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EN40SL

December 6, 2018

The Deception of Adulthood and the Clarity of Childhood in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*

In an age where appearance is often the scale of one's value, the individual is forced to become something society deems greater than themselves. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* thoroughly explores the emphasis society places on appearance, particularly in adolescents. Holden Caulfield, an adolescent, seems to be no exception to this trend, however he often assumes the front someone is putting up is false or phony. He recognizes the masks that others use to impress or endear and this deception frustrates Holden, the world around him is completely false. Heather Brewer once said, "The world is full of monsters with friendly faces" indicating how the world isn't always as one perceives it. The only people Holden can consistently rely on to be true are children, innocent, still free of the influence growing up has on one's identity. In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden prescribes the term phony to nearly everyone he meets, <sup>no contractions</sup> because they all wear masks, unlike children who are straightforward.

One group that Holden finds particularly phony is entertainers. This is somewhat ironic, since the job of entertainers is to provide an interesting performance through acting or creating a soundscape. Holden, however, is less focused on the story they tell, <sup>typically no comma before "because"</sup> than their demeanor and how the performer is delivering it. When he goes to see Hamlet with his siblings, he thinks Sir Laurence Olivier is phony "They never act like people..and if an actor's really good you can

always tell he *knows* he's good, and that spoils it" (Salinger 117). To Holden, actors are superficial and over-exaggerate their roles. Since Hamlet is going through the loss of a loved one and depression, his character should be one Holden can relate to. This is not the case with Sir Laurence Olivier's rendition, however, because he was more "a goddam general" (Salinger 117) than a troubled son, there was not enough depth to the performance. Similar to actors, Holden also perceives musicians as phony throughout the novel. In chapter 12, he goes to a bar for a drink, and the bar's owner, Ernie, is playing piano with a little too much style "He was putting all these dumb show-offy ripples in the high notes" (Salinger 84). Holden is bothered by the performance because it is too flashy, demands recognition. Furthermore, Ernie has installed a mirror on the piano so the audience can see his face as he plays. This, coupled with his flashy playing, suggests Ernie is not only seeking attention but is also rather vain. It is completely understandable why Holden would label him a phony after such a performance. School officials, however, put on just as much of a show as Ernie from Holden's perspective. ✓

interesting point!

The reputation of a school, same as an individual, relies heavily on the image it conveys. The administrations of the various schools Holden has attended are littered with phonies, all trying to endear themselves, and by extension, their institutions to parents. For example, Mr. Haas, the headmaster of Elkton Hills "went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents." (Salinger 14). This behaviour is indicative of a man who wants to be seen by the community being nice, a mask for the discrimination he harbors. This deception is again exemplified by Pencey, in the fact that every Saturday night, students are served steak so that "everybody's mother would ask their darling boy what he had for dinner last night and he'd

say “steak”” (Salinger 35). Similarly to Mr. Haas, Pencey is trying to make themselves appear respectable, however in reality, that is not necessarily the case. Holden describes the steak as “little hard, dry jobs that you could hardly even cut” (Salinger 35). The steak is cheap, reinforcing that serving it is merely a ploy to bolster Pencey’s reputation. Phoniness in schools, however, does not end with administration, the students are just as guilty of the offense. Holden encounters Mrs. Morrow on the subway, a classmate’s mother. While discussing her son, Ernie Morrow, Mrs. Morrow shares “He’s a very sensitive boy. He’s really never been a terribly good mixer with other boys.” (Salinger 55). This is odd since in Holden’s experience, he is quite the opposite of the description offered by his mother. According to Holden, “he was always going down the corridor, after he’d had a shower snapping his soggy old wet towel at people’s asses” (Salinger 54). It is impossible to tell whether Ernie is being himself around his peers, or his family, but one thing is clear: he is a phony. Still, although Ernie may be two-faced, it is undeniable that Holden also wears a mask.

It is strange that throughout the novel, Holden ruthlessly labels so many people as phonies when he himself is one. In chapter 3, Holden abruptly reveals “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life” (Salinger 16) and ironically, although he is exaggerating a little, this is not a lie. Without any conceivable threat, Holden presents himself as Rudolf Schmidt, a fake identity, to Mrs. Morrow. Holden claims “I didn’t feel like giving her my whole life history” (Salinger 54-55) which does not make any sense. By that logic, even if Holden uses an alias, would he not still be asked about the history of his new persona? His true name would invoke the same response from Mrs. Morrow, since she is a stranger. The reality is, he simply has fun with the mask, and possibilities lying provides. Holden further pursues this in conversation with Mrs.

Morrow, when he praises her son despite his true feelings of hate "That's the one fault with him, he's too shy and modest" (Salinger 57). This is interesting since Holden loathes false praise, as shown in the Wicker Bar, when simply watching an inebriated crowd applaud a couple of mediocre singers made him sick (Salinger 142). Holden's hypocrisy is also displayed when he encroaches on Ackley's personal space and ignores Ackley's clear displeasure "Wuddya mean what the hell am I doing? I was tryna *sleep* before you guys started making all that noise." (Salinger 46). Prior to this infraction, Ackley had bothered Holden by moving objects in the latter's dorm around and clipping his toenails there, all without permission. Still, Holden does not feel any remorse for intruding on Ackley's room, showing he has little regard for the feelings of others. Even Holden displays the characteristics of a phony sometimes, however there are a few exceptions, as to who is deemed a phony in the novel

Only a select few people earn Holden's complete respect throughout the novel. When Phoebe asks for him to reveal one thing he likes a lot, Holden thinks only of James Castle and the nuns with the straw baskets (Salinger 170). The reason these individuals escape being branded phony is that Holden admires their modesty and dedication. Holden describes James Castle as "one of these very quiet guys" (Salinger 171), he never draws attention to himself, a humble soul, yet he stood for what he believed in. After calling a classmate conceited, James was threatened by seven boys who "tried to make him take back what he said" (Salinger 170) but he refused. Rather than endure torture and admit he was wrong, James jumped from his dorm window, immortalizing his words. As for the nuns, they exhibit both modesty and dedication in their choice of lifestyle, one entailing "vows of poverty, chastity and obedience" (Edmonds). Holden meets them while eating breakfast and "All the two of them were eating for breakfast

was toast and coffee" (Salinger 110). Their only goal is to better the lives of others, even if the quality of their own must suffer. Beyond the nuns and James, however, the only other people Holden does not find phony are children. Throughout the novel, Holden longs to have a connection with anyone, yet only children reciprocate or have the courtesy to reply politely. While trying to locate his sister, Holden has conversation with a young girl. Upon asking if she would join him for hot chocolate, she replies "no, thank you" (Salinger 119). It is a rare occurrence for Holden to be respected and not looked down upon. Perhaps that is why he is such a strong advocate for protecting childhood. While watching Phoebe ride the carousel, Holden is "damn near bawling" (Salinger 213) with joy. Never once in the novel is he this happy, childhood is his element and he will do anything to protect it. For him, it is the only time people and relationships are simple and true, no ulterior motives, deceptions or classes.

In J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* Holden uses the term phony to describe people who hide their true personality or conform to what is socially expected of them. Holden is continually frustrated by the falsities of others, finding solace only in the purity and honesty of children. Through Holden, Salinger is trying to portray the effects of maturity and society on one's spirit, the loss of innocence, but also the beauty of childhood. Those carefree days are numbered and Salinger understands they are often taken for granted while lived. In a sense, everyone becomes a catcher in the rye, when retrospect reveals just how incredible a gift, being a kid was. It is a call to action, to protect the wonder that surrounds childhood.

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## Explaining Your Writing Variables

Identify your choices for the five writing variables for your writing task

Central Idea: Masks, Deception, the Phunniness of Adults and the purity of children

Form: Essay

Purpose: To explain the central idea

Audience: Parents of small children

Context: School newsletter

Explain how your choices for the writing variables work together to make your text effective.

5 marks

110

In the form of an essay, I chose to explain how in J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, the word phony is used to describe those who wear masks. This medium allows me to present my ideas on what being phony truly is, in a manner that is supported by evidence found both in-text, and online. I believe those who would benefit most from reading my essay are parents, specifically of young children. The reason it would benefit them most is that it touches on preserving childhood, something easily overlooked in our busy world. Today, children are increasingly rebreaking into the online community, missing out on golden days in the sun. Perhaps my piece will inspire a parent to realize what a gift their child is and has, and how it is washing away. To ensure my piece would reach parents, I would use a school newsletter to reach out through their kids. That way, a real conversation can begin between them. All of these writing variables contribute to making my piece effective. ✓