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Perception Versus Reality in *Hamlet* and *The Catcher in the Rye* ✓

While the expression “seeing is believing” is widely known, our perception of the world is only a lens through which reality is seen (Taylor). J.D. Salinger’s novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and William Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*, use the theme of appearances conflicting with reality. Throughout both texts, authors use several techniques to blur the lines between what one sees and the truth. The characters and the reader must question if what they perceive is true. The idea that appearances differ from reality occurs in the same ways in *Hamlet* as it does in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both plots have secondary characters that lie to the protagonist, the main characters lie to others, grief appears to be a delusion, and an unreliable narrator skews reality. ✓

In both texts, secondary characters offer the illusion of companionship to the protagonist. A healthy relationship is based on honesty (*HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS*). In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ordered by Claudius to spy on Hamlet while pretending to be his friends (2.2.1-18). After Claudius’ order, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hide behind lighthearted banter as they interact with Hamlet to gain information for the king (2.2.221-235). In doing this, they manipulate Hamlet, a sign of an unhealthy relationship (*HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS*). While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem like trustworthy friends, they are behaving as such under a false pretense. This ruins their relationship with Hamlet, as he stops trusting them and expresses his anger at their lies (3.2.354-363). Similarly, in Salinger’s novel, Stradlater acts like Holden’s friend for personal gain. He tries to manipulate

Holden into writing his composition for his English class by flattering his roommate (Salinger 28-29). Stradlater makes an attempt to fool Holden into thinking that they are close by making statements such as "Be a buddy." and complementing Holden's hunting hat (Salinger 28-29). While Holden does not believe Stradlater's lies, he struggles to get past superficial interactions, labelling teachers, classmates, and pimps alike as "phony" (Salinger 3, 26, 102). As a result, Holden's quick judgements prevent him from connecting with others and forming meaningful relationships (*Holden Caulfield's The Catcher Of The Rye*). Hamlet and Holden act in a similar manner to the secondary characters, as they also conceal the truth. ✓

Holden and Hamlet are deceitful, despite their dislike of that behaviour in others. Holden is repelled by the "phoniness of the adult world," (Chen). Holden is surrounded by dishonesty throughout the novel (Chen). In spite of this, Holden lies to several people through the novel, often without a motive (Chen). One instance of this is Holden's interaction with Ms. Morrow (Salinger 54-58). Holden gives himself a new name, shares fictional stories about his classmate, and discusses his non-existent brain tumour (Salinger 54-58). Holden's tendency to lie and hide his feelings isolates him from others, preventing him from finding the meaningful relationships that he desires. ✓ Shakespeare displays the same hypocrisy through his character, Hamlet. In the first scene that he appears in, Hamlet makes it known that he values the truth as he explains that grieving behaviours can be mimicked, but he is being truthful in his pain (1.2.75-86). This speech introduces his "preoccupation with seeming and being," and the resultant occurrence of his anger as others deceive him (Kirsch). ✓ Nonetheless, Hamlet intentionally deceived others. One example of Hamlet's deception is his decision to pretend to be crazy (1.5.172-173). This conscious decision to be dishonest isolates himself from others as he cannot express what he is

going through (2.2.545-584). Holden and Hamlet's lies are mistaken for truth, just as their grief is mistaken for delusion. ✓

The main characters are grieving but appear to be delusional. Grief and delusional disorder share symptoms, including auditory and visual hallucinations (*The Normal Physical and Mental Symptoms of Grief, Delusional Disorder*). Hamlet displays this symptom within the play. He does not make an effort to hide his grief, claiming that it is so severe that he is not able to fully express it (1.2. 76-86). However, as he interacts with his mother after the actors perform, he is accused of being delusional. During his conversation, Hamlet sees and speaks to his father's ghost (3.4.104-110). Gertrude cannot see the ghost during this exchange (3.4.132-135). She ignores the possibility that Hamlet may be experiencing grief-induced hallucinations as she says, "Alas! he's mad." accusing her son of being delusional (3.4.107). In the same fashion, Holden's grief can be mistaken for delusion. ✓ Allie's death sent Holden into a state of grief (Salinger 39). This state is referenced throughout the novel, but it may appear to the reader that Holden is delusional rather than grieving as the story progresses. Holden talks to his dead brother as he walks down Fifth Avenue, asking Allie to not "let [him] disappear." (Salinger 197-198). While this seems like a symptom of delusion, it is a result of Holden's grief. In both cases, the characters develop a fixation on mortality – Hamlet's fixation is displayed through his plan to murder his uncle, and Holden shows his through his cynical worldview (3.3.74-97; Menand). In addition to these characters' grief appearing as delusion, unreliable narrators report a story that deviates from reality. ✓

The unreliable narrators in both texts result in a narrative that differs from the truth. Holden is an unreliable narrator (Classen). His tendency to lie is revealed as he claims that he is "the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." (Salinger 16). As a result, the reader must

question whether the events in the novel have occurred or not. Identifying the truth is complicated by the contradictions in Holden's story. One instance of this is Holden's unknown state of sobriety at Luce's bar. While at the bar, Holden states numerous times that he is "drunk as hell." (Salinger 149). Soon after leaving, he says that he "didn't feel too drunk any more", contradicting his previous statement (Salinger 153). The reader is left to decide what is true and what is merely an image that Holden is trying to display. Horatio also uses unreliable narration to create a favourable story for Hamlet. As Hamlet dies, he instructs Horatio to "tell my story" (5.2.542). In saying this, Hamlet is trusting that his friend will recount the events in a way that Hamlet will not be considered the villain (Lucking). While whatever narrative Horatio decides to tell will be rooted in truth, his bias will alter the story enough to blur the lines between fiction and reality. In short, both texts have an unreliable narrator that alters the truth to portray the image that the narrator wants to show.

The idea that perception can disagree with reality is present in *Hamlet* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both texts contain secondary characters who lie to the protagonists who do the same to them. The two texts also have a main character whose grief can be perceived as delusion. Shakespeare and Salinger use unreliable narration to create a greater divide between appearances and reality. Recognizing that one's perception of the world may not be the definitive truth helps society to function (Taylor). As the disconnect between perception and reality worsens, society's capacity to function weakens (Taylor). Therefore, it is critical that people take steps to find blind spots in how they view society. In doing this, one can build consensus with others and work towards progress, rather than grow the seeds of conflict already prevalent in the world.

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