Nikou 3

*The Catcher in the Rye* takes us on a journey to New York City during the 1950’s post World-War-Two era, through the eyes of Holden Caulfield, a young and confused teenager searching for his identity and purpose in life. Through the use of character, setting and symbol, the reader easily becomes exposed to the harsh reality of transitioning from teenhood to young adulthood. How the protagonist Holden Caulfield comes to realize the inevitable truth behind growing up is truly a remarkably genuine and relatable process experienced by many adolescents today.

To begin, J.D. Salinger’s fantastic use of character allowed the reader to better understand Holden’s inner struggle, as he easily becomes his own obstacle throughout this entire novel. However, certain key moments definitely stand out from the rest. For example, when Phoebe (Holden’s younger sister) says, “You don’t like anything that’s happening” (187), Holden accepts the challenge and attempts to find one thing he believes he’d enjoy doing but quickly fails to identify himself with anything. He has one rather unrealistic expectation, and that is to become the catcher in the rye (191), the idea being that Holden would catch children before transitioning into adulthood, therefore preventing their innocence from ever being snatched and forever lost. The inner struggle that Holden faces ultimately revolves around that particular aspect; and until coming to the realization, that becoming the catcher in the rye is not a viable nor realistic possibility, fitting into society becomes increasingly difficult.

Furthermore, the relationship that Holden has with Phoebe can be summarized in one word - love. Phoebe absolutely loves her big brother Holden, and her affection towards him in the novel is clear as day. Holden tells the reader, “She reached into my pocket and took out my red hunting hat and put it on my head” (233). She cares for Holden very much and doesn’t want

Nikou 4

him to go away. Phoebe is an important character in the book as she eventually saves Holden and unwittingly gives him perspective on the process of transitioning in life.

Moreover, another key moment that revealed Holden’s true feelings and thoughts about life were clearly revealed through J.D. Salinger’s excellent use of setting - more specifically, his referral to The Museum of Natural History. The description of the museum was thoroughly explained and gave a sense of realism that had the reader fully invested in Holden’s thoughts and emotional attachment towards the locale. Holden declares, “I loved that damn Museum” (134). Life is a lot simpler for children as opposed to the challenges of being an adult. Holden struggled with this, and perhaps much of his immaturity really was the result of his not being able to cope with such a drastic change in lifestyle. Thus, Holden takes comfort in that, “The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was” (135).

The museum was nostalgic, as it was reminiscent of better days. Holden’s youngest brother Allie died of leukemia when he was eleven years old. If everything remained the way it was when Holden was younger, Allie would still be alive today. The connection between his brother’s death and the way Holden views people in society (bunch of phonies) gives us a better understanding of the emotional burden and resentment he’s embodied over the years.

Furthermore, it’s only towards the very end of the novel that Holden begins to see things more clearly, thanks to the expert use of symbolism. “The song that the carousel was playing was, ‘Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.’ ” (232) This was the song that played at the carousel on which Phoebe was riding. Holden was waiting for Phoebe to finish her ride; he watched as some of the children on the carousel attempted to grab the gold ring. This was the song that guided Holden

Nikou 5

and helped him understand that when your heart’s on fire, smoke gets in your eyes and blinds you. Holden says, “I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy” (233).

Finally, this was the pivotal moment of the novel. As Holden listened to the song and watched as the carousel turned round and round, he finally understood that he didn’t need to save anyone and that growing up is a natural process of life that everyone goes through eventually, when the time is right. As parents scrambled to take cover from the rain, Holden stood in the middle of it all - wearing his red hunting hat that Phoebe had given back to protect from the rain - relieved and no longer encumbered by a responsibility that was never his to begin with.

In conclusion, Salinger’s clever use of character, setting and symbol allowed us to better understand Holden and his inner conflicts. Holden eventually understands that growing up is inevitable and a natural part of human life that all must go through – whether they want to or not – when they’re ready.