
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 328

Jerome David Salinger, **THE CATCHER IN THE RYE**

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PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

Aufgabe 5 ***

It is quite easy to see what *The Catcher in the Rye* is against. Analyze what the novel is for.

Model answer

INTERPRETATION

Holden Caulfield describes his school Pencey Prep as a world of phonies. In his escape to New York he again meets phonies and jerks and idiots all over the place. Falsity and corruption appear everywhere, be it in the movies, in Ernie's bar or in the graffiti in Phoebe's school and the Museum of Art. Holden criticizes this all the time and his lament over the phoniness of his environment forms the main part of the story. A world without phonies would be great. If he is against phonies, what does he – or the author – offer as an alternative? What is Holden for? What is the novel for?

One answer might be to check what the protagonist has to say: Holden himself tells Sally and Phoebe about his plans. He wants to live with Sally in a hut in the wilderness (p. 132) or simply move west on his own (p. 198). Traditionally this is an American ideal, be it in the form of settlers moving west or H.D. Thoreau's life in a hut at Walden Pond. It stands for opening up new frontiers, new possibilities and strive for a better and freer life. But this wish for freedom is presented by Salinger with two negative aspects: First, it is Holden's typical reaction to problems: He runs away. In the context of his other actions, moving west is completely ridiculous. Second, the last chapter makes it clear that he lives close to D.B. now, in California. It is indeed the "West", but not the "West" Holden has dreamed of. He is kept in some sort of hospital, and the freedom promised by moving west is definitely not part of the deal. Running away and moving west are not part of the message of the novel.

A more promising approach might lie in looking for the serious parts and the positive characters in the novel. Holden becomes serious only when he is thinking about death. Nearly everybody in the novel is a jerk or a phony. Only Phoebe and Mr Antolini are described in positive terms.

Phoebe's big moment comes when she rides the carousel (p. 211): Holden wants to hold her, but "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." With these lines Holden shows that he has understood that kids have to be kids, that they grow up some time and that that is the way things are. But while this might well be true, it does not offer the reader a new insight.

The other positive character is Mr Antolini, Holden's former teacher at Elkton Hills. He tries to help Holden, but Holden is too tired to listen to him (p. 186–188). Mr Antolini is worried about him, is afraid he might head for some terrible fall. To prevent this, he tries to interest Holden in the quote by Wilhelm Stekel (p. 188): "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." This plea by his former teacher gets more poignant by the fact that it was Mr Antolini who carried the corpse of James Castle away after he had committed suicide (p. 174). James Castle definitely died for a noble cause, because he did not want to take back something he had said. Mr Antolini's position in the novel is strengthened by this connection to the death topic. Directly after he quoted Stekel, Mr Antolini goes on to point out that Holden will "have to find out where [he wants] to go" (p. 188) and then really go there, that he will have to do something with his life, even if that means that he will have to apply himself in school. If Holden really wants to learn, Mr Antolini promises that he will find that "many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as" he is. "You'll learn from them – if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry." (p. 188–189)

This is the most powerful positive and serious passage of the novel. Here a positive figure explains his view of the world, offers consolation and help to a troubled young man and guides to a life worth living. If *The Catcher in the Rye* is "for" anything, then it is for learning, for reading, for a humble life without phoniness.

Sadly, however, Mr Antolini ruins his attempt by touching Holden, who runs away. While Holden has kept the quote by Stekel (p. 188) up to the present, he still is unsure whether he will attempt to apply himself (p. 213). While Mr Antolini's message becomes clear to the reader, it might be lost on Holden.

Aufgabe 6 ***

Pick two symbols in the novel and explain their meaning.

Model answer

INTERPRETATION

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the author J.D. Salinger uses some very conspicuous symbols to carry an additional layer of meaning in Holden's story. Apart from smaller issues like the cheap suitcases or the big red hunting cap he always wears when he is alone, there are two very important and interconnected symbols: The ducks in the pond in Central Park and the mummies in the Museum of Art.

Holden starts thinking about the ducks as early as the first chapter, even before he reaches New York. He begins to wonder about the ducks already in Mr Spencer's room: "I was wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away." (p. 13) He asks a cab driver on page 60 and again on page 81. The second driver, Horwitz, offers an answer: Mother Nature will find an answer for the ducks like for the fish, which stay in the lake when it freezes. The ducks bother Holden till the end of the novel, when on page 153 he sits by the lake and does not see any ducks.

Holden's thoughts can be explained by a symbolic reading of the ducks and their behavior. The ducks are an example of the caring Holden, the one who thinks about the weak and the helpless, the one who wants to help the helpless.

On the other hand it is indeed dangerous for the ducks if the lake is completely covered with ice. Naturally, ducks fly away to some water that is not frozen. A guy who takes them to a zoo, as Holden imagines on page 13, would of course be a "Catcher". But as the ducks do not need a catcher to protect them, neither do the children, thus linking the ducks to the title of the novel.

Holden is very concerned about the danger he sees the ducks in. How can they survive? Where are they in winter? How do they disappear? Disappearing, however, is another word for dying, like in the breakdown passage on Fifth Avenue (p. 197/198). Holden is afraid of death, he has seen it personally up close when Allie died (p. 38) and when James Castle committed suicide (ch. 22). His fascination with the ducks is one symbol for Holden's attempt to make sense of death.

The other symbol are the mummies, which are connected with the ducks: When Holden has to wait for Phoebe in ch. 25, he decides to go to the Museum of Art, which is very close to Phoebe's school. He does not plan to see anything special, but then two little boys come up to him and ask him to show them the way to the mummies.

Holden tries to explain to them how the Egyptians treated their dead. With this short passage, the narrative takes up an idea from the opening chapter, because the essay Holden had written for Mr Spencer was about treating the mummies. The two boys, however, are scared and leave him. Holden is alone in the tomb. "I sort of liked it, in a way. It was so nice and peaceful", he says on page 204.

The mummies are an obvious symbol for death and death seems to be one of the few things Holden is really interested in. However, Holden's reaction to them is quite surprising, given his state of mind this late in the novel. Rather than being scared or depressed, he relaxes in the tomb. And so the mummies add a new aspect to his attempts to live with his grief about Allie's death: When he is walking along Fifth Avenue (p. 197/198), Holden is struck by a sudden fear of disappearing. Obviously, he is talking about his fear of dying, but first, he does not use the word, and second, his main problem with death seems to be the fact that the dead person is no longer there. Allie is no longer with him, a fact he has not come to terms with. It is this observation that gives the mummies their symbolic meaning: Mummies stay the way they are in their preserved state. They do not disappear as real dead people – or the ducks – do, and that is the reason why Holden is so relaxed close to them.

Both, the ducks and the mummies, further illustrate Holden's feelings about death, a topic he still cannot deal with.