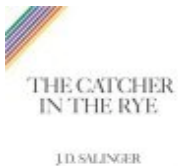


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The Etymology and Symbolism of Characters' Names

by Sarah Downey

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Catcher in the Rye's pallid cover, adorned only with seven multicolored bands in its upper-left corner, is not what one would call eye-catching. Its reverse side lacks criticisms or reviews of any sort; in fact, it is bare of anything except a copyright date. Human beings are advised not to judge books by their covers, rather that they should look further than the obvious and try to apprehend the implied meaning. The world has peered past Catcher in the Rye's cover, cracked its pure, uniform shell of cardboard and discovered the novel of a decade, a story that has now made the name "Holden Caulfield" synonymous with "cynical adolescent." Within the novel, however, there are more "books" into which we can read a bit more deeply - the characters. It seems quite obvious that their personalities correspond with the root meanings of their names. Would brilliant author J.D. Salinger pick the name "Holden" for the protagonist without reason? Analysis uncovers connections between themes and mannerisms that are far too relevant to have been coincidental. Holden Caulfield, his younger sister Phoebe, and a cast of minor characters such as Ackley, James Castle, Carl Luce, Faith Cavendish, and Sally Hayes are several characters whose names display these connections.

As the novel opens, Holden Caulfield stands poised on a hill separating him from the rest of his school at the annual football game. He is both isolated from and above the level of his peers, watching the big game from a distance. His position is a metaphor for his views on life. The phoniness of life disgusts him, and he longs to live in a world free of the tainted hypocrisy he is seeing more and more of as he grows older. He sees the game as a collection of the "phonies" he detests, and is avoiding joining them. He is "Holden" back, not allowing himself to become a part of the ugliness he sees in virtually everyone. Chains of contempt for the world act as manacles that secure his superior attitude and ensure he will not become what he hates. The name "Holden" flawlessly portrays his inability to join society because of his high ideals for it. Caulfield, his last name, relates to recurring theme of childhood innocence. A "caul" is defined as a part of the

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amion, one of the membranes enveloping the fetus, which sometimes is around the head of a child at its birth. The caul protects young children, just as Holden dreams to do when he tells Phoebe his ideal profession would be the catcher in the field of rye. Of course, the second section of his last name represents the field of rye. The few instants when Holden is genuinely happy and unaffected by his painful awakenings to the adult world deal with children, because he feels they are uncorrupted. Walking down the street in New York, Holden's rusted manacles of almost perpetual depression are unlocked when he sees a little boy singing "if a body catch a body coming through the rye." He criticizes his father, saying he wanted to appear "sharp" with the ratty hat he was wearing, and says neither parent was paying any attention to their son. He feels any adult has been demoralized, but will go to great lengths to come into any contact with a child. His perfect job, the catcher in the rye, prevents children from falling abruptly off the cliff of adulthood. He is greatly saddened by the profanity he sees on the walls of Phoebe's school because he doesn't want any children to worry about its meaning. He realizes that he cannot possibly smudge out all the profanity children are exposed to; he cannot halt their inevitable transfer into the adult world. The few characters in the novel he does not speak of negatively are those unruffled by adult phoniness- Jane, who kept her kings in the back row, "holden" back like the protagonist, the boys at the museum, Phoebe, the girl with the skate key, Allie, forever preserved a child, and the little boy singing. Holden Caulfield is held back from a society led by those whose innocence has left them as long ago as their cauls. His name illustrates more about himself than he admits.

The Catcher in the Rye had a wide array of minor characters, many of whom Holden talked to in person and others through which he merely recalled his dealings. Ackley, Holden's across the hall neighbor at Pencey, is described as:

"...one of those very, very tall, round shouldered guys - he was about 6'4- with lousy teeth. The whole time he roomed next to me, I never even once saw him brush his teeth. They always looked mossy and awful, and he damn near made you sick if you saw him in the dining room with his mouth full of mashed potatoes and peas or something. Besides that, he always had a lot of pimples. Not just on his forehead or his chin, like most guys, but all over his whole face. And not only that, he had a terrible personality. He was also sort of a nasty guy. I wasn't too crazy about him, to tell you the truth."

Holden's blunt description disgusts the reader and provides a clear, graphic account of Ackley. The name "Ackley" sounds like acne, one of Ackley's more prominent features. It also sounds similar to a reaction of disgust. When hurt, humans use "ouch" as an exclamation of their pain; when disgusted, we tend to make an "ecch" or "ack" noise. Ackley's loathsome features could evoke this type of reaction. Ackley frustrated and disgusted Holden, but even in his distaste for his roommate, Holden still concluded the novel saying that he misses him. James Castle's last name is

pertinent to his high ideals. He is in a castle, above his insincere peers. He refused to take back an insult even while being tortured by a group of boys, and committed suicide before he would apologize for his comment. James plunged out of his window to his death, or out of his castle of higher ideals. The word "castle" brings to mind great heights; kings were above their subjects both in the height of their dwelling and in their power. The character of James Castle also relates to the theme of falling throughout the story- Holden's gradual fall of health to fanaticizing falling to his death after Maurice attacks him. Holden admires Carl Luce because of his intelligence, saying he had the highest IQ of anyone at The Whooton School. He says he does not like him too much, but he was very intellectual, citing his IQ as the only reason why he was worth talking to. Carl's last name, "Luce", means "light" in Spanish. Knowledge is the light of life, ignorance the darkness. Carl's last name illustrates the quality for which Holden most respects him. Faith Cavendish's character expands on Holden's beliefs that he can appear older and more mature than his actual age. He believes he can give the impression of greater age by his gray hair, height, and incessant drinking and smoking, although he does not seem to realize that he is the only person who thinks he can pass for 21. Holden smoked a great deal of cigarettes at the Edmont and then decided to call Faith Cavendish. His smoking symbolizes his struggle to seem older. When he called, he lowered his voice to conceal his age as well. Faith's last name is defined as leaf tobacco softened, sweetened, and pressed into plugs or cakes. It is certainly not by chance that the very thing Holden does excessively to conceal his age around women is Faith's last name. Sally Hayes is a shallow socialite Holden used to date before he attended Pencey. He says he used to think she was intelligent, because she knew quite a lot about the theatre and literature, but when enough time went by he saw she was lacking in intelligence. He says "My big trouble is, I always sort of think whoever I'm necking is a pretty intelligent person. It hasn't got a goddamn thing to do with it, but I keep thinking it anyway." Even after reflecting on her stupidity, he was struck dumb by her looks. "The funny part is, I felt like marrying her the minute I saw her. I'm crazy. I didn't even like her much, and yet all of a sudden I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her. I swear to god I'm crazy. I admit it." Holden is aware of his actual feelings towards her even as he feels an intense, sudden attraction to her. Her last names, Hayes, shows the phony haze even Holden himself becomes lost in due to her looks.

Holden's love for children first shows itself in his description of his young sister, Phoebe. All of his thoughts up to those of his sister are dark and unsettling. Phoebe's description is so outrightly loving that the reader is shown an entirely new side to Holden, one that shows he is not entirely incapable of happiness. Phoebe's role as a minor character in the novel is to keep Holden anchored to reality; to prevent him from ruining his life completely and losing all hope in his future. It is because of his fear of what Phoebe would do without him that keeps Holden from moving out west. When she tries to accompany him, Holden implicitly realizes that the trip west would destroy Phoebe's innocence, and that his erratic behavior would prove harmful to her. He makes the decision to stay to comfort Phoebe and to keep her from falling

over the cliff by the rye field before her time. Phoebe is the light countering Holden's overwhelming dark depression. Her name is a species of bird known for flicking its tail and hopping about. Phoebe is skinny, "but a good skinny, a roller skate type of skinny," who is in constant motion- dancing, laughing, writing stories, talking about her friends. The word "phoebe" also means "shining" when traced to its old English roots. In mythology, Phoebe was a Titaness who became identified with Artemis as goddess of the moon. All three of the meanings relate to heavenly heights. Phoebe shines as the light in Holden's life, bringing him pure joy when nothing else possibly can. As the moon orbits the earth, Phoebe is always in Holden's thoughts, affecting his decisions for the better, subconsciously holding him back from blindly stumbling off the cliff of the rye field.

From the etymology of "luce" to "light" to Phoebe's name conveying shining, it is apparent there is much beneath the surface of J.D. Salinger's character's titles. Whether he intended for Holden's last name to signify his love for preserving innocence has been disputed, but its meaning cannot be more obvious than if it were written out for the reader. Books cannot be judged by their covers; doing so would show phony qualities Holden despises and limit the reader's understanding of what is available to them. In both reading and living, one must delve at times to see intended meaning. To achieve the greatest knowledge of The Catcher in the Rye, the reader must examine the many levels of meaning associated with the character's names.

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