Allie’s death affects Holden in every part of his life. It is a ghost lurking behind every aspect of his behaviour, especially his relationship with his family, his attitude towards his younger sister Phoebe, and the depression that pervades his life. When Holden is kicked out of his school, rather than calling home or reaching out to his family, he avoids them, even though he knows he has a loving home to go to. He describes himself as “depressed” (p. 51) when he sees the new ice skates his mother bought him, and thinks, “Almost every time someone gives me a present, it ends up making me sad” (p. 51). This shows Holden’s refusal to connect, and his inability to feel gratitude, which might stem back to Allie’s death – his parents and family remind him of his brother, who he lost, and even acts of kindness make him sad. This moves even more into focus when Holden introduces his younger sister Phoebe, who is 10, one year younger than Allie was when he died. Holden idolizes Phoebe. “You never saw a kid so pretty and smart in your whole life,” (p. 67), he says about her. To Holden, Phoebe is perfect as she is now – unspoiled by adulthood, and not lost, like Allie was. Late in the novel, he fantasizes about becoming who he calls The Catcher in the Rye, a person who saves little children who are about to fall. Because Holden wasn’t able to save Allie, he is obsessed with “saving” Phoebe, even though he knows he can’t. This sense of bleakness and hopelessness appears across the entire novel. Holden’s scenes with Phoebe are the only ones where he seems to feel pleasure or connection. Otherwise, he sees himself as surrounded by phonies. He sees the worst in everyone, from Mr. Spencer to Mr. Antolini, and doesn’t reach out and connect with people who might care for him, like Jane and his parents. He does whatever he wants – goes to shows, to clubs, hires a prostitute – and doesn’t enjoy any of it. The Catcher in the Rye shows us how devastating a loss of a sibling can be, and how it can grow, if a person never engages with their grief and processes it.

Pencey Prep was not the right place for Holden Caufield. Instead of being at a cold, disconnected boarding school, Holden needed to be closer to his family, away from the cruelty of other boys, and in a place where he could find an education that challenged and engaged him. Clearly, the Caufield family, especially Holden, was shaken by Allie’s death. He “slept in the garage the night [Allie] died, and [he] broke all the goddam windows with [his] fist” (p. 39). Holden needs to constructively process his grief, and he needs to do it together with his family, and his younger sister Phoebe, the only person in the novel he has unreserved affection for. When he is articulating why he failed out of Pencey Prep to Phoebe, Holden flashes back to a trauma he endured at an earlier school, Elkton Hills. There, he saw his classmate James Castle fall to his death after being assaulted by other boys in his class. Holden clearly feels that he is as vulnerable as James Castle was – James was even wearing his sweater at the time of his death. The environment at these schools are ones of hierarchy, competition, and toxicity, and Holden cannot thrive there. He was unable to thrive so much that he failed out of most of his classes – which shows he wasn’t receiving an education. Later in the book, Mr Antolini speaks to Holden about the value of education, and tells him that “educated and scholarly men…tend to leave indefinitely more valuable records behind them than men do who are merely brilliant and creative” (p. 189). He advises Holden that “[education will] begin to give you an idea what size mind you have” (p. 190). Despite the best efforts of teachers like Mr. Spencer, Holden was so alone and disconnected at Pencey that he was in no place to receive a valuable education – he needed to seek it out elsewhere. The Catcher in the Rye suggests that for sensitive, vulnerable people, the remote and competitive environments of prestigious boarding schools do more harm than good.