

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

MASSACHUSETTS LEVEL III HONORABLE MENTION 2009

Dear J.D. Salinger,

When I read one of your most famous works *Catcher in the Rye* last year, I had very fierce opinions about the main character, Holden Caulfield. I noticed all the things that Holden did, and they evoked some strong emotions in me. These emotions consisted of mostly anger and contempt for him. Throughout the novel I became more and more upset with Holden, and I started to hate his character and overall personality. He seemed too young to be so jaded and judgmental. He was critical of almost everything that he encountered, and he gave off a rather arrogant vibe. I could not understand how someone could be so cynical and still enjoy life.

However, after I had finished the story and my immediate emotions had subsided, I started to realize something shocking. I realized that I saw parts of myself in Holden. I found it hard to admit that someone I disliked so intensely could actually be very similar to me. It took me a while to understand fully, but I came to the conclusion that although I hated Holden, I agreed with several of his views regarding society and life in general. For instance, I recall Holden talking about his roommate, Stradlater, and in his description of him he kept referring to the fact that he was a “phony.” At the time when I read this, I dismissed it as another thing that I disliked about Holden because it made me furious that for some reason he felt the need to repeat points such as this over and over. He would constantly go back and reiterate his statements to the point that I would just skip the entire page and move on to the next so that I could focus on other things. But as I was thinking back on that passage, I discovered that I understood *exactly* what he was talking about. I have experienced first hand (and still do) people just like Stradlater – the kind of guy who acts like a good person in the right setting but starts to show his true colors once you get him away from judging eyes. At that point I started to see that Holden and I both valued the same thing. We valued people that were genuine and sincere.

With the new common ground Holden and I shared, I went back to some of the other passages in the story in hopes that I would find more. Sure enough I found many more times where Holden expressed similar values to mine. For instance, in the passage where Holden meets some women in the club/bar, he has an inner monologue that completely lines up with my beliefs. In the passage Holden’s inner monologue criticizes the women for being so fake and materialistic, and he denounces them because they are completely obsessed with fame. It surprised me how much I agreed with Holden and how similar an experience I had to that very one. It wasn’t even 24 hours ago that I was around a group of women who were discussing fame and the famous, and I had an inner monologue that was almost verbatim to Holden’s. Once again, seeing parts of myself in Holden came as a great surprise to me.

So now I come to the point of the letter where most people would say how the story you wrote changed this life, and they are forever thankful to you...but as I said I don’t like people who are insincere. The truth is your story didn’t change my life. The fact is that I still hate Holden Caulfield. However, there is one thing you can take comfort in knowing: your story is, to this date, the only one that I have ever felt a connection with and the only one that has ever provoked any strong emotions (even though they may have been negative). So although you may not have intended to make Holden the object of my hatred, the fact that you did earns you my thanks. So thank you, Mr. Salinger.

Sincerely (really),

Will

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