weakling, who knows that he is at least half 'yellow,' is also a symbol of protest against the compulsive virility of the Hemingway school of fiction. The action of the novel is in fact centered around the athlete Stradlater, who is 'a very sexy bastard,' and who has borrowed Holden Caulfield's jacket and his girl. Stradlater is 'unscrupulous' with girls.... Ackley is even more stupid than Stradlater....

These are handsome prose passages, and *The Catcher in the Rye* is eminently readable and quotable in its tragicomic narrative of preadolescent revolt. Compact, taut, and colorful, the first half of the novel presents in brief compass all the petty horrors, the banalities, the final mediocrity of the typical American prep school. Very fine—and not sustained or fulfilled, as fiction. For the later sections of the narrative are simply an episodic account of Holden's 'lost week end' in New York City which manages to sustain our interest but hardly deepens our understanding....

The locale of the New York sections is obviously that of a comfortable middle-class urban Jewish society where, however, all the leading figures have become beautifully Anglicized. Holden and Phoebe

Caulfield: what perfect American social register names which are presented to us in both a social and a psychological void! Just as the hero's interest in the ancient Egyptians extends only to the fact that they created mummies, so Salinger's own view of his hero's environment omits any reference to its real nature and dynamics.... If this hero really represents the nonconformist rebellion of the Fifties, he is a rebel without a past, apparently, and without a cause. *The Catcher in the Rye* protests, to be sure, against both the academic and social conformity of its period. But what does it argue *for*?...

This is surely the differential revolt of the lonesome rich child, the conspicuous display of leisure-class emotions, the wounded affections never quite faced, of the upper-class orphan. This is the *New Yorker* school of ambiguous finality at its best. But Holden Caulfield's real trouble, as he is told by the equally precocious Phoebe is that he doesn't like *anything* that is happening.... This is also the peak of well-to-do and neurotic anarchism—the one world of cultivated negation in which all those thousands of innocent, pure little children are surely as doomed as their would-be and somewhat paranoid savior. 'I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall,' says the last and best teacher in Holden's tormented academic career....

He is still, and forever, the innocent child in the evil and hostile universe, the child who can never grow up. And no wonder that he hears, in the final pages of the narrative, only a chorus of obscene sexual epithets which seem to surround the little moment of lyric happiness with his childlike sister. The real achievement of *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it manages so gracefully to evade just those central questions which it raises, and to preserve both its verbal brilliance and the charm of its emotions within the scope of its own dubious literary form. It is still Salinger's best work, if a highly artificial one, and the caesuras, the absences, the ambiguities at the base of this writer's work became more obvious in his subsequent books."

Maxwell Geismar
"J. D. Salinger: The Wise Child and the *New Yorker* School of Fiction"
American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity
(Hill & Wang 1958)

"It is, of course, a book of extraordinary accomplishment.... At the level of its untidy story, the book is about an adolescent crisis. A boy runs away from his expensive school because he is an academic failure and finds intolerable the company of so many phoneyse.... He tells his story in a naïve sophisticated dialect, partly in the Homeric Runyon tradition, partly something more modern. Repetitive, indecent, often very funny, it is wonderfully sustained by the author, who achieves all those ancient effects to be got from a hero who is in some ways inferior, and in others superior, to the reader.... Growing up is moving out of crumbly phoneyse into perverted phoneyse.... For sex is what alters the goodness of children.... There is nowhere free from crumbiness and sex. He retreats into his catcher fantasy as Phoebe rides the carousel; and then into illness....

He daren't grow up, for fear of turning into a phoney: but behind him Eden is shut for ever. Why, then, with all this to admire, do I find something phoney in the book itself?.... [It is a] prefabricated attitude... *The Catcher in the Rye* has a built-in death wish; it is what the consumer needs, just as he might ask that a toothpaste taste good *and* contain a smart prophylactic against pyorrhea. The predictable consumer-reaction is a double one; how good! And how clever! The boy's attitudes to religion, authority, art, sex and so on are what smart people would like other people to have, but cannot have themselves because of their superior understanding. They hold together in a single thought purity and mess, and feel good. The author's success springs from his having, with perfect understanding, supplied their demand for this kind of satisfaction. It is this rapport between author and public, or high-class rabblement, that would have astonished Joyce.... This fine artist writes for the sharp common reader... These may seem hard sayings, when *The Catcher in the Rye* has given me so much pleasure. But I speak as a consumer myself, asking why the book, a few years on, seems so much less impressive."

Frank Kermode
"Fit Audience"
The Spectator CC (London)
(30 May 1958) 705-06

“The middlebrow novel as written by the Jewish American writer. If [Irwin] Shaw defines the middle of the middle, and [Herman] Wouk its lower limits, it is J. D. Salinger who indicates its upper reaches. Though Salinger has written always for the circle of middlebrow periodicals that includes *Good Housekeeping* and the *New Yorker*, he has maneuvered constantly (though at first almost secretly) to break through the limits of that circle. He has piously acknowledged in his stories the standard ritual topics of the enlightened bourgeoisie: the War and anti-Semitism; but he has been concerned underneath with only a single obsessive theme: the approach to madness and the deliverance from it, usually by the intervention of a child. His ‘little people’ are often quite literally little, usually small girls; and his favorite protagonists are under twenty, their typical crisis the last pre-adult decision of deciding whether or not to remain in school.

The themes that find full expression in *Catcher in the Rye* are tried early in short magazine fiction. In ‘A Girl I Know,’ there first appears the familiar, six-foot two, blackhaired boy, cast out of school; though in this case he is eighteen, has been expelled from college, and finds his way to Austria where he becomes involved in a brief, utterly innocent love affair with a Jewish girl, who can speak no more English than he can German. The War separates them and he returns to Europe to find her dead, killed by the Nazis. In the much-reprinted ‘For Esme with Love and Squalor’ the other half of the obsessive fable is sketched in: the story of a man redeemed from a combat breakdown by a gift from an orphaned, twelve-year-old, upper-class girl, with whom he has had a brief tea-table conversation in England.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, the blackhaired boy on the lam from school and the man threatened with insanity are joined together; the savior becomes the little sister--and the sentimental--political background is sloughed away in favor of a discreetly hinted-at world of religious implications. One has the sense that Salinger is making a real bid to break out of the trap of middlebrow ‘understanding’ into the realm of the tragic; but the attempt fails. It is impossible to believe in Holden Caulfield finally, for he is too unreal, a creature of tricks of style, set against an utterly unconvincing family background. One knows that he is intended to represent a holy innocent against whom the rest of the world is measured: a kind of prep-school, upper-income-bracket Huckleberry Finn, who cannot quite light out for the Territory but is redeemed by a little girl in a climax essentially sentimental; yet he ends as the prep-school boy’s dream of himself, a slickly amusing model imitated by a hundred seventeen-year-olds in a score of secondary-school magazines from coast to coast.”

Leslie Fiedler

“The Breakthrough: The American Jewish
Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew”
Midstream IV (Winter 1958) 15-35

“Holden’s alarm at mankind is the kind of experience which is to some degree characteristic of a boy his age who is trying to orient himself.... In the opinion of psychologists an increase in the desire to communicate, as exhibited by Holden, is also typical of adolescence and so is the boy’s final recognition that the ‘I’ is ultimately an island.... Unlike his schoolmates Stradlater and Ackley, Holden possesses a refined moral instinct, an unusually critical but also creative intellect, a lively imagination, a passion for asking questions and, above all, a great desire for contact and love. His susceptibility to what is spiritually and morally beautiful in a world that has so little beauty and an excess of ugliness—this is what makes him so desperately vulnerable....

Denaturalized, perverted, rooted in an insatiable materialism, modern American civilization must inevitably strike a seeker of values like Holden as unapproachable and repelling.... Holden’s brother D. B., for so many years his mentor and the author of significant literary works, prostitutes himself writing movie scripts in Hollywood. Lawyers, such as Holden’s own father, have no interest in saving the lives of innocent people (according to Holden this is what they should do) but only seek fame, wealth, and social status. Whatever is originally true, genuine, natural is transformed by this society into something false and corrupt. By virtue of his inner integrity Holden intuitively recognizes the phonies everywhere: he witnesses the triumph of lies and hypocrisy. Charity work becomes a social event for wealthy ladies, philanthropy becomes a means of self-glorification for successful businessmen....

The Catcher in the Rye is in no way a satire; rather than satire, the novel is permeated with a deep sense of humor placing the work very close indeed to *Huckleberry Finn*.... The little boy whom Holden watches

trotting alongside the edge of the street, singing and humming, is also shut out of his environment. Although the traffic of the great city roars past him, his heedless parents only centimeters away from him are in another world. Another child's basic drive to communicate is frustrated when his mother bursts into tears over the events depicted in the illusory world of the movie and ignores his urgent needs. This symbolism of loneliness culminates in Holden's conception of the American West, the place to which in fantasy he would escape; by pretending to be a deaf mute he even hopes to exclude the possibility of 'goddam stupid useless conversations'....

In abandoning the idea of suicide the boy is not influenced by anyone else but only by aesthetic considerations and by the feat of violating his intimately personal sphere: he does not want 'a bunch of stupid rubbernecks' to stare at his corpse. Holden does not, therefore, turn to death as a possible means of escape from civilization. Instead he seriously considers another kind of flight—leaving the big city and leading a simple, natural, genuine life far away in the country. Like Huck Finn he wants to 'light out for the Territory.' One of the most dramatic and at the same time one of the funniest episodes in the novel is that in which his plan—which is also an attempt to find a way to the *other*, the *you*—comes to naught. For when Holden tries to persuade his girl friend Sally to join him in escape, she exhibits a complete lack of understanding of his unconventional ideas. Even a new version of his plan also fails, and this time it is Phoebe who interferes. Thus Holden does not find happiness in a simple, natural world, a world he imagines as uncorrupted, pure, and secure, but—and this characterizes the frustration and the rootlessness of this twentieth-century Ulysses—he ends up on the couch of the psychoanalyst. Try as he may to be a nonconformist, Holden's own core reaches down into the very civilization he hopes to leave behind. Hence his constant efforts to escape from the feeling of being an island within this civilization....

Among the girls of his acquaintance only Jane Gallagher has the inherent prerequisites for a genuine partnership. In the past Holden had experienced happy moments of spiritual harmony, of wordless understanding, with her. But now he cannot reach her; he is fearful that her date with Stradlater, the 'sexy bastard,' has forfeited her purity and thus dragged her down into the world of vulgarity and ugliness.... The 'horsing around,' the harmless lies, the play-acting—these are simultaneously his protection from an emotional breakdown and his protest against the mechanized, prosaic, non-imaginative present day. The red hunter's cap he repeatedly puts on is the most notable symbol of his need for protection and of his rebellion.... [His] love, directed above all towards the helpless and the suffering, is so strong that Holden has not unjustly been called a 'saintly Christian person.' It is so all-embracing a love that one of his comments at the end of the novel includes everybody, even the 'phonies': 'About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about'....

Not many people, however, are as concerned about preserving purity as Holden, who even refrains from throwing a snowball out into the unspoiled whiteness of fresh snow. On the contrary, dangers threaten innocence everywhere, as symbolized by the obscene inscriptions everywhere which disturb the mind of the child... This struggle for preserving the purity and security of childhood is to Holden the only thing which makes life worth living."

Hans Bungert
"Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*:
The Isolated Youth and His Struggle to Communicate"
Die Neueren Sprachen (1960) 208-17

"Critics, for the most part, have lavished an affectionate understanding upon a Holden Caulfield who regards his fellows with religious compassion and at the same time, out of his own durable honesty, reacts against the phony in both institutions and people.... There is, nevertheless, some critical unhappiness with a Holden who refuses to mature and with a distinctly unsatisfactory conclusion to the novel; and on both counts *The Catcher* suffers in comparison with *Huck Finn*. If Holden displays a superiority over Huck in certain traits of character [Huck is conditioned to be a racist, for example], his neurotic psychology, intensified by sexual conflicts from which Huck was free and aggravated by a vulgar, dehumanized society, leads the boy to the psychoanalytical couch in a thoroughly pessimistic novel, whereas *Huck Finn* ends on a resolute note of courage in Huck's rejection of his society with his escape into the farther West.... [On the contrary a Holden] who has accepted both the mood and the act of responsibility with Phoebe does not require psychoanalytical therapy, for he has miraculously wrought his own cure and has thus spiritually

escaped the social rigidities that would be imposed upon him. The conclusion is, therefore, optimistic and affirmative, not in any credal sense but in terms of the unconquerable resources of personality....

Holden's slob speech is obviously justified as a realistic narrative device, since it is the idiom of the American male; yet from the psychological point of view, it becomes the boy's self-protective, verbalized acceptance of the slob values of his prep school contemporaries. He thus may justify himself in his overt being and may hope to secure immunity from attack and rationalize his 'belonging'; slob language, therefore, hits off two important social themes—security and status. But the psychological intent becomes symbolical portent when we see that the mass idiom emphasizes a significant distinction between two worlds—the phony world of corrupt materialism and Holden's private world of innocence, which, in its corporate love, embraces a secret goldfish, Holden's dead brother Allie, his sister Phoebe (all children, in fact), Jane Gallegher, nuns, and animals...

For his private world Holden uses a literate and expressive English, and so the profounder psychological and symbolic purposes of slob language may be detected only as that idiom functions in polarized relationship with the other.... The slob Holden is more prominent, but the literate Holden is more intrinsic.... The literary precision with which Holden employs slob language for a public world that is varyingly indifferent and cruel and usually phony and literate speech for his private world emerges beautifully when he explains how he met Jane Gallegher....

And does he not wear his red hunting hat backwards like a catcher?... The hat, indeed, is the central symbol of Holden's fantasy and so of the book—not only...for aggression, but later for his humanitarian role, faintly foreshadowed...in the Stradlater episode; and a third symbolic function of the hat is to hit off Holden's quest, which is in large measure hysterical flight, as he rushes to New York before he comes home to Phoebe. Aggression and withdrawal follow each other rapidly in the opening scenes... Since Allie's death, whenever Holden becomes depressed, he tries to make up for this past cruelty by saying that he may go along. Here, then, in his guilt feelings we have an explanation of why Holden broke his hand against the garage windows...

[He rejects being a lawyer] because a lawyer, like his father, would not know whether he was being phony.... Unrelenting in its vision of the double-dealing of society, *The Catcher* portrays teachers as sentimentalists and guardians of an exploded ethic; and one of them, Antolini, is a linguistic phony. In these enclosing patterns, then, the reverberations of irony appear to be endless, and the structure of language and motif is all the more impressive because everything is presented in such an artless and colloquial fashion.... The somewhat less than twenty pages of chapters four and six, the Stradlater episode, provide a brilliant instance of Salinger's technical virtuosity. Here we have convincing evidence that this completely selfish and indifferent young animal did push Holden, in his already neurotic state, down the nightmarish incline toward the psychoanalytical couch....

We note with fascinated attention how Stradlater possesses himself of all things that are Holden's, one after another. He uses Holden's Vitalis on his 'gorgeous locks,' he borrows Holden's hounds-tooth jacket for his date, and yawning all the while, he expects Holden to write his theme for him.... [Holden] requests Stradlater to ask Jane whether she still keeps her kings in the back row; the symbolism of this imagery, portraying defense against sexual attack, is the central motif of the episode.... The mitt symbolically indicates that Holden would like to play the game with sensitivity and imagination, and Stradlater's crude rejection of the theme is itself a symbolic gesture, and a final one, shutting off all hope of communication. Holden tears the theme into pieces. But it should be added that, like Jane's kings in the back row, Holden's private world is impotent, and the effort at self-revelation in them is of a piece with this futility....

It is part of Salinger's intricately patterned structure that Holden's favorite character in the play should have been killed in a duel and that Holden himself was the manager of the Pencey fencing team and had 'left all the foils and equipment and stuff on the goddam subway'.... He protests that he doesn't like automobiles, even 'old cars'.... As Holden sees matters, life has become so inhumanly mechanized that in his secret world animals move up a notch to assume the status of humans. Swift would approve such misanthropy.... We observe, then, that the 'madman' and 'crazy' patterns are employed most effectively in

episodes, chiefly in the first two thirds of the book, that reveal Holden's neurotic condition and...his sense of alienation.... If Holden is sick and escapes into fantasy, so too the nation....

As the supreme national incarnation of the phony, Hollywood (and by extension, California) figures prominently in the tale from first to last, for it provides another enclosing pattern. We learn quite early that D. B. has positioned himself by going to Hollywood to write scenarios; and at the end we see Holden in the clutches of a California psychoanalyst, who is interested not in the cause of suffering, not even in the person suffering, but rather in the 'desirable' social result of adjustment.... Before Holden leaves the hotel he is told five times to go home; the psychological direction of the novel, under the narrative surface, is by now unmistakable.... Holden will mature.... The visit to Central Park and then home to Phoebe must be regarded as the two halves of a single, unfolding psychological experience; they provide the hinge on which *The Catcher* moves.... Finally, the thought of Phoebe gives him courage to live. 'So I got the hell out of the park, and went home'....

The psychological and thematic components of this little scene are profoundly rich and yet beautifully simple. Central Park represents Holden's Dark Tower, Dark Night of the Soul, and Wasteland; the paradise of his childhood is bleak, and the ducks that, in his fantasy, he has substituted for the human, have vanished. In effect, Holden is finished with childhood and is prepared for the burdens of maturity. But all the same he gathers up the pieces to be treasured, and in a final act of childhood profligacy—skipping coins over the lagoon—he symbolically rejects the materialism of the adult world that he is about to enter.... The anti-social bond is confirmed when Phoebe tells Holden that she has the part of Benedict Arnold in a Christmas play and when he gives her his symbolic hunting hat. They are rebels and seekers both.... Paradoxically, the terror exists not for Holden but for Phoebe, and the boy who had been fleeing from one physical and psychological terror after another now finds himself in the role of the elder who must reassure his young sister that nobody is going to kill him....

Salinger is intimating that for the imaginatively endowed the living experience may become the source of precept and rule. The point is that Holden is way ahead of his elders. Holden's image of salvation is a compound of his own anecdote to Phoebe of how James Castle plunged to his death and of the snatch of song Holden had heard, 'If a body catch a body coming through the rye'.... Now Holden's fantasizing will not be neurotically defensive, but rationally motivated and ethically directed; and the death-wish will disappear. On his walk up to Phoebe's school Holden fantasizes about going west; he would pretend to be a deaf-mute, and if anybody wanted to talk to him the person would have to write the conversation on a piece of paper. Whereas earlier in his effort to communicate with society, as in the theme he wrote for Stradlater, society rejected him, now he rejects society. If there is to be no communication it is of his own free, rational choice and not a piece of neurotic withdrawal. At Phoebe's school he sees the obscene word twice inscribed on corridor walls; but now, if he says that it drives him almost crazy, it does so not with a neurotic and inwardly directed thrust, but in an outward direction in defense of Phoebe and other children, for he says that he could kill whoever did it....

Once again he feels that he will never get to the other side of the street; he breaks out into a sweat, and he talks to Allie, begging him not to let him disappear. When he has successfully negotiated a crossing he thanks Allie, who thus assumes his function as a guide, like Virgil for Dante, into the lower regions of the dead... From the start Holden is convinced that by either standard—society's or his own, he is a coward.... He admits that he 'was too yellow not to join' a secret fraternity. The final instance, unmistakably illuminating the climax of the book, shows that he is not a coward and that, in effect, he essentially has business to transact only with himself, and he therefore must stop running. In the museum of art when Holden walks down 'this very narrow sort of hall' leading to the room containing the mummies, one of the two boys with him bolts and runs, the other says, 'He's got a yella streak a mile wide,' and then he also flees. Not Holden but society is yellow....

If in the Stradlater episode and throughout the rest of the novel, Holden is an innocent, he is so, not so much in terms of our popular literary tradition, but rather in a classical, Christian, or psychoanalytical schema. His very fears yield proof that his innocence represents a harmony of attributes and drives—intellectual, emotional, and physical, so that in the proper regulation of them harm will result neither for the person nor for others. Holden's obsession about faces indicates this fastidious care; the Egyptians tried to

conquer the final violence of death by mummification so that, as Holden says, the face 'would not rot.' In Holden's encounter it is important that the spirit should not rot....

The psychological journey from the fear of death to a calm acceptance of it is further highlighted at the beginning when we learn that Mr. Ossenburger, the mortician, has donated the dormitory wing named for him in which Holden has a room. Holden's victorious encounter with death reveals psychological maturity, spiritual mastery, and the animal faith and resiliency of youth.... Yet although Holden masters his neurosis he also falls victim to society, for in alternating stress the novel continuously presents two mingled actions—his own inner dealings with himself and society's brutal effect upon him. After his visit to the mummies Holden goes to the lavatory and proceeds to faint, i.e., symbolically dies; and his comment is that he was lucky in falling as he did because he 'could've killed' himself. The parallelism with the earlier Stradlater episode leaps instantly to the mind, for then, as we recall, Holden 'nearly dropped *dead*'; and that scene also took place in a lavatory—a fit symbol, in both instances, for a scatological society. Significantly, he feels better immediately after; and he is reborn into a new world of secure feelings and emotions, with himself fulfilling the office of catcher in his mature view of Phoebe. Thereafter the psychoanalytical couch can mean little to him, far less than Antolini's couch, to which it is thematically related....

If Holden...dies only to be reborn into the world of Phoebe's innocence and love, he has all through the novel been announcing the theme of regeneration in the 'wake up' pattern.... To round out the pattern, Holden's father 'won't wake up even if hit over the head with a chair'.... Actually, Holden's secret world fails the boy not only outwardly in the encounter with society, but also inwardly in his retreat from circumstance, for it is effectively sealed off, so that, as with the outside world, there is here likewise no communication. The pattern that discloses this aspect of Holden's isolation is 'giving old Jane a buzz'.... The psychological remoteness of the image of Jane is the one time when Holden does actually phone her: there is no answer. His own world fails to respond. Thereafter come the visit to Central Park, the return home to Phoebe, and a concomitant spiritual recovery.... Phoebe had learned how to cross her legs in the Yogi manner, hold her breath, and by concentrating exert the influence of mind over matter. In this position, 'smack in the middle of the bed,' Phoebe represents the still, contemplative center of life; at the same time she is listening to dance music, and with the impulsiveness of the child she offers to dance with Holden...participation in the dance of life—a spiritual perception that is as ancient as the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Although the humanitarian role of savior that Holden assigns himself stands in the foreground, we must nevertheless not fail to see that Phoebe is the essential source....

The short concluding chapter, far from being the lame and defective appendage to a charming book that some think it, is like so much else in *The Catcher*, a triumph of technical virtuosity. In this reading of the novel the conclusion is blunted...because we cannot say what society will do to impose adjustment upon a boy who has effected his own secret cure; and we therefore close the narrative not with psychoanalytical questions, but ethical. In rejecting the formalism of psychoanalytical technique for the spontaneous personality Salinger follows D. H. Lawrence; and in boldly proposing that the resources of personality are sufficient for self-recovery and discovery, his book will stand comparison with Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, whose protagonist, Harry Haller, rises above his own neurosis in a discovery, based on Buddhist thought, that the potentialities of the soul are limitless.... Since the action of *The Catcher* takes place against the background of the approaching Christmas holidays, the answer is again suggested in the implied contrast between the birth of Jesus and the Egyptian art of mummification.... Salinger has found his rationale in Buddhist thought....

In the large, Whitmanesque acceptance of evil there is affirmation of the life-process as the personality 'lets go'; and such Zen riddling is easily translatable into existentialist understanding. In its emphasis on the conflict between the organic and the mechanistic, the secret and the public, reality and appearance, awakening and death, *The Catcher* hits off the strongest Romantic affirmations from Goethe and Wordsworth down to Lawrence, Joyce, and Hesse. Whether at Walden Pond...or in New York hot spots, the problem of personality remains... At the close of *The Catcher* the gap between society and the individual has widened perceptibly; and far from repudiating Holden's secret world, Salinger has added a secret of psychological depth. A mechanistic society, represented just as much by Antolini as by the psychoanalyst, may with the glib teacher continue to ignore the boy and talk of 'what kind of thoughts your

particular size mind should be wearing'; we may all comfort ourselves with the reflection that, after all, Holden is another bothersome case of arrested development, albeit rather charming in a pathetic and oafish manner...

No doubt Salinger has overdrawn the portrayal, but...in its pathetic and sentimental tone *The Catcher* faithfully reflects the surface of American life, and insofar, therefore, as it lacks intellectual substance and a valid universality based on a cultural heritage, it falls far below the Romantic masterpieces... But as I have tried to make clear, *The Catcher* is strongest where these are strongest... And the blunted, ambiguous ending mingles with this affirmation the doubt whether now at last, in the long travail of the spirit, the odds have not become too dreadful. If, as this reading interprets the book, the scales tip in favor of the affirmation, it is so because the history of youth is almost always hopeful."

Carl F. Strauch
"Kings in the Back Row: Meaning Through Structure,
A Reading of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*"
Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature II
(Winter 1961) 5-30

Communist perspective: "The Russian translation of the novel was published in the Soviet magazine *Foreign Literature* in November 1960, but comments by Soviet critics still appear in the press. I can truly say that no other book by an American writer published in recent years aroused such a response in our country. Moscow's leading newspapers and magazines alone—including *Foreign Literature*, *Novy Mir*, *Znamya*, *Voprosi Literaturi*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Literatura i Zhizn* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*—published more than a dozen articles and critical reviews devoted to the novel. The general opinion is that Salinger is a very talented writer, and his novel an outstanding work of fiction that makes a deep impression on the reader. The famous writer Vera Panova says in her afterward to the Russian translation: 'Every episode is evidence of the maturity of the writer's talent. At first sight it seems that the novel is written in a loose style, but it soon becomes apparent that it is a subtle work of a real master'....

Salinger has identified himself with his principal character to such an extent that one almost does not feel his presence there. It seems that it is sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield who is the author, simply and frankly relating the story of his misadventures.... Holden's naïve coarseness is rather amusing sometimes, but at the same time the boy arouses sympathy by his great sincerity, honesty and kindness.... Inna Levidova, the author of several works on American literature, writes: 'The book...gives a very precise representation of the typical meager and monotonous, but sometimes very amusing language of a green youth.... It is slang of course, but slang that does not kill the individuality of the narrator. And behind all this one can clearly see Holden's great inner purity and honesty. It is these features, in fact, that give a dramatic tension to the book and raise it above the usual aping of childishness.'

Soviet critics agree that the chief merits of the book are the descriptions of modern American life, and the honesty of the writer. The world surrounding Holden is barren and dreary. The boy is tragically alone among tired, spiritually bankrupt people.... He knows only that the American army 'was practically as full of bastards as the nazis were'... Holden is a rebel. He revolts against the world of grown-ups. But his revolt takes the form of an escape from this world. He does not want to become grown-up himself.... *The Catcher in the Rye* is typical of works by Western writers who use for their motto Shakespeare's phrase 'a plague on both your houses—a plague on the "rights" and on the "lefts," on the Whites and on the Reds, and on the struggle between them'.... *The Catcher in the Rye*, writes Alexander Dymshits in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 'is a frightening book, for it reflects the spiritual bankruptcy of modern America.... This is the most valuable thing about the book and not its end where the author tries to make the reader believe in the possibility of an 'independent' moral rebirth of his hero.'

Konstantin Chugunov
"Soviet Critics on J. D. Salinger's Novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*"
Soviet Literature
(No. 5, 1962) 182-84

"After this [*Franny and Zooey*], it is not only a relief, but a necessity to return to *The Catcher in the Rye*, and remind oneself that Salinger is, after all, a great writer. *The Catcher* seems to me the best novel

published since the war, one of those contemporary American novels that have recreated in twentieth century terms that simultaneous sense of character and society of the great nineteenth century realists. Salinger has fused a pessimistic portrait of his society with a classic dramatization of adolescence. His method is, of course, very unlike that of the great nineteenth century realists, more in the tradition of the American novels that create their sense of reality through a tone of voice. Holden Caulfield is the same kind of character narrator as Huck Finn, Ishmael, the Lardner baseball players and small-town worthies, and Saul Bellow's Augie March and Henderson, with the resources of American popular speech...

Holden has the blend of penetration and immaturity in judgment which is the mark of the intelligent adolescent. The shrewd social observation...balanced by characteristically school-boyish crudities of overstatement: "Mothers are all slightly insane." In personal relations he shows a mixture of good-natured youthful spontaneity and innocently calculated mischief. His speech contains the mannerisms and stock reactions that help to create his tone of voice—naturally this is a quality that can only be fully sensed by reading the whole book. The mannerisms maybe as simple as the familiar 'and all' and 'if you want to know the truth' tags; the reactions as elaborate as those channeled through the word 'phoney.' Their stock nature is perfectly valid, since it is usually in this way that we respond to life. It is an illusion of the Jamesian type of novel that our responses to situations are invariable unique and unrepeatable; there is always an element of routine in character...

The Catcher is not only consistent in tone, but is an extremely well-constructed novel. Beneath its episodic brilliance is a tight three-movement structure. The first movement shows Holden Caulfield at school; the second, his escape to New York and search there for sexual adventure; the third, his collapse, at the conscious level, backward into childhood, at the unconscious forward into madness.... He is introduced as a complete misfit in the setting which his society considers appropriate for him...his school becomes a microcosm of the individual's relation to his society.... His detachment from the game is a key to his rejection of the ethos of his society.

What depresses and infuriates him most about his headmaster and Spencer is their insistence that 'life is a game'.... Games are a system devised for the benefit of the star-performer; the rules of the game enable him to shine, they are no protection for the weak—for those on the side where there aren't any hotshots. The pretence of team-spirit is pure hypocrisy, and the cynicism of Holden's attitude the proper reaction to the assertion that the game is played for the common good. The game, as seen by Holden, is an image of the competitive society, in its glorification of success, callousness towards failure, and its most unpardonable assertion—that its hot-shots not only have the tangible benefits of success but the moral satisfaction of feeling that they are the finest flower of an incorruptible system....

This second phase is the best part of the book. It describes Holden's four successive attempts at sexual satisfaction: his telephone-call to the girl who is 'not quite a whore'; his evening in the Lavender Room with the three girls from Seattle, Washington; his encounter with the prostitute; and his proposal to Sally Hayes. Salinger captures with extraordinary power, as well as with comic verve, the euphoria of escape from the formal limits of school, and the excited sense of being on the town, with which Holden arrives in New York. Holden's excitement is the excitement of the fantasist: he is embarking on a dream which is both universally adolescent, and built into contemporary American mass-culture through Hollywood and television, advertising, pulp fiction and magazines, and social mores—the offer of unbelievable possibilities of sexual adventure and satisfaction. This erotic day-dream is confronted in each of the four incidents with harsh realities which the day-dream disqualifies the fantasist from handling, in a manner analogous to Gatsby's experience. Holden is caught in an ironic and painful dialectic: four times his participation in the communal day-dream propel him into real situations from which he recoils, even more incapacitated and humiliated, back into fantasy.

The profound pessimism which grows steadily beneath the humor of this movement lies in the fact that the reassuring progressive nineteenth century conviction that one learns from experience is reversed.... In *The Catcher*, experience incapacitates and destroys, and after the failure of Holden's last attempt at satisfaction, he is moving towards mental collapse. This nihilism is colored and intensified by two atmospheric touches: a sense of New York as nightmare—the theme of twentieth century urban despair rendered with a particularly intense local concentration....and an ironic compassion for the horrors of the

human condition.... I have said that *The Catcher* is the classic novel of adolescence—indeed the only great novel I know which handles this phase successfully....

The strength of Salinger's study of adolescence is that he does not stop with a succession of superficial manifestations as other novelists have done, but goes straight to the fundamental biological situation. He sees that all the contradictions, agonies, and exaltations of adolescence stem from the central fact: that the adolescent has newly gained the physical potentialities for sexual experience but has not learnt to integrate them either within himself or in any consistent relation to the demands of society. 'Sex,' says Holden, 'is something I just don't understand.' From this flows everything—the confused idealism of his attitude to Jane Gallagher; the naïvely unscrupulous calculatingness of his adventures; the wish for experiment and the corresponding fear and revulsion; a general fascination and disgust with the physical—Ackley's pimples, Stradlater's toenails—a new horrified awareness of physical process....

When the prostitute arrives, Holden projects his fantasy into this real situation and begins role-playing, 'suave as hell, boy'.... Nothing breaks up this dream so quickly as discovering that the woman is a person with...a cold professionalism that knocks Holden's potency to pieces. The control of tone is remarkable—the way in which the farcical and the painful elements are brought out, and the dramatic impetus of Holden's rising panic as he begins to feel his dominance slipping—especially where the prostitute sits on his lap—physically pinning him down to the realities of the situation. She has now fully emerged as a person, and takes control: she has been insulted, and is not particularly pleasant or attractive anyhow. The dramatic reversal is complete—Holden is no longer Jim Steele-Blanchard, omnipotent sensualist in his Riviera chateau, but a frightened adolescent in the hands of a shrewdly calculating prostitute. He goes through the humiliation of the prostitute's insults, and the pimp, Maurice's, brutal return. The reality is now intolerable, and the dialectic is completed by a return to fantasy. With tight-lipped heroism he shoots Maurice, and then Jane Gallagher comes to nurse his wound. 'The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I'm not kidding'....

Holden feels almost with hysteria that he cannot escape, least of all into the earlier American log-cabin Thoreau-innocent existence he proposes to Sally Hayes.... The fable of the catcher in the rye itself belongs to the same aberrant tendency. Holden wishes to protect children who are playing happily in a field of rye from running over the edge of the cliff that borders the field. Falling over a cliff is a classic unconscious sexual symbol, and here represents without any doubt the dividing-line of puberty, separating the happy innocence of childhood from the dangers and agonies of sexual capability. This perpetuates the conventional view of the innocence of children, and shows an atavistic belief in the existence of a Fall from grace. It may be objected here that Holden's sexual failures could convincingly make him hanker for a return to a pre-sexual state of existence. If one felt that Salinger were consciously planning this and directing one's responses this way, one would agree, but my own feeling is that, by this point in the novel, he is completely submerged in Holden Caulfield and no longer preserving that necessary detachment from his main character.

Two features of his writing support this view: first, his abrupt abandonment of his sense of Holden's comic potentialities, expressed earlier in the novel through Holden's tone of voice as a note of ironically sympathetic self-mockery. It is this control of tone that gives the prostitute incident, without curbing the farce or minimizing the pain, its essential sanity—a dimension which is obviously lacking in the '—you' sequence. Secondly, to understand what is happening, one is forced to drag out unconscious sexual symbols and atavistic superstitions, evidence not of profundity, but of a collapse of artistic control. Such examinations are always impertinent and usually irrelevant, but here the indications are so unmistakable, and the connections with the artistic failure so clear, that one is forced to follow this line of analysis. In particular, there is the recurring unconscious symbol of a return to the womb—Phoebe's bedroom...and the Pharaoh's tomb in the Museum, a peaceful and quiet place which Holden is hysterically enraged to find violated once again with the words '—you.'

At the denouement, Salinger sees Holden Caulfield's tragic predicament through the kind of closed system which nihilistic writers construct with diagrammatic clarity: childhood is the only state of existence which is innocent, unspoiled, uncorrupted; escape backwards into it is obviously impossible; the despair of knowing this inexorable situation is the tragedy. The effectiveness of the tragedy depends on our accepting

the author's view of childhood—a view which is manifestly false. And so the novel's greatness is flawed by the denouement and rests on those earlier scenes of adolescence where there is no falsity of observation, lapse of consciousness, or failure of control.”

Brian Way
“A Tight Three-Movement Structure”
New Left Review
(May-June 1962) 72-82

Michael Hollister (2015)

psychological state of narrator is much more important
• Book covers a time span of four days
• Principle setting is New York City, which plays such an important part that it can almost be considered another character in the story
Back Page Preview (1951) (Possibly written by Salinger)
The hero-narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye* is an adolescent child of sixteen, a.Â Holdenâ€™s reaction to Allieâ€™s death was violent and extreme: He smashed out the windows in the garage. He didnâ€™t attend the funeral because he was hospitalized. (Holden also instantly recalls the exact day Allie died.)