Holden’S Red Hunting Hat And It’S Symbolism Essay, Research Paper

Holden’s Red Hunting Hat and it’s Symbolism

Can a hat really provide a person with emotion, or for that matter, can a hat ever protect a person from their own emotions? In the book The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger the image of the main character’s red hunting hat comes up many times. Holden, the main character buys a hat while he is in New York with his school fencing team. Holden has just been kicked out of his school because for academic reasons, he decides to leave his school before the winter break starts, so he goes to New York. Steering clear from his family, except for his sister, he stays there for about three days on his own. During this time a lot happens to Holden, causing him to grow up. Holden’s hat is a metaphor for Holden’s growing up; in the beginning of the book Holden uses his hat frequently to combat as well as bring on emotion, then when he gets to New York and begins to grow up more, he uses his hat less frequently; at the end of the book Holden realizes that he doesn’t need his hat, and gives it to his sister.

Holden’s hat allows him to show and hide his emotions. Holden uses his hunting hat to speak freely and emotionally about his brother in an essay for Stradlater. After Holden gets back from being out with Brossard and Ackley he sits down to write a composition about Allie. Before he does this, he “put on [his] pajamas and bathrobe and [his] old hunting hat,” (37). Holden puts on his hunting hat so that he can write about his brother who died three years before this story takes place. Holden would not normally wear his hat to bed, so we can assume that he doesn’t wear it as a part of his pajamas. Putting it on before he writes an essay about his brother suggests that he put it on for that reason. At another time Holden uses his hat to supress his emotions. When Stradlater gets home from his date with Jane Gallagher, he and Holden get in a fight. When it is over, both Holden and Stradlater are left in physical pain. “I kept sitting there on the floor till I heard old Stradlater close the door and go down the corridor to the can, then I got up. I couldn’t find my goddam hunting hat anywhere. Finally I found it… I put it on, and turned the old peak around to the back, the way I liked it” (45). The fight that Holden has with Stradlater is about Stradlater going out on a date with Holden’s friend Jane Gallagher. Holden gets upset with Stradlater for doing that because he thinks that Stradlater will cause Jane to lose her innocence. After Holden puts his hat on he stops thinking about Jane’s innocence and about his face, a more rational, less emotional subject. At another time Holden’s hunting hat allows him to show his emotions. Holden decides to leave Pencey early, as he is leaving he is very emotional. “I was sort of crying…I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, ‘Sleep tight, ya morons!’ (52). In this passage Holden is crying because he is leaving a school that he has been kicked out of, and going back to New York to be by himself for awhile. When he puts on his hunting hat it allows him to speak freely and emotionally, saying “sleep tight ya morons,” to his classmates.

As Holden grows up more and more in New York,

he needs his hat less and less, until he doesn’t need it at all. Holden begins to talk more of taking his hat off than of putting it on. After Holden has left Pencey and is on the train back to New York he says, “I usually like riding on trains, especially at night…But this time, it was different. I just didn’t feel like it. I just sort of sat and not did anything. All I did was take off my hunting hat and put it in my pocket” (53). Holden takes off his hunting hat because he wants to just sit and not do anything, so he must feel that wearing his hat would be doing something. He takes off his hat because when he left Pencey he took charge of his life a little bit, and in turn grew up a bit. Another time that Holden speaks of taking off his hat is when he is checking into the Edmont Hotel. “I’d put on my red hunting cap when I was in the cab, just for the hell of it, but I’d took it off before I checked in. I didn’t want to look like a screwball or something” (61). Holden realizes that while his hat may have helped him in Pencey, it won’t help him in New York. After he has grown up ever so little by leaving Pencey, he continues to grow up by realizing that his hat is inappropriate in an adult situation such as checking into a hotel. After he decreases the frequency with which he wears his hat he finally stops wearing it altogether, of his own free will. When Holden is leaving Ernie’s bar he shows his hat to the hat-check girl; “I showed her my goddam hunting hat, and she liked it. She made me put it on before I went out” (153). Holden doesn’t think that he needs his hat anymore, he says that the hat-check girl “made [him] put it on,” implying that he would not have ordinarily. Holden has grown up so much in that past night that he has outgrown his hat.

In growing up Holden realizes that his hat does not have any kind of power to make change him, but that his thinking so was only a manifestation of his mind; realizing this he gives his hat to his sister, who in turn returns it to him, upon this return he discovers that the manifestation of his mind actually helped him to grow up. After Holden leaves Ernie’s bar he goes to central Peak to look for the ducks. On his hunt for these ducks he walks around, and almost falls into, their pond. After that he simply sits down on a bench to contemplate his life. “I was still shivering like a bastard, and the back of my hair, even though I had my hunting hat on, was sort of full of little hunks of ice” (154). Holden becomes worried when his hat fails to keep his hair from freezing. This is the first time that his hat has failed him, and this is when he realizes that it doesn’t have any power to make him different. After realizing that his hat doesn’t have these powers, Holden is ready to give it up. When Holden is leaving Pheobe, after sneaking into his apartment to visit with her for a little while, he tries to give her his hat. “Then I took my hunting hat out of my coat picket and gave it to her…She didn’t want to take it, but I made her” (180). After Holden realizes that his hunting hat doesn’t do what he once thought it did and gives it to his sister so that he can move on. However, this attempt is fruitless because it is soon returned to him. Holden has told Pheobe that he will not run away, and given him back his hat. Holden sits watching Pheobe ride the carousel as he sits in the rain, reflecting on his hat he says, “My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way, but I got soaked anyway” (213). Holden realizes that while his hat fails to give him protection from the weather, it did help him grow up. It did this by letting him express his emotions, and then by letting him give it up.

Holden’s hunting hat serves as a metaphor for his growing up; the more he grows up the less he uses his hat as an aide. Throughout the book it seems as though Holden uses his hat unconsciously, until the end, where he seems to divulge his knowledge of the aide of his hat. Does Holden really know how he is using his hat throughout the book, or does he merely realize at the end? The world will never know. What we do know, however, is that he progressively estranges himself from his hat, until he is independent of it.