Language, Voice, and Holden Caulfield: The Catcher in the Rye Part 1

Crash Course: Literature
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===== Introduction =====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course Literature, and today we're going to talk about The Catcher in the Rye, the best-selling book never to be adapted into a film.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green, what about the Quran?

Fair enough, me from the past, but there's a religious injunction there; the reason this has never been made into a movie is of course because Salinger and his estate won't allow it. But how this text - I mean, even most of Salinger's covers are imageless - has managed to remain relevant without a movie adaptation in our image-saturated and image-driven culture is a very interesting question.

And so today, we're going to take a look at the pure and unadulterated text of The Catcher in the Rye. Now there are many ways to read a novel critically,
and next week we'll take a very different approach - we'll infuriate JD Salinger's ghost by reading this novel in a historical and biographical context - but today let's appease Salinger's ghost by pretending that he as a person never existed.

[intro music]

===== Imagery vs Language =====

These days our artistic landscape is so deeply defined by visual narratives on TV and in the movies that we can hardly imagine a world without images. In fact, I'd argue that we have a bad habit of seeing books as sort of cheaply made movies where the words do nothing but create visual narratives in our heads.

So too often what passes for literary criticism is "I couldn't picture that guy", or "I liked that part", or "this part shouldn't have happened." That is, we've left language so far behind that sometimes we judge quality solely based on a story's actions.

So we can appreciate a novel that constructs its conflicts primarily through plot - the layered ambiguity of a fatal car accident caused by a vehicle owned by Gatsby but driven by someone else, for instance. But in this image-drenched world, sometimes we struggle to appreciate and celebrate books where the quality arises not exclusively from plot but also from the language itself.

Holden Caulfield, by the way, was aware of this, because he too lived in an image-driven world. I mean, on the very first page of the book, Holden calls his brother a prostitute for abandoning book-writing for Hollywood, and says, "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies."

And the novel frequently identifies itself in direct opposition to film, as for instance when Holden says, "I don't remember if he knocked me out or not, but I don't think so. It's pretty hard to knock a guy out, except in the goddamn movies."

By the way, for the record, it is okay to say Charlotte Bronte if you are quoting the book in question but now, outside of the text, I have to use
"Charlotte Bronte". Ugh Stan, I know we have to do this for the schools but this prohibition on cursing is so Emily Bronte annoying.

Okay, so if you'll just allow me one biographical note here, Salinger once wrote in a letter that "The Catcher in the Rye is a very novelistic novel. There are ready-made 'scenes' - only a fool would deny that - but, for me, the weight of the book is in the narrator's voice, the non-stop peculiarities of it, his personal, extremely discriminating attitude to his reader-listener. He can't legitimately be separated from his own first-person technique."

All right, but before we examine that first-person technique, let's go to the imagetastic Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble =====

Catcher in the Rye is the story of Holden Caulfield's expulsion from Pencey Prep and his journey back home to New York City, where he bums around for a few days trying to get someone to listen to him and meaningfully respond to his fears about becoming an adult - Holden has grown six inches in the past year and one side of his head is full of gray hair, both symbols of impending inevitable adulthood and its accompanying adulteration of innocence. He's so obsessed with, and protective of, innocence that he can't even throw a snowball at a car because the car "looked so nice and white."

Over and over again Holden tries to reach out to people who might tell him that adulthood will be okay - friends, old teachers, a prostitute, a nun, cab drivers - but he can never quite find a way to ask these questions directly, and anyway, no one ever listens to him.

Nothing much else happens; there are no explosions or car chases, and certainly no skoodilypooping, as Holden Caulfield is perhaps the first human in history ever to pay a prostitute not to have sex with him. What Holden really wants is not sex, or money, or power, or any of the dramatic stuff in Hollywood movies; he wants to stop time. As he famously says when thinking about the Natural History Museum, "the best thing, though, in that museum, was that everything always stayed right where it was."

Holden wants to be a protector of innocence, a catcher in the rye, but he also wants to stay innocent himself. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

===== Sex and the Adult World =====

So one way this is explored is through sex. Holden is certainly very interested in sexuality, and he acknowledges his sexual desire, but what he knows of the adult world of sex is very scary, and even abusive. After a possible sexual advance from a trusted adult near the end of the novel, Holden says, "That kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid."

Like a lot of what Holden tells us about his feelings, that's very subtle, and it requires close reading, but it's important. Like, it's easy to see why the adult world strikes Holden as so phony: the only adult who pays attention to him in the entire novel has ulterior motives.

So he just wants to stop time to keep himself and the people he cares about away from that world. You may remember this obsession with stopping time - "Holden time back", if you'll pardon the pun - from The Great Gatsby. Of course, that doesn't work out for Gatsby, just as it doesn't work for Holden. I mean the kid's 16 years old and he's already got grey hair. Oh, it's time for the open letter?

===== An Open Letter =====

An open letter to grey hair. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, thank god, it's the red hunting cap. Ohh, my people hunting hat. Stan, I know this is corny, but I just feel so much more confident when I'm wearing it. It's kind of my emblem of protection.

Dear grey hair,

You generally result from the wisdom that comes with age, or else someone experiencing a great fright. But grey hair, if you're associated with age, how come you've already attacked Holden Caulfield, and more importantly, how come you've already attacked me?

I just had a haircut, and not a great one, I might add, and my stylist said, "Do you think we should dye your hair? You are on YouTube." There's no room in the brave new media world for wisdom or age. Holden Caulfield, I am beginning to know what it's like to be you.

Grey hair, all of this leads, as TS Eliot put it, to an overwhelming question: should I dye my hair? Eh, I think I'll just stick with my red hat; it covers my grey hair and it makes me feel like I can take on the crushing phoniness of the adult world.

Best wishes, John Green.

===== Passive Voice =====

Okay, let's now turn to what Salinger called "Holden's first-person technique." So all these experiences are obviously very important and intense to Holden - I mean he's writing us about the stuff that led him to a mental hospital - but the intensity of these emotions is masked by the tactics of his narration.

I mean, we just saw how subtly he hints at sexual abuse, for instance, and also, Holden uses the passive voice constantly, which of course, you're not supposed to do as a writer. Look, for instance, at this sentence: "The reason I was standing way up on Thomsen Hill, instead of down at the game, was because I'd just gotten back from New York with the fencing team."

Any writing teacher would tell you that this is a disaster; you ought to say "I stood way up on Thomsen Hill," not "I was standing on it," but this passive voice is a coping mechanism. I mean, the whole reason that writing teachers tell you not to use the passive voice is because it creates distance, whereas active verbs feel immediate and real.

But Holden needs to create distance between himself and the reality of his pain. I mean, he's standing on top of that hill because he's been expelled from school, and also because everyone hates him because he left the fencing team's equipment on the subway, thereby forcing them to forfeit, becoming the first person in history to lose the big game without being on the team. Who wouldn't want to distance themselves from that humiliation?

You see this again and again in Holden's voice, and you also see other strategies of minimization of language as a form of self-protection. I mean, he describes his institutionalized self as "pretty run-down." He says that Ackley is "sort of a nasty guy." He "sort of" strikes up a conversation with a cabdriver, asking him what happens to the ducks in the pond when winter comes. Late in the novel, he "sort of" gives his sister Phoebe a kiss. In fact, the phrase "sort of" appears in the novel 179 times!

===== Something Else Here ?? =====

Also, even 60 years later, Holden's voice still sounds authentic, which is a function of grammar and word choice. After Stradlater asks the expelled Holden to write a composition for him because he "doesn't know where to put the commas," Holden writes, "That's something else that gives me a royal pain. I mean if you're good at writing compositions and somebody starts talking about commas. Stradlater was always doing that. He wanted you to think that the only reason he was lousy at writing compositions was because he stuck all the commas in the wrong places. He was a little bit like Ackley, that way." You see what Holden did there? He stuck a comma in the wrong place. There shouldn't technically be a comma before "that way," but it sounds right.

But Holden's greatest gift as a narrator is that all these techniques of creating distance only make it easier to empathize with him, especially when his defenses finally break down. I mean, look, for instance, at this passage where he's talking about his brother Allie's baseball glove. "He had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. He wrote them on it so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat. He's dead now."

The gut-punch of those last three words is brilliant. A present tense sentence in a past tense novel. We go from imagining a kid standing in the outfield reading poetry from his glove to knowing that this kid is dead - not that he died or that he passed away, but that he is dead now. The tense reminds us that the dead don't stop being dead; that they remain dead, and that is how they haunt us.

Or another example, look at the use of the word 'listen' in this novel. Over and over again, characters - but especially Holden - begin sentences with 'listen.' "Listen, do you feel like laying canasta?" Holden asks Ackley. Ackley doesn't. To Luce he says, "Listen, hey, Luce. You're one of those intellectual guys. I need your advice. I'm in a terrific-" and then Luce cuts him off, unable to listen even to the end of the sentence. But at the end of the novel, Holden says to Phoebe, "Listen, do you want to go for a walk?" It takes her a while - they start out walking on opposite sides of the street - but they do go for a walk. Holden finally does get listened to.

===== Conclusion =====

Maybe you realize that as you're reading and maybe you don't, but it works on you unconsciously regardless. And so, moments later, you feel something welling up inside of you as Holden writes, "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could have been there."

Look at the phrases that get repeated there: "So Bronte happy" and "kept going around and around." Some say that Holden never changes in this novel, but I think he does right there at the end. The boy who wants nothing ever to change becomes "so damn happy" when he sees his little sister going around and around.

When Holden stops thinking of time as a line toward corrupt adulthood and starts imagining it as a circle where one goes around and around, in a journey to and from innocence that lasts throughout life, he can finally be so damn happy.

Yes, Holden never really gets anywhere. And yes, nothing much happens. He just keeps going around and around. But that doesn't mean nothing changes.

Thanks for watching.

===== Credits =====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by me, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Every week, instead of cursing, I use the names of writers I like. If you want to suggest future writers, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of English literature experts, mostly me.

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