

Discussion Questions for *A Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

Here is a copy of the poem “Comin Thro’ the Rye” by Robert Burns, which I have modified for modern English usage:

Chorus

O, Jenny is a wet poor body,
Jenny’s seldom dry:
She draggled all her petticoat,
Coming through the rye!

Coming through the rye, poor body,
Coming through the rye,
She draggled all her petticoat,
Coming through the rye!

If a body meet a body
Coming through the rye,
If a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?

If a body meet a body
Coming through the glen,
If a body kiss a body,
Need the world ken (know)?

O, Jenny is a wet poor body,
Jenny’s seldom dry:
She draggled all her petticoat,
Coming through the rye!

1. Why does Holden Caulfield make the mistake of saying that the poem refers to a body being a catcher in the rye, instead of a body coming through the rye?
2. What does Holden mean when he says he would like to be a “catcher in the rye,” helping small children from falling off a cliff?
3. Does the poem provide insights into Holden Caulfield’s personality? If so, what are they? Does the poem provide a different take on your reading of the novel?
4. Salinger uses colloquial language in Caulfield’s language, perhaps to indicate that he is a young man. Is this an effective technique; why or why not?
5. When did you first suspect that Holden Caulfield was having a nervous breakdown? What are some specifics that you can point to which led you to believe he was troubled?
6. Why does Caulfield dislike phonies so much? How does he define a phony? What people in particular does he identify as being phony, and what traits do they have?

7. Caulfield cries at three distinct times in the novel: a). when confronted by the prostitute and her pimp for more money; b). when he went to the hat check room at the Wicker Bar in New York; c). when he met with Phoebe at his parent's home in New York. In each case, he says he is lonely and confused. Do the lines in the Burns' poem give a clue about why Holden is crying?
8. Does Holden love Jane Gallagher? Does he know he loves Jane Gallagher? Why doesn't he ever call her, although he means to on several occasions?
9. On pages 121-122 in the Bantam Books edition of the novel (chapter 16), Caulfield visits the museum and enters into a long internal dialogue about change. The passage begins "The best thing, though, in that museum . . .and ends with Anyway I kept thinking about all that while I walked." Why do you think he wants things to stay the same? Is it a reaction to his unsettled mental state? Is he reacting with nostalgia, or is it a deeper problem?
10. Does Holden love Sally? Why does he propose that they run away together, and then regret the proposal? Can Holden adequately deal with his feelings for women? Why or why not?
11. Holden visits Mr. Antolini after he leaves his parent's apartment. Mr. Antolini, who is portrayed as a heavy drinker, tells Holden that "The mark of an 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." Does this remark apply to Holden; does it apply to Mr. Antolini?
12. Earlier, Mr. Antolini tells Holden that he is headed for a fall, and that he will wake up some day hating people. Holden responds by saying that he can't hate people for a long time, and that if he forgets about them, he stops hating them. At the end of the novel, he says that he misses people he talked about in the novel, and concludes by saying, "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." Do you think Holden really hates people? Why does he miss the people he says he dislikes? Do you think Mr. Antolini is speaking as someone who is jaded or whose life has passed him by? Is Mr. Antolini a good person, as Holden believes him to be?
13. Why does Holden call his brother, D.B. a prostitute?
14. Why does Holden love his younger brother, Allie, so much? Why does he love Phoebe so much? Is it because they are younger than he is, and he feels a need to protect them, like "a catcher in the rye"?