The Significance of Jane in *The Catcher in the Rye*

Many people have fears regarding the act of growing up. **For a small group of people,** during their teenage years, these fears of innocence lost can be crippling, constantly affecting actions and moods. They are reluctant to give up the innocence of the past and accept the cold, hard reality of the adult world. Holden Caulfield is one of these people. J.D. Salinger’s novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, follows Holden’s actions over three days throughout New York City as he attempts to protect innocence everywhere, especially his own. One example of an innocent figure whom Holden strives to protect is Jane Gallagher. Holden became acquainted with Jane two summers before the novel begins and is someone with whom Holden almost had a romantic relationship. Jane started off as a young, innocent, character, associated with Holden’s childhood. She then becomes an important figure in Holden’s crusade against the destruction of innocence. Salinger shows that Jane is more important as a fantasy figure than a
real-life companion to Holden, explaining why the reader never meets her. He does this in three ways: first, by highlighting Holden’s dependence on his shared experience with Jane; next, by utilizing the character Sally and Holden’s actions regarding her; and finally, by having Holden think about Jane in an unrealistic way.

One way that Salinger explains why the reader never meets Jane and demonstrates how she is more important as a fantasy figure to Holden is by highlighting his dependence on their shared childhood innocence. Throughout the novel, Holden continuously makes references to his childhood with Jane in order to convince himself that Jane is still equally as innocent as she was during their childhood. As soon as he learns of Jane’s upcoming date with Stradelator, Holden thinks of how he first met Jane, and of her big, protective Doberman. Salinger’s choice of a Doberman for Jane’s dog suggests that Holden appreciates the dog because it makes Jane only slightly more protected. When Holden thinks again of Jane’s date with Stradelator in the hotel lobby, he quickly reverts to thinking about her in the past, as he liked her, in order to protect himself, and his sacred idea of the ideal Jane. Another recurring example that shows Holden’s dependence on Jane is the way she played checkers. Jane liked to play without using her kings in the conflict of the game. “She’d get them all lined up in the back row. Then she’d never use them”(32). Holden appreciates the way that Jane protects things that are valuable to her and this appreciation transforms Jane’s protection of her checkers pieces into his personal example of innocence. Holden also uses childish aspects of young Jane to remind himself of the innocent qualities of his past. He gives examples of them watching movies and playing various sports as friends, in order to convince himself that Jane will always be Jane. A final example is when he talks about Jane being muckle--mouthed. “I mean when she was talking and she got excited about something, her mouth sort of went in about fifty directions, her lips and all. That killed
me”(77). Holden likes to remember this image of her because he thinks that it is a deterrent from Jane dating frequently, a prospect that he despises because he feels that it results in a loss of her highly valued innocence. Holden views Jane as the symbol of innocence, their shared, innocent past the cause of this view (Absolute phrase). If Jane were to have grown up since their last meeting, she would no longer be of any use to Holden as his ideal of innocence. Salinger shows that Jane is more important as a fantasy figure because Holden’s desire to see her in the present is vastly outweighed by his desire to continue to believe that she is as innocent as she was during their childhood, an thus he decides against calling Jane.

A second idea that Salinger uses to convey Jane’s importance to Holden as a fantasy figure, and explain why the reader never meets Jane, is the character Sally Hayes. Sally is a girl that Holden used to date, and is someone that Holden associate with innocence because he did not share any of his childhood with her. By highlighting the contrasts between Holden’s actions regarding these two women, Salinger proves that Jane is more important as an idea to Holden than Holden’s current companion. Sally has a personality that Holden does not appreciate, but he is still attracted to her solely because of her looks. Jane, on the other hand, is not described as attractive, yet Holden greatly values his time with her because of her intellectuality and innocence. However; when given the opportunity to call either of them, Holden calls Sally due to his persistent fear of Jane’s possible loss of innocence. “I thought of giving old Jane a buzz, to see if she was home yet and all, but I wasn’t in the mood. // What I did do, I gave old Sally Hayes a buzz”(105). This conscious choice to call Sally instead of Jane shows that Holden is much more worried about meeting Jane again then he is about seeing Sally. This fear of interacting with Jane in the present explains the role that Jane plays in Holden’s mind, and consequently why the reader never meets Jane. Salinger contrasts Sally and Jane further when
Holden talks fondly of his memories of he and Jane participating in several activities; then, later on, he speaks rudely to Sally and his true feelings about her are revealed. “You [Sally] give me a royal pain in the ass, if you want to know the truth”(133). As soon as these words come out of Holden’s mouth, the reader realizes the vast difference between Jane and Sally and explains why Holden feels compelled to protect Jane’s innocence, but not Sally’s. By utilizing the character Sally as a contrasting figure to Jane, Salinger is able to give the reader a clear picture of Jane’s importance as a fantasy figure to Holden, and his reasons for never contacting Jane throughout the novel.

One final way that Salinger demonstrates that Jane is more important to Holden as a fantasy figure, while explaining why the reader never meets Jane, is his creation of scenes in which Holden thinks of Jane in an unrealistic manner. One example is when Holden becomes extremely agitated when Jane goes on a date with Stradlater. He thinks that it is not acceptable for a seventeen-year-old girl to go out on a date. This prospect of an old friend, who is now seventeen, going on a date continues to bother Holden throughout the novel. “I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy”(34). This idealistic thinking about Jane proves that Jane is more important to him as a fantasy figure, and thus Holden is afraid to meet her in the time frame of the novel. Holden also attempts to seriously injure Stradlater after Stradlater comes back from his date with Jane and refuses to tell Holden if he “gave Jane the time” or not. This is important to Holden because to him Stradlater having sex with Jane would mean a loss of innocence for Jane. Holden can not accept this sexually active version of Jane while still keeping his idea of an innocent playmate, so he refuses to accept the new one. Another example of Holden thinking unrealistically about Jane is when he lies to himself about Jane throughout the novel. Holden lies to himself about
Jane in two ways: he constantly tells himself that he will either call Jane or go to see her, and he frequently tells himself that he is sure that Stradlater did not have sexual intercourse with Jane. In the beginning of the novel, as Stradlater is about to go on a date with Jane, Holden tells Stradlater, twice, that he will go down and say “hello” to Jane. However, Holden simply delays meeting her until she is gone. Then later before he is about to go west he thinks about calling Jane but decides against it using a ridiculous excuse. “I thought I might stop in a phone booth and give old Jane Gallagher a buzz before I started bumming my way west, but I wasn’t in the mood”(202). This refusal to accept reality and realize that he no longer has the courage, or the ‘mood’, to talk to Jane shows how Holden thinks about Jane in an outdated way in order to preserve her legacy of innocence. Holden again attempts, unsuccessfully, to convince himself that Stradlater did not have sexual intercourse with Jane. “I was pretty sure old Stradlater hadn’t given her the time -- I know old Jane like a book”(76). Holden is evidently not sure of this because he tells himself the same thing only four pages later, which means that he is insecure and worried that she has grown up. The final, and perhaps most important, example of Holden thinking about Jane in an idealistic way is the scene he imagined after he is robbed by the pimp, Maurice. “Then I’d crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. I pictured her holding a cigarette for me to smoke while I was bleeding and all”(104). This shows Holden reaching a peak of insanity and beginning to realize Jane’s fanatical importance to him. By having Holden think about Jane idealistically throughout the novel, Salinger demonstrates that Jane is more important to Holden as a fantasy figure and consequently explains why the reader never meets Jane.

Using three important examples, Salinger shows that Jane is more important as a fantasy figure than a real-life companion, which is why Jane never appears in the novel. First, he
highlights Holden’s dependence on his shared experience with Jane; then, he utilizes the differences between Jane and the character Sally and Holden’s attitude towards both of them; finally, he has Holden think about Jane in an unrealistic way. To Holden, Jane is the only connection between innocence and his troublesome past, a teenage girl representing the ideals of childhood (Appositive phrase). If Holden were to lose this connection to innocence, he would lose his sanity, and this is why it is so important to him to preserve his ideal image of Jane. This is important because when Holden finally gives up his pursuit of the protection of innocence, his life seems to improve. Today, society can learn from this by acknowledging that some level of inner peace can be gained by letting go, moving on, or confronting the facts. By understanding Holden’s realization that everything can not be protected, anyone can let a past fantasy in their lives go, and accept the present, in order to achieve a higher level of calmness and ultimately happiness.