

The Flaws That Break Heroes Are Those That Make Heroes

Born and raised in New York, J.D. Salinger's work was very much influenced by his surroundings. His classic novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, was written in first-person narrative form, capturing readers' attention with its portrait of reality and truth. Salinger, revealing the innermost thoughts of his main character, Holden Caulfield, struck a chord ringing into his readers' personal lives and showed that humanity, through its evils and imperfections, still contained a bit of innocence and decency. With a story almost reminiscent of a Greek tragedy, the events following Holden's discharge from his school slowly revealed much about his past, and the factors leading up to his present condition. The cynical and contemptuous Holden Caulfield could be seen as an individual with many flaws; flaws from which a tragic hero would emerge.

Holden, a chronic liar, had often told lies for no apparent reason. "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It's awful. If I'm on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I'm going, I'm liable to say I'm going to the opera."(p.16)

However, through his lies, his true character was often revealed. In his meeting with Ernest Morrow's mother, Holden had lied from the beginning till the end of their conversation. Holden had lied about his own name, his reason for leaving Pencey early, and most importantly, about Ernest, who had made for himself the reputation of being the biggest bastard on the campus. Holden lied to Mrs. Morrow and made her believe that her son was a shy and modest boy whom everybody admired. The lie directed to make Ernest's mother feel better about her son revealed Holden's compassion toward others. "But I'll bet, after all the crap I shot, Mrs. Morrow'll keep thinking of him now as this very shy, modest guy that wouldn't let us nominate him for president."(p.57)

Holden later again revealed his true character after meeting with a prostitute named Sunny. She, expecting to have a quick “throw” with him, found that he simply wanted to talk to somebody. The incident demonstrated Holden’s regard for sex in both the physical and the spiritual aspect. He was not comfortable with having cold and impersonal sex and never intended to have sex with the prostitute. Holden, however, was still flawed in that aspect, as he continually avoided contacting people he cared for most, including Jane Gallagher or his sister Phoebe, but never hesitated to make contact with strangers such as Sunny, Faith Cavendish, and the three dim-witted blondes whom he had danced with at the club.

Reaching out to a girl he had liked superficially, Holden revealed himself as somewhat of a paradox. Although Sally was among the “phonies” he had so bitterly loathed, Holden found himself going out with her on a date. At the close of their night, Holden began to rant about going off with her and marrying her. But soon afterward, he found himself saying that she gave him “a royal pain in the ass”(p.133). The swift change in Holden’s attitude towards Sally revealed a bit of hypocrisy in his thinking.

Holden’s second encounter with Sally over the telephone further revealed his flaws. While drunk and free of all inhibitions, Holden’s innermost, often masked feelings, were magnified. It was during his drunken stage when Holden woke Sally up with a rambling telephone call. “I wished to God I hadn’t even phoned her. When I’m drunk, I’m a madman.”(p. 151) The flaws in Holden’s drunkenness had become apparent with the rise of the situation. But another event soon followed, and introduced an empathetic perspective of the drunken Holden—his dropping and breaking the record he had bought for his sister Phoebe. “I damn near cried, it made me feel so terrible...”(p.154) He proved to be a compassionate character with a deep respect for the morally good.

With his grief over a broken record, Holden realized that his gift for Phoebe could be shattered easily; as easily as a child's innocence could be shattered. He held a bitter contempt toward people who wrote the words "Fuck you" over public surfaces. "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 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."(p.201) Although Holden was often insensitive toward others, he cared much about the innocents; the children of the rye. Holden, who certainly was never portrayed as resembling perfection, yet holding strong moral character, was a truer hero than one could ask for in a traditional heroic tale.

J.D. Salinger was a master at describing indescribable beauties and feelings. He knew the unexplainable feelings that would somehow click in his readers' minds. Holden Caulfield, although a vulgar and outwardly crude individual, somehow ended a hero in *The Catcher in the Rye*, through all of his golden flaws reflecting the beauty of error—the beauty of humanity.