The Teenage Years Essay, Research Paper

THE TEENAGE YEARS:

HOLDEN S STRUGGLE

In the novel Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield, as an individual entity is internally torn up by dividing forces. One supports adolescence, while the other supports adulthood. This battle is known as the transitional period, or the teenage years and is illustrated by three main themes. First, his outlook on all things sexual displays an important part of this struggle. Next is his perception of himself and others, which contains many of its own obstacles. Finally, Holden s desire to remain a child and dwell in the past conflicts with the reality that he needs to grow up and focus on the future and is the basis of his struggle.

Throughout the novel, Holden can be caught boasting stories of his sexual conquests. His tales are filled with could ves and would ves , all of his sexual encounters with women are very limited and incomplete. Proof of this is evident when he hires a prostitute to fulfill his sexual needs and in the end decides not to have sex with her.

I was a little nervous. I was starting to feel pretty sexy and all, but I was a little

nervous anyways. If you want to know the truth I m a virgin. I really am.

I ve had quite a few opportunities to lose my virginity and all, but I ve never

got around to yet. Something always happens. For instance, if you re at a

girlfriend’s house, her parents always come home at the wrong time- or at

least you re afraid they will. (Page 92)

His encounter with the hooker displays his inexperience and his nervousness when it comes down to sex. Holden, however, would rather blame fate than admit that he is still a virgin because of his own actions and feelings.

Holden s sexual immaturity is again demonstrated when he begins to talk about homosexuality. He is preoccupied with identifying gay men because he feels that it may make him seem as if he has reached some sort of high level of sexual maturity. In actuality this is very immature. One generally cannot discover another s sexual preference by merely looking. To presume otherwise is a sure sign of a child trying to disguise themselves as an adult.

Holden s relationship with Luce is like that of a student and teacher s in Holden s eyes. Luce qualifies as an adult because of his knowledge and experience in the world of sex. Holden tries to portray an image of sexual maturity yet again, but this facade is dispelled when he relentlessly questions Luce about all things sexual.

Listen. Let s get one thing straight. I refuse to answer any typical

Caulfield questions [about sex] tonight. When the hell are you going to grow

up? (Page 16)

Luce tires easily of Holden s questions, not because Holden is simply curious. His questions are posed so frequently and structured in such a way that it is obvious that Holden is trying to made their

conversation seem more like one that is between two men rather than a boy and a man.

Holden is enthralled by sex. Customary to his age, however, Holden is not yet quite comfortable with it. He sometimes tries to pass off as someone who knows what he is talking about when in reality it is just an act. He struggles to come to terms with sex and his relationship with it.

Holden himself, his perception of himself and his feelings regarding the elderly all show his desire to stay a child. This struggle is almost definitely futile considering one must eventually grow up, or self-destruct by trying not to.

First off, Holden s name clearly illustrates the fact that Holden desperately wants to remain a child, but must grow up. His first name is simply deconstructed and merely means to hold onto . His last name, when divided into two parts, has two separate meanings. Caul is a membrane, which encloses the fetus when in the womb. Field is an open space. With these three parts of the name analyzed, one can see that Holden s name sums up his basic want. He wants to hold onto childhood for as long as possible. He wants to stay wrapped up safely inside a warm and safe place but must be thrust forth into the great open space known as the real world .

Holden describes himself as a young boy although his physical attributes make it seem as if he is older.

I act quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then and I m

seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I m about thirteen. It s really ironical,

because I m six-foot-two and a half and have gray hairs. (Page 9)

This is a clear example of how he is a mixture of both adolescence and adulthood. He can t control his physical growth, however he can, to a certain extent, control his mental growth. As far as he s concerned, he ll try and stay a child for as long as possible.

Holden s aversion to the elderly and their bodies stems from an inner fear of growing old. His description of Old Spencer portrays this.

What made it even more depressing, Old Spencer had on this very sad,

ratty old bathrobe that he was probably born in or something. I don t much like to

see old guys in their pajamas or bathrobes anyways. Their bumpy old chests are

always showing. And their legs. Old guys legs at beaches and places always

look so white and unhairy. (Page 7)

Holden hates the idea of growing old because he equates an increase of age as an increase of weakness and a decrease in beauty. If he grew old, he would lose his vitality, which is packaged, with his youth. If he grew old he would lose the safety of health, grow sick and succumb to death.

The past and the future are the foundations of the war going on within Holden. He is caught in limbo, wanting to stay in his past, because it is safe and stable. However, he must move into the future because whether he likes it or not, he is chronologically becoming older. To enter this impending stage of his life safely, he must come to terms with this fact.

Holden s antipathy for growing up is shown when he talks to Sally Hayes about how mundane life would become after college.

I said no, there wouldn t be marvelous places to go to after I went to

college and all. Open you ears. It d be entirely different. We d have to go

downstairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We d have to phone up

everybody and tell em good-bye and send em postcards from the hotels and all.

And I d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs

and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the

time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming

attractions and newsreels. Newsreels. Christ almighty. There s always dumb horse

race, and some panzee riding a goddam bicycle with pants on. It wouldn t be the

same at all. You don t see what I mean at all. (Page 133)

Holden rants about how life would be filled with rules and obligations, something that he detests. The adult world is filled with extra baggage that wears one down and responsibilities that are present because of pop culture s formalities. It is sitting through pathetic displays of pseudo-amusement made to ease the mind of societie s conditioned mind. As far as Holden is concerned, the world run and lived by adults is filled with phoniness and obscure duties and a world he is determined to stay far, far away from.

Holden associates his memories of Allie and Jane with his earlier childhood. This is a childhood in which everything and everyone was good. Jane Gallager was a very special childhood friend, however after years of knowing each other, they lost connection. Early in the book, Allie finds out that his roommate Stradlater was going to go on a date with her. Stradlater is renown for having a lot of sex, and sex, as established earlier, is a deed that is equated with adulthood in Holden s eyes. Holden becomes enraged when Stradlater goes on his date with Jane because he knows that he will try to have sexual relations with her. It is as if he is stripping a part of his childhood from Holden. A part of his childhood where Jane was innocent and cared more for playing a game of chess than having sex with the school gigalo in the back of a car.

While Allie was alive, his childhood memories are only filled with emotions of euphoria and safety. When Allie died, Holden lost some of that innocence. His brother s death acted as a major catalyst as it was Holden s first step to growing up. He becomes increasingly nostalgic as the book progresses, when thinking of Allie. Because Allie is such an integral part of his childhood, Holden becomes increasingly disturbed when he continues to try to suppress his growth and hold on desperately to his childhood. He calls to Allie while having delusions of disappearing.

Anyway, I kept walking and walking up Fifth Avenue, without any tie on or

anything. Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every

time I came to the end of a curb, I had this feeling that I d never get to the other

side of the street. I thought I d never get to the other side of the street. I thought

I d just go down, down, down, and nobody d ever see me again… Then I started

doing something else. Every time I d get to the end of a block I d make believe I

was talking to my brother Allie. I d say to him, Allie, don t let me disappear.

Please, Allie. And then when I d reach the other side of the street without

disappearing, I d thank him. (Page 197)

Holden at that time had decided he was going to run away from his problems: the adult world. As he made these plans he just accumulated more worry and problems for himself and had the above hallucination. Holden, while having a mental breakdown, called to Allie for help. He called to Allie because he was part of his childhood, a world without problems, and fights to keep his sanity.

Finally, Holden has fond memories of his school and the Museum of Natural History in New York City. As a child, he spent much of his time at school and at the museum, (on trips with his school.) For most of the book, Holden occasionally enjoys to reminisce about those days. However, he decides to never enter these places, until he has to in order to find his sister. It is as if he is determined to not taint his memories of these places from his childhood. These memories are like that of the museum s artifacts. His natural history should remain untouched by the dirty hands of the adult. When he does reenter these two places, he becomes stricken with anger when he sees the f-word on the inner walls of the building.

Somebody d written Fuck you on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I

thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they d

wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them-all

cockeyed, naturally-what it meant, and how they d all think about it and maybe

even worry about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever d

written it. (page 201)

This is perhaps the most sacrilegious thing someone could do to Holden. To tamper with something so dear to him that is part of his childhood. Also, without actually realizing it, Holden is actively playing the part of the responsible adult. He, like many parents, is saddened by the fact that someone would try and take a sliver of innocence from a child by writing such profanity on the wall. His wish for the children to stay ignorant to the dirty words of the adult world is in vain.

Holden has a real problem with the idea of adjusting to the adult world. His links with the past are so strong one could think that he is chained and held by them. He is trying to beat off the looming adult world, whether it be for his own sake or for others. It represents all that Holden detests, however his battle to stay forever child-like is futile, because he can never win. One cannot stop from growing old. Holden s two choices are to conform to the adult world, or to die – symbolically or in actuality.

Holden is a teenager. It is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood. This time, for the average teenager, is soaked in conflict. Holden s conflicts have many faces; sex, the people around him, himself, and everything from the past which affects his future. This struggle is the foundation of this book, and is the basis of the teenage years.

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