

# Avidity and Deceitfulness

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The *Catcher in the Rye* begins with seventeen-year-old Holden Caulfield jumping right in – with a lot of attitude and dated profanity – to tell us about "this madman stuff" that happened to him "around last Christmas." His story begins on a December Saturday at Pencey Prep School in Pennsylvania, where he's just been given the ax (read: kicked out) for failing all his classes except English. Turns out, getting the ax is a recurring theme in Holden's past. He visits a friendly teacher of his, Mr. Spencer, who lectures him about the "future."

Back in the dorm, Holden goofs around with Robert Ackley, a pimply and annoying kid. We're introduced to Holden's distinctive red hunting hat, and we meet his roommate, Stradlater, who is a "sexy bastard" getting ready for a date with Jane Gallagher, an old friend (and sort-of-romantic-interest) of Holden. Holden is none too happy about this impending date, but agrees anyway to write an English composition for Stradlater, who, in addition to being attractive and athletic, is also a "moron".

Holden's composition gives us some insight into his character; he writes about his younger brother Allie, who died three years earlier of [leukemia](#). More specifically, the composition is about Allie's left-handed baseball mitt, which had poems written all over it in green ink (so that Allie would have something to read while out in the field). Holden reveals that on the night Allie died, Holden broke all the windows in the garage with his bare hand. As a result, he still can't make a good fist with his hand.

Stradlater comes back and Holden tries to figure out if anything happened (in the sex sense of "anything") with Jane. Stradlater is evasive, so Holden tackles him and gets the worse end of the scuffle (a bloody nose). He tries to chat with Ackley for company, but ends up so fed up with everyone and everything that he decides to leave Pencey, right then and there. Everyone leaves for Christmas break on Wednesday, so he has to bum around New York for a few days before going home (otherwise his parents will know he's gotten the ax).

On the train away from Pencey, Holden has a

conversation with the mother of one of his classmates, Ernie Morrow. She's quite an attractive older woman. While Holden knows that Ernie is a "phony bastard" (by the way, Holden thinks everyone is a "phony bastard"), he pretends that Ernie is God's gift to the world to make his mother happy. Holden also pretends his name is Rudolf.

Holden gets off at [Penn Station](#) in New York, wants to call someone but can't decide whom, and ends up taking a cab to the Edmont Hotel. On the way, Holden asks the cabbie if he knows where the ducks in the park go when the water freezes over. The driver doesn't know.

Once he's gotten a room at the Edmont, Holden tries calling a girl who he knows is a good time, but fails to make a date with her. In the hotel lounge, he dances with three "moron" girls, only one of whom is attractive. He isn't allowed to drink, since he's obviously a "goddamn minor." This, among every other person, event, and place in the novel, Holden finds to be depressing. The girls take off, and Holden reminisces about Jane Gallagher.

What Holden describes is some sort of puppy love; he and Jane used to golf together, play checkers, go to the movies, and hold hands and so forth, but there wasn't much in the way of anything sexual. One instance he reveals suggests that Jane may have been molested by her stepfather. We can start to see why Holden was so upset about her and "sexy" Stradlater on a date.

Holden gets into a cab with a guy named Horwitz, asks him about the ducks (seems he's really concerned about them), and goes to "Ernie's," since he knows he'll be able to drink there. When he runs into an old and annoying acquaintance, he leaves to avoid having to spend time with her.

Back in his own hotel, he somehow ends up with a prostitute named Sunny in his room. He's more into talking than sex, and Sunny, who's quite young herself, gets confused and leaves his room with a little of

Holden's money but no sex. She comes back later with her pimp, Maurice the elevator man, and Holden ends up with a punch in the stomach (they wanted more money than he paid Sunny).

The next day Holden leaves his hotel, makes a date with an old friend named Sally Hayes, and meets two nuns while he's having breakfast. One of the nuns is an English teacher, so they talk about literature – Romeo and Juliet, in particular. Holden has a hard time talking about a "sexy play" like that with nuns. He makes a donation to their collection. After he leaves, he buys a record for his little sister, Phoebe, and overhears a boy singing, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." More on this soon.

Holden heads to the park to kill some time before his date with Sally. He chats with a girl in the park as it becomes increasingly clear that Holden likes children a lot more than adults. Thinking on the museum he used to visit as a child, he remarks on how the displays behind the glass cases always stay the same, but the children that visit are different every time.

He meets Sally for a "phony" matinee show and then goes skating with her. By now, he's pretty fed up with the general craziness of city life and shares with Sally his fantasy of running away, living in a log cabin, and doing log-cabin-y things for the rest of his life. When Sally is not so partial to running away with him, Holden flips out.

Alone yet again for the evening, Holden calls up an old acquaintance from school, Carl Luce, and arranges to meet him for drinks. At the bar, Carl takes the annoying "I'm soooo mature" attitude, so the night ends early. Well, it ends early for Carl. Holden stays alone at the bar and drinks himself into fuzzy oblivion. After trying to make a date with the coat-check girl, he goes to the park to look for the ducks. Seeing no ducks, he heads home to visit his sister Phoebe, who we've been told is the greatest girl in the world.

Phoebe does in fact appear to be the greatest girl in the world. She's the first person we see Holden have any sort of genuine interaction with; they talk about her schoolwork and then, quite cheerily, the fact that Holden doesn't like anything or anyone except his dead brother Allie. Of course, he finds this depressing. He says all he wants to do with his life is be the catcher in the rye – if there were a bunch of children playing in a field of rye next to a big cliff, he'd be the guy to catch them before they go off the edge. Phoebe informs him that the "song" he heard about the catcher in the rye is actually a poem by Robert Burns, and it's about bodies meeting bodies, not catching bodies.

Holden leaves home (to avoid his parents) and visits an old teacher, Mr. Antolini. He gets another long lecture on the importance of education, and experiences what may be a sexual come-on from his former teacher. Holden bolts, and reveals that "pervery" stuff like that has happened to him a lot. He spends the night in the train station, and gets even more depressed.

Holden decides to run away, informs his sister Phoebe of as much via a note left at her principal's office, tries to rub several "fuck you" signs off the walls of an elementary school, and finally meets up with Phoebe. She has decided that she wants to run away with him.

Holden explains this isn't possible. Phoebe gets angry and pulls a "Fine, I'm not talking to you anymore." Fortunately, being mad at someone doesn't mean you won't go to the zoo with them, which she does. They end up at the carousel, where Holden promises Phoebe that he won't run away after all. As he watches her go around and around on the carousel, he declares he's happy, which is the first time we've heard him say that in the novel.

At last, we pull out of the narrative and back to the Holden of one year later, the one who was telling us this story. He's clearly in therapy for getting "sick" in some way. He says he's supposed to go back to school in September, but he's not sure whether or not things will be any different (that is, any better) this time around. He concludes that he sort of wishes he hadn't told us this story at all, since relating it makes him miss all the people he'd met "If you really want to hear about it," begins the narration. You can tell right away you're going to get a lot of attitude from this first-person narration, so you'd better be ready to deal with it if you're going to read *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The first thing you hear from this young guy is that his parents wouldn't want him to tell you about his personal life. Doesn't matter. He's going to tell us all about "this madman stuff" that happened last Christmas. He says he's got a brother named D.B. who's out in Hollywood "being a prostitute," which we know means "writing scripts," since D.B. used to write short stories (such as "The Secret Goldfish," a tale about a boy who wouldn't let anyone else look at his pet goldfish). Anyway, the narrator hates "phonies," which is what his brother is now since he made "a lot of dough" and bought a Jaguar. Our narrator also hates the movies. He hates a lot of things, so get used to it.

- Back to this story of "last Christmas." The narrator says he'll start off with day he left Pencey Prep. Pencey is an annoying, snobby

East-coast Prep school in Pennsylvania. Our narrator is disgusted by it and its phoniness. The day in question is a Saturday, and Pencey is hosting a big-deal football game against rival Saxon Hall. The narrator doesn't feel like watching the game, so he hangs out up on a hill and watches the crowd from a distance. He digresses about Selma Thurmer, the headmaster's daughter and the only girl around the place. Her father is a "bastard," the narrator says, but she's decent because she knows as much. She also wears "falsies" (fake breasts). So why isn't our narrator watching the football game? It seems he is 1) the manager of the fencing team, and 2) the guy who, earlier this Saturday, left all the fencing equipment on the subway. So no match + a mob of angry fencers = necessary isolation.

- Additionally, the narrator wants to go say good-bye to his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, before he (the narrator) leaves the school.
- And why is he leaving the school? Mostly because... he got kicked out. Because he failed all his classes, they "gave [him] the ax," which it seems they do quite frequently. So now he's hanging around on the hill (and freezing because some "crook" at school stole his camel hair coat) and trying to feel some sort of good-bye for the place. He says, "When I leave a place, I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse."
- In order to get the emotion of a proper good-bye, the narrator reminisces about tossing around a football with two friends of his one evening on campus. They played even after it was too dark to see. This is just the sort of things he needs. A round of nostalgia later, he heads off toward Mr. Spencer's, but slowly, as running proves difficult for this "heavy smoker." We get another hint as to where the narrator is in the present time (as he's telling us this story about leaving Pencey last Christmas): he reveals that last year he "grew six and a half inches" and "practically got t.b." and "came out here for all these goddamn checkups and stuff." We think he is in some sort of institution or hospital.
- He gets to the Spencers' and, as he is greeted by Mrs. Spencer, we learn our narrator's name: Holden. The Spencers are about seventy years old, and, as Holden informs us, they "get a big bang out of things" such as buying an old

Navajo blanket. Also, Holden's last name is Caulfield. Holden Caulfield. Nice ring to it, isn't there?

- As soon as Holden makes it into Mr. Spencer's room, he regrets having come at all. Mr. Spencer is sitting reading the Atlantic Monthly and surrounded by Vicks Nose Drops.
- He is in fact wearing a ratty bathrobe, which isn't the most aesthetically pleasing sight. The two discuss Mr. Spencer's grippe (hence the nose drops) and Mr. Thurmer, the headmaster.
- They talk about life being a game – Thurmer's advice to Holden. Holden remarks to us (not to Mr. Spencer) that, sure, it is a game – if you're on the side of all the hot-shots. Otherwise, "no game."
- Holden tells Spencer that his parents are going to be pretty irritated when they find out he's gotten the ax, since this is the fourth school he's been booted from.
- Holden reveals to us some key information about himself: he shakes his head a lot, he says "Boy!" a lot, was sixteen at the time of the story (when he's leaving Pencey) and is seventeen now (as he's telling us the story from his hospital/ward/institution place), has gray hair, often acts like he's twelve, but occasionally acts older, except no one notices when he does.
- Spencer picks his nose. We learn that Holden hates the word "grand," on account of it being "phony." He decides he'd better "get the hell out of there" because he feels a "lecture coming on."
- And he is right. Spencer opens with, "What's the matter with you, boy?" Ugh.
- Holden admits that he took five classes and failed all but one – English, and only because he'd read all the books before, at another school (before he was kicked out of that one).
- Spencer then resorts to low-blows: he makes Holden read aloud his final exam essay (in history), which is utter garbage about the Egyptians and ends with a note that (roughly speaking) says, "I know this is junk, so it's OK if you flunk me, don't worry about it."

- Holden is livid that Old Spencer made him read the essay out loud.
  - Spencer wants to know why Holden left his previous schools (like Whooton and Elkton Hills).
  - Holden isn't very forthcoming to his history teacher, but he tells us everything we want to know (and more). He left because he was "surrounded by phonies" and the headmaster was a "bastard." Sound familiar?
  - Spencer wants to know if Holden has any concerns for his future. He says Holden will, someday – when it's too late. Holden finds this depressing.
  - Holden gets out of there after that. As he heads out the front door he thinks he hears Spencer yelling something like "Good luck!" after him, which Holden also finds to be depressing.
  - "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." Holden opens Chapter Three with this declaration. He gives a short discourse on lying, and then we learn that Holden lives in a dormitory donated by an alumnus named Ossenburger, who made all his money with cheap funeral parlors.
  - Holden doesn't like the guy (Ossenburger came to Pencey to give a big, "corny speech" about praying to Jesus). In fact, the only good part of the speech was when someone in the audience let one rip. (Or "passed gas," as they say.)
  - Holden ends up back in his dorm and puts on a red hunting cap – he's partial to the thing and wears it with the peak swung around to the back.
  - Holden chills out and reads *Out of Africa*, which he got by mistake from the library.
  - This brings us to a discourse on books. Holden's brother D.B. is his favorite author (or Ring Lardner, who writes sports-related stories), but mostly Holden just likes books where you can laugh once in a while, books that, after you read them, you wish the author was a friend of yours that you could just call up and talk to. Having read *The Return of the Native*, he wouldn't mind calling old Thomas Hardy up.
  - Anyway, a few pages into *Out of Africa*, this guy Robert Ackley "barges" in. He's a tall guy with dirty teeth and pimples.
  - Ackley looks around to make sure Holden's roommate, named Stradlater, isn't there. The two don't get along.
  - Ackley wants to talk and hang out. Holden clearly does not. So Ackley does the next best thing, which is to walk around Holden's room, pick up all his stuff, examine it, and put it back in the wrong place.
  - One such item is Holden's picture of a girl he "used to go around with" named Sally Hayes. (Relationships were complicated back then; "go around with" was somewhere in between "hanging out" and "together.")
- Holden, after reading the same sentence twenty times, gives up and puts his book down. He starts "horsing around," which he admits he does "quite a bit." In this particular case, "horsing around" means pulling a hunting cap over your eyes and pretending to be blind.
- Ackley asks about Holden's red hat, informing him that it's a deer-hunting hat.
- Holden responds that it's a people-shooting hat.
- Ackley proceeds to cut his toenails and leave the clippings all over the floor. Ew.
- The boys go back to talking about Stradlater, who is out on a date. Ackley is really not a fan of this guy, but it seems the reason is because Stradlater told him he should really brush his teeth once in a while.
- Holden admits that Stradlater is conceited, but defends him. He says if Stradlater was wearing a tie you really liked, he'd just take it off and give it to you.
- Speak of the devil, here comes Stradlater – he wants to borrow Holden's hound's-tooth jacket.
- Ackley takes off and Holden gives up his jacket, asking Stradlater not to stretch it out with his "godamn shoulders," which are very broad.
- Stradlater takes off his shirt and tie so he can have a shave and show off his fantastic body. Meanwhile, his date is waiting in the annex.
- Holden, who doesn't have anything better to do, goes along with Stradlater to the bathroom to bug him while he (Stradlater) shaves and demonstrates his poor



whistling abilities.

Holden remarks that Stradlater is a "secret slob" – he always looks put together and smells nice and all that jazz, but secret things, like his razor blade, are all crumby and filled with hair and rust.

Stradlater is attractive, he says, but mostly in the good-yearbook-photo way.

Holden is still wearing his red hat, which he gets a "real bang out of."

Stradlater needs a big favor. Hotshot people who are in love with themselves always need a big favor, Holden remarks (to us, not Stradlater).

Anyway, the big favor is that Stradlater needs Holden to write him a composition, only a so-so one – not one with the commas all in the right place and so forth.

This is a pain. Holden hates it when people like Stradlater try to pretend the only reason they're bad at English essays is commas, when really they're just not good at English.

Holden responds by doing a tap dance like you see in the movies, which he hates but gets a bang out of imitating. He makes a point of telling us that Stradlater laughs.

Stradlater compliments the red hunting hat, but only so he can butter up Holden to ask him again to write his English composition (which has to describe something – anything).

Holden asks about a girl (Fitzgerald) that Stradlater was dating at one point. Stradlater says she's too old for Holden, and Holden responds by trying to put Stradlater in a half nelson.

Stradlater ("a very strong guy") pushes Holden ("a very weak guy") away.

Back to the girl-talk. Stradlater says his date's name is Jean Gallagher, and Holden "nearly [drops] dead." He says her name is Jane, not Jean, and he practically grew up next door to her.

Stradlater obviously knows nothing about this girl, but Holden goes on about how she used to dance ballet when she was little, and how, when they played checkers, she would never move her kings from the back row because "she [...] liked the way they looked."

Holden admits that most people aren't interested in such details. Stradlater is obviously a member of that

majority.

Holden keeps remarking that he should go down and say hello. Stradlater gives Holden the go-ahead, but instead Holden sticks around and talks about Jane's stepfather, an alcoholic who used to run around the house naked all the time.

This interests Stradlater. Holden tells him to give his regards to Jane, but he knows Stradlater is the kind of guy that never does give regards, even when you make a point of asking him to.

Suddenly very nervous, Holden asks Stradlater just what he plans on doing with Jane on their date.

Stradlater responds that they can't do much, since she only signed out of her dorm (at her own nearby boarding school) until 9:30pm.

Of course, this irritates Holden, who figures Stradlater is probably thinking that if Jane knew what a "sexy bastard" she was going on a date with, she probably would have signed out until three in the morning.

Stradlater is indeed thinking as much. He reminds Holden about the essay and heads out of the bathroom.

Ackley comes back. Holden is happy "for once" to see him, despite the fact that all the guy does is sit around and pick pimples, because it takes his mind off the other stuff (namely, Stradlater potentially having sex with Jane).

What Cather is interested in, is the dualistic nature of man. Every individual has got both the sensuous aspect and the spiritual side in equal proportions. Cather has coined a phrase called "sensuous spirituality." William M. Curtin says she first used this phrase to describe Massenet's music. "Sensuous spirituality conveys Cather's preoccupation with the double, frequently rival nature of man" (Giannone: 3). What she shows in her novels is that man is at peace only when he is reconciled to the tension between the physical and the spiritual. She sees the human being as one composed of two components-physical & spiritual. She believes that words have their strength in sound. Sound is the natural abode of words. So for her the printed page is not the original text but the words that have travelled from the ear to the eyes by means of print. According to her the higher process of fiction creates a voice that addresses the inner ear of the reader. She stresses the auditory synthesis of a story, so that the story may become wholly human. The overtone divined by the ear recreates the story in our

consciousness. Thus voice offers us not only a contact with others but it makes us delve deep into ourselves. The physical ear creates for us a shared world but the voice heard by the inner ear makes us go into a very personal world within ourselves. That is what happens to Tom Outland and the Professor, they go into the inner world or the non-human world which refers to the personal inwardness. Because of this Godfrey finds himself different from others. In this sense he addresses himself as "primitive." That is why he is not interested in the modern mechanistic attitude but rather in the "earth and woods and water. He was earth and would return to earth" (T.P.H: 265).

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