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English 117

November 11, 2010

Holden Caulfield is God

In late 1965 graffiti with the words “Clapton is God” first began appearing around London. Painted by devoted fans who recognized the guitarist as a kindred spirit and someone who illuminated their own fears, hopes, anger, cynicism, and pain. Searing guitar riffs and soulful lyrics let them know Eric Clapton not only shared their inner lives but his creative bursts of music could offer profound understanding and acknowledgement in the midst of their confusion and misery. If I had a can of spray paint right now I would press down the small, sharply rounded button to release a liquid stream into letters spelling the words “Holden Caulfield is God.”

Some people wait for deliverance from Jesus. Other wait on Buddha, Allah, Mohammed, prophets, and priests. Waiting for that “Ah-ha moment” of deep contentment and understanding to brighten the eclipse of their soul that has slowly turned things dark and cold. As a teenager reading the “Catcher in the Rye” for the first time, meeting Holden is like getting baptized. Washed with the water of truth that runs over you like holy water, you are Born-Again. At the edge of the adult world of “phonies, liars, fakers, and sell-outs”, American youth are poised for a fall, a fall from grace, innocence, and security. Everywhere you look there is nothing to like or feel good about. You experiment with the fake and phony adult world, with its alcohol and drugs, the uneasy distraction of women, and the pursuit of impersonal sex. You reach out and no one is there. You look for someone to connect to.....no one is there. You are shipwreck in rough seas and alienated from the living and not yet dead. You don’t want to disappear like Holden sweating through each city block and begging his dead brother Allie to “Please, don’t let me disappear” (p. 198) but in fact you are and you are becoming something you hate.

 You are looking for answers and you find yourself listening to a shallow mortician, a religious zealot whose idea of the good life is waiting for people to die, a “phony bastard” whom we become acquainted with on page 17 who “tells 50 corny jokes” and shifts his big Cadillac into “first gear praying to Jesus to send him some more stiffs”. You see life is a wretched game that you must play by the rules in order to succeed. This advice Holden receives on page 8 from an ailing professor who knows how to play the game especially when the headmaster comes to observe his own classroom. Speaking of headmasters, the one at Elkin School, Mr. Haas reserved “phony smiles and handshakes” for parents who qualify for his attention. He’d be charming as hell unless you happen to have “old, funny-looking parents”. Holden tells me all this before page 15. This is the life of an American teen. You are driven nearly insane. You are headed for a breakdown. You face the great existential questions. You have something to say, but like Holden preaches on page 86 you know, “Those bastards never give your message to anybody.”

You resist the tide and wear your red hunting hat, backwards even, like a true baseball catcher. You purchase it at a time when you feel most vulnerable, when you have failed at a task that you fail to see the value of and yet you are trapped in a world where you are supposed to care about such things. You are supposed to want “to commit suicide or something if old Pencey doesn’t win the football game” on page 2 or the fencing team has to forfeit, especially if that forfeit is due to your frailties, page 3. So you wear your red hat like Christian wear their crosses, for protection and for comfort, but your hat is not what the “real” world of grown-ups wants you to wear. They want you to conform to their mind-numbing sameness and lock you in a padded cell and strip you of imagination and unadulterated joy. “Don’t be the person you want to be, be who we want you to be,” the world rails at you. Few are the dauntless defenders of the individual and those precious few can often only wear the red hunting hat of nonconformity on occasion. Most choosing to take it off when faced with ridicule. LeBron James’s summertime commercial tells it like it is. “Should I be who you want me to be?” “Should I accept my role?” “Maybe I should just disappear.” Most of us feel it. We just don’t say it. We lead lives of quiet desperation until we are too old or worn down to care that youth with its shiny joys and perfect pleasures is gone, dried up like a dusty stream in the arid desert, long forgotten. To be fettered to the false and joyless adult world is to die and disappear forever. Most of us on the brink of it feel it we just don’t let the words of acknowledgement slip free from our lips. We just swallow hard and become what they want us to be.

The greatness of Holden Caulfield is he says it and he may be nuts but how can we live in this world and not be driven insane? And if we don’t acknowledge that fact, we truly will be Holden Caulfield’s roommate at that asylum, disgruntled, alienated, and prepared to kill. Why should we not want to kill? Why shouldn’t we see jumping out of windows and the atomic bomb as real alternatives when the adult world of grown-ups is just an endless blur of mind-numbing falseness, “going to get an office job and make a lot of money like the rest of the phonies” (page 133). Where is the beauty? Where is the poetry? It is written on a baseball mitt in green ink on page 41 or on the face of a red-haired girl riding a carousel pony reaching for the brass ring (page 211). It breaks through like wayward rays of the sunlight after a drenching rain and is almost too bright to bear for those grown accustom to the clouds and rain. Its blessed and fleeting presence can reduce you to tears. Am I alone in my feelings? Am I the only one who sees the ugly hypocrisy and the uselessness of it all? Am I the only one who understands the all too often seen bumper sticker, “Life sucks and then you die?” No, no, I am not. I have to believe that. Am I the only one who can see the BS of it all and yet continues to go headfirst into growing up and becoming just like those I despise...the fakers, the liars, the phonies. Am I the freak or what? As we sit in lonely hotel rooms on our journeys headed from youth and inexperience to adulthood, who can we call? Who will pick up the phone? And will we have the courage to talk to them? Who will meet us? Who’s out there? Have they all become phonies too? Phony girls to make out with but not to love. Good looking “pains in the asses” that are so self-satisfied because a horny cadet from West Point or a pompous bastard from Harvard was “cutting his throat” over her and calling night and day. That made everything just “grand” for Sally, I’m sure you noticed, just check out page106. Are all the amazing girls like Jane Gallagher who naively and sweetly would not move those precious kings in the back row of the checkerboard just fodder for the boys who eagerly go over the cliff because they are too stupid, limited, or “crumby” to see what they are becoming? Am I alone? Am I the only one who sees it? Has everyone else gone mad or it is just me? Am I stupidly stubborn or just too thoughtful or astute not to be convinced of the “goodness of life” by the two Bible-toting nuns over coffee and toast on page 110? Who’s out there that I can connect to?

I can agree with Mr. Antolini’s assessment on page 188 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.” I get that and I agree but I can’t worship at the alter of Antolini. Do any adults, especially the ones in Holden’s life and probably my own, live humbly? I don’t have a cause I am willing to die for and I don’t have any illusions of grandiosity. I don’t want to live nobly at 15, I just want some peace, love, and understanding. How can I know it will be ok if the forces of nature cannot even sustain mere ducks in a pond over one winter? How can I survive a lifetime? Who can I connect with?

Maybe no one. Just maybe no one. But wait, Holden Caulfield is there. Among the “phony, pimply, dopey” kids in their “secret fraternity” who “lock their doors when somebody wants to come in” (page 167). Holden knows what it is like to take a bath and go to bed when you really feel like committing suicide. He knows what it feels like to want to put six shots right through the hairy belly of a yellow-bellied liar and then wipe your guilt off the handle and throw the gun down the elevator shaft (page 104). Holden knows and that feels so good. So yes, that critically insane, nasty, crazy, frustrated, disenfranchised, cigarette smoking, scotch drinking SOB from New York is my god. He offers me peace and understanding. I don’t need the moral platitudes of Mr. Antolini or the Messiah of the mortician. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I look towards Holden. I don’t need to know that everything happens for a reason or that playing life’s game will yield happiness or rewards. I don’t even need to know that everything works out or that joy does exist in life beyond our youth. I just need to know that I am not alone. Someone else knows how adults spend their lives chasing the almighty buck but in the end, “money always ends up making you blue as hell” (page 113). Holden sees the egregious falseness of the Joe-Yales of the world that tell you “Glad to’ve met you” when what they really mean is fuck you (page 87). At least some people have the courage to actually write it. And there are too many fuck you’s in the world to EVER erase them all(page 202). As a young person, you are reaching out to see if someone else is real or even sees you but people are people and “people are always ruining things for you” (page 87). At least someone is out there and someone else knows what it feels like to be unsure about all the small questions and other deeper questions. Holden tells me that someone else got my message, too, and even if he does not exist anywhere but on the pages of a book written over half a century ago, that someone, even someone imagined, tried to catch me from my fall, someone wanted to be my Savior, that catcher in the rye for me, because he shares my belly full of woe at the thought of going over that cliff and not coming out whole.