

Symbolic Resolution in *The Catcher in the Rye*: The Cap, the Carrousel, and the American West _____

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The ending of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has, I believe, been consistently slighted or misinterpreted. The result has been a number of misreadings of the ultimate meaning of the novel. The final pages, as heavily laden with symbols as a Salinger short story, not only illuminate the previous chapters, but also suggest a hopeful resolution of Holden's crippling search for himself and his America.

The climactic final action centers on Holden Caulfield and his ten-year-old sister Phoebe. They meet to say goodbye at the museum in New York City. She has brought her suitcase and wants to join Holden in his flight to the West. He refuses to let her come along. They go to the zoo and then to the carrousel. Phoebe rides on the carrousel, and Holden, standing in the rain, suddenly feels happy. We next discover, in the postscript final chapter, that Holden afterwards had gone home, and that he is now recovering in the West.

For economy, we shall view this action as it focuses on the pervading symbol of the novel, Holden's cap, and with it two accompanying symbols, the carrousel and the American West. Holden's cap may well be the happiest symbolic device in recent American fiction. It works unobtrusively to suggest every aspect of Holden's thwarted search for external reality and private identity. Before interpreting the ending, we must briefly examine the ways in which Salinger has employed this symbolic device earlier in the novel. First are the obvious uses of the cap early in the novel. Holden wears his cap backwards, 180 degrees out of phase, as a badge of his nonconformity and his rebellion against the rest of society. He buys it originally, it will be remembered, to wear as a gesture of defiance after losing the fencing foils of his teammates on the New York subway. It represents his need for individual identity, for a sense of his private self. And his wearing it backwards suggests not only his defiant withdrawal from his teammates, but more gener-

ally, his basically recessive tendencies. He wants to retreat backward into the world he is leaving—that of childhood innocence—rather than advance into adolescence, maturity, and the world of adult American society. Again, the cap suggests his yearning for innocence because, as a reversed cap, it becomes also a baseball cap—specifically the catcher’s. Hence Holden’s misquoting the Burns poem and fancying himself the *catcher* in the rye, a companion and protector of children in their everlastingly innocent field of rye. As a catcher’s cap it carries us even more intimately into Holden’s rather disturbed psyche. The red cap ties him closely with his idealized younger brother, the red-haired Allie, who played baseball and wrote poems in green ink on his baseball glove. The possibility here is that Holden is doing more than merely trying to evade the reality of his own adolescence, or even to regain his lost brother (recall his guilty conversations with Allie when he becomes very depressed). Through the reversed baseball cap, he presumably is *identifying* himself with his dead brother Allie. Salinger drops hints which the amateur psychologist can hardly miss. He describes the traumatic shock which Holden experienced when Allie died of leukemia. Obviously despairing at the cosmic injustice of such an early death, the highly sensitive Holden punched his fist through all the windows of the Caulfield garage and broke his hand. In his continuing identification with Allie (as well as his strong preoccupation with the equally idealistic James Castle, who committed suicide at Elkton Hills school), Holden can be interpreted as seeking, in an ultimate regression, the comfort of death itself. This will be the only successful release from the agonizing complexities of a mutable and deceitful world.

The circumstances surrounding and issuing from Allie’s death then, rather than the phoniness of the prep school and American society at large, are quite clearly set forth as the important, underlying cause of Holden’s present maladjustment.¹ Had Salinger intended Holden to be the young social critic *par excellence* he would scarcely have supplied Holden with this private childhood trauma and overly charged emo-