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

In JD Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, a teenage boy, struggles with the idea of maturity and growing up. The novel presents Holden’s journey to find what he should do with his life after being kicked out of school. Being both lost and confused, Holden encounters many moments where he doesn’t know where to go or what to do next. To help him make the right decision Holden considers the ducks of Central Park. These ducks are an important symbol used throughout the book to describe Holden’s journey toward maturity. Throughout the novel, Holden ponders whether the ducks are taken away to a zoo to be cared for when the pond in Central Park freezes over or if they are left to fly away and fend for themselves. Holden revisits the question of the ducks when he doesn’t know if he should return to his parents or learn to live on his own. Each time the ducks appear in the novel, Holden’s maturity has augmented a bit more and the ducks symbolize his process of learning how to deal with his fear of
becoming an adult. The four separate moments where Holden considers the ducks of Central Park- Mr. Spencer’s home, the two taxis rides, and when he goes to Central Park- reveal the very specific stages of Holden’s growth in the novel. Each step of the way, the ducks guide Holden toward his ultimate goal: maturity.

The first time Holden considers the ducks is when he is at Mr. Spencer’s home. He seeks guidance and help from Mr. Spencer after flunking out of yet another school, Pencey Prep. Holden is afraid to tell his parents that he flunked out of school. Not having a school to stay at or a place to go, he is lost and hopes to get assistance from Mr. Spencer. Mr. Spencer starts bombarding him with questions and forces Holden to think about the reason that he flunked Holden in his history class. Mr. Spencer asks, “What would you have done in my place?” (12). Mr. Spencer asks Holden if he deserved the F that he gave him. Holden isn’t ready to admit that there is something wrong with him and doesn’t want to discuss the reasons that he chooses to not try in school. He had gone to see Mr. Spencer to say good-bye because he liked him. Even though Holden knew that Mr. Spencer was going to confront his behavior, when he starts asking him about it Holden realizes that he is not ready to have a serious conversation about his life. Holden “shot the bull” (13) for a while but his mind quickly wonders to the ducks. “The funny thing is, though, I was sort of thinking of something else while I shot the bull… I was wondering if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something, or if they just flew away” (13). At this point, Holden does not know what he is going to do or where he is going to go. The ducks become a metaphor for what could happen to Holden- will he be taken care of like in a zoo or will he be alone and on his own to fly away? Holden looks to the ducks to tell him what will happen next. He wonders whether
or not he will be fine and cared for, or alone and helpless. At this point, Holden is not mature enough to admit that he is afraid to leave Pencey Prep with an undetermined future. When Mr. Spencer asks if Holden has concerns for his future, instead of saying yes and asking for help he responds, “not too much, I guess” (14). Holden is so confused and immature that he is not able to admit he needs assistance. On top of flunking out of school, Holden cannot even bring himself to notice how immature he is. He would rather go off into the unknown than confront his future.

As Holden gets a cab to go to a hotel, he thinks about the ducks again, reminding the reader of their significance. Holden decides to stay in New York City until winter break, instead of going home and confronting his parents. He decides to stay in a hotel. At this point, Holden does not know what to do alone in the city. He considers calling a friend but doesn’t know whom to call. He decides to get in a cab because he doesn’t know what to do. This is when he looks to the ducks again for guidance. When entering the cab, he instinctively instructs the driver to take him to his house by mistake. “I’m so damn absent-minded, I gave the driver my regular address, just out of habit and all” (60). By giving the driver his home address, Holden is showing that he should go home to his parents but he is not ready to face them. Because he is immature, Holden believes he can live in the city alone, and refuses to admit that he still needs the protection of his parents. Holden still yearns for the guidance of an older influence, because he is still not mature enough to deal with life. A lost and confused boy, Holden resorts to the question of the ducks. He asks the cab driver what they do in the winter even though he “realized it was only one chance in a million” (60) that the driver would have the answer. Although Holden knows it is an inane question, and he will not find his answer
in the cab, he still asks in hope of discovering whether the ducks are taken to a zoo or left to fly away. The question of the ducks is really Holden wondering if he will be taken care of or if he will learn to fly away and become mature. He searches desperately for the maturity that he should possess everywhere he goes, including this cab. Holden shows that he wants to grow up to make mature decisions, troubling himself to such a large extent and showing that he cares. Even though he goes about finding maturity by looking within others instead of himself, he is still trying to grow up showing he has changed a bit since flunking out of Pencey. Even though he needs his family, Holden decides against going home and goes to a hotel instead. At this point, he still cannot admit that he should go home and even when the cab was driving toward the safety of his house he instructed the driver to turn around. Not possessing the ability to make good decisions proves his immaturity. At this point in the novel, Holden, although still immature, knows he needs to grow up and starts to make an effort towards good decisions. He isn’t ready to “fly away” yet but he does not need the “zoo” either.

The next cab ride, Holden wonders about the ducks for the third time. Out in the city alone, he is still lost and confused. He doesn’t know what to do so he spends money and drinks a lot. Holden is heading to a club called Ernie’s to get a drink. It was a club that his older brother DB used to go to and Holden had a family connection to the place. This time, the cab driver, Horwitz, listens to Holden and tries to answer his question. When Holden asks Horwitz, where the ducks go, Horwitz responds by telling him about the fish in the Central Park pond. He says to Holden, “If you was a fish, Mother Nature’d take care of you, wouldn’t she?” (83). All the while, Holden just wants to hear about the ducks. “The fish-that’s different. The fish are different. I’m talking
about the *ducks*” (82). The fish symbolize everyone else but Holden is not a fish. All the other boys at Pencey Prep are taken care of by Mother Nature but Holden is different. He does not care about the fish because he is a duck. The ducks do not stay in the pond all winter; they have to leave, just like Holden had to leave Pencey. Not knowing where to go, he wants to hear about the ducks, not the fish to understand better what he should do. So, yet again, his question is not answered. His determination to find where the ducks go corresponds with his need to find maturity. He continues to hope that he will find an answer to his question, therefore finding a solution to his own situation. Despite the fact that nobody knows about the ducks, he continues to search for his answer, showing that he has started to grow. Feeling defeated and still not knowing what to do, Holden continues to drink and be a *spendthrift*. Even though Holden wants to go home, he will not admit that he needs the help of his parents. These childish actions show that he is not yet ready to make the mature decision to go home. He has not found the way to maturity but continues to take small steps to figure out what to do as well as the right choices for him.

Finally, Holden goes to Central Park to see for himself if the ducks are there. Again, feeling lost, he resorts to the ducks for an answer. Its very dark out and he “had the most terrific trouble finding that lagoon at night” (154). Holden goes to learn about the ducks by himself this time. He isn’t asking other people where the ducks go or finding the answer within others, he is finding it alone. This shows that Holden is ready to face the answer to his question directly, without looking to others for the solution. He is ready to grow up. Already understanding that he needs to mature, he now recognizes that he must depend upon himself to find the ability to grow up. By going to Central
Park specifically, he is really ready to face his question with nothing standing between him and the adult he wants to become. As he reaches the lake, Holden walks around the entire pond looking for ducks. When he doesn’t see one duck, he suspects that they are resting in the grass so he looks harder. Holden “damn near fell in once, in fact” (154). He is so determined to locate the ducks and will search until he finds an answer to his question. This determination to spot the ducks is the first thing that he has really strived for. From the beginning, when he couldn’t even stay in school he has changed dramatically. This adamant attitude helps him to change for the better and find the maturity within himself. At this point Holden is ready to make his own choices and can detect the difference between good ideas and bad ideas. Although he never finds the ducks, he finds his answer. Following his visit to Central Park, Holden goes home. He learns that he needs an adult influence and that trying to live on his own is not something he is ready for. At this moment, Holden found the maturity and sense to go home at last.

Throughout the novel, Holden’s journey to find where the ducks go in winter lead him to maturity. Each step of the way, the ducks help to uncover small pieces that lead to Holden’s growing up. A crucial symbol used throughout the novel, the ducks show Holden’s journey and transition to adulthood.