***The Catcher in the Rye***

***Notes – Chapters 1 and 2***

**Holden Caulfield: main character / protagonist.**

* **The novel is told via *flashback,* and the opening pages provide context. Holden is in some sort of treatment facility in California *(“…I got pretty run down and had to come out here and take it easy…(D.B.) is in Hollywood. That isn’t too far…”).* D.B. is his older brother.**
* **Holden relates his experiences from the previous December, when he was expelled from Pencey Prep, a prestigious private school. He was expelled due to poor academic performance, and is almost immediately critical of the institution (the school’s ad campaign – page 2; its apparent hypocrisy *“…the more expensive a school is the more crooks it has.” –* page 4; sarcastically referencing the “academic rating” of the school – page 4)**
* **Holden clearly resents his brother’s career – D.B. is a writer for films, and apparently makes a good living doing it (he isn’t a *real* prostitute. Holden speaks figuratively on page 2). The problem is that Holden believes his brother has abandoned *authenticity. “He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book…”***
* ***Holden vs. Society: a major conflict.* This is one of the main reasons for the enduring popularity of the novel. Adolescence represents an inevitable loss of innocence, as children become adults. This transition is obviously filled with challenges, such as coming to terms with hypocrisy and superficiality – two qualities that Holden (and many other young people) believe are present in the world of adulthood. He is quick to use terms such as *phony* in describing anything he doesn’t agree with or dislikes. In fact, this term is used to describe anything he deems insincere, hypocritical, inconsistent or compromised: schools, teachers, peers…He mostly uses it in describing the worlds of adults - most of whom he believes are terrible phonies. It is *ironic* that he sees himself as a “terrific liar” (16). There are many examples throughout the novel of Holden’s own behavior being inconsistent and hypocritical**
* **So many of Holden’s qualities – teen angst, feelings of superiority, rebelliousness – all mask a fear of growing up and getting older. The inevitable progression of time is at the root of so many of his problems. To live is to age. Childhood represents truth, goodness and innocence to him. Adulthood, he believes, destroys this.**
* **There are suggestions in the opening pages that there may be other issues at play here. He isn’t forthcoming initially with any background information *(“It bores me…I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography…”).* There may be indications that he is hiding something. This is an issue. Can the reader fully trust Holden as narrator?**

**Chapter 2**

***Holdens’s encounter with Mr. Spencer***

* **Holden regards Mr. Spencer with a mixture of respect, annoyance, disdain and pity. He liked the old man enough to visit prior to leaving campus, but is annoyed with the lecture Spencer tries to give him: *“I had to sit there and* listen *to that crap. It certainly was a dirty trick” (11).***
* **Spencer reads a recent assignment Holden had submitted, and asks Holden if he really understands why he failed. The assignment is obviously substandard, even though Holden had the choice to do something else. It appears as though Spencer had taken a liking to Holden, and probably realized that the boy was intelligent (he had asked Holden to drop by before break, something Holden insisted he would have done anyway). He is therefore puzzled at Holden’s lack of academic success, or even initiative.**
* **Holden fixates on what he sees as the man’s shortcomings, specifically related to his age: posture, lack of mobility, hygiene, illness…Holden even wonders what “…he was still living for” (7).**
* ***Cynicism:* “Life is a game that one plays according to the rules,” says Spencer. Note Holden’s response: “Game, my ass” (8). Holden recognizes that for *some* people (wealthy, privileged, connected) life could be a game. These people, he seems to insinuate, are either insulated or unaware. Most people don’t have the luxury of treating life as a game.**
* **Be aware of the contrasts that exist between some of Holden’s opinions and his own self assessment. While his feelings on “life is a game” may appear to be the result of insight and experience, he actually admits that he can be immature. In this way, he embodies the conflict that drives the novel.**