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Censorship in the Schools: What's Moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*?

June Edwards

A well-organized campaign is being waged in our country against literature read in public school classrooms. School districts from New York to Texas have been attacked for using such works as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, and Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*, as well as old stand-bys like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and even Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*.

Still heading the list of favorite books to be censored, however, is the classic story of a teenager's quest for maturity, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. "Obscene" is the usual cry, based on the four-letter words. "Blasphemous" claim the protestors over the boy's caustic comments about religious hypocrisy. *Catcher* has become a symbol for critics of what they perceive to be a vile, ungodly plot on the part of schools to undermine the morals of American school children.

Book selectors, of course, do not agree. They choose *Catcher* for the library or classroom on a number of important bases—literary quality, interest, readability, and relevance as well as moral worth. Protestors censor the book on only one—"immorality." When a book has been thus labeled, educators must confront the charge directly if they wish to protect their right to choose worthwhile books. English teachers are prone to defend a controversial book on the basis of literary merit rather than moral worth. That is like defending a prisoner on the basis of his achievements when he has been charged with murder. He may be an outstanding engineer, but it won't convince a jury he did not murder his wife. Likewise, though a book may have many character witnesses as to its

literary quality, unless we address the issue of morality, we will not convince critics, judges, or the public that it should remain in the classroom.

Is *The Catcher in the Rye* immoral as censors claim? It depends on how one defines immorality. Certainly if one sees it as any work that contains "dirty" words, refers to a sexual act, or questions religious dogma, no matter what the content, then *Catcher* fits the description. One does not have to read the book. Just flip a few pages and the offending words and passages can be easily spotted.

But there are other ways to define *morality*. As educators we should not bend to those who scream the loudest. We should choose a mature and responsible definition, one tested by time, and actively defend the books we select for classroom reading as moral works. There are several alternative sources readily available to us to help make this decision. First, schools in a democratic society can claim the early documents of our nation as a legitimate authority for determining society's definition of morality. The Constitution, for instance, states that "all men are created equal" If one uses "men" in its generic sense, the moral tenet is that each person has the right to be treated with equal respect and dignity. The Bill of Rights contains amendments that spell out this moral commitment in more detail. Works by the early fathers, such as Jefferson and Franklin, provide further interpretations.

Second, over the centuries, philosophers have espoused numerous ways of evaluating moral behavior. For example, Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* explains his principles of the virtuous life. In the eighteenth century, Emmanuel Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason* influenced

moral thinking with his theory of the “categorical imperative,” a universal law based upon the autonomy of the will.

Third, philosophers in recent years have developed theories about morality as a result of empirical research into human behavior. Most notable is Lawrence Kohlberg’s work on moral reasoning. Basing his studies on the work of Dewey and Piaget, Kohlberg redefined their concepts through longitudinal and cross-cultural means until he developed his six stages. The most advanced stage contains such universal, abstract principles as justice, human rights, and respect for individuals.

All the above have much in common. They are also similar to precepts found in the New Testament which the Moral Majority and other critics claim as their moral base. Why not, then, use the same document as a way to challenge their charges? One does not have to be a Christian to appreciate the moral content of Jesus’ teachings. Even agnostics and atheists accept much of it as a sensible way for people to get along well in society. The New Testament is not the only available source for moral reasoning, but it is a strong one. Since it is used by critics to attack books, it can be used by educators to defend them.

That is not to say the *Bible* should be the basis for curricular decisions in public schools. Because of our society’s commitment, in theory at least, to the separation of church and state, that would be viewed as inappropriate and illegal. The point here is that literature, carefully selected by school guidelines, is being attacked as antithetical to Christian morals. Unless we use the same source our critics use, we cannot effectively dispute their charges. The *Bible* is part of our cultural heritage, and we have every right to examine its meaning for ourselves. We need not accept interpretations given by those who wish to expunge from our schools high quality, *moral* literature.

Unto the Least of These

In simple, forceful language, Jesus taught precepts easy to understand, hard to follow. Moral living presented in the New Testament involves humans interacting with others in ways that demonstrate caring and respect for the rights and dignity of each individual. When Jesus saw a crowd ready to stone a woman caught in adultery, he said, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” He admonished the disciples to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and

imprisoned for “inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

Immorality, from the New Testament viewpoint, can be illustrated in our generation by an incident in Birmingham, Alabama, in the mid 1960s when Mayor “Bull” Connor unleashed police dogs on a group of blacks demonstrating for civil rights. In an article proposing a Christian definition of obscenity, the Reverend Howard Moody wrote in *Christianity and Crisis* that obscenity has

as its basic motivation and purpose the degradation, debasement and dehumanization of persons. The dirtiest word in the English language is not “fuck” or “shit” in the mouth of a tragic shaman, but the word “NIGGER” from the sneering lips of a Bull Connor.

In other words, it is not sexual or blasphemous words that make something immoral but acts that degrade human life.

What, then, is moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*? Let us look at some examples from the story that show the New Testament definition of morality in action. One of the most endearing qualities of the teenage protagonist is his empathy for other people, especially those whom others reject. The story opens with Holden Caulfield skipping a football game at his elite boys’ school to visit an infirm, elderly history teacher. Thanksgiving vacation is near and Holden has heard he must leave school after Christmas because of failing grades. The boy realizes “Old Spencer” will lecture him about not fulfilling his potential, and he doesn’t like seeing old men in their pajamas with “their bumpy old chests” and their legs “so white and unhairly.” But he goes anyway out of respect for a teacher who cares about his subject and his students. On the last test Holden wrote an apology to Spencer for doing poorly, “so he wouldn’t feel so bad about flunking me.” For a sixteen-year-old to worry about an elderly teacher’s feelings is moral behavior. To visit the sick man is even more so.

Other people in Holden’s life also benefit from his caring attitude. Everybody hates Ackley. Besides snoring loudly, he has “sinus trouble, pimples, lousy teeth, halitosis, crumby fingernails.” But, says Holden, “You had to feel a little sorry for the crazy sonuvabitch.” Holden is the only one who does. Though Ackley irritates him, he never turns him away. He makes snide remarks but he does not reject. He invites Ackley to go to a movie because he knows the boy has no other friends.

With Ackley, as with others, *Catcher's* hero shows a concern not common with his peers.

Holden is especially distressed at the insensitivity of his classmates. He remembers a small, quiet student who refused to apologize for calling another fellow conceited. Six dormmates descended on his room. That night, wearing a green turtle-neck sweater borrowed from Holden, he threw himself out a dorm window. Holden still winces at the image of the boy sprawled dead on the sidewalk and thinks the harassers deserved more for their actions than school expulsion.

Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother

Family unity is a moral value espoused by the New Testament and by critics of *The Catcher in the Rye*. No teenager could demonstrate more love and respect for his family than Holden Caulfield. He admires his father's abilities as a corporation lawyer, his mother's taste in clothes and decorating (typical reactions for the 50s), and his older brother's skill as a writer in Hollywood. He shows special affection for his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe: "You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life . . . if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about . . . you can take her anywhere with you."

Tragedy struck the Caulfield family a few years earlier when the third son, Allie, two years younger than Holden, died of leukemia. "You'd have liked him," says Holden ". . . he was the most intelligent member of the family. He was also the nicest." When Allie died, Holden went out to the garage and smashed all the windows with his bare hands.

Catcher's leading character is not rebelling against parental values. He is roaming the streets of New York because he wants to protect his family from the hurt he thinks his failure will bring. In the end, it is his love for Phoebe, and her love for him, that ends his escapades, keeps him in the family circle, and restores his self-respect.

Blessed are the Pure

Holden is a virgin. He tells us that right off. Despite all the thoughts typical of an adolescent, and "quite a few opportunities," he has set a limit. As he puts it,

In my *mind*, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of *very* crumbly stuff I wouldn't mind doing if the opportunity came up. . . . The thing is, though, I don't *like* the idea. It

stinks, if you analyze it. . . . Sex is something I really don't understand too hot.

When a girl tells him to stop, he says, he stops. He never wants to hurt or offend.

Holden leaves Pency a few days early and wanders around New York, afraid to go home and announce his school dismissal to his family. He gets a hotel room and in the elevator is approached by a pimp who persuades him to "have a good time." Holden is reluctant, but decides maybe it would be good experience if he ever got married. He goes to his room, brushes his teeth, and changes his shirt. When the prostitute knocks on the door, he trips over his suitcase getting to it. She isn't any older than he—a skinny little thing with a high, squeaky voice. She takes off her dress. He hangs it in the closet so it won't wrinkle. He tries to make casual conversation. When she approaches with serious intentions, he panics, tells her he has just had an operation, apologizes profusely, and pays her \$5.00 to leave. Clearly, he is not ready to lose his virginity and certainly not with a prostitute. The poignant scene dispels any belief that Holden is anything but a mixed-up adolescent with a strong sense of values.

Woe to You, Hypocrites

Like Jesus who became incensed over the behavior of the scribes and pharisees, *Catcher's* main character rails against those who behave one way in public and another in private. He claims he left his last school because of the hypocrisy of the headmaster:

He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents . . . if a boy's mother was sort of fat and corny-looking . . . then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, maybe for half an *hour* with someone else's parents.

Holden objects to the catalogue at Pency which shows a student on a horse jumping over a fence and writes of the "splendid, clear-thinking young men" the school produces. According to Holden, the school did not even own a horse, and the students are anything but splendid. He believes the school serves steak on Saturday nights so Sunday's visiting parents will think the meals are always like that. He sees the school as manufacturing a public image that belies reality—a type of hypocrisy not uncommon in educational institutions.

Religious phoniness upsets him even more. Holden considers himself an atheist, but he "likes

Jesus and all.” The disciples, however, are another matter. They were all right after Jesus died, he says, but while he was alive “they were as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting him down.” Loyalty is a very strong value for Holden. His own predicament stems from the belief that he himself is letting down his family and is thus unworthy of their love.

While still in New York, the boy invites an old girlfriend to see the Christmas program at Radio City Hall. It is supposed to be a religious theme, but Holden cannot “see anything religious or pretty, for God’s sake, about a bunch of actors carrying crucifixes all over the stage. When they finished . . . you could tell they could hardly wait to get a cigarette or something.” Religion, in his mind, should be simple, not gawdy and profit-making. If Jesus had seen all those fancy costumes, says Holden, he “probably would’ve puked.” If Jesus were wholly man as well as wholly God, he probably would’ve.

In contrast to the show-biz religion at Radio City Hall, Holden meets two nuns in the lunchroom at the train station carrying cheap suitcases. They are teachers going to a new assignment in southside Chicago. He insists on giving them a \$10.00 contribution. When he realizes they did not ask if he were Catholic, he wishes he had given them more. Their humility and gentleness epitomize for Holden what religion ought to be.

Suffer the Little Children

Jesus stated that one must become like a little child before one can enter the Kingdom of God. The innocence and simplicity of children holds an especial appeal for Holden as well. He demonstrates repeatedly his love for his sister. He empathizes with a little boy in a movie whose mother will not take him to the bathroom. He shows two young brothers how to find the mummies in the public museum. Finally, he spies a poor family going home from church. A small boy is walking in the street singing the Scottish ditty, “Comin’ Through the Rye.” Says Holden, “He had a pretty little voice, too. He was just singing for the hell of it. It made me feel better . . . not so depressed any more.”

Later Holden tells Phoebe that what he’d like to be more than anything else in the world is a

“catcher in the rye.” He pictures a large field with thousands of little kids playing and nobody big around but him. He stands at the edge of a steep cliff and catches all the kids before they fall over. “I know it’s crazy, but that’s the thing I’d really like to be.”

Toward the end of the book, Holden goes to Phoebe’s school to send her a note. He sees the words “Fuck You” scrawled on the wall and goes crazy. He thinks of how Phoebe and the other children will wonder what it means. He wants to kill whoever wrote the words, to smash his head against the stone steps. Finally, he rubs them off with his hands, afraid somebody will think *he* wrote them. The scene illustrates Holden’s main wish, to protect children from getting a “cockeyed” version of sex from “some dirty kid.” Obviously, sex for him is not an obscenity but an act of love between two people who respect each other.

In this sometimes funny, sometimes painful, novel of a teenager’s search for self-worth and values, the protagonist uses words typical of an insecure young man trying to appear grown-up. He tries out sexual ventures, only to retreat when he oversteps his moral limits. He drinks to escape the fear of hurting his family and falls into depression. None of this is painted as glamorous. None is likely to entice other teenagers to go and do likewise.

Contrary to the claims of the censors, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a moral book. Whether one takes as a basis for morality the teachings of Jesus, the documents of our democracy, Kohlberg’s levels of moral reasoning, or some other source, Holden Caulfield emerges as a confused but moral person. He befriends the friendless. He respects those who are humble, loyal, and kind. He demonstrates a strong love for his family. He abhors hypocrisy. He values sex that comes from caring for another person and rejects its sordidness. And, finally, he wants to be a responsible member of society, to guide and protect those younger than he. What greater morality can one want from a novel?

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