

Analysis of Major Characters

Holden Caulfield - The number of readers who have been able to identify with Holden and make him their hero is truly staggering. Something about his discontent, and his vivid way of expressing it, makes him resonate powerfully with readers who come from backgrounds completely different from his. It is tempting to inhabit his point of view and revel in his cantankerousness rather than try to deduce what is wrong with him. The obvious signs that Holden is a troubled and unreliable narrator are manifold: he fails out of four schools; he manifests complete apathy toward his future; he is hospitalized, and visited by a psychoanalyst, for an unspecified complaint; and he is unable to connect with other people. We know of two traumas in his past that clearly have something to do with his emotional state: the death of his brother Allie and the suicide of one of his schoolmates. But, even with that knowledge, Holden's peculiarities cannot simply be explained away as symptoms of a readily identifiable disorder.

The most noticeable of Holden's "peculiarities" is how extremely judgmental he is of almost everything and everybody. He criticizes and philosophizes about people who are boring, people who are insecure, and, above all, people who are "phony." Holden carries this penchant for passing judgment to such an extreme that it often becomes extremely funny, such as when he speculates that people are so crass that someone will probably write "fuck you" on his tombstone. Holden applies the term "phony" not to people who are insincere but to those who are too conventional or too typical—for instance, teachers who "act like" teachers by assuming a different demeanor in class than they do in conversation or people who dress and act like the other members of their social class. While Holden uses the label "phony" to imply that such people are superficial, his use of the term actually indicates that his own perceptions of other people are superficial. In almost every case, he rejects more complex judgments in favor of simple categorical ones.

A second facet of Holden's personality that deserves comment is his attitude toward sex. Holden is a virgin, but he is very interested in sex, and, in fact, he spends much of the novel trying to lose his virginity. He feels strongly that sex should happen between people who care deeply about and respect one another, and he is upset by the realization that sex can be casual. Stradlater's date with Jane doesn't just make him jealous; it infuriates him to think of a girl he knows well having sex with a boy she doesn't know well. Moreover, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by women whom he doesn't respect or care for, like the blonde tourist he dances with in the Lavender Room, or like Sally Hayes, whom he refers to as "stupid" even as he arranges a date with her. Finally, he is disturbed by the fact that he is aroused by kinky sexual behavior—particularly behavior that isn't respectful of one's sex partner, such as spitting in one's partner's face. Although Holden refers to such behavior as "crummy," he admits that it is pretty fun, although he doesn't think that it should be.

A brief note about Holden's name: a "caul" is a membrane that covers the head of a fetus during birth. Thus, the caul in his name may symbolize the blindness of childhood or the inability of the child to see the complexity of the adult world. Holden's full name might be read as Hold-on Caul-field: he wants to hold on to what he sees as his innocence, which is really his blindness.

Phoebe Caulfield - Before we meet [Phoebe](#), Holden's side of the story is all we've been given. He implies that he is the only noble character in a world of superficial and phony adults, and we must take him at his word. There seems to be a simple dichotomy between the sweet world of childhood innocence, where Holden wants to stay, and the cruel world of shallow adult hypocrisy, where he's afraid to go. But Phoebe complicates his narrative. Instead of sympathizing with Holden's refusal to grow up, she becomes angry with him. Despite being six years younger than her brother, Phoebe understands that growing up is a necessary process; she also understands that Holden's refusal to mature reveals less about the outside world than it does about himself. Next to Phoebe, Holden's

stunted emotional maturity and stubborn outlook seem less charming and more foolish. Phoebe, then, serves as a guide and surrogate for the audience. Because she knows her brother better than we do, we trust her judgments about him. Our allegiance to the narrator weakens slightly once we hear her side of the story.

Phoebe makes Holden's picture of childhood—of children romping through a field of rye—seem oversimplified, an idealized fantasy. Phoebe's character challenges Holden's view of the world: she is a child, but she does not fit into Holden's romanticized vision of childlike innocence. Although she never explicitly states it, Phoebe seems to realize that Holden's bitterness toward the rest of the world is really bitterness toward himself. She sees that he is a deeply sad, insecure young man who needs love and support. At the end of the book, when she shows up at the museum and demands to come with him, she seems not so much to need Holden as to understand that he needs her.

Mr. Antolini - Mr. Antolini is the adult who comes closest to reaching Holden. He manages to avoid alienating Holden, and being labeled a "phony," because he doesn't behave conventionally. He doesn't speak to Holden in the persona of a teacher or authority figure, as Mr. Spencer does. He doesn't object to Holden's calling him in the middle of the night or to Holden's being drunk or smoking. Moreover, by opening his door to Holden on the spur of the moment, he shows no reservations about exposing his private self, with his messy apartment, his older wife with her hair in curlers, and his own heavy drinking.

Mr. Antolini's advice to Holden about why he should apply himself to his studies is also unconventional. He recognizes that Holden is different from other students, and he validates Holden's suffering and confusion by suggesting that one day they may be worth writing about. He represents education not as a path of conformity but as a means for Holden to develop his unique voice and to find the ideas that are most appropriate to him.

When Mr. Antolini touches Holden's forehead as he sleeps, he may overstep a boundary in his display of concern and affection. However, there is little evidence to suggest that he is making a sexual overture, as Holden thinks, and much evidence that Holden misinterprets his action. Holden indicates in Chapter 19 that he is extremely nervous around possible homosexuals and that he worries about suddenly becoming one. We also know that he has been thinking about sex constantly since leaving Pencey. Finally, this is not the only scene in which Holden recoils from a physical approach. He is made very uncomfortable when Sunny pulls off her dress and sits in his lap. Even when his beloved sister puts her arms around him, he remarks that she may be a little *too* affectionate sometimes.

Holden regrets his hasty judgment of Mr. Antolini, but this mistake is very important to him, because he finally starts to question his own practice of making snap judgments about people. Holden realizes that even if Mr. Antolini *is* gay, he can't simply be dismissed as a "flit," since he has also been kind and generous. Holden begins to acknowledge that Mr. Antolini is complex and that he has feelings.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Alienation as a Form of Self-Protection - Throughout the novel, Holden seems to be excluded from and victimized by the world around him. As he says to Mr. Spencer, he feels trapped on "the other side" of life, and he continually attempts to find his way in a world in which he feels he

doesn't belong.

As the novel progresses, we begin to perceive that Holden's alienation is his way of protecting himself. Just as he wears his hunting hat (see "Symbols," below) to advertise his uniqueness, he uses his isolation as proof that he is better than everyone else around him and therefore above interacting with them. The truth is that interactions with other people usually confuse and overwhelm him, and his cynical sense of superiority serves as a type of self-protection. Thus, Holden's alienation is the source of what little stability he has in his life.

As readers, we can see that Holden's alienation is the cause of most of his pain. He never addresses his own emotions directly, nor does he attempt to discover the source of his troubles. He desperately needs human contact and love, but his protective wall of bitterness prevents him from looking for such interaction. Alienation is both the source of Holden's strength and the source of his problems. For example, his loneliness propels him into his date with [Sally Hayes](#), but his need for isolation causes him to insult her and drive her away. Similarly, he longs for the meaningful connection he once had with [Jane Gallagher](#), but he is too frightened to make any real effort to contact her. He depends upon his alienation, but it destroys him.

The Painfulness of Growing Up - According to most analyses, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a bildungsroman, a novel about a young character's growth into maturity. While it is appropriate to discuss the novel in such terms, Holden Caulfield is an unusual protagonist for a bildungsroman because his central goal is to resist the process of maturity itself. As his thoughts about the Museum of Natural History demonstrate, Holden fears change and is overwhelmed by complexity. He wants everything to be easily understandable and eternally fixed, like the statues of Eskimos and Indians in the museum. He is frightened because he is guilty of the sins he criticizes in others, and because he can't understand everything around him. But he refuses to acknowledge this fear, expressing it only in a few instances—for example, when he talks about sex and admits that "[s]ex is something I just don't understand. I swear to God I don't" (Chapter 9).

Instead of acknowledging that adulthood scares and mystifies him, Holden invents a fantasy that adulthood is a world of superficiality and hypocrisy ("phoniness"), while childhood is a world of innocence, curiosity, and honesty. Nothing reveals his image of these two worlds better than his fantasy about the catcher in the rye: he imagines childhood as an idyllic field of rye in which children romp and play; adulthood, for the children of this world, is equivalent to death—a fatal fall over the edge of a cliff. His created understandings of childhood and adulthood allow Holden to cut himself off from the world by covering himself with a protective armor of cynicism. But as the book progresses, Holden's experiences, particularly his encounters with Mr. [Antolini](#) and [Phoebe](#), reveal the shallowness of his conceptions.

The Phoniness of the Adult World - "Phoniness," which is probably the most famous phrase from *The Catcher in the Rye*, is one of Holden's favorite concepts. It is his catch-all for describing the superficiality, hypocrisy, pretension, and shallowness that he encounters in the world around him. In Chapter 22, just before he reveals his fantasy of the catcher in the rye, Holden explains that adults are inevitably phonies, and, what's worse, they can't see their own phoniness. Phoniness, for Holden, stands as an emblem of everything that's wrong in the world around him and provides an excuse for him to withdraw into his cynical isolation.

Though oversimplified, Holden's observations are not entirely inaccurate. He can be a highly insightful narrator, and he is very aware of superficial behavior in those around him. Throughout the novel he encounters many characters who do seem affected, pretentious, or superficial—Sally Hayes, [Carl Luce](#), [Maurice](#) and [Sunny](#), and even Mr. Spencer stand out as examples. Some

characters, like Maurice and Sunny, are genuinely harmful. But although Holden expends so much energy searching for phoniness in others, he never directly observes his own phoniness. His deceptions are generally pointless and cruel and he notes that he is a compulsive liar. For example, on the train to New York, he perpetrates a mean-spirited and needless prank on Mrs. Morrow. He'd like us to believe that he is a paragon of virtue in a world of phoniness, but that simply isn't the case. Although he'd like to believe that the world is a simple place, and that virtue and innocence rest on one side of the fence while superficiality and phoniness rest on the other, Holden is his own counterevidence. The world is not as simple as he'd like—and needs—it to be; even he cannot adhere to the same black-and-white standards with which he judges other people.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Loneliness - Holden's loneliness, a more concrete manifestation of his alienation problem, is a driving force throughout the book. Most of the novel describes his almost manic quest for companionship as he flits from one meaningless encounter to another. Yet, while his behavior indicates his loneliness, Holden consistently shies away from introspection and thus doesn't really know why he keeps behaving as he does. Because Holden depends on his isolation to preserve his detachment from the world and to maintain a level of self-protection, he often sabotages his own attempts to end his loneliness. For example, his conversation with Carl Luce and his date with Sally Hayes are made unbearable by his rude behavior. His calls to Jane Gallagher are aborted for a similar reason: to protect his precious and fragile sense of individuality. Loneliness is the emotional manifestation of the alienation Holden experiences; it is both a source of great pain and a source of his security.

Relationships, Intimacy, and Sexuality - Relationships, intimacy, and sexuality are also recurring motifs relating to the larger theme of alienation. Both physical and emotional relationships offer Holden opportunity to break out of his isolated shell. They also represent what he fears most about the adult world: complexity, unpredictability, and potential for conflict and change. As he demonstrates at the Museum of Natural History, Holden likes the world to be silent and frozen, predictable and unchanging. As he watches Phoebe sleep, Holden projects his own idealizations of childhood onto her. But in real-world relationships, people talk back, and Phoebe reveals how different her childhood is from Holden's romanticized notion. Because people are unpredictable, they challenge Holden and force him to question his senses of self-confidence and self-worth. For intricate and unspoken reasons, seemingly stemming from Allie's death, Holden has trouble dealing with this kind of complexity. As a result, he has isolated himself and fears intimacy. Although he encounters opportunities for both physical and emotional intimacy, he bungles them all, wrapping himself in a psychological armor of critical cynicism and bitterness. Even so, Holden desperately continues searching for new relationships, always undoing himself only at the last moment.

Lying and Deception - Lying and deception are the most obvious and hurtful elements of the larger category of phoniness. Holden's definition of phoniness relies mostly on a kind of self-deception: he seems to reserve the most scorn for people who think that they are something they are not or who

refuse to acknowledge their own weaknesses. But lying to others is also a kind of phoniness, a type of deception that indicates insensitivity, callousness, or even cruelty. Of course, Holden himself is guilty of both these crimes. His random and repeated lying highlights his own self-deception—he refuses to acknowledge his own shortcomings and is unwilling to consider how his behavior affects those around him. Through his lying and deception, Holden proves that he is just as guilty of phoniness as the people he criticizes.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The "Catcher in the Rye" - As the source of the book's title, this symbol merits close inspection. It first appears in Chapter 16, when a kid Holden admires for walking in the street rather than on the sidewalk is singing the Robert Burns song "Comin' Thro' the Rye." In Chapter 22, when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life, he replies with his image, from the song, of a "catcher in the rye." Holden imagines a field of rye perched high on cliff, full of children romping and playing. He says he would like to protect the children from falling off the edge of the cliff by "catching" them if they were on the verge of tumbling over. As Phoebe points out, Holden has misheard the lyric. He thinks the line is "If a body catch a body comin' through the rye," but the actual lyric is "If a body *meet* a body, coming through the rye."

The song "Comin' Thro' the Rye" asks if it is wrong for two people to have a romantic encounter out in the fields, away from the public eye, even if they don't plan to have a commitment to one another. It is highly ironic that the word "meet" refers to an encounter that leads to recreational sex, because the word that Holden substitutes—"catch"—takes on the exact opposite meaning in his mind. Holden wants to catch children before they fall out of innocence into knowledge of the adult world, including knowledge of sex.

Holden's Red Hunting Hat - The red hunting hat is one of the most recognizable symbols from twentieth-century American literature. It is inseparable from our image of Holden, with good reason: it is a symbol of his uniqueness and individuality. The hat is outlandish, and it shows that Holden desires to be different from everyone around him. At the same time, he is very self-conscious about the hat—he always mentions when he is wearing it, and he often doesn't wear it if he is going to be around people he knows. The presence of the hat, therefore, mirrors the central conflict in the book: Holden's need for isolation versus his need for companionship.

It is also worth noting that the hat's color, red, is the same as that of Allie's and Phoebe's hair. Perhaps Holden associates it with the innocence and purity he believes these characters represent and wears it as a way to connect to them. He never explicitly comments on the hat's significance other than to mention its unusual appearance.

The Museum of Natural History - Holden explicitly tells us the symbolic meaning of the museum's displays: they appeal to him because they are frozen and unchanging. He also mentions that he is troubled by the fact that *he* has changed every time he returns to them. The museum represents the world Holden wishes he could live in: it's the world of his "catcher in the rye" fantasy, a world where nothing ever changes, where everything is simple, understandable, and

infinite. Holden is terrified by the unpredictable challenges of the world—he hates conflict, he is confused by Allie's senseless death, and he fears interaction with other people.

The Ducks in the Central Park Lagoon - Holden's curiosity about where the ducks go during the winter reveals a genuine, more youthful side to his character. For most of the book, he sounds like a grumpy old man who is angry at the world, but his search for the ducks represents the curiosity of youth and a joyful willingness to encounter the mysteries of the world. It is a memorable moment, because Holden clearly lacks such willingness in other aspects of his life.

The ducks and their pond are symbolic in several ways. Their mysterious perseverance in the face of an inhospitable environment resonates with Holden's understanding of his own situation. In addition, the ducks prove that some vanishings are only temporary. Traumatized and made acutely aware of the fragility of life by his brother Allie's death, Holden is terrified by the idea of change and disappearance. The ducks vanish every winter, but they return every spring, thus symbolizing change that isn't permanent, but cyclical. Finally, the pond itself becomes a minor metaphor for the world as Holden sees it, because it is "partly frozen and partly not frozen." The pond is in transition between two states, just as Holden is in transition between childhood and adulthood.