

Analyzing *The Catcher in the Rye* from a Humanistic Psychological Stance

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published a paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation”. This paper outlined what would soon become one of the bases for all Humanistic psychology, his hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy of needs is composed of many elements and levels that we as humans must go through in our lives to reach the final stage and top of the hierarchy, self-actualization. Maslow argued a sort of existential type of psychology that focused on the individual and his search for his own meaning of life. This method of analyzing human existence became an extremely popular and widely used source for psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, poets, filmmakers, artists and even authors. You can find hint traces of humanistic and existential psychology in many pop culture icons in our everyday lives. For example, the movie most notably and obviously referencing Maslow’s ideals would be *The Shawshank Redemption*, where a man spends the entire film trying to reach self-actualization.

J. D. Salinger also integrated these ideals into the text of *The Catcher in the Rye* to create a character that is the epitome of all the theories that the Humanistic psychologists and existentialists relate to individuals and society. ***The Catcher in the Rye* as a whole parallels Humanistic psychological theories on human existence through the journey of Holden Caulfield.** Holden Caulfield embodies all of the “Five Basic Postulates of Humanistic Psychology” as described by Tom Greening in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. These postulates include:

1. Human beings, as human, supersede the sum of their parts. They cannot be reduced to components.
2. Human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology.
3. Human beings are aware and aware of being aware—i.e., they are conscious. Human consciousness always includes an awareness of oneself in the context of other people.

4. Human beings have some choice and, with that, responsibility.
5. Human beings are intentional, aim at goals, are aware that they cause future events, and seek meaning, value, and creativity. (Greening)

The five basic postulates help to create a basis for identifying humans and characters with Humanistic psychological attributes.

David Myers, in his textbook *Psychology*, 8th edition, outlined the parameters of self-actualization as “the importance of current environmental influences on our growth potential, and the importance of meeting our needs for love and acceptance” (7). Holden exhibits how his own “environmental influences” have influenced his “growth potential” through narration in the very first chapter of *The Catcher in the Rye*. He details his “lousy childhood” and Pencey, the boarding school that “kicked [him] out” for “flunking four subjects and not applying [himself] at all” to the reader (Salinger, 3-6). These “environmental influences” (home life, school life) can arguably be the factors that shaped Holden’s attitude towards people and institutions, as he expresses to the reader that he is “surrounded by phonies” and therefore decides to “quit” school (Salinger 18-19).

As described in postulate number four, Holden immediately shows the reader that he is aware of his “responsibility” to go to school and to succeed in life in a conventional sort of way, but his choices reflect a drive towards happiness and self-worth that does not depend on school or any traditional sort of means.

Holden is “intentional” in his regard to leave Pencey—relating to postulate number five that “human beings are intentional, aim at goals, are aware that they cause future events, and seek meaning, value, and creativity” (Greening). He is completely aware of “future events” that his parents will not be pleased at his “flunking” out of school. Because of this, he takes “a couple of days” to “not go home till vacation started” (Salinger 78). During these “couple of days” he

spends time in New York to find “meaning, value, and creativity” and in turn, try to reach a sense of self-actualization by finding an authentic meaning to his life and the world around him.

The journey Holden embarks on parallels not only the Five Basic Postulates of Humanistic psychology according to Tom Greening, but also Abraham Maslow’s steps in his hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy of needs begins with the largest needs, the base, the basic needs. The first thing Holden does when he gets to New York is find a place to stay and a place to drink, which is how he ends up at “this night club, The Lavender Room, in the hotel” (Salinger 87). These are his basic needs, as well as the next step of needs in the hierarchy—safety needs—being met.

Maslow described that once you have satisfied your physiological needs (food and drink) and safety needs (security, stable place to stay), you become motivated towards a need for belongingness and love (Myers 472). This social need to belong and be loved is mirrored by Holden’s need for companionship, expressed through his various encounters with females. From when he first gets to New York until the near end of the book, Holden is always looking for a date or someone to keep him company. At first, he calls a woman named “Faith Cavendish” to “have a cocktail together” and when she turns him down, he settles for dancing with some girls at The Lavender Room (Salinger 83, 93). He proceeds in the novel to end up at another hotel, where he orders a prostitute up to his room out of loneliness and depression. Not only this, but he also goes on a date with his friend, Sally, and visits his sister, Phoebe, multiple times. All of these events are clear cries for a need to fill a void of belongingness that Holden has seemingly created for his self.

All of Holden’s relationships in *The Catcher in the Rye* seem to be formed purely out of his need for a feeling of social belongingness, whereas his relationship with his sister, Phoebe, is

based on a deeper attachment. This attachment helps him fulfill his needs and avoid loneliness depression and anxiety, which Holden struggles with throughout the novel. Holden feels accepted by his sister and states that she is “somebody you always felt like talking to on the phone” (Salinger 90). Phoebe helps to fill the void of belongingness in Holden’s life, helps Holden return back to a happier state, and helps Holden to continue on his path of self-actualization.

After feeling a sense of belongingness Holden moves on to Maslow’s next step in the hierarchy of needs, esteem needs. These esteem needs include feeling a sense of personal worth and a feeling of purpose in the world. After all, Humanistic and existential psychologists both agree on the fact that esteem needs are extremely important and that “positive self-esteem has beneficial psychological and physiological aspects” which can help a person grow towards their self-actualization (Chopra).

Holden seeks out meeting these esteem needs by paying a visit to his English teacher from a previous boarding school he had attended, Mr. Antolini. Mr. Antolini sits and talks with Holden about life and where Holden is headed. He tells Holden that he is “going to have to find out where [he wants] to go. And then [he’s] got to start going there” (Salinger 245). Meaning: Holden needs to understand what he wants out of his life and he needs to understand how to go about getting to that point, the point of self-actualization. Holden takes what Mr. Antolini says to heart.

His conversations with Phoebe eventually lead to their conversation about being the catcher in the rye. Holden comes to a realization that not only leads him to master and move on from the stage of self-esteem but also allows him to reach a stage of quasi self-actualization. He explains to Phoebe that he wants to help kids by “standing on the edge of some crazy cliff...I

have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff... That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only think I'd really like to be"

(Salinger 224-225). Holden's suggestion that he would like to become this "catcher in the rye" meets Maslow's definition of self-actualization—

"It may be loosely described as the full use and exploitation of talents, capabilities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that they are capable of doing... They are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they capable."

Holden tries to imagine a life where he believes that he is exploiting all of his "talents, capabilities" and "potentialities". He believes that he is truly fulfilling himself. Since the time of *The Catcher in the Rye's* first publishing all the way up through today, Holden Caulfield is seen as a literary example of a true rebel. I am making the case to read the novel from a different perspective. Holden is not running away from everything in his life, he is running towards everything that will complete his life. He is beyond simplistic means of generalization, such that everybody is a "phony" so he does not wish to be around them. He is beyond the thinking that school is not for him, classes are not for him, and so he will just drop out and do what he wants. Holden is actually doing so much more than what the average reader may think. He embarks on this existential journey to find himself and find authenticity in his life. As the novel reaches an end, Holden has decided that he wants to become this "catcher in the rye" therefore, in Maslow's terms, reaching self-actualization. Maslow described the overarching concepts of self-actualization as this—

"It refers to the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions" (Maslow 382-383).

Holden spends the entire book going through a journey that leads him to this self-actualization that all Humanistic psychology theories are centered around. Holden has found his “meaning” in life. He wishes to “fulfill” his life by helping people by catching them in the rye. We can conclude that Holden has found his existence remains not only in a human context, but in the context of the entire universe, as related to the second of the five basic postulates of Humanistic psychology. He expresses his ideals of self-actualization and understanding of himself by “painting pictures” of himself as the catcher in the rye. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger embodies dozens of Humanistic and existential ideals and theories all within one character, Holden Caulfield. Holden’s character and the story as a whole needs to be read as more than a traditional rebel going on a journey and encountering various scenarios. It needs to be read as a beacon of psychological light that all readers should turn to when attempting to understand their own self-actualization. J. D. Salinger puts the steps of the hierarchy and the five basic postulates all within the text for the reader to interpret and understand a deeper meaning. J. D. Salinger “capture[s] something as ambiguous as identity via a literary medium” with great success (Visser).

Works Cited

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