

## ENGLISH: IDENTITY AND BELONGING

**We can't know ourselves fully without connecting with others.**

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It is impossible for us to understand ourselves without the connections and relationships to others. It is the knowledge of ourselves obtained through our connection with others and the affirmation of our identity these relationships provide that allows a self-awareness and perception that ultimately forms our own self of self, our identity. Self awareness and knowledge of ourselves is directly related to our connection with others and reflects a subjective development to social expectations, ideologies and cultural values, as individuality is a mirror of the plane of social existence. As our identity is intricately linked in regard to our relationships to others, any attempt at divorcing ourselves from specific groups will likely lead to some form of dislocation or disenfranchisement. In Salinger's narrative The Catcher in the Rye, the paramount importance of connections with others for our developing sense of who we are is reflected in the morose entrapment of Holden in a crisis of identity.

The people around us and society in general, gradually increase in influence as we grow older. It is these connections to the people around us and society that affirm our existence and feed our deep-rooted desire to belong. Without these affirmations, be it positive or negative, it is not infrequent to experience great isolation and disconnection, by-products of a lost identity. This idea certainly rings true with Holden Caulfield, as we witness his desperation to break out of his loneliness. Throughout the novel, Holden is a bundle of contradictions; he hates "phonies", yet doesn't mind "shooting the old bull" himself, he acts "quite young for [his] age", and claims to be illiterate although having read many books. Holden's contradictory nature reflects an internal struggle with his understanding of himself, as he is confused with his place in society and becomes disengaged and bitter towards the world around him "you got to hate everybody in the world". Holden's identity crisis only serves to exemplify and magnify the importance of connections to those around us. Even at the height of his cynicism towards the adult world after being plugged by Maurice, Holden craves Sally's company, whom he calls the "queen of phonies". Furthermore, his attempt to convince a shallow socialite such as Sally to run into the wilderness highlights his irrationality and confused sense of self. Here, Holden's hostility towards phoniness and the complexities of the adult world become subordinate to his primal need to connect with others. Holden's younger sister Phoebe, his memories of the museum and his childhood friend Jane all represent a window and link to the past where Holden can feel a sense of familiarity and belonging. They all provide him with a view of himself and the world that makes sense and act as his anchor amidst the cyclone of isolation he finds himself engulfed by. It is only connections like these that can bring joy to Holden, as the thought of Phoebe frequently makes him "so damn happy". So we come realise connections with others affirm our existence, and it is through connections that individuals can find their place in society. Without these relationships, our understanding of who we are is clouded with isolation and loneliness.

Relationships become essential to our own emotional and conscious identity. We often know ourselves most fully through the intimate connections we achieve in life. The loss of these intimate relationships frequently disconnects our identity and leaves us emotionally devastated and isolated. Dawe explores this loss in his depressive and tragic poem "Widower", where the main character is confined to a miserable existence, lamenting the destruction of his own "world" that is the person he grounded his life upon. Dawe's use of the metaphor "the silver web of glass", immediately draws the reader into the fragile emotions of this widower, as his sense of self is barely functioning, feeling "so unlike himself, so much machine". The loss of identity of this man is reflected in his loss of purpose in life; with all his sense of who he is relative to his wife, without her everything for him seemed of "little consequence". Here, the importance connections with loved ones hold is shown to be irreplaceable. As for the widower, he has lost all sense of stability and his isolation is made evident in that even his bed fails to offer him familiarity, as he feels out of place in it "too narrow and too small". J.D Salinger's Holden Caulfield shares the widower's sentiments at Allie's tragic death. For Holden, the early loss of his younger brother Allie is shown to be deeply emblazed in his memory "He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946." Holden's close

relationship with his brother Allie exemplifies the suffering felt from the loss of a loved one. When Stradlater rejects the imaginative piece based on Allie's baseball mitt, Holden's pain and anger is made stridently aware to the reader, as he admits himself he "was practically yelling". The baseball mitt effectively becomes for Holden a tangible reminder of his brother Allie, thus Stradlater's dismissal of the piece which Holden "sort of felt like writing" is felt as an emotional and personal attack on Holden's sense of self. Holden's memories of Allie keep him from "disappearing", as his identity and understanding of his self is centred on these memories. Herein we realise the intimacy we achieve in our relationships, rather paradoxically heightens our pain when these relationships suffer. Thus, our close connections and relationships with others is inextricably linked to our understanding of ourselves.

Central to an understanding of one's self and their personal identity is our relationship with our family. Family relationships are crucial, as they provide a firm cornerstone during our formative years, as well as a springboard from which we can confidently spread our wings. The contemporary issue of the Stolen Generation, where Aboriginal children were forcibly relocated with White Australian families, illustrates that families no doubt play a key role in the developing of one's personal identity. Many Aboriginal children when later interviewed felt that a separation from their parents made it virtually impossible to develop a strong understanding of one's self, which they felt required an extensive cultural understanding that only a family context could provide. When questioned about their culture and values, many strongly believed that they belonged to the land (a culture heavily derived from the Indigenous population), showing the important influence that a family culture and relationships instils upon one's identity. With only echoes of their family traditions and values however, many admitted that an inability to grasp the nuance and subtleties of their culture meant that their self-awareness and knowledge was compromised and to a certain extent lost. In the article, "The Homeland's Ancient Ties" that appeared in "The Age" on the 27th September 2008, Multhara Mununggurr talks of the importance that an emotional and spiritual connection with the land holds for many Aboriginal, as she says "This is our home, our life. It's where we sing the songs of the sea and the soil and the tress ... it's where our culture is connected to the land." Similarly, an inability to receive the necessary unconditional love and support from one's family can be detrimental to one's understanding of themselves and society. Throughout The Catcher in the Rye, there is no doubt that Holden has been unable to overcome the grief and guilt that Allie's death haunts him with, "It drives me crazy if somebody gets killed ... and it's somebody else's fault", neither do we see signs of active help from his parents. The fact that Holden's family is in New York, whilst Holden is in some form of mental institution in Hollywood, California, is a testament to how far his parents are from understanding the sufferings of their son. Sigmund Freud understood the poignancy of family relationships and declared that he "cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection." Thus, in Holden's case, the fact that his father is frequently absent in his life, coupled with Holden's repressed emotions and need for empathy over the death of Allie, has ultimately left Holden in a present identity crisis. As a result, an intelligent boy is shown to be disenfranchised and unable to connect with the world around him – "I felt so lonesome, all of a sudden. I almost wished I was dead." The tragedy lies in that Holden's need for family connection is unquestionable, as he subconsciously wants to return to where he can no doubt be accepted and belong "so damn absent-minded, I gave the driver my regular address". Therefore, when an individual is failed by their family, the outcome is often the most harmful and destructive to one's awareness of themselves.

Hard-wired to interact with others, relationships become an integral part for human beings in terms of building a solid sense of who we are and what we value. Connections with others consolidate our understanding of our place in society, and provide the necessary emotional security, support and familiarity for our developing self-perception. Ultimately, we are just one of the leaves on the tree of humanity, we cannot live without relationships to others, without the tree.