Holden, JD, and the Red Cap- The Catcher in the Rye Part 2: Crash Course English Literature

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi there, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature and today we're going to continue our discussion of this guy, J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye.

So Holden Caulfield is often dismissed by teenagers for being a whiny little Nathaniel Hawthorne, who hates his life but never does anything to change it.

(Past John) Mr. Green, Mr. Green! All the kids in school say he resembles me

(Current John) Ughhh, and he does me from the past. And frankly the idea that your third rate, first world problems can be the subject of great literature is a bit difficult to swallow. Also how many times do I have say it, no hats in class! Especially people hunting hats!

This is where, if you're the kind of person who thinks that books should be read with their authors in mind, it becomes relevant that J.D. Salinger saw more combat in World War Two than almost any other American. The great American war novels of that generation; Catch 22, Slaughterhouse 5, The Naked and the Dead, were all written by men who saw far less of war's horror, than J.D. Salinger did. He was on Utah Beach on D-Day. At the Battle of the Bulge and he was one of the first Americans to enter a liberated concentration camp. And yet Salinger returned home and wrote not about war, but about Holden Caulfield bumming around New York City. So you see you can say that the stakes aren't high in this novel, but as Salinger well knew the cruel and phony world of adults doesn't just treat people like Holden Caulfield poorly, it kills them.

(Opening theme plays)

So it's easy enough, and extremely common, to conflate Holden Caulfield the character with J.D. Salinger the man. The only time Salinger seriously considered an adaptation of the novel, for instance, it was as a play in which he would play Holden Caulfield even though by then Salinger was in his thirties. Holden Caulfield is obsessed with young women and has a deeply conflicted relationship with their sexuality; J.D. Salinger dated and married many women who were decades younger than him. But ultimately I don't think it's that interesting to use a novel to analyze its author; however, imagine that you've just come home from a horribly destructive war. You've seen combat and you've seen concentration camps and you've lost innocence in a way that most of us thankfully never will. As we discussed last week, the traditional line on 'Catcher' is that it's a book about clinging to innocence; you know, Peter Pan refusing to grow up, Chris Jenner thinking she can be one of her daughters, Donald Trump investing his fortune in the least believable wig ever. And that trying to keep everything the same and everyone innocent is a fool's errand and only leads to madness. And there's a lot in the text to support that - how much he loves nothing ever changing at the Natural History Museum, how he prefers imagining Jane Gallagher as a terrible Checkers player than as a sexual being or how he wants to be a catcher in the rye. And while Holden is driven mad by this desire to preserve innocence, there's also something kind of heroic about it. I mean, the catcher in the rye might be on a hopeless mission, but at least it's arguably a noble one, like Gatsby's, or Romeo's. I mean, children do deserve our protection, and in war and elsewhere Salinger often saw and sometimes was a victim of that phony adult world that preys on the weak and the frightened.

And in this reading, the final scene of the book is particularly interesting. Let's go to the Thought Bubble:

So Holden's little sister Phoebe is riding the carousel - an innocent kid activity if ever there was one - she says she's too big, but Holden convinces her otherwise. He's definitely too big though, so he just watches. And as the carousel spins, Phoebe, like all the other kids, keeps reaching for this gold ring; and Holden says:

> "I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddamn horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them."

The ride finishes, Phoebe tries to get Holden to ride it, but he declines, and then it starts raining, and she puts Holden's red hunting cap (an enchanted object if ever there was one) on his head. This scene is usually read as being about innocence and change, which is how we read it last week, but that red hunting cap is vital. He tells us that he got the hat soon after leaving the fencing equipment on the subway - an intensely vulnerable moment - and it obviously gives him confidence. He wears it, for instance, when writing the essay about Allie's glove, but he's also self-conscious about it, taking off so as not to look suspicious, and only putting it on when, quote: "I knew I wouldn't meet anyone that knew me." And there at the end, Phoebe puts the hunting cap on *him*, as if to say: 'this thing gives you the confidence you need to keep the rain out of your eyes and go on living with some semblance of integrity in the adult world? So wear it.' Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So in short, in a very quiet and subtle way, Phoebe empathizes with Holden, which is striking mostly because no one has empathized with him in the entire novel. Holden can be tremendously empathetic: remember that he writes to his teacher telling him not to feel bad about failing him? But from his friends to his teachers to nuns to prostitutes to cabbies, Holden never feels like he's being heard. J.D. Salinger is, of course, most famous for not wanting to be famous: he stopped publishing in the early 1960s and lived an intensely private life. In a famous passage from 'Catcher', Holden says:

> "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it."

An author, in short, that empathizes with you. Just as an aside, it's never a good idea to try to track down an author; even if he tweets a lot, still, don't come to his house. Salinger was that kind of author for millions of people, including me. We read 'The Catcher in the Rye' and feel like the book understands us in deep and improbable ways, but what Holden Caulfield didn't understand and Salinger did is that a book is not its author. You may wish that you could call up the author whenever you felt like it, and again - don't, but the real comfort is found not in the author, but in the text. And this is where it becomes relevant that there are in fact two Holdens in this story: there's the 16-year old Holden the story is happening to, and the 17-year old Holden who is telling us about it. The Holden the story is happening to *sucks* at getting people to listen to him; in fact, everyone in the book, including Holden, is way too self-involved to listen to anybody. Although the be fair, they're self-involved because - oh, it's time for the open letter?

'An open letter to the phrase 'self-involved'.' But first let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's a carousel! Just keeps going around and around...you are extremely symbolically resonant, but I've got an open letter to deliver. And this show ain't about carousels, it's about me.
Dear self-involved,

Whose 'self' would I otherwise be involved with? Let's imagine that instead of thinking about myself I spent all my time thinking about some other person and what they're doing and how they feel right now, you know what that's called? - CREEPERING! Unless the person is Benedict Cumberbatch, then that's called Tumblr.
Here's the thing, self-involved - 155,000 people are going to die today. If I felt the loss of all 155,000 of those people as intensely as I would feel the loss of, say, Benedict Cumberbatch, then I would be Herman Melville crazy. People are self-involved because if we empathized with all human beings equally we would never be able to get anything done.
The challenge is in understanding that while you'll always be the central character in your own narrative, other people matter too and empathizing with them is hugely important. In short, self-involved, I don't have a problem with *you* exactly, but you don't have to go all fountain-head-y about it.
Best wishes,
John Green

So the Holden the story is happening to can't get anyone to listen to him other than his sister and a probable creeper. But a year later, he's found a way to write about his story and make us care. Through things like the red hunting cap, we understand him and we can listen to him. An even though his battles aren't fought on Utah Beach or in the Hürtgen Forest, we care about them. That's the miracle of language, especially effective, figurative language. The hunting cap, the passive voice, the Natural History Museum, the carousel: all these things are ways into Holden's experience. That's how he gets into our brains and lets us see the world through his eyes.
After describing Phoebe going around and around on that carousel, Holden writes, "God, I wish you could have been there." But we are there! When students complain about reading critically, about having to do all this "English-class-stuff", that's what they're forgetting. All that English class stuff is a way into empathy; for Holden and for all of us, it's a way to hear and be heard.
Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, the script supervisor is Meredith Danko, our 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 name of writers I like - or, Nathaniel Hawthorne - you can suggest other writers in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of literature experts.
I'm just kidding, Nathaniel Hawthorne, I love you. Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town: don't forget to be awesome.