

Mrs. Garcia

English 10-300

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Content Over Class

Oscar Wilde categorized all books into two groups: either successful or unsuccessful. He believed that the “morality” held no weight in their categorization. Censored stories give their audiences a more unrealistic view of the world. The Catcher in the Rye’s inclusion of potentially controversial language and sensitive topics does not detract from its overall quality. Instead, these aspects add to the authenticity and characterization, two major factors in determining the success of a piece of literature, of Holden’s voice and his experiences. *Thesis*

↳ So-called “immoral” language provides Holden’s character with an aspect of believability. Teenagers tend to talk freely – as Holden does – without censoring their language. Swearing also conveys emotion that the author would not be able to convey as strongly with censored words such as “crap” or “darn.” *Holden* He tells the reader what happened the night he left Pencey Prep, recounting, “I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, ‘Sleep tight, ya morons!’ I’ll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out. Some stupid guy had thrown peanut shells all over the stairs, and I damn near broke my crazy neck” (Salinger 52). The author uses words such as “goddam,” “bastard,” and “hell” in order to illustrate Holden’s bitterness and frustration at failing out of yet another private school. Salinger’s word choice also demonstrates Holden’s deep-seated frustration at being surrounded by people he dislikes – and now his elation of finally being able to escape them. The crudeness of Holden’s voice gives his character verisimilitude and even adds an element of humor to the novel. *Q1*

↳ Salinger also characterizes Holden by illustrating his desire to save children from the corruption of the adult world by revealing to the reader Holden’s disapproval of the word “fuck.”

When Holden pays a visit to his sister Phoebe's elementary school, he sees that "Somebody'd written 'Fuck you' on the wall. It drove [him] damn near crazy. [He] thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant" (201). His criticism of the swear word translates into his wish to keep Phoebe and children in general innocent forever. Seeing something as obscene as the phrase "Fuck you" takes away from that innocence. Ironically, parents prompting censors on the book harbor similar intentions. Words considered offensive (such as "damn" and "hell") also express strong resentment here, further adding to the authenticity of Holden's character. In essence, the author purposefully uses graphic language to capture Holden's unique character.

Additionally, although its sexual content may have prompted many bans on the book, Holden's experiences (or inexperience, rather) with sex reveal his naïveté to the reader, adding authenticity to his character. As he anticipates the arrival of his "hired" prostitute – "Sunny" – he attempts to dress up for her. Holden confesses, "I was a little nervous... If you want to know the truth, I'm a virgin" (92). Readers can readily believe that, as a teenager, he has little experience with sex; he even gets "dolled up" for someone he pays. The author also uses Holden's encounter with Sunny to demonstrate Holden's extreme loneliness. After she and her pimp Maurice leave, Holden admits, "What I really felt like... was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window" (104). He becomes so lonely and depressed that he contemplates killing himself. Salinger intended the sexual content to serve as a way of characterizing Holden and adding to his character's dimensionality. When Holden shares his vulnerabilities with the reader, it gives him depth and makes him more real.

Moreover, the author chooses to involve in the novel such controversial subjects as pedophilia and homosexuality in order to further develop a prominent character trait of Holden's; his disconnectedness from others. During a night at his old teacher's house, he wakes up to find the

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Q5

teacher, Mr. Antolini, watching over him. Holden remembers, “Boy, I’ll bet I jumped about a thousand feet... I was so damn nervous. I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they’re always being pervery when *I’m* around” (192). Holden is paranoid because he is so isolated from people. He thinks that Mr. Antolini only lets him stay because Mr. Antolini is a pervert. In reality, perhaps Mr. Antolini feels lonely and views Holden as a kind of substitute son. Salinger adds topics of perversion and sexuality not to corrupt the story, but to enrich the reader’s perception of Holden’s character in Holden’s isolation from others.

↪ In addition to its topics on pedophilia and homosexuality, *The Catcher in the Rye* includes elements of violence to contrast Holden’s sincerity with the superficiality of the people around him. He gets into a physical fight with his roommate, Ward Stradlater, when he discovers that Stradlater uses Jane, a friend dear to him. Even while Stradlater holds him down, Holden continues to insult him: “I told him he thought he could give the time to anybody he felt like. I told him he didn’t even care if a girl kept all her kings in the back row or not” (44). In this case, Stradlater’s “phoniness” shows through in counterpoint to Holden’s character. Holden’s attention for minor details – such as Jane’s tendency to keep her kings in the back row of the checkerboard – demonstrates his deeper relationship with her. Also, his willingness to defend Jane shows the degree to which he cares for her. In counterpoint, Stradlater only sees her as a one-night-stand. The difference between the two boys highlights Holden’s character genuineness.

↪ Salinger includes the topic of suicide not to contribute to the “immorality” of the story, but to reveal to the audience Holden’s heightened awareness of life’s delicacy. When Phoebe asks him to tell her one thing that he enjoys, he cannot bring himself to think of anything except a former classmate, James Castle, from Elkton Hills. Instead of giving in to the demands of some bullies at school, Castle jumped out of a window. Holden recalls witnessing Castle’s body, “laying right on the stone steps and all. He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody

would even go near him. He had on this turtleneck sweater I'd lent him" (170). The fact that Castle wore Holden's sweater at the time of his death almost ties him to Castle; one would marvel that Holden was loaning him clothes one moment, and the next, Castle was dead. Holden's detailed observation of the horror of the incident demonstrates the long-lasting effect Castle's suicide has on him. It brings him to the painful realization that life is not eternal and can be extinguished instantly. Salinger uses this realization to bring out the vulnerable side of Holden's character and make him more believable.

Ultimately, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* gives its audience a more realistic view of the world than a censored text would. The author uses what some have deemed as questionable content not to make the book "immoral," but to demonstrate aspects of Holden's character and to present readers with a more authentic story. Without including these topics, Salinger would have subjected his readers to a "phony" story – perhaps a bigger offense than subjecting them to crude language, sexual content, or violent images. Holden certainly would not have approved of that. 

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