

## ENGLISH: IDENTITY AND BELONGING

**Prompt: The individuals' greatest challenge is to be true to oneself despite external pressures.**

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Our identities are a construct of those around us and also the difficulties which arise from the distinct environments which we associate with. The pressures of society around individuals about the notion of conformity tend to make it difficult for one to develop into an authentic person who is true to his/her beliefs. This is explicitly evident in J.D Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye', where the protagonist, Holden Caulfield feels entrapped and frustrated by the society which surrounds him. Though the pressures of his school, peers and older mentors do often invite him to conform to what they deem to be normal, Holden continues to be critical and harsh of the world around him. It is ultimately this seclusion and need to belong that Holden endures that leads him on to his almost schizophrenic state. At the age of adolescence, Holden is confused about his place in the world and what his identity entails. Thus, Salinger depicts how challenges to conform to societal expectations can affect a human's own beliefs and their stance on life.

Pressures to conform from society and the peers around us often has a significant impact on one's own personality. Through these pressures it is a difficult task not to conform and remain truthful to your morals as the sense of belonging arises from being part of a group can be overwhelming, even to an extent where one's own judgements are clouded. The pressure which surrounds Holden is significant. The school community expects Holden to 'play according to the rules' and grow up to be a 'well rounded individual'. Similarly, Mr Antolini encourages him to be wise and take more responsibility for his own life as he may heading for a 'great fall'. However, Holden repels the prospect of what may seem normal to most of his peers like a successful career 'working in some office, making a lot of dough'. Not only does this show that he has a different view in life, but it also demonstrates that he struggles to make connection with the people around him. Despite being constantly told to 'grow up', Holden often reminisces on the innocent aspects of life as dreams of protecting children from a hidden cliff. The cliff is symbolic of the harsh realities of the adult world, which Holden fails to acknowledge. The pressures from his school prove to be significant challenges which Holden faces, however he continues to remain truthful to his own values on what he deems not to be 'phony'.

Despite the external influences that Holden faces, it is evident that Holden continues not to conform. Continuing on in his cynical and sarcastic fashion, Holden is critical of those around him, while he often personifies those very flaws. He chooses not to share his room with anyone else because of their inferior suitcases. Even though Holden is disapproving of 'phonies' it is never actually revealed what he does approve of, other than young children. His narration informs that he admires the simple aspects of life like the ducks in the lagoon and the innocence of children, thus his love for Phoebe and Allie but what he deems to be pure is never actually revealed. This also hints at the fact the Holden's narration can be unreliable and contradictory.

It is through his deep cynicism and pessimistic attitude of the society around him that leads Holden to feel secluded and ostracised from the world. He reaches out for any form of communication, evident as he talks to strangers like the taxi driver and the nuns. He feels that he belongs nowhere and almost always his attempts to communicate are rewarded with some sort of rejection, ultimately leaving him depressed and all of a sudden 'wishing (he) was dead'. Similarly, Holden is confused about his purpose in society and what he actually is meant to think of those around him. He finds it extremely difficult to seclude himself from a world which in his eyes is pretentious and full of 'phonies'.

Though most would expect that remaining true to your own beliefs and morals would despite the external influences present would have positive consequences. However, in the case of Holden, Salinger depicts his restrictive views on life and what it should entail lead him onto a path of self destruction. Holden finds himself wanting to belong to a 'tribe' and attain that universal sense of self

worth that all humans desire. This is demonstrated in the unmade phone calls, as he wants to feel some element of connection with society but he is afraid of rejection that he has faced so many times. Even when he meets his beloved sister, who represents a child's world of innocence to him, he faces some rejection as she yells 'Daddy'll kill you' which in turn makes him feel 'depressed' and that he is a failure to some extent. His strangeness and desire to belong culminates as he has a nervous breakdown. It is his stringent and unwavering morals about how 'phony' the world is and that fact that he does not take time to develop his own beliefs that cause him to be so 'depressed' and lonely.

As humans we all require some affiliation with a group which makes us feel wanted and gives a better sense of our own identity. Holden proves that he is strange and finds it difficult to connect with others, whether they are male or female. Even though the pressures to conform to what society deems to be 'normal' are great, Holden portrays that his own beliefs can be upheld. However, it is these very strict views which Holden is unwilling to change that lead him to his almost schizophrenic state, thereby showing that it is a significant challenge to remain true to oneself amidst external influences. Holden's entire journey is one which he travels, searching for someone who understands him. Upon not finding this connection, he returns home, a place where he feels some affection with his sister.