The Significance Of The Title In The Catcher In The Rye Essay, Research Paper

In J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, there are many themes that are perceptible, however the most dominant theme was embedded in the title of the book. This is why in this essay I will address the significance of the title of this book. At the very outset, I will like to state what the title signified. The title established Holden Caulfield, the protagonist’s obligations in life, as stated by himself. Holden wished to serve humanity by safeguarding the innocence and purity of children, by protecting them from the evils of life and more directly the dangers of the ‘adult’ world. There were many instances in this novel when this meaning was supported. After having evaluated these instances the reader was readily able to notice how the title of this book described and/or influenced the protagonists’ nature.

The author made a direct reference to the title in Chapter 22, when Holden returned to Phoebe, his younger sister’s room just after having sneaked back home in order to seek salvation through her: “I figured I’d better sneak home and see her (Phoebe), in case I died and all.” When Phoebe found out that Holden had been expelled from yet another school she became upset and complained that Holden didn’t like anything. She asked him what he would like to be and Holden answered, “I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around – nobody big, I mean – except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be. I know it’s crazy.” This response to Phoebe’s question is essentially the underlining event that explained what the meaning of the title is. This response, by way of symbolism, accorded to Holden his duties as the ‘catcher in the rye.’ His responsibility to shelter the innocent from falling into the ‘adult’ world. In which, even the price of a set of luggage is enough to separate school roommates, where ambitions are hollow, and the purpose of school is to gather up sufficient knowledge so that someday one can buy a long, sleek, shiny Cadillac. Briefly, he has to protect the innocent from the shortcomings of the ‘adult’ world.

The first time that the author hinted about the pith of the title was in Chapter 16, when Holden was walking up Broadway, just before his rendezvous with Sally Hayes, (one of his friends with whom he had made a date to go to the theater.) On his way, he walked behind a family of three who had just been to church. Holden liked them and attempted to hear what one of the young boys was humming. The child was singing “If a body catch a body coming through the rye,” and this made Holden feel better: “It made me feel not so depressed anymore.” Although this was not entirely evident, and it did not directly interpret the title as him being the savior of the innocents, it did show how Holden obtained relief from depression and melancholy as soon as he encountered what he held to be innocence. In other words, when he met children.

An additional example of when Holden demonstrated his role as the ‘catcher in the rye’, was when he learned that Stradlater, his roommate, was going on a date with Jane Gallagher, a friend of his. Holden was a sensitive, caring individual who showed concern for the well being of Jane Gallagher. To Holden Jane represented purity, he used to play checkers with her and she was the type of person who would leave all her kings in the back row. This may seem just as if it is a petty detail, however it holds a lot of symbolic value. The fact that Jane did not know that her kings are of no use sitting in the back row represented innocence. Since it is Holden’s job to protect the innocent he did not want her to date Stradlater because he knew that Stradlater was a sexually attractive, virile young man who is careless, somewhat thoughtless and not interested in details. “If you knew Stradlater, you’d have been worried, too. I’d double dated with that bastard a couple of times, and I know what I’m talking about. He was unscrupulous. He really was.” Therefore by showing his concern for Jane, “I sat there for about half hour after he left I kept thinking about Jane, and about what Stradlater having a date wither her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy.” Holden attempted to fulfill his duties as being the ‘catcher in the rye.’

Another example that confirmed the gist of the title, was when Holden went to his younger sister Phoebes elementary school in order to talk to her before he left. Anyhow, while he was there he saw the word ‘fuck you’ written on the walls and “it drove me (him) damn near crazy.” He couldn’t stand the idea that Phoebe or her friends had seen that written on the wall. If they had seen it they would wonder and eventually “some dirty kid would tell them,” what it meant. This is when he started erasing the first impression on the wall. But soon he realized, “it was hopeless anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn’t rub out even half the fuck signs in the world. It’s impossible.” Now when this event is assessed with the essence of the title the reader can effortlessly observe the fact that this event perfectly parallels the meaning of the title. This event illustrated Holden’s duties as ‘the catcher in the rye’ by showing how he tried to erase the impressions of the word ‘fuck’ on the walls. The kids that Holden was trying to protect were the innocent kids who did not know what the word ‘fuck’ meant so he tried to save them before they fell off the cliff and into the adult world where according to him innocence was non-existent.

The aforementioned events conclusively support the idea upon which was grounded the title of the book and also the protagonists, Holden Caulfield’s, character or nature. This idea was the protagonist’s responsibility to protect the innocent from the impure.