“Comin’ thro the Rye” Activity

Analyze the title of *The Catcher in the Rye* through reading the lyrics of “Comin’ thro the Rye” by Robert Burns. This will give you an added explanation of Holden’s ideals, in particular the fact that his life philosophy is based on a misread poem. It will also expose you to another genre and literature from a different time period and literary style to help hone reading skills and presentational skills through discussion.

Before reading and listening to the poem as a song, answer the following questions:

1. Whom does Holden go see in the middle of the night? What do they talk about? What question does Holden have a hard time answering? What is his answer finally?

2. What is Holden’s relationship like with his sister? What about his father?

3. How did Holden feel about the gift that Phoebe gave him?

4. What is Phyllis Marquies teaching Phoebe?

Then read together the poem “Comin’ thro the Rye” by Robert Burns. Click on the video on the website and listen to the song.

*Comin’ Thro’ the Rye*, is the song/poem which is referenced in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. In the novel, Holden Caulfield heard a child singing “If a body catch a body coming through the Rye.” The child had a pretty little voice, and it made Holden feel better and not so depressed. In fact, the song translates as ‘If a body meet a body’ but Holden did not know that at the time. Later when Phoebe, his little sister, asked him what he would like to be, he answered that he wanted to be the Catcher in the Rye.

- http://ncowie.wordpress.com
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Burns Original</th>
<th>Standard English Translation</th>
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| *Comin' Thro' The Rye.*  
Chorus.  
O Jenny's a' weet, poor body,  
Jenny's seldom dry:  
She draigl't a' her petticoatie,  
Comin thro' the rye!  
1.  
Comin thro' the rye, poor body,  
Comin thro' the rye,  
She draigl't a' her petticoatie,  
Comin thro' the rye!  
2.  
Gin a body meet a body  
Comin thro' the rye,  
Gin a body kiss a body,  
Need a body cry?  
3.  
Gin a body meet a body  
Comin thro' the glen,  
Gin a body kiss a body,  
Need the wairld ken?  
4.  
Gin a body meet a body  
Comin thro' the grain,  
Gin a body kiss a body,  
The thing's a body's ain.  | *Coming Through The Rye.*  
Chorus.  
O Jenny is all wet, poor body,  
Jenny is seldom dry:  
She draggled all her petticoats,  
Coming through the rye!  
1.  
Coming through the rye, poor body,  
Coming through the rye,  
She draggled all her petticoats,  
Coming through the rye!  
2.  
Should a body meet a body  
Coming through the rye,  
Should a body kiss a body,  
Need a body cry?  
3.  
Should a body meet a body  
Coming through the glen,  
Should a body kiss a body,  
Need the wairld know?  
4.  
Should a body meet a body  
Coming through the grain,  
Should a body kiss a body,  
The thing is a body's own. |

Notes:
- *draigl't a' her petticoatie:* draggled (wet by trailing on the ground) all her petticoats
- *meet:* Burns chose this word deliberately to refer to an encounter between two lovers.

Questions!

5. Holden mistakes the word “meet” for the word “catch” in this song. What is ironic about his understanding of the song?

6. Why is ironic that Holden heard a child singing this song?
Discuss your interpretations as you begin answering the following questions:

7. Why does Salinger throw in the belching lessons at the end of Holden and Phoebe’s conversation? How is this reflected in Holden’s interpretation of the poem?

8. “If a body meet a body…if a body kiss a body”—What does Burns mean when he says meet? Why is it important that the world not know—what does Burns suggest about the nature of love?

9. In your opinion, how does secrecy affect a relationship? Does it help or hinder growth?

10. What does Holden think the poem says?

11. In his interpretation, what is happening in the rye fields? Where is he in relation to what’s going on? What purpose does he serve?

12. How does the word change affect the meaning?

13. What does Holden’s interpretation suggest about his personality and life goals? Also, what does it suggest about his behavior in school?

14. Has anything in your life (event or something you’ve read, seen, or heard) had a profound impact on your personality? How so?