

Phony encounters



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist Holden Caulfield critiques people for being deceptive or, as he would say phony. He uses the word "phony" to describe people that are false, counterfeit, or untrue to themselves. Holden has a broad definition of the word "phony". Many characters, in Holden's mind, can be classified as phony in the novel. For example, his classmates at Pencey Prep, Elkton Hills, people who use the word "grand", and showoffs are all considered phony because they try to be something that they are not.

As the novel progresses, and as Holden comes closer to adulthood he undergoes a change that impacts the rest of his life. Holden experiences new things that change his mind and give him a new outlook on life as he searches for people that are not phony. Holden's realization suggests that only a few characters contain a level of integrity, which classify them as not phony. Holden gives the most respect to James Castle because he takes his life for a cause he believes in. He also views adolescents and adults as phony because they generally do not abide by their beliefs when maturing.

Holden believes adolescents and adults want to create a self-image that will not be looked down upon by other adults, so they change themselves and become phony. Many times, students try impressing one another by trying to be something they are not. Holden critiques Pencey Prep, because it is an expensive prep school filled with phonies. Holden sees the school as phony because all the kids try to act the same in order to associate with the in crowd. In an advertisement for the school it is written, "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear thinking young men" (Salinger 2).

Holden strongly disagrees with this quote because instead of teaching people to think for themselves, Pencey is molding mindless, uniform people. He thinks many of the students are phony and he only knows of two guys who are righteous and they probably came there that way. All the others are crooks and phonies that use people to get things they want. They want the respect without earning it. They want to impress other students by creating a false character or pretending to be something they are not. The more Holden ponders about these phonies the more upset he becomes.

Naturally it would depress anyone that affiliates with artificial students. One that is associated with the crowd usually follows the crowd. At this point Holden is confused as well as despondent and wants to depart elsewhere in order to find people with integrity that will give him hope about maturing and becoming an adult. Holden feels there is no hope in society because so many individuals are phony. Even at Elkton Hills, Holden is surrounded by phonies. He can not get away from them as they flood through the windows. Holden talks of the phoniest individual he has met, Mr. Haas.

He describes him as: " this headmaster, Mr. Haas that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer" (14). Holden classifies Mr. Haas as a phony because he would avoid certain people when meeting parents. Holden notices that Mr. Haas only affiliates with the well dressed, well liked, and well known; anyone else is left with a phony handshake and smile. Mr. Haas only associates with parents of high status in order to build his reputation as the infamous adult. He lies to himself that he has class, wealth, and fame because he only converses with the people that he admires.

He feels accepted even though he has to be a phony. Holden is sickened that someone could be this way. He eventually learns that society behaves in unique ways. Holden clings to his childhood innocence because he does not want to become a phony adult. He believes that people should be honest and if they are not, they are phony because they are being untrue to themselves. Another one of Holden's falseness indicators is the way people speak. For example, Holden strongly dislikes the word "grand". Anytime someone uses this word he immediately classifies him as a phony. Holden explains, "Grand. There's a word I really hate.

It's a phony. I could puke every time I hear it" (9). Holden is against the word "grand" because it sets a negative image about someone's personality. People that are affluent use the word "grand" to rise over society. His view of people that use the word grand is that they are trying to be even better than the wealthy class by being very snobby and making everything seem grandiose. Holden believes that the word "grand" holds untrue value in a person's character. Holden interprets people trying to be better than others by using the word grand. This is a major reason why grand sounds entirely phony.

He has a close encounter with grand when he awakens in a hotel and decides to give Sally Hayes a phone call. Sally answers, "I'd love to. Grand" (106). Holden then explains, Grand. If there's one word I hate it's grand. It's so phony. For a second, I was tempted to tell her to forget about the matinee. But we chewed the fat for a while. That is she chewed it. You shouldn't get a word in edgewise. First she told me about some Harvard guy (106) Sally tries to impress Holden by talking about the Harvard guy calling

her night and day. Sally sees this as a status symbol that will make other people think of her as a better person.

Holden just becomes sick of this and does not care. Then Holden and Sally go to a play. The discussion of the play at the end of the first act with George reveals Sally's sham character. Holden sees her talking to an acquaintance named George and can not believe how Sally and George like to impress one another. " He was the kind of a phony that have to give themselves room when they answer somebody's question" (127). George names several places and names while Sally does the same. Holden does not care that George goes to an Ivy League school and he cares even less as George tries to impress Sally any false way he can.

Holden sees through the pointless conversation because of George's tired, snobby voice. Here Holden experiences the harsh reality of adulthood. Holden would rather be truthful and voice his opinion about the play, than try to impress someone with false names and places. He once again is aware that not everyone is as innocent as he wants them to be and that people act differently towards each other to attract attention. Actors and movie stars act differently to the public than towards other actors and Holden considers them phony since their attitude adjusts according to the people they are associated with.

Holden also believes that when musicians rise to the top they create a negative image of themselves by being deceitful. For example, musicians that showoff to the crowd are classified as phony in Holden's mind because they try to be more impressive than they naturally are. For instance, Holden

is disgusted when he goes to see a pianist named Ernie play and the audience claps for no reason. Holden knows that Ernie is a cocky piano player but he takes the applause as if he were a very humble guy with class, which makes him a phony. The audience claps as if they do not know any better, almost being forced to clap.

They were exactly the same morons that laugh like hyenas in the movies at stuff that isn't funny. I swear to God, if I were a piano player or an actor or something and all those dopes thought I was terrific, I'd hate it. I wouldn't even want them to clap for me. People always clap for the wrong things. (84)

Holden wants to seclude himself from society to escape judgment. Holden believes in his childhood innocence. By holding onto it he does not become a phony in the eyes of adults. He seeks seclusion within his sister, Phoebe. Holden views her as an innocent child because she is so unconstrained.

Unfortunately the adult world is always judging people left and right, and it is almost impossible to escape criticism unless one is perfect, no one is perfect. As people try to be perfect they become phony. Holden views many people as phony but he does see some people as righteous such as the nuns, James Castle, the children, and Phoebe. The nuns represent innocence to the world as they devote their lives to God. They do nothing wrong than merely collect money for charity. They do not criticize people, only accept the world as it unfolds. They pass no judgment on Holden only admire him for donating ten dollars.

He also admires James Castle who is the individual at Elkton Hills who committed suicide because of his pride. During the course of the school year

James made a remark about someone and did not take it back. Rather than taking it back or suffering, he maintains his integrity by killing himself. “ Finally, what he did, instead of taking back what he said, he jumped out the window. ” (170) If James did take back the comment, Holden would classify him as just another phony who changed his character to be accepted by others. Holden sees his integrity because it took great courage to abide by his beliefs.

Holden wants people to believe in themselves and stand up for what they believe in. Children and Phoebe also maintain a level of integrity because they do not worry about creating a self-image nor do they worry about other children judging them. As children grow up, they dress, talk, and behave anyway that pleases them. Holden sees this innocence and views them as the only real people he knows and can trust. They truly express themselves because they are not afraid to conceal it. Holden classifies many characters in this novel as phony because they lose their integrity.

His broad definition of the word “ phony” justifies in the classification of many people as phony. Holden is afraid of entering adulthood because he does not want the label of a phony because he does not want to change himself in order to be accepted by adult society. It is during adulthood that people create an image about themselves. They go to excessive heights to maintain that image, sometimes changing their principles or beliefs, thus making themselves phony. This sickens Holden as he is brought up with honesty and virtue and as Holden sees people for what they really are, he realizes that only a handful of righteous people exist.