

Anger and Rebellion: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

Warm-Up: Look at the pictures 1-3 below and discuss what the people are protesting about.



Task 1. Integrated task. You will read a short passage and then you will hear a short lecture by a professor on the same subject. Then you will answer a question that relates to both of them. In your answer, you will have to combine and show the relationship between what you have read and what you listened to.

a) Read the text and make notes on the main points.

The Uneasiness of the Young

After World War II, the uneasiness among the young increased due to: the generation gap; the development of a conformist society which did not approve of diversity and marginality; and the fear of a nuclear war. The year 1968 was crucial, since youth protest movements held marches and demonstrations against the establishment. Soon protests spread to the political field, often linked to pacifism in the United States, Marxism in Europe and to nationalistic independence movements in the countries of the Third World struggling to free themselves from colonial dominion. Other important issues were the civil rights of minorities and the emancipation of women.

b) Now listen to a talk on the same topic and make notes on the main points. Answer the following questions: What forms did protest take around the world in the 1960s.

American Literature and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

In American literature, the main trend was set up by writers who rejected conventional society and its values for a life and writing based on authentic individual experience, celebrated through music, sex, alcohol and drugs (*Beat Generation*). Their outsider life was taken over by the hippies of the 1960s.

One of the main topics of American literature was the painful passage from youth to adulthood as embodied by J.D. Salinger's (1919-2010) character Holden Caulfield in the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). He rejected the falsity of grown-ups and used the jargon of American adolescents in the 1950s. Salinger's model was followed by several contemporary writers who created adolescent heroes or anti-heroes.

The novel is set around the 1950s and the narrator is an unhappy and sensitive sixteen-year-old American boy. Although Holden does not say where he is while he is telling the story, it seems clear that he is undergoing treatment in a mental hospital.

In the novel, he talks about his last day at school, from which he has been expelled due to his bad marks, and the few days he spends in NY city before making up his mind to inform his parents and go back home.

Feeling more and more depressed, he goes back home, where his little sister Phoebe saves him from despair. They dream of a simple country life together.

Like many young people, Holden is intelligent but also sensitive and vulnerable; he struggles against the society he belongs to, which he considers extremely false, corrupt, hypocritical, or 'phony' and looks for authentic values and true friends.

1. What are the 1950s-1960s American writers interested in?

2. What does Holden Caulfield embody?

3. How would Holden Caulfield be connected with the idea of uneasiness among the young people of those times?

***The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) J.D. Salinger**

Chapter XXII. *Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of the novel, has been expelled from a private boarding school and has escaped to New York without informing his parents. Here, however, he does not succeed in overcoming his depression and dissatisfaction, and decides to go back home just before Christmas. He manages to enter his house without being seen, and goes to his younger sister Phoebe's room and wakes her up.*

Warm-up. Decide. Who would you call for help when you needed it the most, and why?

4.7 | Then all of a sudden, she said, 'Oh, why did you *do* it?' She meant why did I get the axe¹ again. It made me sort of² sad, the way she said it. 'Oh, God, Phoebe, don't ask me. I'm sick³ of everybody asking me that,' I said. 'A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies⁴. And mean guys⁵. You never saw so many mean guys in your life. For instance, if you were having a bull session⁶ in somebody's room, and somebody wanted to come in, nobody'd let them in if they were some dopey, pimply⁷ guy. Everybody was always locking their door when somebody wanted to come in. And they had this goddam⁸ secret fraternity that I was too yellow⁹ not to join. There was this one pimply, boring guy, Robert Ackley, that wanted to get in. He kept trying to join, and they wouldn't let him. Just because he was boring and pimply, I don't even feel like¹⁰ talking about it. It was a stinking¹¹ school. Take my word.'

Old¹² Phoebe didn't say anything, but she was listening. I could tell by the back of her neck that she was listening. She always listens when you tell her something. And the funny part is she knows, half the time, what the hell¹³ you're talking about. She really does.

I kept talking about old Pencey¹⁴. I sort of felt like it.

'Even the couple of *nice* teachers on the faculty, they were phonies, too,' I said. 'There was this one old guy, Mr Spencer. His wife was always giving you hot chocolate and all that stuff¹⁵, and they were really pretty nice. But you should've seen him when the headmaster, old Thurmer, came in the History class and sat down in the back of the room. He was always coming in and sitting down in the back of the room for about a half an hour. He was supposed to be incognito or something. After a while, he'd be sitting back there and then he'd start interrupting what old Spencer was saying to crack a lot of corny jokes¹⁶. Old Spencer'd practically kill himself chuckling¹⁷ and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam *prince* or something.

'Don't swear¹⁸ so much.' [...]

Old Phoebe said something then, but I couldn't hear her. She had the side of her mouth right smack on the pillow¹⁹, and I couldn't hear her.

'What?' I said. 'Take your mouth away. I can't hear you with your mouth that way.'

30 'You don't like anything that's happening.'

It made me even more depressed when she said that.

'Yes I do. Yes I do. Sure I do. Don't say that. Why the hell do you say that?'

'Because you don't. You don't like any schools. You don't like a million things. You don't.'

35 'I do! That's where you're wrong – that's exactly where you're wrong! Why the hell do you have to say that?' I said. Boy²⁰, was she depressing me.

'Because you don't,' she said. 'Name one thing.'

'One thing? One thing I like?' I said. 'Okay.'

The trouble was, I couldn't concentrate too hot²¹. Sometimes it's hard to concentrate.

'One thing I like a lot you mean?' I asked her.

40 She didn't answer me, though. She was in a cockeyed position way the hell²² over the other side of the bed. She was about a thousand miles away. 'C'mon answer me,' I said. 'One thing I like a lot, or one thing I just like?'

'You like a lot.' [...]

'What?' I said to old Phoebe. She said something to me, but I didn't hear her.

45 'You can't even think of one thing.'

'Yes, I can. Yes, I can.'

'Well, do it, then.'

'I like Allie²³,' I said. 'And I like doing what I'm doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff, and –'

50 'Allie's *dead*. You always say that! If somebody's dead and everything, and in *Heaven*, then it isn't really –'

'I know he's dead! Don't you think I know that? I can still like him though, can't I? Just because somebody's dead, you don't just stop liking them, for God's sake – especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that're *alive* and all.'

55 Old Phoebe didn't say anything. When she can't think of anything to say, she doesn't say a goddam word.

'Anyway, I like it now,' I said. 'I mean right now. Sitting here with you and just chewing the fat and horsing²⁴ –'

'That isn't anything *really*!'

60 'It is so something *really*! Certainly it is! Why the hell isn't it? People never think anything is anything *really*. I'm getting goddam sick of it.'

'Stop swearing. All right, name something else. Name something you'd like to *be*. Like a scientist. Or a lawyer or something.'

'I couldn't be a scientist. I'm no good in Science.'

65 'Well, a lawyer – like Daddy and all.'

'Lawyers are all right, I guess – but it doesn't appeal to me,' I said. 'I mean they're all right if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't *do* that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough²⁵ and play golf and play bridge, and buy cars and drink martinis and look like a hot-shot²⁶. And besides. Even if you did go around

70 saving guys' lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really *wanted* to save guys' lives, or you did it because what you *really* wanted to do was be a terrific²⁷ lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back²⁸ and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren't being a phoney? The trouble is, you *wouldn't*.'

75 I'm not too sure old Phoebe knew what the hell I was talking about. I mean she's only a little child and all. But she was listening, at least²⁹. If somebody at least listens, it's not too bad.

'Daddy's going to kill you. He's going to *kill* you,' she said.

I wasn't listening, though. I was thinking about something else – something crazy. 'You know what I'd like to be?' I said. 'You know what I'd like to be? I mean if I had my goddam

80 choice?'

'What? Stop swearing.'

'You know that song "If a body catch a body comin' through the rye³⁰"? I'd like –'

'It's "If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye"! old Phoebe said. 'It's a poem. By Robert Burns³¹.'

85 'I *know* it's a poem by Robert Burns.'

She was right, though. It is 'If a body meet a body coming through the rye.' I didn't know it then, though.

'I thought it was "If a body catch a body",' I said. 'Anyway, I keep picturing³² all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's

90 around – nobody big, I mean – except me. And I'm standing on the edge³³ 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.'

2. Comprehension. In pairs, make notes on what Holden says about:

1. His schoolmates;
2. His History teacher;
3. What he likes;
4. His brother Allie;
5. His father;
6. What lawyers are like;
7. His sister;
8. His idealistic aspirations.

3. Analysis. Focus on the narrative parts and write adjectives and verbs referring to Phoebe. What are the feelings between brother and sister?

4. List the social models Holden rejects.

5. Consider how the expression *the catcher in the rye* refers to the way Holden wants to protect young people in his future adult life.

5.1. What do the field of children and the cliff symbolize?

5.2. What does this idealistic aspiration of Holden's reveal about his present life?

6. Underline some examples of the language used by the American teenagers of the 1950s.

7. Discuss. Do you think the worlds of childhood and adulthood are as separate as Holden believes them to be? Is it easy being a teenager? Why yes/no?