

Hippie Caulfield: *The Catcher in the Rye*'s Influence on 1960s American Counterculture

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Chapter One: Historical Context of *The Catcher in the Rye*

The surge in popularity of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is often attributed to the brutal honesty and introspective nature of Holden Caulfield. An anti-hero who not only exposes people for their "phoniness" but is able to understand his own inability to connect with others is an attractive quality to an American culture which prides itself on independence and anti-elitism; Holden's total rebellion against American conventions posited him as a type of literary poster-child for the American countercultural movement of the 1960s. The counterculture championed Holden's anti-establishment views as a bold indictment against a corrupt, oppressive society, and they developed a type of community around his story. This study will examine Holden's personal struggles with identity as well as his social struggles with American institutions. The impact of *The Catcher in the Rye* on youth counterculture exemplifies the postmodern qualities of the novel, and it is these postmodern qualities—an ironic self-identity, a questioning of social structure, and a resistance to definition—which posit the novel as a literary beginning of the postmodern era.

The similarities between *Catcher* and the countercultural movement can be seen in both Holden's personal life as well as his social life. In both aspects, Holden's influence on youth can be defined by his idea of a childlike innocence and an adult encroachment upon this innocence. During the countercultural era—a time marked by war, global instability, and major technological advances in warfare—many youth viewed the world as an incredibly hostile place, an attitude that caused many to both question the purpose of society as well as remove themselves from that society all together. Margot A. Henriksen describes how Salinger's story about a loss of childhood innocence occurred during the beginning of an age of fear in America: "In his 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* J.D. Salinger introduced Americans to the cultural and

psychological landscape of the age of anxiety. Through his trouble adolescent protagonist, Holden Caulfield, Salinger illustrated the depressing insecurity that ate away at many of the young in postwar America” (83). Mark Hamilton further remarks how Holden’s personal life became a source of influence for many countercultural youth: “First published in 1951 and popular ever after, it was among the baby boomers one of the most widely read novels. As poignantly as any author of the era, Salinger defined the landscape of psychological discontent. Who could have been more profoundly alienated than preppy Holden Caulfield? *The Catcher in the Rye* caught the insecurities of those born in the atomic age” (45). This insecurity began as a question of self and then translated into an overall questioning of society, a development that can be seen through Holden’s experience.

The countercultural movement began as a youthful question regarding age, identity, and purpose, and Holden’s journey through adolescence reflects this response. While Holden certainly struggles with relationships with others, Holden first struggles to understand his relationship with himself. He struggles with understanding how his behavior should reflect his age, how he should prepare for his future, what he believes in, who he trusts, and how he can prevent himself from growing up, all questions pertaining to who he is and why he matters as an individual. The text indicates that Holden’s identity crisis began when his brother Allie died, a fate that Holden fears for himself and all the other children in the world, and this threat of death draws similarities to a countercultural fear of death brought about by the beginning of the nuclear era:

The one group of postwar Americans least able to deny reality and block out their fears were the young of America, those children and young adults, like David in *Invaders from Mars* and Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, who were

emotionally and psychologically susceptible to atomic nightmares and atomic insecurities. By focusing on the psychological troubles of America's young and by highlighting social deviance and rebelliousness of American youth, the culture of dissent illuminated the social and psychological disruption that characterized life in the age of anxiety (Henriksen 149).

The threat of death and robbed youth was a daily reality to many youth, and their reaction to this personal threat was to question the purpose of the values and institutions that their parents had created for them. While parents promoted their values to youth as methods of living a long and successful life, many youth rejected these values because they did not view life in the long term.

Holden's disdainful opinion about his family, his school, and religious figures signifies the beginnings of a youthful distrust of these institutions. What began as a personal question of identity translated into a reaction against the social institutions created by older people to help younger people have a sense of purpose and direction in their lives; the young sought to be separate from their parents and their parents' standards, but, like Holden, they were unsure of what they would replace this gap with, a common dilemma among countercultural youth. Rather than viewing their adolescence as a time of opportunity and growth, many youth related to *Catcher* because it presented a very real picture of confused, distant, and disconnected adolescence that was becoming more common in postwar America:

In modern middle class American parenting, as in expressive forms of culture such as the novel, adolescence has served as a complex symbol of cultural innocence and hope for the future...In the postwar period, however, recognition of the increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social

experience has become unavoidable, and it is precisely this cultural dissonance that is highlighted by Salinger's novel (Edsforth and Bennett 131).

Youth no longer believed the future was bright or even possible, and parents had lost the ability to convince youth that their standards, their beliefs, and their ways of life had meaning and value. Holden's frequent references to his own death, confirmed by phrases such as "I started thinking how old Phoebe would feel if I got pneumonia and died. It was a childish way to think, but I couldn't stop myself" (156), "Anyway, I kept worrying that I was getting pneumonia, with all those hunks of ice in my hair, and that I was going to die. I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father" (154), and "Try it sometime. I think, even, if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it'll say 'Holden Caulfield' on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died" (204), are bizarre examples of a youth prematurely questioning his own mortality, a concept introduced to Holden by Allie's death and to countercultural youth by the atomic age. The reaction against adulthood and adult institutions was Holden's defense against this threat of death, and his breakdown of his own identity and society are indicators of postmodernism in the novel.

It is important to note that *Catcher* does not necessarily signify a clean, distinct break from the modernist period; rather, the novel represents a subtle movement away from modernist ideology. *Catcher* is neither clearly modern nor postmodern—Salinger himself would have abhorred such stringent categorizing of his writing—but *Catcher* is indicative of a culture that was beginning to develop a collective understanding of the frailty of society and the breakdown of the self. It is not my goal to prove that *Catcher* is a postmodern novel, but it is my intention to exemplify the fact that the novel is significantly unique—and consequently possesses postmodern themes—in the way that it is difficult to categorize. Ihab Hassan describes the nearly

impossible task of clearly distinguishing modernism from postmodernism: “Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future... an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work” (3). The counterculture’s relationship with the novel and their connection to Holden’s disparaging loss of innocence, unreliable narration, and rejection of adult authority provides solid historical context for the novel’s postmodern themes. Holden’s identity crisis coincided with youth counterculture as young people quickly became synonymous with stereotypes of angst, rebellion, and hedonism, and this growing perception of the “rebellious teenager” became a product of the onset of postmodern America. While *Catcher* is not the sole influence behind rebellious teenage culture, the novel’s postmodern qualities were and are a direct influence on teenage culture in the literary sphere. Teenage culture in the 1960’s is historical evidence of the postmodern qualities of *Catcher*, and the novel is an influence on rather than result of this culture.

Connecting with the postmodern qualities of the novel, the critical responses to *Catcher* are extremely varied and at times polarizing. Sarah Graham comments on the multitude of interpretations that surround the novel: “It is a testament to the richness of *The Catcher in the Rye* that so many critics have been able to produce such varied responses to it in the more than half a century since it was published, supporting readers’ own interpretations of the text” (1986). However, there are a select few major themes in the novel that almost all critics most often address in the novel, and it is in the specific responses to these themes that most critics come close to a mutual point of either agreement or disagreement in interpretation. Most notably, Holden’s arrested development and obsession with childlike innocence, his vehement distrust of “phonies” and adults, and his psychological instability are factors of the novel that cannot be

ignored and almost always are discussed in a critical interpretation of the novel. Similar to popular interpretation, I will also expound upon these themes in the novel; however, I will provide an interpretation that puts the novel in a larger context—namely, through a historical as well as textual approach, I will evaluate the novel’s postmodern qualities and observe how those qualities are evidenced through youth counterculture of the 1960s.

The critical response to *Catcher* often interprets the novel as a modern work that captures the struggles of postwar America. Viewed largely in its cultural context in 1951, many view Holden as a representation of a postwar America that itself was experiencing its own identity crisis. Erika Doss when describing political modernity cites *Catcher* as a modern novel that possesses “[d]isturbing insights into the human condition in postwar America” (338) and that “depicted the alienation of an entire generation” (338), confirming the historical interpretation of *Catcher* as a modern novel. Raychel Haugrud Reiff describes how Holden views the world as a place where “shallow, superficial people have created a world in which phoniness abounds” (61), and this phoniness is a scapegoat Holden can attack. Harold Bloom interprets the youthful response to the novel as indicative of a sort of cultural identity crisis during the 1960’s: “Their strong interest in these themes perhaps reflects the need of young readers in many cultures for increased understanding of themselves and of others, and for heightened awareness of their own individual identity in context of family and society” (21). It is not my goal to refute these perceptions entirely; rather, it is my goal to take these perceptions further by analyzing the tangible beginnings of postmodernism in America—most notably, youth counterculture—and relate these postmodern beginnings to the novel. It is my intention to connect the beginnings of postmodernism in America partially to *Catcher*’s influence and indicate that the common themes

found in the novel are in fact signs of the beginning of a postmodern philosophy. The beginning of youth counterculture is evidence of this postmodern philosophy.

Prior to the publication of *Catcher* in 1951, American culture experienced a multitude of cultural changes, and the most notable of these changes was the common theme of distrust and a lack of identity. While a distrust in social conventions was certainly an aspect of the modernist movement prior to World War II, a total lack of distrust in humanity, adult authority, and social institutions were notable traits of youth counterculture. Pamela Steinle describes the cultural climate of America before the publication of *Catcher*: “Metaphorically, *Catcher* reads as a recognition of America’s own process of maturity, from innocent and idealistic ‘childhood’ to the ‘adult’ pursuit of status and power in both our private lives and as a nation. Hence, *Catcher* and the surrounding debate can be said to point out a disjunctive gap of moral ambiguity in American culture—for the adult as well as the child” (4). This gap signifies a distinct break between youth and their parents, a generation gap where youth found themselves in a no man’s land between childhood and adulthood. This lack of identity—neither child nor adult—created a general identity crisis in the average American youth; youth were uncertain of themselves but certain of what they were not: their parents. The beginning of the counterculture was not based in clear definition but instead a resistance against definition—a very postmodern idea.

Postmodernism is by definition an ironic theory. The irony in postmodernism resides in its questions about language, structure, and ultimate meaning; that is, the irony of postmodernism exists in the fact that it must utilize language, structure, and meaning in order to exist as a theory.¹ Many critics of postmodernism claim that this paradox contradicts and therefore

¹ Postmodern critic Hugh J. Silverman describes how the postmodern concept of deconstruction indicates how language is self-defeating: “For deconstruction can make a living only inasmuch as there is already someone who wants to say something about something to someone. Deconstruction requires a prior hermeneutics, the anterior

invalidates postmodernism,² but proponents of postmodernism address this problem by claiming that sincerity and originality are non-existent and the idea of meaning is ultimately ironic.³ The irony of postmodernism affirms the irony of truth and meaning. Postmodern critic Fredric Jameson describes how postmodernism exists only by its dependence on past ideas, a necessary paradox: “[T]he paradox lies in the difficulty of distinguishing what made the new and the original, the innovative, in the modern system from a postmodern dispensation in which ‘originality’ has become a suspect concept, but where many of the basic postmodern features... look suspiciously indistinguishable from the old modern ones” (397). Likewise, Eco compares how postmodernism provides nothing new or sincere to a husband’s relationship with his wife: “[H]e cannot say to her ‘I love you madly,’ because he knows that she knows... that these words have already been written... In an age lost of innocence, [a person accepts] the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated” (623). The postmodern approach to language, structure, and meaning is to ironically utilize and depend on them, which ultimately eliminates the possibility for sincerity and originality. Eco’s claim that postmodernism must ironically lead to a stifling of creativity and newness (622) and Hassan’s idea that postmodernism is an idea that can only exist in paradox and contradiction (591) is where *Catcher* is ultimately postmodern. Holden’s rejection of phoniness is actually a call for a childlike sincerity—for something new, original, and unaffected by adult standards and motivations—and his realization that sincerity is impossible is what makes him an ironic postmodern character as well as a representational voice for the countercultural movement.

work of addressing one another about the matter at hand. Deconstruction lies in wait for ‘discourse’ to stake its claims and it pounces on it” (30).

² Stefan Morawski terms this dilemma the “postmodern syndrome” in where postmodernism self-defeats by reestablishing what it is trying to question: meaning in language and structure (102).

³ Max Oelschlaeger describes how the greatest challenge that postmodernists face is how to present their theory in a way that is not self-defeating: “Deconstructionists decry all foundational claims; thus, they open themselves to charges that they are self-defeating, because the possibility of human existence requires an assumptive framework—cultural leaps of faith—that guides human action” (6).

The counterculture—identified by what it is not rather than what it is—is a movement that lacked clear definition, which is the clearest sign of the postmodern beginnings of the countercultural movement. Frederick Jameson describes postmodernism’s resistance to definition by claiming that “definition no longer exists: the definition of the question is in fact that of postmodernism itself” (387), and Martin Heidegger describes how postmodernism requires no definition: “[I]t resists every attempt at definition. Nor does this most universal and thus indefinable concept need any definition” (1). This resistance to definition is clearly seen in the counterculture not only by their name but also by its resistance to the people and institutions that attempted to provide them with definition. The conventional ideologies—both pertaining to religion, politics, and personal choices—presented to countercultural youth by their parents were commonly rejected; rather, the only definition that countercultural youth could identify with was their opposition to their conventional parents and standards created by their institutions. This culture of difference and opposition is not a culture of definition because it depends on the opposition for definition, similar to Jacques Derrida’s description of postmodernism’s lack of definition: “By definition, difference is never in itself a sensible plentitude. Therefore, its necessity contradicts” (53). While Derrida’s ideas were specifically in regards to postmodernism’s impact on language, the idea that language in itself resists definition resonated with a postmodern idea of self-identity. Youth counterculture and its necessity were dependent on the culture they were resisting, a self-defeating idea. While the countercultural movement resisted definition, on a personal level, this lack of definition impacted the average youth’s sense of identity. Holden’s struggle with identity is similar to the struggles of many youth during the countercultural era, and his lack of direction is indicative of a postmodern resistance to a metanarrative.

Holden's journey, while eventful, lacks any clear purpose, and it is this lack of goal and direction that correlates his experience with a postmodern life void of structure. Holden reveals his lack of direction, "I don't even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it" (5), and his decisions, impulses, and experiences seem to have no clear cause and effect. Holden's story draws similarities to Stanley Grenz's definition of the breakdown of the metanarrative in postmodern literature: "We have not only become aware of a plurality of conflicting legitimating stories but have moved into the age of the demise of the metanarrative. The postmodern era is a period in which everything is 'delegitimized'" (45). Holden's narrative—both unreliable and scattered—fits into this definition: he is unable to trust others' opinions, he often is confused about his own ideas, and he has difficulty liking anything. Even his sister Phoebe criticizes him by saying "[y]ou don't like anything that's happening" (169), frustrated at his inability to understand or develop any solid commitment to anyone, anything, and any place. Dromm and Salter comment on Holden's confused opinion about the world: "At any stage in life, reading Holden's story can remind us that the world's confused. Much of our world doesn't make sense, even though most people move through it as though it and never bother to question it like Holden. To disregard the world's confusion requires sometimes being a phony" (xiv). Holden's idea of the phony correlates with anything adult—a symbol of authority—, and his distrust of adults and the structure they impose on him is actually a rejection of structure and purpose all together. Holden rejects structure because he finds that the adults who impose structure on him cannot protect him, which is an idea present in many countercultural youth living with the constant threat of the Cold War. The constant threat of ultimate destruction created a culture—especially among impressionable adolescents—that seriously reconsidered the idea of

destruction and its permanence, and Salinger's experience during and after the war, as well as his writing, exemplified this struggle.

Contrary to an overtly simplistic interpretation of *Catcher*, it is not my intention to make direct comparisons between Salinger and Holden because such comparisons would unfairly reduce Salinger to a mere literary character; however, the environment that surrounded an author during his writing process can at times reveal key elements behind a text, and Salinger's wartime experience and ideological transformation following the war directly correlate with the postmodern qualities of the novel. Salinger's personal changes following his service in World War II were significant because his religious beliefs, opinions about mankind, and questioning of his own identity signified a personal transformation to a more postmodern view of the world. Rather than approaching the novel from an authorial intent interpretation, I will approach the novel largely from a new historicist approach, and a brief overview of Salinger's background will contribute to a better understanding of the postmodern qualities of *Catcher*.

Prior to the war, Salinger possessed a moralistic attitude towards humanity, believing that the human race, while corrupted, was still redeemable. Largely due to his Jewish upbringing and elitist prep school education, Salinger readily adopted a more conventional idea that man was a moral being who actively chose between right and wrong (Bloom 53). His decision to join the Army during World War II was largely due to his patriotism and desire to help those who were under oppression from Nazism, and by most accounts he was a very brave and admirable soldier who served in some of the bloodiest battles in the European front (Reiff 9). However, following the war, Salinger experienced a disenchantment with the human race as Kenneth Slawenski states that "[t]he army would eventually have a profound effect upon Salinger's work... he was forced to adjust his attitude towards people. His view of humanity shifted with every new

individual he encountered, which had a substantial effect upon his literary sensitivities” (51), and this changing view resulted in a more isolated, lonely attitude towards humanity and a rejection of its inherent goodness or badness. Slawenski describes how after the war, Salinger attempted to take part in a “Denazification” of Germany by trying to undo the philosophical damage that the Nazi regime had wrought upon the German people; however, he was shocked at how difficult it was to change peoples’ minds, and he was incredibly discouraged with the nature of humanity (134). Slawenski describes how the war impacted Salinger: “In the summer of 1945, Jerry Salinger’s experiences, extended service, sudden loneliness, and reluctance to express his pain converged upon him with disastrous effect. As the weeks wore on, his depression deepened and his feelings began to immobilize him... In July he voluntarily checked himself into a general hospital in Nuremburg for treatment” (135). His inability to mentally cope with the horrors of the war is most greatly seen in the evolution of his writing.

Salinger’s writing following the war took a noticeably darker turn as he began to craft stories dealing with death, suicide, depression, alienation, and anxiety, and this change in mood to his writing can be attributed to his experience at war. Many of his short stories were about soldiers dealing with anxiety after the war, and he visited the theme of depression frequently. His short story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” while critically celebrated, exposes a much darker side of Salinger as the story deals with a main character who is unable to deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome and eventually commits suicide. His story “For Esmé with Love and Squalor” deals with a U.S. Army Sergeant (Sergeant X) who found it difficult to connect with others and express compassion: “[a]waiting the D-Day invasion, he expressed the exact same determination to appear less cold and more compassionate to those around him. Like Sergeant X, Salinger lost sight of that resolve after the war” (Slawenski 188). The transformation of Holden

Caulfield's character after the war also provides a clear shift towards more postmodern themes in Salinger's writing.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of Salinger's change in writing can be seen through previous creations of Holden Caulfield. His short story entitled "Slight Rebellion off Madison" written before the war displays a Holden who is emotionally confused but intimate with others. Similar to *Catcher*, Holden is a teenage boy attending Pencey Prep who is constantly attempting to find affirmation in others; however, this Holden differs in the sense that he feels he can still find some hope in other people. However, following the War, Salinger decided to reintroduce the character of Holden, and he created the Holden in *Catcher* as a much more pessimistic character detached from the world around him. This version of Holden was more relevant to the countercultural movement and signified some form of philosophical break from Salinger's previous writings: "Though historians are fond of defining virtually every era as one of transition, it does make sense to locate the publication of Salinger's novel on the cusp of change. The novel benefited from the loosening of tongues that the Second World War sanctioned" (Whitfield 597-98). This transition in Salinger's writing is indicative of Salinger's own personal change in philosophy, as well as America's transition and "loosening," into a more postmodern viewpoint. The controversy surrounding the novel indicates that the novel was in the least challenging some aspect of American culture—most notably, conventional, nationalistic American culture—and Salinger's personal change in philosophy reflected in *Catcher* were representational of a cultural change in America.

The release of *Catcher* in 1951 caused an immediate strong reaction to the novel, both positive and negative, and the public opinion of the novel reflected the "culture wars" America was undergoing at the time. Steinle describes how the novel was the literary centerpiece of post-

War America: “The controversy generated by *The Catcher in the Rye* is just such a contemporary American debate ...public controversy over *Catcher* is essentially a Geertzian ‘note in a bottle’: a cultural debate about what constitutes moral and ethical conduct in mid-twentieth-century American life” (8). She attributes this controversy to the novel’s structure and its reflection of America’s “cultural contest over the sources as well as the symbols of individual control and cultural authority in postwar America” (5-6). William Faulkner’s opinion on Holden after reading *Catcher* further reveals how Holden’s lack of place and identity were both tragic and shocking, indicating a character who was willing to question the meaning of authority and structure:

To me, his tragedy was not that he was, as he perhaps thought, not tough enough or brave enough or deserving enough to be accepted into humanity. His tragedy was that when he attempted to enter the human race, there was no human race there. There was nothing for him to do save buzz, frantic and inviolate, inside the glass wall of his tumbler, until he either gave up or was himself, by himself, by his own frantic buzzing, destroyed (244).

Holden’s attitude towards others stems from his idea that “[p]eople are always ruining things” (87), and this attitude is perhaps what people found most shocking about him. This disconnected view of humanity reflected the philosophical climate in which *Catcher* was written, and the popularity as well as controversy of the novel in the 1960’s provides explanation for why youthful counterculture were so attracted to Holden.

This rebellious worldview that Holden possesses was mainly why many youth were so drawn to his character; culturally speaking, *Catcher* is unique because of its popularity among adolescent readers and their overwhelming response to the novel. This trend can be most

obviously attributed to the fact that the narrator is himself a teenager, and he experiences many of the problems that a countercultural teenager would have encountered—namely, family and school troubles, sexual confusion, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety. However, Holden’s narration surpasses a mere teenage diatribe against the world; rather, the growing counterculture of the 1960’s gravitated towards Holden because his narration itself represents an America that was beginning to question and deconstruct basic foundational institutions. David Castronovo explains how *Catcher* resonated with the American public: “Formal discourse, sequential thinking, reverence for the dignified and the heroic: these acts closed by the 1960s. The voice of Holden played a part in shutting them down. Its tone—directed against prestige and knowingness—is as cutting today as it was in 1951” (186). For many countercultural youth, Holden became a literary hero not only for his adolescence but because of his complete distrust of adults, institutions, and his overall disdain for those who represented hierarchical thinking in both relationships and society. The novel became a type of manifesto for youth culture, and its popularity among adolescents reflected the dawn of a new era of thinking that many youth would adopt. The novel changed and grew up with America, and the conventional response to the novel confirmed that there was at least some aspect of Holden’s story that many found disturbing.

Catcher’s cultural impact and its postmodern themes, specifically in regards to the American adolescent, were most greatly seen through its presence in high school reading lists and the controversy that surrounded the novel. Whitfield describes how twenty-two years after the novel’s publication, high school English classes were assigning *Catcher* despite a significant public outcry against the novel: “In 1973 the *American School Board Journal* called this monster best-seller ‘the most widely censored book in the United States.’ It was noted nearly a decade later that *The Catcher in the Rye* ‘had the dubious distinction of being at once the most

frequently censored book across the nation and the second-most frequently taught novel in public high schools” (574). Jack Salzman also comments on the public response to *Catcher*: “In secondary schools, colleges, and universities, it may well be the most widely read post-World War II American novel—and the most banned. For a few years, critics and scholars seemed as interested in Salinger’s fiction as did undergraduates” (15). The conflicted opinions about *Catcher* were oftentimes attributed to Holden’s crass and blasphemous language, but *Catcher* was certainly not the only novel on high school reading lists to contain obscenities. Rather, the novel’s controversial nature was largely due to the deeply honest and introspective nature of Holden.

Holden’s first person narration connected with youth largely because he actually invites the reader to not only perceive the world as he does but also invites the reader to feel as deeply as he does. His confusion, his depression, his frustration, and his eventual mental collapse provided a strange sense of comfort to a confused youth culture; they were called to feel and hurt with Holden, and in the end they were told that this confidant was not mentally stable to begin with. It is reasonable to infer that perhaps some people felt so uncomfortable with Holden—and others felt so comfortable with Holden—not because he is vulgar and honest but because they felt betrayed or comforted by his mental instability. Steinle describes the reaction to *Catcher*:

The division, then, is over whether to prepare adolescents for or to protect them from adult disillusionment, and it is a split I believe indicates a contemporary crisis in the process of middle class enculturation... In the postwar period, however, recognition of the increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social experiences has unavoidable, and it is precisely this cultural dissonance that is highlighted by Salinger’s novel (131).

Similar to the disenchanting child who finally realizes that his heroes are flawed and human, many felt that Holden's mental collapse exposes him as a fraud. Joyce Rowe describes Holden's unreliable narration: "Salinger never frees himself, or therefore the reader, from the grip of Holden's perspective... Instead, isolation, anxiety, the modern sickness of soul turns out to be the given, irremediable condition of our lives" (95). Holden's confusion and lack of identity caused the reader to experience his own identity crisis, and while youth seemed to find comfort in this realization, many adults and parents were uncomfortable with this experience and were afraid of how Holden would influence youth.

Holden's influence on the counterculture is both personal and social, and his character serves as a type of countercultural voice for youth. Similar to the way Holden's fear of growing up and obsession with childlike innocence translated into rejection of adulthood and adult institutions, many countercultural youth rallied around *Catcher* as a literary representation of their angst. Through an observation of the countercultural response to the novel as well as similarities between Holden and the average countercultural youth, there is clear evidence that *Catcher* is a transitional novel that embodied postmodern themes and helped to influence a massive philosophical shift in America.

Chapter Two: Holden and the Development of a Countercultural Identity

The effects of the postmodern era on American culture can be seen in the rise of youth counterculture in the 1960s. Predating the rise of youth counterculture, the publication of *Catcher* provided an image of a rebellious teenager, confused and lacking clear personal identity. Following the publication of *Catcher*, this confused teenager became the stereotype for the American teenager, and Holden's character became a type of literary model for the average countercultural youth. Manifested through massive cultural changes in race relations, women's rights, sexual liberation, the Vietnam War, and an emerging drug culture in the middle class, American youth were promoting a new way of life that emphasized a breakdown in social structures—such as the role of the state, family, and religion in the life of the individual—and a rise in individual separation from these structures, tenets that I propose signify postmodernism. Along with influencing the social institutions of American society, youth counterculture began primarily with the individual teenager's struggle for personal identity, a dilemma that Holden helped to popularize. *Catcher* is the staple novel of American youth counterculture, and Holden's personal influence on the average countercultural youth—most clearly seen through Holden's identity struggles—is evidence of the postmodern aspects of the novel.

While the countercultural movement was a movement against society, the movement began as a very personal resistance to maturity and adulthood. Prior to the counterculture's prominence and impact on American society, youth began a questioning of self and identity. Issitt describes how the counterculture's origins "advocated self-enlightenment and individual experience" (64) and sought to create a "society in which the group did not obscure the individual" (64), and many youth first questioned basic personal traits—such as age, sex, race, and family—that were traditionally used to give a person definition. Social institutions such as

the family, church, school, and government existed to help a person understand his place in society, and youth rallied together to question the validity of these institutions, but ultimately the average teenager's questioning of society began as a questioning of the self. Youth, being neither child nor adult, struggled to identify with their age; the rise of feminism caused youth to question what it means to be a man or a woman; civil rights caused youth to break down the question of race and what it means in the life of an individual. They questioned what their parents had told them and who their parents set them up to be, and their natural reaction to this question of identity was to go against their parents who they deemed as restrictive and repressive.⁴ The beginning of the counterculture first signified a questioning of these traits, and many youth adopted an identity that simply resisted what their parents had done. The commercial response to *Catcher* among youth provides evidence of the novel's influence on the teenage perception of identity.

The novel's popularity among countercultural youth is largely seen in overall sales as well as the general countercultural response to the novel during the countercultural movement. Scott Hurley describes how by the early 1960s the novel had already taken on the status of a classic American novel, but *Catcher* differentiated from other classics in the way the novel continued to sell, especially among teenagers (1). Pinkser comments that the novel's commercial success during the 1960s was due to "readers who were attending colleges and universities" and that "Holden Caulfield is meant to be a sharp critic of such 'phony' values, and his desperate search for a more authentic, more spiritual alternative linked him with other postwar rebels" (6-7), revealing how countercultural youth identified with his desire for identity and authenticity.

Ian Hamilton describes how his youth, as well as the lives of many of his contemporaries, during

⁴ Debra Michals refers to how countercultural youth identified with how they didn't want to become: "In effect, they enact (construct) the kind of social world they want to experience by talking about what they don't want to occur in relations with others" (58).

the countercultural movement was largely defined by Holden's narrative: "*The Catcher* was the book that taught me what I ought already to have known: that literature can speak *for* you, not just to you. It seemed to me 'my book'" (5). Youth financially supported the novel and also promoted its value as an academic, social observation of their generation. Conveniently, whether Salinger intended to or not, the novel's popularity with youth coincided with a growing teenager market in America.

The creation of the American teenager was a result of both economic interests as well as the changing culture of America. Young people were an untapped market, and marketers began to promote the idea of youth culture largely due to the fact that they could potentially create an identity for an entire generation left struggling with questions of identity—both in societal structures as well as their own identity—after returning from war. Bill Osgerby describes the rise of the American teenager following World War II as the concept of a teenager began during the 1940s (18), and Osgerby later goes on to explain the economic influence of teenagers in the 1940s: "During the 1940s the term [teenager] was increasingly utilized in the world of advertising and marketing, steadily leaking into popular discourse where it was used to denote a new breed of affluent, young consumers" (18). Twenty years later, the rise of teenager culture peaked as counterculture developed. Conveniently, the publication of *Catcher* occurred during the middle stages of this rising youth market, and the novel had amassed over three million sales and five republications in its first ten years of existence with the overwhelming majority of those purchasing the book under the age of twenty-five (Steinle 89, 92). Not only was *Catcher* successful commercially with youth culture, but it also quickly became a staple on high school reading lists⁵ as teenagers across the country were now encountering *Catcher* in their English

⁵ Reiff discusses how the novel was one quickly become a staple in high school reading lists in 1960, during the times of censorship efforts against the novel as well (79).

classes⁶, bringing a literary and philosophical discussion of the novel to the forefront of this new youth culture. Undoubtedly, Holden Caulfield and his distrust of adults and society greatly resonated with youth, and Holden became a type of spokesperson who could adequately represent the confusion and angst of post-World War II youth counterculture.

It is important to distinguish that the beginning of youth counterculture in America does not necessarily coincide with the publication of *Catcher* in 1951; rather, Holden's thought processes and behavior came about in the beginning stages of the movement. Karen M. Staller argues that it was not until 1960 that we have any newspaper or journal articles describing a noticeable trend in youth developing a new way of life that opposed their parents' standards (30), Reuven Kahane claims that 1961 was when "[w]hat was defined as a subculture or counterculture ha[d] been transformed into a dominant culture" (14), and Fred Turner argues that in 1964, during the beginning of the first major Vietnam War protests, that America's youth expressed fear that their government no longer cared for them and "that America's political leaders were treating them as if they were bits of abstract data" (1). While certainly there is no concrete date to mark the beginning of the countercultural movement, I will use the early 1960s as the general time period for the beginning of youth counterculture, which is post-publication of *Catcher* by roughly nine years. *Catcher's* existence prior to the countercultural movement does not indicate that its themes are outdated; rather, the novel's existence before the countercultural movement indicates that the themes of the novel were at least somewhat "ahead of the times." Holden's narrative became a model for the general sentiments of lack of identity and meaning in youth during the beginning stages of their movement, and *Catcher's* popularity before and during the movement signifies that youth viewed Holden as a literary voice for their countercultural ideas.

The lack of clear definition in youth counterculture draws similarities to postmodernism. Staller provides a definition of the average countercultural teenager, who she deems as “runaways”: “They were either ‘rejecting’ or ‘seeking liberation from’ traditional social values and institutions, including family and work. They were searching for ‘identity’ or ‘spontaneity’ or ‘natural life’” (36-37). As the name itself indicates, counterculture is most easily defined by what it is not—namely, youth began to gravitate to the idea that they were anything but what was the accepted social norm, an otherness or opposition. Peter Braunstein and Michael Villiam Doyle corroborate this idea of otherness found in youth of the 1960s: “These roles were played by people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were” (10). Many youth of the countercultural movement adopted an identity simply by drawing comparisons to and distancing themselves from what had come before, a movement that Braunstein and Doyle claim permanently changed American culture as “millions of people formally in its thrall incrementally realigned their values and actions to contradistinguish themselves from it” (11), developing an anti-identity rather than an identity. This movement against traditional personal identity created a unique dilemma among youth—rather than breaking down the norm and creating something better, many youth were left only with what they had destroyed, a “deconstruction of our national hymn, which managed to simultaneously evoke chauvinistic pride for and unbridled rage against the American way of life...seemingly incompatible feelings” (Braunstein and Doyle 190). This culture of anti-culture found identity mainly in its oppositions⁷—notably, an individual understood that he was not his parents, and he did not

⁷ Maia Gibbs refers to the importance of defining through opposition during the counterculture: “A counterculture is usually indicative of a group of people with separate values and ideals, typically posing an ‘oppositional stance,’ and an alternative to the mainstream” (n. pag.).

identify with what his parents gave him—, and this counterculture’s ideas were based in resisting these definitions.

This opposition to adult standards in order to create an identity was primarily based in the idea that youth were not their parents. Many countercultural youth saw their identity through the realization that they were not their parents, and the result of this attitude was a lack of foundation and identity. Derrida’s idea that the signifier exists only by comparison to the sign where “[e]very sign—verbal or otherwise—may be used at different levels, in configurations and functions which are never prescribed by its ‘essence,’ but emerge from a play of differences” (276) is seen in the way that many youth experienced a lack of clear identity in self. This “play of differences” existed in their attempt to become different and separate from narrow, boxed-in definitions of personal identity, drawing comparisons to the postmodern idea of anti-foundationalism which claims that “questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law, or value” (Fish 344). The countercultural reaction to patriotism was simply to become unpatriotic, its reaction to the family institution was individualism and sexual liberation, and its reaction to religious structure was anti-religion⁸; albeit all of these attempts, once they became a reality, left many youth with questions of identity and true, sincere meaning⁹, a situation that Manuel Luis Martinez describes as leaving “little room for forming a coherent coalition. A focus on the ‘resistant’ nature of fluid, shifting ‘subjectivity,’ central to an antifoundationalist, antiessentialist, counter-hegemonic project, has left the minority subject with no place to ‘arrive’... a deconstruction of the notion of ‘nation’” (278). It is in this idea of a of a

⁸ “Ultimately, its cultural nationalism and separatist tendencies, its identity politics, and its exclusive communality led to an isolationism... [counterculture] rejected the possibility of a ‘national culture’” (Martinez 9-10).

⁹ “Self-subsistence within a mobile corporatist society cannot participate within community, for community requires roots” (Martinez 13).

lack of clear identity that *Catcher* relates to the countercultural movement, both in Holden's anti-phony agenda and lack of identity. *Catcher's* significance during this era cannot be understated; it was a novel that gained great commercial success and popularity among youth not because of its gripping plotline or sentimental qualities but because of its honest representation of youthful angst and questions of identity. This identity crisis is one of Holden's most defining characteristics, and it is within his interactions with others—primarily adults—and his desire to preserve childlike innocence that we see his role as a countercultural voice.

Correlating with the idea that Holden is a voice for American youth counterculture, Holden's resentment towards anyone "phony" is a postmodern questioning of the unoriginal, regurgitated standards of adulthood. Joyce Rowe describes the postmodern influence that *Catcher* had on American culture:

This image of a bleak moral climate which destroys the soul is not only the keynote of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* but of much that now seems representative of the general tone of American cultural commentary in the aftermath of World War Two, when the novel was conceived. By 1951 (the year of *Catcher's* publication) the ambiguities of the cold war, of American global power and influence, were stimulating a large popular audience to find new relevance in well-worn images of disaffection from the modern world. (77)

To Holden, any experience that is not entirely sincere and new is phony and destroys any sense of identity. It is for this reason that Holden hates the idea of sex: "Sex is something I really don't understand too hot. You never know where the hell you are. I keep making up these sex rules for myself, and then I break them right away I spent the whole night necking with a terrible phony named Anne Louise Sherman. Sex is something I just don't understand. I swear to God I don't"

(63). Holden is afraid of sex because it is a rite of passage into adulthood—once he has sex, then every other sexual experience will be an unoriginal copy of his first experience¹⁰, a distinction he makes when Ackley keeps trying to tell him a different story about the same sexual experience: “All he did was keep talking in this very monotonous voice about some babe he was supposed to have had sexual intercourse with the summer before. He'd already told me about it about a hundred times. Every time he told it, it was different” (37). Holden observes how Ackley feels the need to recreate a sexual experience because he understands that he can no longer approach sex from a sincerely innocent viewpoint: this loss of innocence is Holden’s idea of phoniness. Graham comments that the process of sexual maturity is a “process that that Holden fears because it implies the loss of innocence” (22), and his fear of sex is a fear that children will be introduced to the world of phony “adult callousness” (55). It is for this reason that Holden’s idea of phoniness is synonymous with adulthood: adulthood is a symbol of postmodern unoriginality, similar to Lyotard’s claim that postmodernism is “the pastime of an old man who scrounges in the garbage-heap of finality looking for leftovers, who brandishes unconsciousnesses, lapses, limits, confines, goulags, parataxes, non-senses, or paradoxes, and who turns this into the glory of his novelty” (136). Holden struggles to create an original identity because he cannot separate himself from adult standards of identity, which is the reason he resists adulthood by attempting to rescue and preserve childhood.

Holden resists adulthood because he views it as the antithesis to innocent, sincere childhood, and his identity crisis is a postmodern resistance to definition. The same way the counterculture movement found an identity in the idea to resist adulthood and “not trust anyone

¹⁰ James Cumes describes how Holden is “constantly engaged in a futile search for sincerity” (n. pag.), and his resistance to sex is a fear that he will lose his innocent, sincere opinion about sex (n. pag.).

over thirty,”¹¹ Holden’s final piece of advice to never “tell anybody anything” (214) also rang true for many disenchanted youth of the 1960s. It is this idea of arrested development, or as Kahane describes, “postmodern misperception” (3) that many youth adopted: “The new youth culture is aimed at coping with social complexity and transforming alienation into meaning. It is an attempt to create a new concept of youth based on institutionalizing unstable, spontaneous behavior and character trends as a kind of order” (3). The issue that Holden encounters with this anti-phony, anti-adult attitude is the mere impossibility of delaying adulthood. He bases his identity on an impossible premise, and it is this push against adulthood that causes Holden’s anxiety and identity crisis.

Holden’s association of phoniness with the adult world is a reaction to the idea that youthful innocence will always be corrupted by adulthood. Similar to the counterculture’s search for identity through opposition, Holden understands childlike innocence only by comparing it to adult corruption, its opposite. Martin Haliwell comments on the connection between phoniness and the adult world: “He [Holden] quickly establishes himself as an outcast, swift to ridicule the phoniness of the adult world and the hypocrisy that he detects hidden in their empty promise to value individuality... Holden stands out as a prototype of the youth culture that was to explode upon the scene in the middle class of the decade” (66). The text confirms this association with phoniness and adulthood in the beginning of the novel when Holden first begins using the word phony exclusively when an adult in some way attempts to force a child or a teenager to grow up too quick, corrupting innocence by forcing on adulthood. Holden’s first use of the word is when he describes Selma Thurmer’s father, the headmaster of the school: “What I liked about her, she

¹¹ Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik describe the relevance of this phrase during the countercultural movement: “[It was] a broader cultural revolution that broke down rigid social rules and hierarchies. After all, it was Berkeley that first circulated the phrase ‘don’t trust anyone over thirty,’ a challenge to the hierarchies of age that would be repeated many times over in a decade known for its iconoclastic youth culture and the ‘generation gap’ it helped to promote” (30-31).

didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy her father was. She probably knew what a phony slob he was" (2). He uses the word multiple other times when he is encountering adults who are criticizing his immaturity such as Mr. Spencer (11), the preacher Ossenburger who he describes as a "big phony bastard" (16), and his roommate Stradlater, a "phony kind of friendly" (26), who stretches out Holden's clothes—a symbol of a bigger, adult body no longer fitting into childhood clothing—, has sexual relations with Holden's childhood friends, and asks Holden to write English papers for him, forcing him to take on his identity. Holden expresses resentment for Stradlater when he has sex with at least two girls who Holden knew in his childhood: "The thing is, you didn't know Stradlater. I knew him. Most guys at Pencey just talked about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time--like Ackley, for instance--but old Stradlater really did it. I was personally acquainted with at least two girls he gave the time to. That's the truth" (49). Largely because of Stradlater's sexual behavior with girls who Holden specifically knew during childhood, Holden is drawn to the point of violence with Stradlater, getting in a fist fight with him over the fact that he is forcing the girls he grew up with to move away from their childhood and mature sexually, a clear sign of "phony" adulthood and innocence robbed. Holden's reaction to this forceful adulthood is similar to that of many youth of the counterculture; rather than accepting the inevitability of adulthood, many chose to rebel against adulthood and cling to a childlike innocence.

While predating the countercultural movement, *Catcher's* anti-adult premise correlated with a growing American sentiment that youth were beginning to question the value of adulthood and maturity and consequently preserve themselves from adult corruption. The title of the work itself indicates a theme of salvation from certain death—Holden wishes to save children from running off of a cliff in a rye field, and Holden posits himself as a type of savior from this death:

“Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around--nobody big, I mean--except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff--I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them” (173). Holden confirms two aspects of the counterculture movement in this passage: he describes a large amount of young people with no sense of direction, and he views the absence of anybody “big” except himself, implying that he, a child, must fulfill the absence of an adult presence. Gerald Rosen comments on the significance of this passage in 1951, prior to the countercultural era: “What we have here in miniature, in 1951, is the prescient portrait of an attempt to create counterculture. The children, unable to connect with the prevailing culture, begin to separate from it and attempt to care for each other” (561). Holden’s role throughout the novel is to save children from falling, and it is in this impossible role that we see the cause behind Holden’s troubles—he views innocence only in its opposition, that which is not adult, but he is unable to construct his own idea of what innocence truly means, which is evidenced by his failure to actually rescue the children in his own life that he loves, symbolizing the general theme of innocence lost in youth counterculture.

The idea of lost innocence is a countercultural association with adulthood—adult standards exist only to corrupt and repress youth. The countercultural struggle for definition is largely a reaction to the idea that youth must develop an identity independent of their parents. Bennett M. Berger describes how countercultural youth attempted to “unlearn” the adult standards that were taught to them:

[T]he association between the “innocence” of childhood and the (romantic) idea of childhood’s elemental intelligence or wisdom is understood as connected by

the fact that children have not yet had the opportunity to learn the taboos in terms of which an “adult” perspective is defined. This devaluation of the adult world carries with it a devaluation of its association of competence with conventional “learning,” thus strengthening the belief of communards that it is important to *unlearn* much that they were taught (78).

Forging an identity against previous conceptions of knowledge, the countercultural youth based their identity on the idea that the majority of their parents’ thoughts were wrong, and their advice was adult corruption rather than valuable information. Similar to a postmodern philosophy, many of these youth found identity in their oppositions, understanding not who they were but who they were not. Joseph A. Kotarba and John M. Johnson describe how this postmodern attitude—a breakdown of an adult identity—in youth correlated with the beginnings of the countercultural era: “A postmodern existentialist reexamination of these events suggests that the innocence of middle class, postwar, baby boom childhood served as the primary metaphor for these young people. High status was attributed to the ‘flower child,’ whom the counterculture posited as the innocent who simply rejected the oppression of adult establishment” (117). It is through this opposition to the adult world that Holden exemplifies his countercultural similarities—he wishes to preserve innocence and be anything except what is adult, and he develops false perceptions of other people, as well as himself, in order to maintain a childlike innocence. This false premise found in Holden, based on opposition rather than definition, connects Holden to the postmodern ideas of countercultural youth.

Youth counterculture and its movement against adulthood only delayed an inevitable consequence: eventually, all of these youth will grow up, and they will have to develop an identity from the adult standards that they rallied against. Holden’s character—including his

struggles with identity, his self-destructive behavior, and his compulsive lying—signifies these postmodern tenets of the countercultural movement. Christopher Göhn describes how Holden’s journey throughout the novel is a symbol of the countercultural “focus on innocence, and especially the loss of it during maturation” (5), further commenting that Holden represents the “protagonist’s quest for identity and a place in society” (5). While Holden seeks to be a catcher in the rye, preserving childhood innocence, his own being contradicts this desire. He himself is growing up and he will eventually embody the phony adult world that he hates so much; he cannot save his own innocence and cannot define himself.

Throughout the novel, Holden’s desire to protect innocence causes him to question his age—a symbol of constant maturation away from childhood. Physically, Holden’s gray hair, lanky figure, and higher pitched voice posit him as a paradox, and emotionally he at times displays great maturity as well as immaturity—embodying both adult and childish attributes. He describes his confusion at what it means to act his age:

It’s really ironical, because I’m six foot two and a half and I have gray hair... And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It’s partly true, too, but it isn’t *all* true. People always think something’s *all* true... I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything (9).

Holden resists defining himself by age because he understands that the older he gets the more unoriginal and adult that he becomes. While Holden certainly understands that his actual age is sixteen, he resists identifying with his age because his age is attached to a cultural standard about how he should behave. He finds that his body and mind can at times contradict the cultural

stereotype of what it means to be sixteen, and he implies that his age does not need to be “all true.” Similar to the countercultural idea that a way to avoid the onset of adulthood is to reject the significance of age,^{12 13} Holden communicates that perhaps his age, or the relevance of age in general, is truly not important at all. Marcus Schulzke describes Holden’s lack of identification with his age: “Holden appears older than sixteen. Yet he admits to acting as if he were only twelve or thirteen and his friends seem to think that he acts much younger than he is. There is a vast disconnect between how he looks, how he acts, and how old he actually is. Even though we know his age, it does not categorize him” (110). His lack of commitment to both childhood and adulthood—a postmodern resistance of definition— causes him to not be able to fully commit to other aspects of his life. He desires to mature sexually but backs away from any actual sexual experience, as can be seen in his experience with the prostitute in his room (94); he tries to express his maturity through drinking and smoking, but only complains of the negative side effects of both behaviors; he wishes to connect with school children and protect them from destruction, but he understands that he could never truly accomplish this task and contradicts this desire by frequently using profanity around his sister Phoebe, a behavior she criticizes him for (168). Holden resists both childhood and adulthood, a sign of immaturity but also a sign that he is not willing to commit to any definitive identity that comes with an age. It is this difficulty in which Holden signifies the dilemma of countercultural youth: a postmodern agenda that goes against definition only causes confusion.

¹² James E. Perone describes how many countercultural youth resisted the categorization of age because it was an attempt to define their movement: “The movement was a collection of causes, but could not, despite the efforts of many in the established power structure of the United States, be defined in terms of hair length, age, or lifestyle; the counterculture was too amorphous” (44).

¹³ Berger refers to this countercultural rejection of age as age-grading, where many youth rejected what the idea that a person can identify with his age. It was largely a reaction to older generations attempting to enforce standards on youth because of their age: “The analytic question is whether they are expressions of the equalitarianism that the communards brought with them to their rural settings from the urban counterculture. If so, are they therefore definitive of the culture of the group, a culturally fundamentally different from the mainstream of American life?... [T]he decline of age-graded culture in many hippie communes seems real enough” (73).

Holden's lack of identity and definition is further seen in his deceptive tendencies. If he is not able to define his own self and age, then he reacts by withholding truth from others as well, attempting to define their reality. Holden even describes how he finds a strange sense of control through his ability to define his own reality: "It's funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands and they'll do practically anything you want them to" (157-58). Throughout his narrative, Holden frequently withholds the truth from others strictly because he finds gratification in being able to determine how others perceive reality. He tells a woman on a train that his name is Rudolf Schmidt because "I didn't feel like giving her my whole life history" (54-55), he lies about his age often and even once made his voice deeper over the phone to do so (64), and he constantly relays false information about past events. While Holden understands what he is doing, he does so simply because he is in the mood to lie to people: "Once I get started [lying], I can go on for hours if I feel like it. No kidding. *Hours*" (58). This deceptive tactic correlates with a youthful expression of angst—in a postmodern era¹⁴ in which one can only find definition through comparison to others, control is found by attempting to define others.¹⁵ This attempt to define others' reality is how Holden deals with his lack of identity, and his desire to be a savior for children everywhere, defining for them their permanent existence as children, is Holden breaking down their natural progression into adulthood. He is enforcing his own standards upon children, attempting to provide them with his own definition. The death of Holden's little brother

¹⁴ Henry Giroux refers to how postmodernism in countercultural youth took form in their questioning of meaning: "As a discourse of disruption and subversion, postmodernism does not argue that all referents for meaning and representation have disappeared; rather, it seeks to make them problematic, and in doing so reinscribes and rewrites the boundaries for establishing the conditions for the production of meaning and subjectivity... It subordinates reason to uncertainty and pushes its sense of distrust into transgressions that upon up entirely different lines of inquiry" (462). Holden pushes the boundaries of truth because he is questioning the existence of truth in and of itself.

¹⁵ Brent Whelan talks about how countercultural youth took their identity crises out on society as a whole, exerting control over by breaking down accepted definitions: "We can read in them a wealth of desires: to assert control over the representational machinery of mass culture; to escape the rationalized boundaries of that culture and the social relations it enforces; to achieve an ahistorical, wholly present time and self-present subjectivity called 'higher consciousness'" (86).

Allie, a literal loss of innocence for Holden, serves as the impetus for Holden's emotional instability and misperceptions. Holden uses Allie as a symbol for what happens to all children if they make it off the cliff into adulthood.

Holden attempts to immortalize youth and its innocence throughout the novel, believing that the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood symbolizes death both literally and metaphorically.¹⁶ Regardless of his opinions about adult corruption, Holden's view of himself as a type of messiah figure for all children, rescuing them from sure death and adult "phoniness," does nothing but question the foundation of an individual identity—meaning, his desire to immortalize childhood is anti-progressive and ultimately destructive. Rather than viewing a child as a living organism that will eventually grow into a flourishing person, Holden views children only by what they are not, their opposition—they are not adult phonies, but he tries to make sure that they will never be able to grow into adults either, stopping them from running off the cliff. This attitude is similar to the countercultural perception of youth; while many youth understood that they too will eventually become the adults who they oppose, their destructive behavior towards themselves is a result of a misperception of the lasting meaning of their own youth. Irving Kristol remarks on how the self-destructive behavior of the counterculture was a result of a general lack of personal identity and meaning in youth: "The energy of the postmodern counterculture...will bring down with it—will discredit—human things that are of permanent importance. [It is] a celebration of irrationalism and a derogation, not simply an overweening rationalism, but of reason itself. In these circumstances, the idea of an ordered liberty could collapse under pressure from a new spiritual and ideological conformity" (146). Postmodern youth responded to temporality of life by rejecting it, viewing the onset of adulthood as the onset

¹⁶ The death of Holden's brother Allie is a literal example of a child dying before adulthood, and the progression of his little sister Phoebe serves as a metaphorical example of this death.

of death. Holden's attempt to immortalize children is a reaction to the idea that life is not permanent, and he irrationally attempts to make childhood permanent by denying reality and definition.

Allie's death symbolizes Holden's greatest fear—his inability to preserve a childlike innocence—, and it is Holden's failure to accept his brother's death that serves as the underlying basis for his desire to preserve innocence; Allie is the one who he could not save from running off of the cliff. Throughout the novel, Holden connects Allie's death with adulthood—two occurrences that symbolize the end of childhood. Holden's inability to separate Allie from his opposition—what destroyed him—is what causes Holden to experience a crisis. Holden views his own progression into adulthood as a symbol of his own death. Holden's reaction to Allie's death is self-destructive, an understandable reaction when faced with his own eventual death:

I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn't do it. It was a very stupid thing to do, I'll admit, but I hardly didn't even know I was doing it, and you didn't know Allie. My hand still hurts me once in a while when it rains and all (39).

This passage reveals Holden's intense grief over the loss of a family member, but it is unique because it indicates Holden's self-destructive behavior. Not only does he wish to destroy the garage, his shelter, he also wishes to destroy himself, breaking his own fist. This passage reveals both Holden's deconstruction philosophy—he literally seeks to destroy his parents' garage, the adult shelter that failed his brother—as well as his powerlessness to prevent the innocence from fading from a child. Holden's insistence on maintaining Allie's memory—meaning, his efforts to

immortalize his brother—is his irrational belief that Allie’s childhood is the antithesis to death. He claims that it was a foolish, irrational thing to do, and he revisits this irrationality by talking to Allie whenever he feels depressed: “Boy, I felt miserable. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed” (98). He feels his identity, even his very existence, is dependent on Allie: “I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, ‘Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie.’ And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd thank him” (198), and he describes how Allie’s death has damaged his relationship with his mother: “She hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died. She's very nervous” (107). Holden connects his depression, his existential questions, and his familial problems largely to Allie’s death, indicating that Allie’s death—a literal end of a child—symbolizes adulthood, also a literal end of childhood. Holden equates adulthood with death for all children, including himself, and his desire to preserve innocence in children is an attempt to protect them from an adult identity.

Holden’s inability to accept his brother’s death is a symbol for his inability to accept the end of youth, a misperception very common among countercultural youth. Holden has a static image of Allie—forever immortalizing him as a child—and he defines Allie by his death, viewing him only by what destroyed him. He cannot develop a solid identity for his brother, and consequently he has a misperception of his brother. Holden’s conversation with his little sister Phoebe reveals Holden’s misperception:

“I like Allie,” I said. “And I like doing what I'm doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff, and—” “Allie's dead--You always say that! If somebody's dead and everything, and in Heaven, then it isn't really—” “I

know he's dead! Don't you think I know that? I can still like him, though, can't I? Just because somebody's dead, you don't just stop liking them, for God's sake-- especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that're alive and all" (171).

This passage indicates Holden's refusal to allow Allie to be a person—someone who would have grown up if he did not die—, and his inability to connect with other people stems from the fact that he will not allow Allie to mature; rather, Holden's perception of Allie as an unchanging child only to lose his innocence through death causes Holden to fight against his own personal changes. Bloom discusses the impact that Allie's death has upon Holden and how he uses it to delay his own maturing: "Holden is seventeen in the novel, but appears not to have matured beyond thirteen, his age when Allie died. Where Holden's distrust of adult language originates, Salinger cannot quite tell us, but the distrust is both noble and self-destructive. To be a catcher in the rye, Holden's ambition, is to be a kind of secular saint, willing and able to save children from disasters" (2). Bloom's claim that Holden's behavior is "both noble and self-destructive" correlates with Holden's desire to preserve innocence—while his love for childlike innocence is a good motive, his refusal to accept the end of childhood is a denial of reality. Similar to the way that Holden still illogically talks to Allie even though Allie is gone, Holden views Allie as an example of the fact that moving past childhood into adulthood is synonymous with death, a philosophy prevalent in many counterculture youth.

Much like Holden's immortalization of Allie's childhood, many countercultural youth also immortalized their youth, believing the onset of adulthood to symbolize an existential death. Similar to the way that Holden talks to Allie as if he is still there and asks Allie to maintain his existence, there was a type of "suspension of disbelief" present in many countercultural youth

that caused them to behave as if they were never going to grow old. Braunstein comments on the idea of eternal youth in the counterculture: “At first glance, the generation gap dividing youth and adult society seems a fit antagonism to place on the mantle alongside such other hallowed 1960s binarisms... The image of rampaging youth who rejected the values of their parents and surrogate parents vowed never to trust anyone over thirty, and hoped to die before they got old” (243). Stephen Burt also refers to how *Catcher* helped to promote this “forever young” idea to youth: “Postwar cultural critics, as Leerom Medovoi notes, could ‘adopt...youth as a national signifier’; the ‘striking celebrations’ of *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger, ‘place youthful rebellion at the very core of Americaneness.’ At the same time, many adults ‘suspected’ that a new peer culture of movies, comic books, and rock music would prevent the rising generation from every becoming adults” (87). Holden’s reaction to Allie’s death is to destroy the windows and physically hurt himself, and many countercultural youth also practiced self-destructive behavior¹⁷, embodying a postmodern breakdown of structure and meaning.¹⁸ The reason for this destruction largely stems from a general lack of identity—if youth did not want to be like their parents, then they must look to their youth for definition, a task that Staller describes as a separation from “the adult world of responsibility” (68) to the “wild world of the young and the reckless. Its characters insisted on absolute freedom and autonomy without guilt or responsibility. It was an anthem to perpetual motion” (68); in Holden’s case, his perpetual motion is cyclical, endlessly repeating (or immortalizing) childhood and not allowing himself to progress into adulthood. Similar to the way that Holden’s denial of Allie’s death is destructive,

¹⁷ “Drug usage was one of the most important markers of membership in the youth community in general” (Staller 80).

¹⁸ “Once harmless destinations... were replaced by dangerous, drug-infested, and morally suspect environments of the counterculture” (Staller 39).

the countercultural immortalization of youth resulted only in a stunting maturity, disallowing the possibility for growth or definition.

The inability for counterculture youth to define themselves—or their overall resistance to definition—draws similarities to the postmodern philosophy that Derrida terms the “undecidable,”¹⁹ indicating that a lifestyle that illogically goes against inevitable progress and maturity cannot produce any solutions. When Holden responds to why he crippled his hand and destroyed his garage after Allie’s death, he does not provide any clear reason: “It was a very stupid thing to do, I’ll admit, but I hardly didn’t even know I was doing it, and you didn’t know Allie. My hand still hurts me once in a while when it rains and all, and I can’t make a real fist any more--not a tight one, I mean--but outside of that I don’t care much” (39). This willing acceptance of illogical destruction stems from Holden’s inability to find meaning in anything, a tenet that Donald P. Costello claims is similar to many countercultural youth: “[M]an does not exist within recognizable human values. Peace has become totally replaced by violence. Freedom exists for no one, the victims or the victimizers. Love has been totally replaced by sex; a body is not any longer free or revered, but the subject of obscene graffiti and the object only of violence, a sickness to be cured” (191), and this attitude affected the counterculture: “In such an extreme world of the nonchoosing and the nonhuman, no culture—mainstream or counter—can exist” (191). Meadan describes this countercultural self-destruction as a direct result of an anti-adult agenda: “A situation was created in the sixties where young people finally voiced a feeling bottled up inside them for years. It became legitimate to admit that they despise a world that they feel is being imposed on them by adult society, and it is now time to establish a new world, an

¹⁹ Derrida describes this postmodern lack of identity the “undecidable”: “I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, ‘false’ verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical oppositions, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution” (19).

antithesis of the current one...The more they returned the feeling of alienation towards the adults, the better” (51). Consequently, the overwhelming usage of drugs, alcohol, and sexually promiscuous behavior found in many youth²⁰ of the counterculture was a response to an adult warning against such actions, an attempt to create an “antithesis of the current” adult world. Holden’s relationship with his sister Phoebe symbolizes his current struggle, attempting to stop a child who is running towards the cliff.

Holden compares Phoebe to Allie and views Phoebe as a symbol of his second chance to preserve innocence; while he may have not been able save Allie, he is terrified that he may not be able to save Phoebe as well. Since Phoebe is a living, growing child, her eventual progression into adulthood is inevitable, which causes much distress in Holden. Holden confirms this comparison between Allie and Phoebe when he notices how Phoebe has short red hair like Allie (67) and how his fondest memories of Phoebe are when he and Allie were making her smile. James Bryan describes Phoebe as Holden’s “emblem of unattainable childhood beauty” (1066), and he immortalizes Phoebe similarly to the way that he immortalizes Allie—namely, he is not willing to allow Phoebe to grow up and therefore does not view Phoebe on a realistic level, which is confirmed in the ways that he gets extremely angry when he is reminded of the fact that she too will eventually leave her childhood. Multiple times he expresses how he wishes Phoebe would always stay the same, most notably when he visits the museum, a place that never changes: “I kept thinking about old Phoebe going to that museum on Saturdays the way I used to. I thought how she'd see the same stuff I used to see, and how she'd be different every time she saw it... Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. I know that's impossible, but it's too bad

²⁰ “The use of psychoactive substances and rock music were an integral part of this new youth counterculture” (Meaden 50).

anyway” (122). Allie’s death, while disturbing to Holden, reaffirms the fact that Allie will forever be a child, and Holden’s hopelessly attempts to preserve Phoebe’s childhood as well. He views Phoebe’s childhood as merely an antithesis to adulthood and immortalizes her childhood, attempting to define for her who she should be.

Phoebe, the Greek word for “protector of children” (Bloom 185), exists in order to expose to Holden a living embodiment of childhood. Sarah Graham asserts that Phoebe, while being the youngest character in the novel, in fact is the most reasonable character (76), John C. Unrue claims that Holden views Phoebe as “the antithesis of the phonies” (144), and Bloom comments that Phoebe represents a “time of innocence which he [Holden] would like to recapture or perpetuate” (32). This image of Phoebe—as a living symbol of childlike innocence—causes Holden to compare her to Allie as well as express fear that perhaps she too will be robbed of her childhood and die. While Phoebe certainly is still very much childlike, she does exhibit some behavior that is very much reasonable and adult-like, which is very disturbing to Holden. She scolds Holden for flunking out of school, (174) she supports Holden by giving him her Christmas money (178), and she takes the blame away from Holden in order to protect him from their mother (178). All of these actions present to Holden the opposite of what he is trying to do for her; rather than Holden protecting Phoebe, Phoebe is the one who protects Holden, a realization that makes Holden weep: “Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn't help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she came over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can't just stop on a goddam dime” (179). It is this scene in which Phoebe exposes to Holden the illogical nature of his actions, indicating that his desire to preserve her innocence will only halt her own development. She comforts Holden, provides Holden with financial security, and

protects Holden from getting in trouble with his mother, all behaviors that symbolize the role of a protector. Reiff describes this reversal of roles between Holden and Phoebe: “Now, instead of saving the world by protecting the children, Holden wants to reject the world and shut himself off from evil by becoming a ‘deaf-mute’ in the West. It is Phoebe who rescues him from this total withdrawal” (71). Phoebe forces Holden to view her as a human—living and progressing—rather than as a forever child, and it is this humanization that causes Holden to accept her eventual progression into adulthood.

Holden’s acceptance of Phoebe’s fading childhood signifies his eventual acceptance that he cannot define himself by what he is not. Towards the end of the novel, he realizes that he will truly never be able to stop Phoebe from running off the cliff as he notices profanities vandalized all across her school: “I went down by a different staircase, and I saw another ‘F[*]ck you’ on the wall. I tried to rub it off with my hand again, but this one was scratched on, with a knife or something. It wouldn’t come off. It’s hopeless, anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn’t rub out even half the ‘F[*]ck you’ signs in the world. It’s impossible” (202). His frustration at his inability to remove the corruption from his sister’s environment causes Holden to understand that sheltering her, preserving her from the world is not possible because she is a living human rather than a stagnant being, forever stuck in her childhood. While Holden may not be able to accept his own maturity, he cannot stop Phoebe from becoming an adult. Holden’s acceptance of Phoebe’s eventual progression into adulthood is a postmodern acceptance that innocence and sincerity²¹, which can be defined as an attempt to create something new and originally authentic, cannot be preserved.

²¹ R. Jay Magill describes how sincerity is a response to postmodern irony and the end of new expression: “[Sincerity is] a simultaneous attempt to regain the legitimacy of sincerity by attempting to ironize oneself out of the dead. Thirty years after the postmodern proclamation of the death of the author, the sincerely expressive self, the artist with the true concern (personal, political, religious, obsessive) is beginning to have legitimacy” (191).

The novel's end depicts the only time that Holden is able to accept reality and suspend his role as a savior figure for children. He brings Phoebe to the carousel, and he worries that Phoebe will fall off the carousel as she attempts to reach for a gold ring: "All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (211). It is here that Holden is able to let go of his attempts at defining Phoebe, trapping her in her childhood and refusing to let her grow up. Holden then describes an intense moment of happiness that overwhelms him:

Boy, it began to rain like a bastard. In buckets, I swear to God. All the parents and mothers and everybody went over and stood right under the roof of the carrousel, so they wouldn't get soaked to the skin or anything, but I stuck around on the bench for quite a while. I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants. My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way; but I got soaked anyway. I didn't care, though. I felt so damn happy all of sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth (213).

Holden's thoughts are similar to his feelings about Allie, especially in the fact that it is raining. Holden previously described how his hand always hurts when it rains (39)—a consequence of punching out all the windows—and he describes how the two times he visited Allie's grave it rained, causing all of the parents to run back to their cars for shelter:

It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All the visitors that were visiting the cemetery started

running like hell over to their cars. That's what nearly drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner--everybody except Allie. I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there. You didn't know him. If you'd known him, you'd know what I mean. It's not too bad when the sun's out, but the sun only comes out when it feels like coming out (156).

This symbol of rain offers a type of baptismal rebirth for Holden; his attempt to protect Phoebe has only instead forced him to come to terms with his own disappearing childhood. Holden recognizes that he cannot forcefully save all the children in the world, and he is willing to recognize that it is healthy for a child to grow, progress, and naturally develop an identity, regardless of whether that identity is sincere or not. Dromm and Salter describe this scene as a moment when Holden is able to empty “[his mind] of any false hopes of the inauthentic” (51) and renew his “quest for what is real, genuine, valuable, and beautiful” (51). Similar to a postmodern idea that beauty and reality can only be experienced through comparison and are essentially non-existent,²² Holden eventually accepts this idea by allowing himself to accept Allie’s death, accept Phoebe’s human progression into adulthood, and accept his own identity as he matures into an adult; rather, Holden has become exactly what he set out to fight against: an adult.

While Holden’s experience is representative of the common experiences of many countercultural youth, his ultimate acceptance of adulthood is not a rejection of the counterculture nor is it a denial of postmodernism. Rather, Holden symbolizes that meaning and

²² Jonathan Roffe describes the deconstruction of meaning in a deconstruction philosophy: “[T]here never was nor could there be such an order of pure intelligibility, no logos or meaning that would be an ideal presence, pre-existing and occult” (7).

definition are cyclical, only existing in their comparisons to other definitions. Similar to Heidegger's claim that "[t]he question of meaning of being is possible only at all only if something like an understanding of being is" (193), Holden briefly is able to accept happiness, accept Allie's death, and accept the impossibility of protecting all of the children in the world. It is through this theme of acceptance that *Catcher*, while symbolic of youth counterculture, is also an affirmation of lost identity and confusion; the novel addresses the issue and provides a narrative to the lack of personal identity in countercultural youth. It is for this reason that youth gravitated towards the novel—beyond simply affirming youthful confusion in identity, *Catcher* addresses this confusion and attempts to provide some solace for those who find themselves in a similar crisis as Holden. Holden became an influence on youth culture because he offers to join the lost in their journey, and his story exists to help to provide some guidance. This guidance was something that countercultural youth thirsted for, and their connection with *Catcher* is evidence of this thirst.

Catcher's contribution to the counterculture was that it most clearly provided a concrete voice for youth who were dealing with an incredibly tumultuous and transitional time in American history. At least in the literary field, many youth were so attracted to the novel because of its ability to coherently represent a postmodern philosophy in an adolescent's life, and it is this cultural voice of *Catcher* that coincided with its influence on youth. Largely because postmodernism and counterculture by definition go resisted definition, Holden's voice provided explanation to youth who were hungry for some type of definition amidst the chaos. Holden Caulfield's confused identity—and acceptance of that confusion—helped to provide explanation and guidance for the counterculture.

Chapter Three: Holden Versus The Nation: *Catcher's* Influence on Social Structure

Catcher's influence on countercultural youth is most clearly seen in Holden's behavior—namely, his lack of identity, fear of adulthood, and self-destructive tendencies; however, his influence on the counterculture is also seen in the way he approaches various societal institutions. More specifically in regards to *Catcher*, Holden's attitude towards these institutions—most notably education, religion, and family—is representative of a growing countercultural attitude that these institutions needed to be questioned, broke down, and transformed. Holden's general distrust of the adult world correlates with a general distrust of the institutions they have created for him, and his attitude towards these institutions is similar to a countercultural anti-institution attitude.

Catcher's social impact was greatest in the way that the counterculture almost entirely interpreted the novel in the same manner, creating some semblance of community amidst a multitude of questioning young people. The majority of countercultural youth discovered a voice through Holden, and their collective agreement and emotional connection to his character somewhat created a platform for their post-modern, post-institution ideas. Harold M. Foster discusses that youth of the 1960s communed around the novel like future youth cultures found community in MTV; Holden Caulfield became a pop culture icon, embodying a youthful dissatisfaction for social institutions: “[T]he first modern tribal youth experience was the collective reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*... so many people read it at the same time and seemed to receive the same message that the phenomenon is similar to an MTV special today. The messages from *The Catcher in the Rye* helped shape the youth culture of the late 1960's and early 1970's” (31). Further evidencing the countercultural response to the novel, Christopher Gair comments that “novels such as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) were widely

believed to articulate a significant generation gap” (32), Bloom comments that Holden experiences a major sense of alienation from his parents, a feeling that many youth related to during the countercultural era (41), and Ana Sobral even goes as far as to describe the countercultural reaction to *Catcher* as that of a cult following: “Hamilton explained the profound emotional impact of *The Catcher in the Rye* by claiming that the novel ‘spoke not only *to* him but *for* him.’ This reaction was hardly unique: in the 1950s and ’60s, countless readers in—and outside the USA adopted Salinger’s seminal novel as a personal manifesto. It is precisely this quality that has ensured its leading position in the cult canon” (56). A reason for this communal—perhaps even cult-like—response to the novel among countercultural youth was because it helped lay some foundation for a generation who was quickly defining itself by breaking down the existing foundations. While many were questioning the meaning and validity of social institutions, they found agreement and community through *Catcher*, indicating that the novel in and of itself became almost a type of social institution for youth counterculture.

Youth culture developed a community around Holden largely because of the novel’s popularity in academia as well as the commercial market, indicating that the novel was both a best-seller and a quickly becoming a respected work of literature. David Simmons describes the counterculture’s overall unity around Holden: “Indeed, in an ideological stance reminiscent of *The Catcher in the Rye*’s Holden Caulfield, during the 1960s the adult world is largely delegitimized as ‘phoney’ or corrupt. In the 1960s, youth is positioned in opposition to the adult world and imbued with a distinctly savior-like role, possessing the sole capacity to rejuvenate American society” (34). Likewise, the novel’s popularity among youth was shown primarily in its sales but also due to its presence in university classrooms: “In 1961, *Catcher* made its second appearance on the paperback bestseller list of the *The New York Times Book Review*, causing

Times critic Robert Gutwillig to comment that while use in college classes explained some of its high sales figures, ‘the appeal of *The Catcher in the Rye* extends also to younger brothers and sisters of the college crowd’” (Steinle 127), and: “At the same time, Edward Corbett reviewed *Catcher for America*, and noted that ‘I have never witnessed on our campus as much eager discussion about a book as there was about *The Catcher in the Rye*’” (Steinle 127). Youth, both in the classroom as well in their personal lives, had discovered Holden and were eager to discuss his character, his distrust of adults, and his honest, open rejection of social conventions and standards. Holden’s honesty and quest for identity were contagious to youth, and their celebration of Holden’s narrative was an example of their connection to his postmodern questioning of society.

Similar to the way that many countercultural youth began a massive questioning of their own identities, attempting to find personal meaning by breaking down what had come before, this confusion also transferred into a general questioning of society as a whole. Contrary to their parents and their general trust and allegiance to American society, many youth found American society to be corrupt. Micah Issitt describes that “[a]t the root of all these changes was a generation of people asking, ‘Why are things the way they are’” (66), describing an overall questioning of the necessity and purpose of major social institutions, and Timothy S. Miller comments on how the counterculture spread their own lack of identity to a national lack of identity: “The counterculture’s participants...found themselves adrift from the prevailing values of society and tried, variously, to effect major changes in majority society or drop out of it... the Establishment—the tired, entrenched, declining prevailing system—was rotten to its core, and a new society needed to arise on its cultural dunghill... although the means for getting there were usually murky” (xvii). A countercultural movement predicated on the idea that society is corrupt

and youth must not become like society found roots in many major cultural events such as the ever-present threats of the Cold War²³, the nationalistic ideologies of their “greatest generation” parents,²⁴ the civil rights movement, and the beginning of the Vietnam War; all of these events correlated with a breakdown which became the societal context for the beginning of the counterculture.

The countercultural reaction to American society generally derives from the breakdown of the largest American institution: the state. Largely due to the fact that the counterculture was a movement based in a common distrust of authority, the easiest target for many youth was the only authority all of them were under: the government. Many critics argue that the clearest aspect of the counterculture was a breakdown of trust in the government, a movement that began during the Cold War and peaked during the Vietnam War. Scott McFarlane describes how the counterculture developed a general “disaffection towards the Vietnam War [that] created a common ground” (119), and Eli H. comments that the roots of the counterculture were a reaction to a “U.S. government [that] left the American in the dark about the real happenings in Vietnam” (3) and started a “student movement against war” (3). Many youth adopted the mentality that the governmental foundation of their society was in fact opposed to them, forcing the “American way” upon them while disregarding their well-being. The countercultural response to this perceived encroachment of their individuality was to respond in the exact opposite manner—

²³ Phil Ford develops a connection between this questioning and the Cold War and describes how many youth were adopting postmodern theory, questioning the value of the society that came before them: “...the historical cliché of an America in the cultural deep freeze of the cold war... in the 1960’s daydreams began to change... What [we] call postmodern was also ‘post-war,’ ‘post-white,’ ‘post-heroic’—wised up the cold war’s masculine fantasies of power and privilege. The movement made for itself a narrative of youthful idealism in a fallen world, and that fallen world was the cold war culture” (11).

²⁴ Preston Shires describes how the World War II generation largely believed in a common, American way of life, a nationalistic idea that many counterculture youth found oppressive and went against: “[M]embers of the World War II generation by and large assumed that there existed one good and perfect system for economic progress... often summed up as the ‘American way’... And it would seem to sixties’ youth that there emerged a whole army of suit-and-tie men... that constituted an establishment, the Establishment, that was bent on compelling all Americans to abide by its rules and regulations” (7).

much like Holden and youth developed an anti-identity as a response to the threats of adulthood, many youth also developed an anti-institutional philosophy that challenged the necessity of social institutions.

A “post-American way” correlated with a post-institution way, and Charles Jencks argues that the 1960s were an age of protest and postmodern lack of identity: “Post-Modernism was a confluence of streams that became much bigger in the 1960s with the counterculture and its protest movements. The arguments were against bigness, the loss of local identity” (n. pag.). Similar to theories about society posed by postmodern critics such as Derrida²⁵ and Foucault,²⁶ many countercultural youth not only distrusted their society but also questioned the purpose of the society. Simon Gottschalk observes a connection between the countercultural movement and postmodernism. (354) Barbara Epstein suggests that the counterculture movement was “under the influence of postmodernism, an intellectual movement that calls for exposing and questioning the assumptions behind all accepted ideas” (18), and Todd Gitlin comments on what these postmodern tendencies meant for American society: “History was ruptured, passions have been expanded, belief has become difficult... Old verities crumbled, but new ones have not settled in” (58). It is this lack of direction during the counterculture that connects Holden to the movement; while previous literary characters such as Huck Finn and David Copperfield²⁷ attempted to progress past some facet of society that they disliked, Holden wishes to break down accepted culture but has no solution or direction for afterwards. This lack of direction is what many youth ironically rallied around.

²⁵ Michael Naas comments that during the 1960s a Derridean deconstruction philosophy created a “death drive” (150) in society that affected “political institutions, nation-states and national contexts,” (150) where people began to question the necessity of society itself.

²⁶ Sarah Mills describes how a countercultural idea of society correlated with Foucault’s theory that there existed “a struggle concerning the status of truth and the role it plays in the socioeconomic and political order of things” (62) and that this struggle was “central to the structure and functioning of society” (62).

²⁷ During the very beginning of his story, Holden comments on how his experience is nothing like that “David Copperfield kind of crap” (1).

The lack of direction present in many youth's personal lives became a communal lack of direction, and Sobral further comments that the Cold War and the beginning of the Vietnam War caused many youth to develop an identity as strictly agents of change but not progress, a clear break from a modernist idea of social progress: "[T]he effect of the event [war] on society may make prevalent attitudes, rules and institutions seem outdated. The younger generation [assumed] its culturally prescribed role as agent of change, not only publicly challenging dominant cultural standards and beliefs but also 'rejecting the status quo and attempting to overturn current political values'" (31). Nadel describes Holden's postmodern approach to his narrative, and indicates how his confusion ties into the counterculture:

As the author of two anatomies [the Caulfield in the narrative and the actual Caulfield in the psychiatric ward], Caulfield thus manifests two drives: to control his environment by being the one who names and thus creates its rules, and to subordinate the self by being the one whose every action is governed by rules. To put it another way, he is trying to constitute himself both as subject and object; he is trying to read a social text and write one. When these two drives come in conflict, his autobiographical narratives betray the same structural authority as that of the historical narratives he critiques, and there are no options left... This lack of options reveals an organization of power that deeply reflects the tensions of post-World War II America from which the novel emerged (73).

Consequently, this breakdown of society correlated with a breakdown of the individual—these youths were still members of the society and its institutions, and the youthful journey away from them resulted in a collective identity crisis.

A large reason for this countercultural push against society was that, similar to Holden, many of these youth were very much a part of a middle class culture of nationalism, indicating

that their questioning of society was a personal one; similar to the way that youth questioned their own personal identities, the value of their culture was also a personal question. Holden even comments on how he hates the fact that he came from the privileged class of America, the American bourgeoisie: “Everything I had was bourgeois as hell.... At first he only used to be kidding when he called my stuff bourgeois, and I didn’t give a damn—it was sort of funny, in fact. Then, after a while, you could tell he wasn’t kidding any more. Goddam money. It always ends up making you blue as hell” (113). The text confirms that Holden comes from a place of privilege, which is further evidenced by the wealth of his father, “My father's quite wealthy, though. I don't know how much he makes--he's never discussed that stuff with me--but I imagine quite a lot. He's a corporation lawyer. Those boys really haul it in” (107), and his hatred of the expensive prep schools that he attended, his family’s wealth, and his socioeconomic class is also a struggle with his own identity—more specifically, his family.

The closest institution to a youth’s identity was the family, and it is through the questioning of the family structure that many countercultural youth also experienced a questioning of their own identities. Largely because the family is an immediate, determined source of identity for a child, the counterculture was largely identified by familial standards—youth were commonly identified by the fact that they were different from their parents and their grandparents. Theodore Roszak describes how the countercultural questioning of the structure of the family was the most significant aspect of the countercultural movement because they “will be born to the faith—to the dress, the diet, the ritual, the beliefs, the authorities. The children will not choose. They will inherit” (157), and the countercultural questioning of the role of the family provided desired a replacement for the family structure but failed to provide that replacement: “Their efforts, born of rebellion against parental oppression or the despair of bad marriages, take

no interest in reclaiming the family, only in replacing it” (162). Due to this reaction, it was not uncommon for many youth to leave home and attempt to reinvent the structure of the family²⁸, a task that only created more confusion for youth. Robert N. Whitehurst describes how a countercultural reaction to the nuclear family was primarily a consequence of the strict social standards set by parents: “Mothers (and fathers) often fall short of the ideals of parenthood, and for some good reasons. Conditional love, achievement-ethic norms, and status anxiety are pressures and conditions which keep children within a definite and fairly rigid normative system... This problem is alleviated in a quite neat fashion with the norms of the counterculture family movement” (396). David W. Bernstein describes how the counterculture attempted to restructure the family: “This movement, which the social historian Theodore Roszak termed the ‘counterculture,’ inspired an ambitious reassessment of cultural values, an ‘effort to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeoisie home, and the Protestant work ethic’” (8). It is within this movement that many youth found a voice through *Catcher* and Holden’s disconnect and distrust of his family.

Holden’s family situation—or his lack thereof—is representative of an overall familial disconnect in the counterculture. His relationship with his parents is essentially nonexistent, and the novel begins with Holden describing the very impersonal nature of his parents:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, an what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of

²⁸ Eric v.d. Luft describes how countercultural youth attempted to learn how to “do away with this need” (113) to belong to a certain family structure, stating that many youth felt the family structure to be restrictive of individual expression. He claims that youth instead declared themselves “members of no particular family” and “citizens of no particular country” (113). However, youth still desired some form of family structure, just not the traditional model. Their failure to develop a family structure is a major cause of identity crisis.

crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father (1).

Before Holden even begins his story, he prefaces that his parental relationship is boring, dismissing the possibility that he is in any way like his parents. While Holden is certainly not the first teenager in literature to separate himself from his parents or his society—for example, Huck Finn is largely known for rebelling against his culture—Holden differs from previous characters such as Huck due to the fact that Holden does not understand why he is rebelling nor does he have any clear purpose for what he is doing. S.D. Sharma notes on this difference: “Holden is less capable of articulating his own predicament than Huck. His confession that, his is lousy vocabulary, testifies to this problem. He essentially lacks the capacity to conceptualise either his aesthetic experiences or inner conflicts. But Holden’s apparent indifference or incapacity is itself a guise or a kind of mask” (137). Alan Nadel describes how Holden begins his narrative by attempting to separate himself from the influence of his parents, but “at every turn he fails, constantly reflecting rather than negotiating the contradictions of the world” (85). Holden himself is this contradiction—attempting to create an identity—whether known or unknown—for himself apart from the identity already established for him by his family. Similar to the counterculture youth, Holden’s wanderings throughout New York City are shocking because he is away from the shelter of his parents—the absence of his parents defines his identity as a runaway youth, and ironically his parents provide him with the clearest source of identity²⁹.

Holden’s desire to separate himself from his parents indicates that he defines himself through his

²⁹ The fact that Holden is not at home with his parents is what defines his story most. It is not common for a young boy to travel around a big city by himself, and we view and identify Holden as a character that is not with his parents.

opposition; he cannot develop an identity on his own, and his return to his parents' apartment indicates that he recognizes some familial void in his life.

Holden's journey back to the apartment to visit Phoebe is symbolic of the absence of a family structure in his life. He returns to the apartment in the middle of the novel, terrified that his parents will discover him but insistent on seeing his sister: "I figured that if I didn't bump smack into my parents and all I'd be able to say hello to old Phoebe and then beat it and nobody'd even know I'd been around" (157). After making it to Phoebe's room, he is relieved to know that his parents are not home: "I began to relax, sort of. I mean I finally quit worrying about whether they'd catch me home or not. I figured the hell with it. If they did, they did" (163). The absence of his parents when he returns home is a depiction of Holden's family situation: he returns from the streets to his shelter, but there is no parental presence in the home, only the child Phoebe. Salzman describes the significance of the absence of Holden's parents in his apartment and a growing cultural disconnect between youth and their parents: "Holden's anxiety, then, is of a specifically contemporary kind. Those adults who should serve as moral tutors and nurturers are neither wholly absent nor fully present... Yet, however shadowy these adult figures may be, they are as controlling of Holden as is the impersonal, elusive authority which, he knows, ultimately determines the values of his home" (89). Holden's parents control him in their absence—their lack of a relationship with Holden impacts Holden greatly, and his fear of seeing them confirms the power that their absence has over him. The lack of a family structure provides as much of an identity—or an anti-identity—for Holden as a family structure would. He finds a source of identity in his lack of parental authority.

Similar to the way that Allie's death symbolized a literal loss of innocence for Holden, his death is also a major factor in the breakdown of his family dynamic. Holden describes how

his parents—especially his mother—have been distant since Allie’s death: “She [his mother] hasn’t felt too healthy since my brother Allie died” (107) and “I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father. Especially my mother, because she still isn’t over my brother Allie yet” (155). While Holden provides some character details about his mother—humanizing her response to Allie’s death—, his image of his father is human but also rigid, a man that is “quite wealthy” (107) and constantly enforces high academic and personal standards for Holden. The difference between his parents is significant, indicating that he still has some connection to his mother. However, when his mother returns home to the apartment, Holden retreats into Phoebe’s closet, letting Phoebe take the blame for the smell of cigarettes and shelter him in her closet (177). It is apparent that Allie’s death—a loss of childhood innocence—again is the basis for Holden’s identity confusion; the crisis of his death created an emotional separation between Holden and his family, and he feels estranged from his family largely because of his death. Allie’s death is the catalyst for Holden’s distrust in family structure because his family could not shelter Allie and preserve his innocence.

While Holden does not clearly blame his family for the death of his brother, naturally the death of a sibling would expose to him the inability of his parents to protect him from all danger. Allie’s death confirms to Holden that his parents, while not entirely malevolent people towards him, do not have the ultimate power to protect him, a reality he describes when he talks about how his parents mourn Allie’s death: “I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something. Anything except sticking me in a goddam cemetery. People coming and putting a bunch of flowers on your stomach on Sunday, and all that crap. Who wants flowers when you're dead? Nobody. When the weather's nice, my parents go out quite frequently and stick a bunch of flowers on old Allie's grave” (155). This portion of

Holden's narrative is significant because it describes how his parents' attempts at coping with Allie's death are pointless, and their ritual of putting flowers on his grave is their way of keeping him alive, a ritual that Holden hates. Dromm and Salter describe how this ritual is a symbol of conventional adult behavior that does nothing to protect Allie, similar to the way Holden's parents were unable to save Allie (87). Holden seeks to find identity outside of his parents' standards because he does not trust his parents nor does he want to be like them; rather, Holden believes that he is better off forging his own way, which is shown through his distancing from his parents.

Holden's lack of trust in his family is indicative of a growing parental distrust among youth during the 1960s. Holden's resentment of his parents' strict academic standards—confirmed by the fact that he is terrified of the fact that his parents will find out that he “got the ax³⁰” (4)—and his insistence that he is the “only dumb one in the family³¹” (67) represents a growing countercultural idea that a family identity only causes repression and disappointment. M. Amanda Ely comments that Holden perceives his parents as very flawed people, indicating that “Holden is particularly aware of the failings of his parents” (1130), and their failings signify not that they are human but that they are incapable of their duties as guardians. Patrick J. Hayes, when commenting on how Holden's distrust of his parents connects with a countercultural sentiment of alienation, states that Holden was a “favorite countercultural character” (505) who embodied the idea of a youth attempting to break away from his parents' flawed shelter to take care of himself. Holden's role as child-savior, guarding a field of children where no adults exist,

³⁰ Holden repeatedly talks about how his father has strict academic standards, claiming that he wants him to go to Yale, “My father wants me to go to Yale, or maybe Princeton, but I swear, I wouldn't go to one of those Ivy League colleges, if I was dying, for God's sake” (85) and how his parents would be incredibly angry if they found out he failed out of school: “I figured my parents probably wouldn't get old Thurmer's letter saying I'd been given the ax till maybe Tuesday or Wednesday. I didn't want to go home or anything till they got it and thoroughly digested it and all. I didn't want to be around when they first got it. My mother gets very hysterical” (51).

³¹ Holden describes how, compared to all of his siblings, he is the only child in his family that does not impress his parents and live up to their standards.

is an image of a youthful rejection of parental authority not only because it was restrictive but because it had failed both him and the rest of youth culture. A large reason that many youth felt this sentiment is that the world that they inherited was not a stable one; Issit describes that many youth living in a world of racial injustice, constant threats of nuclear annihilation, and unclear American militarism in Vietnam blamed their parents for the corruptions and hostilities of the world (47), determined to separate themselves from their families in order to create a better world. However, similar to Holden's aimless journey away from the shelter of his parents, many of these youths failed to develop a clean break away from their dependency on their parents³² to recreate a flourishing society. Rather, their rejection of the nuclear family only resulted in the rejection of various other social institutions.

Coinciding with a countercultural attitude against adulthood, many youth also viewed social institutions as a product of the adult world, tools used by older people to enforce their standards upon them. Adults required youth to attend school and sometimes university and taught them their values in these institutions, the government at times forcibly required young men to fight overseas in order to preserve an American ideal that many of them did not believe in, and the nuclear family was viewed as a patriarchy that enforced stringent standards about sexuality³³, domestic life, and overall happiness. It was not uncommon, nor unreasonable, for many youth to view these institutions not as helpful but harmful to them, and the majority of them began to resent these institutions as oppressive forces aimed at forcing them to become more mature and more adult. The educational institution was a clear target for many countercultural youth to question.

³² Thomas S. Weisner conducted a study of countercultural youth and what he termed the "dependency conflict." He discovered that many youth sought to go against their parents' standards largely because "[c]ountercultural youth certainly tried to change family life in the spirit of experimentation with all social forms, but also did so to break out of the emotional and social constraints they felt needed reform, especially the dependency conflict" (274).

³³ Epstein claims that the counterculture viewed the "family as an institution of oppression" (168).

The countercultural reaction to the education system largely stemmed from the fact that many youth were currently products of the system; school, teachers, and the university were very much a part of a youth's life. Similar to Holden's ironic anti-adult attitude—he hates phoniness and adulthood even though he is close to becoming one—many youth were against the academic institution because they were closely tied to it; a movement of youth unified around the premise that knowledge and society should be questioned would undoubtedly question the institution that exists to give them knowledge. Likewise, the countercultural push against the academic institution ironically became the breeding grounds for this countercultural movement.³⁴ Youth, or more specifically students, who found the adult standards of the institution as repressive used the institution as a platform for their countercultural ideas. It is no coincidence that Holden's journey begins at a school, which he abhors for its phoniness, and his story is based on the premise that he is journeying away from school but eventually will have to go back. Joseph Claro discusses how Holden views his time at Pencey as repressive: "Because of his age, school should be the most important institution in his life, but Holden has no use for it. Although he's intelligent and fairly well-read, school represents repression to him; it stands for the 'phony' standards and values" (7). However, he himself is a part of this system, and the school provides a scapegoat for him to reject. This phony, adult standard enforced by the school created an identity crisis in youth; they viewed educational standards as a violation of trust, but they had no clear solution as to how to rebuild that trust. The academic institution was their base, and their journey away from it only led to confusion.

³⁴ Roberta T. Ash argues that education was one of the easiest targets for the counterculture and possibly became a breeding ground for the counterculture: "[E]ducational institutions may be the most effective source of countercultural units—perhaps the only *possible* source. For ethnic or national movements, by definition, set themselves apart from other groups, and it is only when such movements act in the name of all the oppressed that they begin to transcend nationalism... For this reason, it is educational institutions that are fairly likely to be hatching grounds for the actual units of the counterculture" (122).

This journey of youth away from the academic institution was largely a reaction to a perceived elitism of their parents—more specifically, a rejection of a class-based society. Robert L. Hilliard discusses how many countercultural youth who were attempting to separate themselves from their parents' social class rebelled against education as an elite system: "Parents who have traditionally had the position and the power to change schools are those of the middle and upper classes, educated and affluent, who have the time and the resources to participate in the process of education...educators who protect the status quo sooner or later become indifferent and even antagonistic to the needs of the child" (14-15). Holden describes Pencey Prep as a hostile environment largely because of the higher class people who attend the school like himself: "So I got the ax. They give guys the ax quite frequently at Pencey. It has a very good academic rating, Pencey. It really does... Pencey was full of crooks. Quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families, but it was full of crooks anyway. The more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has" (4). Holden's disparaging attitude towards the educational institution is based on two premises common in counterculture youth: the institution is elite, and the institution attempts to enforce an elitist standard upon its students. Fred H. Marcus, when commenting on Holden's rejection of Pencey Prep, claims that Holden's rejection of his school is because of the adult values that the schools promote and how "we observe Holden at Pencey Prep where contemporary adult values are mirrored by the school patterns. Holden rejects the school; he is rejected by it" (4), and he further comments that these adult values are contrary to Holden's anti-conformity nature: "From the outset, then, the *molding* by Pencey Prep contrasts dramatically with the nonconformity of Holden" (6). This rejection of social class and the school's enforcement of it can be seen in the questionable relationship Holden has with his English teacher Mr. Antolini, an adult who tries to force him to grow up quickly.

Mr. Antolini is a symbol of a violation of trust for Holden, an adult who tries to force himself onto Holden, similar to a countercultural idea of academic “brainwashing.” Holden describes Mr. Antolini as “very nice” (174) and “the best teacher I ever had” (174), a positive role model who carried away James Castle’s body, a boy who committed suicide after being bullied (174). Holden trusts Mr. Antolini and views him as a sort of role model, which can be evidenced by the fact that he is the only person Holden ever calls for a place to stay or is willing to be completely honest with. Holden even explains that, due to Mr. Antolini, English is the only class that he was able to pass, implying that he still trusts Mr. Antolini’s role as an adult teacher in his life: “‘What was the trouble?’ Mr. Antolini asked me. ‘How'd you do in English? I'll show you the door in short order if you flunked English, you little ace composition writer.’ ‘Oh, I passed English all right. It was mostly literature, though. I only wrote about two compositions the whole term,’ I said” (182). While Holden may have failed his other studies, he still views English—the subject that Mr. Antolini taught him—as something that is worth his time, which is proven by the fact that it is the only subject that Holden excelled in. To Holden, Mr. Antolini represents what he is trying to be: a savior figure, teaching younger people how to be young. Peter Seng describes how Holden’s relationship with Mr. Antolini is symbolic of postmodern irony: “Holden’s interview with Antolini is also the high point of irony in *The Catcher in the Rye*: the proffered offer of salvation comes from a teacher whom Holden enormously admires” (207). Mr. Antolini describes his philosophy of education to Holden as a way to comfort him: “‘Many, many men have been just troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them--if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry’” (189). Much like

an older generation attempting to teach the counterculture according to their values, Mr. Antolini encourages Holden to look to older people for help, something that Holden struggles to do.

However, Mr. Antolini's sexual advance towards Holden destroys Holden's trust in his role as an older role model and symbolizes the counterculture's idea of an adult violation of trust.

Mr. Antolini's questionable motives with Holden solidify Holden's anti-adult and anti-institution sentiments. While the novel provides other more subtle hints of the sexual abuse of children—most notably Holden's fear that his childhood friend Jane Gallagher is being abused by her stepfather³⁵—Holden's views his experience with Mr. Antolini as the ultimate adult intrusion upon his innocence. Holden awakes to Mr. Antolini rubbing his head:

I woke up all of a sudden. I don't know what time it was or anything, but I woke up. I felt something on my head, some guy's hand. Boy, it really scared hell out of me. What it was, it was Mr. Antolini's hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. Boy, I'll bet I jumped about a thousand feet. "What the hellyya doing?" I said. "Nothing! I'm simply sitting here, admiring--" (192).

Mr. Antolini's response to Holden—that he is simply admiring Holden's body—is disingenuous; Mr. Antolini wishes to take advantage of Holden's trust and violate Holden. After Holden runs out of Mr. Antolini's apartment, he relates a telling history that provides evidence for his distrust of adults: "Boy, I was shaking like a madman. I was sweating, too. When something pervery like that happens, I start sweating like a bastard. That kind of stuff's happened to me about

³⁵ Holden describes Jane's questionable relationship with her stepfather: "I asked her, on the way, if Mr. Cudahy--that was the booze hound's name--had ever tried to get wise with her. She was pretty young, but she had this terrific figure, and I wouldn't've put it past that Cudahy bastard. She said no, though. I never did find out what the hell was the matter. Some girls you practically never find out what's the matter" (32).

twenty times since I was a kid. I can't stand it" (193). Holden reveals that he has been sexually abused before, a revelation that explains both his fear of adulthood and lack of trust in adults. Seng comments on Mr. Antolini's violation of trust: "The irony built into this denouement is clear: the saving advice that Antolini has given Holden has been rendered useless because the idol who gave it has fallen. Antolini is a shabby adult like all the others" (208). Holden's experience with Mr. Antolini is significant not only because he is an adult who violates his trust but also because he is an educator. Mr. Antolini's role as an educational role model who violates Holden's trust symbolizes Holden's ultimate rejection of academic institutions.

The final societal institution that Holden feels disconnected from is the institution of religion—namely, Catholicism. His mostly negative attitude towards religion again correlates with a loss of innocence; religion is an institution created by adults, and religion most of all attempts to set forth a standard for living, codifying the adult life³⁶. Whitehurst, when describing a countercultural opinion of the necessity of religion, posed a common question among youth during the 1960's: "The question asked by many youth regarding conventional morality and religion essentially is 'Who needs it?' simply because it is long-lasting, if it consigns one to unfreedom and game-playing in the by now distasteful middle class alternative" (399). Youth saw religion as an attempt at definition and standards, a system that puts groups of people into categories and provides them with an identity in the system. It is for this reason that Holden somewhat flippantly claims his status as an anti-religious figure by loosely associating himself with atheism multiple times throughout the novel: "I'm sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible" (99), he expresses disgust for

³⁶ Holden frequently discusses how Catholics are always trying "to find out if you're catholic (112) and how a person cannot join in on monastic lifestyle of peace and quiet if they are not Catholic (50). While Holden does not hate all standards that religion imposes, he does find the stringent rules of religion as an attempt to standardize a person, disallowing their individuality.

preachers who do not speak in their normal voices (100), and he claims, “Sally said I was a sacrilegious atheist. I probably am” (137). Similar to his image as a post-family, post-education figure, Holden as well claims that he is somewhat post-religion; however, again Holden’s status as a post-religious figure in a way affirms the presence of religion in his life—namely, he wishes to be a Christ figure for children, providing salvation for the corruptions of adulthood, and his failure at being this savior³⁷ reveals his lack of identity once he departs from religion. Stacey Donovan Smith comments that Holden’s attempt to be a Christ figure solidifies his desire for religious guidance: “Even though he may not be readily willing to accept it, there is some belief in a higher power within the mind of Holden... The main concept behind Holden’s quest is saving the innocence of the children, not letting them fall. This fall can be viewed as both the literal and figurative fall from innocence, similar to the fall in the Garden of Eden, tying together the concepts of religion to Holden’s belief system” (93). This religious imagery of a fall from grace correlates with Holden’s departure from the institution of religion.

Holden’s opinion about religion—more specifically Christianity—is another example of a postmodern breakdown of a societal structure; however, in the case of religion, Holden’s resentment stems from an overall greater resentment of the lack of parental authority in his life. While religion is not a major theme throughout the novel, Holden does have some curious encounters with religion that display his distrust of but at times fondness for religion. His relationship with his Catholic roommate Ackley becomes quickly hostile when Holden claims that all monks are “stupid bastards” (50), implying Holden’s dismissive and offensive attitude towards religion. However, his opinions regarding religion—most notably Catholicism—bear strange resemblance to his absent relationship with his parents: “Catholics are always trying to

³⁷ Holden’s savior-status derives from his desire to save children from running off of a rye cliff, which ultimately will lead him to failure because he cannot save all the children from running off of a cliff into adulthood.

find out if you're a Catholic. It happens to me a lot, I know, partly because my last name is Irish, and most people of Irish descent are Catholics. As a matter of fact, my father was a Catholic once. He quit, though, when he married my mother" (112). This passage first reveals that Holden resents how religions attempt to label him, but it also signifies how he connects the loss of faith with his parents' marriage, a traditional symbol of religious unity. Again, we see a connection between Holden's distrust of adult authority and his questioning of a social institution.

Holden's dissatisfaction with religion is actually a distrust of the adults who propagate religious authority to him. The clearest example of this distrust is Holden's distrust of preachers. He claims that preachers are phonies, "If you want to know the truth, I can't even stand ministers. The ones they've had at every school I've gone to, they all have these Holy Joe voices when they start giving their sermons. God, I hate that. I don't see why the hell they can't talk in their natural voice. They sound so phony when they talk" (100), and provides an example of such a preacher, Ossenburger, an alumni of Pencey Prep who attempts to give the students spiritual guidance: "Then he started telling us how he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down his knees and pray to God. He told us we should always pray to God--talk to Him and all--wherever we were. He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all. He said he talked to Jesus all the time" (16-17). However, Holden contrasts this opinion about preachers when he meets two nuns who he views favorably, even donating ten dollars to their charity: "That's why I was glad those two nuns didn't ask me if I was a Catholic. It wouldn't have spoiled the conversation if they had, but it would've been different, probably. I'm not saying I blame Catholics. I don't. I'd be the same way, probably, if I was a Catholic. It's just like those suitcases I was telling you about, in a way. All I'm saying is that it's no good for a nice conversation. That's all I'm saying" (113). His contrasting opinions about religious authority

figures indicate a deeper issue with religious institutions—namely, he understands the necessity of religious structure, which is shown when he donates to the nuns, but he attempts to form his own structure, a task that he is incapable of doing.

Holden's fickle opinions regarding religion correlate with a general countercultural confusion about the role of religion in one's personal life and the role of religion in society. While many countercultural youth rejected the orthodox Christianity of their parents, their attempts to replace a post-Christian culture with other methods of spirituality were experimental attempts at replacing religious structure. Miller describes the role of religion in the counterculture: "The counterculture was a movement of seekers of meaning and value, a movement that thus embodied the historic quest of any religion. Like many dissenting religionists, the hippies were enormously hostile to the religious institutions of the dominant culture, but they tried to find new and adequate ways to do the tasks the dominant religions failed to perform" (xxv). Similar to the way that Holden will claim "I like Jesus" (99) and then rant about the phoniness of organized religion, many youth also felt a general distrust of the religious authority enforced on them by their parents. Shires describes the religious atmosphere of the counterculture by claiming that "[i]t is hard to overestimate the spiritual element in America's counterculture... in reality, the quest for spiritual freedom was quite pervasive, and it stands to reason. America's middle-class youth, the rank and file of the counterculture, had been nurtured during the forties and fifties in religion's greenhouse" (25), indicating that youth had been prevented from experimenting with other beliefs by their parents, and he further notes that "the vaunted generation gap itself could be explained in terms of a spiritually motivated quest, on the part of youth, for a new worldview" (28). Similar to Holden's quest to be a sort of messiah

figure, many youth attempted to deconstruct religious authority and replace it with a new type of faith, albeit that faith—similar to Holden—lacked definition.

Catcher is a narrative that greatly embodied a countercultural approach to a changing society, and Holden's voice provided a type of rallying call for millions of youth seeking some form of community and identity after rejecting the community and identity found in social institutions. Foster describes the social impact of *Catcher*: "The world forever changed in the 1960s, and I was present at the creation of the world my children take for granted. Three events stand out as change agents...The first event was a traditional literary experience, the collective reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The messages many young readers drew from it created hostility toward the older generation, and the book became one of the staples of the generation gap" (30). While a generation gap certainly existed, Holden's confusion and disconnect from society helped to bridge the gap between confused adolescents hungry for meaning and heartbroken parents wondering what they did wrong. In a generation lacking structure, *Catcher's* lack of structure ironically created community, a self-defeating premise similar to postmodernism.

Chapter Four: *Catcher* as an Institution: Holden's Self-Defeating Irony

While the popularity of *Catcher* among countercultural youth was largely a result of the novel's ability to describe and unify young people who were lacking personal definition and unity, the countercultural relationship to the novel confirms the self-defeating irony of postmodernism. Along with Holden's lack of identity and disdain for social institutions, the fact that Holden is able to express his confusion and disregard for structure is in itself a structured response to postmodernism. This premise does not contradict Salinger's work nor expose a weakness in his writing; rather, this underlying structure to the novel correlates with the greatest struggle of postmodern philosophy—namely, postmodernism requires language, definition, and structure in order to be expressed. Holden lacks identity and a connection with society, but he understands that he cannot simply escape the fact that he too is a growing person and he exists in a society; similarly, postmodernism and its proponents understand that its idea requires structure, coherence, and meaning in order to exist as a theory. The postmodern irony of *Catcher* is seen through the counterculture's ironic response to the novel as well as Holden's ultimate acceptance of adulthood.

The countercultural community who responded to the novel indicates that the novel became a type of institution for countercultural youth who defined themselves as anti-institutional. This community that developed around the novel confirms that while the novel contains postmodern qualities, its ability to somewhat provide definition and structure is ironic and postmodern. This premise confirms two aspects of the novel's impact on postmodern youth: it does address and somewhat embody the very real questions about identity and meaning that many youth had during the countercultural movement, and it also provides definition and meaning through its questioning. Clinton W. Trowbridge addresses Holden's postmodern

attitude, and he concludes that Holden eventually realizes that rejecting adulthood and society as a whole is impossible: “The important thing to realize is that these are the conditions of life and that (to put it back in terms of the catcher metaphor), rather than attempt the impossible (catch and hold something that by its very nature cannot be caught and held—childhood, innocence), man should meet man, form a relationship of love and understanding with him, and in doing so help him towards his goal” (693). Similar to the way that a counterculture sought to break down accepted standards but failed to replace those standards with any clear sense of guidance, the novel’s relevance as a postmodern text is in the way it provided guidance to youth who lacked guidance. The self-defeating premise of postmodernism is similar to the self-defeating behavior of Holden, a character who eventually accepts that his behaviors to resist adulthood have only brought him closer to adulthood.

Since Holden embodies postmodernism both in his lack of individual meaning and distrust of social structures, the postmodern irony within the novel is that Holden finds identity in the fact that he does not have an identity and that he creates structure and standards through his opposition to structure and standards. He is a paradox, existing through and dependent on what he deems unnecessary and meaningless. This paradox in Holden is the same paradox found in postmodernism as a theory—the theory requires language and structure in order to exist—as well as the counterculture—the counterculture required social structure and individual meaning in order to exist as a movement. Through an examination of Holden’s contradictory thoughts and behaviors, there is clear textual support that Holden is a postmodern character. The fact that countercultural youth rallied around Holden as a postmodern character confirms that his story helped to build community for the counterculture, an example of postmodern irony.

Holden's postmodern irony exists in the fact that he himself is a growing, adult person who is quickly losing his childhood. He claims that most children are nice and polite after he helps a little girl (119), and Phoebe and Allie are the only two characters in the book that he finds sincere and original; however, Holden himself is not sincere nor original, which can be seen in the way that he constantly is forcing himself to be like someone else. He desires to be like his older friend Carl Luce when he meets with him, bragging about fake sex stories in order to impress him (141), he tells a prostitute that his name is "Jim Steele" and he is twenty two in order to prove that he is an older person ready for sex (94), and he frequently uses profanity around Phoebe in order to prove how he is an older person than her, a behavior that she criticizes him for. All of these behaviors confirms that Holden, while attempting to protect the innocence of children, is in fact trying to separate himself from childhood during the process. Not only does Holden's adult behavior posit him as a hypocrite, but it also indicates the irony that his desire to protect children only forces him and all of the other children to grow up even quicker. Holden wishes to be a savior and protector, an authority figure, and he wants all of the children to follow his rules, finding unoriginal identity in his standards. Holden in fact ruins their sincerity and introduces them into adulthood, an ironic process that indicates postmodernism.

While Holden associates phoniness with adulthood, the aspect of adulthood that he challenges is the lack of sincerity he finds in it. The idea that somebody will do something with any sort of selfish motive is phony to Holden, and his call for absolute sincerity, freshness, and spontaneity in life is his desire to preserve childlike behavior and innocence—childhood represents an original, new experience. To Holden, not-phony means non-regurgitated, non-self interested, and non-agenda based. He cannot enjoy the entertainment of a roller skater because he believes the roller skater only practices to make money: "Then, after the Rockettes, a guy came

out in a tuxedo and roller skates on, and started skating under a bunch of little tables, and telling jokes while he did it. He was a very good skater and all, but I couldn't enjoy it much because I kept picturing him practicing to be a guy that roller skates on stage" (137). He also views the charitable behavior of the two nuns he meets as somewhat sincere, but he clarifies that their actions are only sincere when they are not pushing their Catholic agenda on him (112). Louis Filler describes how Holden's desire for sincerity sets him up for an impossible world: "This is the question Holden asks of everyone. Its force is rhetorical. Holden wants a guarantee of the purity of human motive. He has been given everything else he wanted, but this complete absolution of himself, of himself and his world, he cannot have" (95). Holden's desire for sincerity is in fact his grappling with a postmodern idea that nothing new and sincere is yet to be discovered. It is for this reason that Holden's views sincerity and originality in children: he believes that children are sincere because children have the ability to express something new, a tenet that postmodernism claims is impossible.³⁸

The clearest example of irony in Holden's character is in the way that he is ultimately a fulfillment of what he hates the most: phoniness. He uses the term *phony* to signify adulthood because sincerity and originality quickly become hard to obtain with age; on the contrary, childhood innocence is a time of unprejudiced reality—a child's view of the world is sincere, unadulterated by adult standards and structures. It is for this reason that Holden is so intent on rescuing children: children are constantly growing and therefore constantly losing their ability to view the world sincerely. His intense grief over Allie's death, his anger at the fact that Phoebe is being exposed to profanity, and his mental collapse are due to his realization that he too is losing

³⁸ Postmodern critic Randy Martin describes Jameson's view that "postmodernism is nothing new, but is bringing to the fore of what had previously been recessed" (72), and he later describes how "[w]e still talk of the meaning of things. Postmodernism is an account of this nostalgia—a testimony to the power of the meaning myth while acknowledging its impossibility" (72).

his sincerity, a dilemma that Holden describes after viewing the profanity in Phoebe's school:

"That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find any place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (204). Holden later expresses that a nice place does not exist because people will always vandalize profanity onto it, indicating that he cannot go anywhere where there is not human corruption and insincerity. He also comes to terms with his own insincerity when he admits to Phoebe that he will never be able to go to his cabin where phonies are not allowed:

"Did you mean it what you said? You really aren't going away anywhere? Are you really going home afterwards?" she asked me. 'Yeah,' I said. I meant it, too. I wasn't lying to her. I really did go home afterwards" (212). The novel ends with Holden realizing that all his efforts to escape school and his home have actually led him back home and nowhere closer to his cabin where people cannot be phony and insincere. The ending of the novel is also the end of Holden's journey, and it is in this ending that Holden understands that he has not expressed or discovered anything new; instead, he goes back to the comforts of his home.

Holden's admission that he himself is not sincere—and possibly a phony—is a postmodern understanding that his experiences are not new, sincere forms of expression and identity. He embodies a postmodern lament at the loss of an original, innocent perception of meaning, similar to Lyotard's description of a "cheerful lament" (vii) where "futility suits the postmodern, for words as well as things" (vii). Alex E. Blazer comments on how Holden is a character coming to grips with the idea of a postmodern identity: "Holden Caulfield represents a nascent postmodern identity quest... Holden searches for some kind of emotional truth that can help him mediate his lost and listless existence. What he finds, however, is phoniness" (144). It

is no wonder why Holden views the movies³⁹, his Hollywood screenwriting brother D.B.⁴⁰, and even live Shakespearean dramas⁴¹ as phony: all of these are just regurgitated, unoriginal, ironic representations of reality. The actor will ruin *Hamlet* because he will bring his own agenda, his own self-promotion, and his own experience into an original story and make it unoriginal (117). Blazer also comments on how Holden hates phoniness and adulthood because it exposes the fact that he himself is unoriginal and insincere: “Holden cannot connect with the spectacle of the other because he recognizes the void it veils” (145). Holden understands that adulthood leads to a lack of childlike sincerity and emptiness, and he struggles against adulthood for that reason. Holden’s story is a story of a character hopelessly fighting for sincerity but only affirming irony through that fight, a contradiction he fulfills in his own creation of personal structure.

Holden’s rejection of adult institutions like family, education, and religion indicates that he views adult standards as a means of forcing unoriginal meaning onto children, signifying a postmodern resistance to structural meaning; however, his insistence on resisting structural authority is in fact a codified, structural standard that he imposes on himself as well as other people. In defiance of structure, Holden ironically becomes phony and applies a stringent set of rules on other people to not follow adult standards. He despises how ministers talk in authoritative tones, but he authoritatively states that ministers should talk in their real voices (100). He questions the motives of a lawyer, like his father, who saved his client’s life but insists that he must be entirely altruistic in order to avoid being phony: “[Is it that you] really *wanted* to save guys’ lives, or because... what you *really* wanted to do was to be a terrific lawyer, with

³⁹ Holden frequently expresses how much he hates movies throughout the novel, even though he still attends them: “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies” (2) and “The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I’m not kidding” (104).

⁴⁰ Holden expresses disgust at his brother D.B.’s decision to be a filmmaker: “Now he’s out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute” (2).

⁴¹ Holden talks about how he can only read *Hamlet* because he is afraid an actor will ruin the story: “I’ll have to read that play. The trouble with me is, I always have to read that stuff by myself. If an actor acts it out, I hardly listen. I keep worrying about whether he’s going to do something phony every minute” (117).

everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over. How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn't*" (172).

He even goes so far as to set an absolute standard for everybody:

What I'd do, I'd let old Phoebe come out and visit me in the summertime and on Christmas vacation and Easter vacation. And I'd let D.B. come out and visit me for a while if he wanted a nice, quiet place for his writing, but he couldn't write any movies in my cabin, only stories and books. I'd have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn't stay (205).

Holden, who envisions an ideal world where phonies and adults cannot force their unoriginal standards and restrictions on children, is developing a very strict and structured way of behavior for everybody, a sign of postmodern unoriginality and irony.

Holden's anti-phony set of standards is similar to the self-defeating premise of postmodernism: Holden's resistance to structure and definition is in fact a structured and defined way of living. Graham comments on the irony in Holden's strict anti-phony way of life: "Holden is constantly using his observations to develop theories and rules about himself and his society, suggesting that he is aware of the ways in which his society is characterised by issues of control. Holden can empower himself by seeming to create and apply rules, but to a great extent he is simply repressing his own individuality by applying rules to himself" (n. pag.) The irony behind postmodernism—and the reason critics claim it is a self-defeating philosophy—is because it essentially leads to nowhere new; rather, it just recognizes that it cannot lead to anywhere new. Jameson argues that a postmodern search for meaning and newness is only a repetition of what has come before: "In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is

to imitate dead styles” (658). Holden’s efforts to resist adult standards of definition actually cause him to return back to those very same standards he did not wish to apply to himself, further exposing how he is a self-defeating character. His journey is cyclical and repetitive, an experience based only on others’ standards of meaning and definition, and the conclusion of the novel confirms his cycle back to where he began.

Holden ends his story claiming he is happy⁴² and that he has finally reached a level of acceptance. However, the concluding scene of his story actually depicts Holden’s acceptance of irony; Holden understands that his attempt to preserve the original newness in himself as well as Phoebe has instead been a cyclical repetition of adult protection, standards, and definition. Holden reaches this level of happiness when he brings Phoebe to use a carousel, a children’s ride that simply repeats a circular motion. His description of this scene emphasizes the fact that Phoebe is going around in circles: “I went over and sat down on this bench, and she went and got on the carrousel. She walked all around it. I mean she walked once all the way around it. Then she sat down on this big, brown, beat-up-looking old horse. Then the carrousel started, and I watched her go around and around” (211). He later describes how he wants to protect her from falling off of the carousel, but he resists, allowing her to go around in circles (211). The fact that Holden emphasizes how Phoebe first circles the carousel all the way around before she gets on it indicates that she is consciously choosing to examine the entire ride, beginning and end, before she gets on it—Phoebe’s ride on the carousel will take her nowhere, exactly what Holden wishes for her and all of the other children. His desire for an eternal childhood of sincerity is actually a stagnated life, an endless circular repetition where children permanently remain as children and are never able to grow as human beings; Holden actually forces his own beliefs and standards onto these children as well as himself.

⁴² Holden claims that “I felt so damn happy” (213).

Holden's decision to not join the ride with Phoebe is his acceptance that he is in fact an ironic character. He declines when Phoebe asks that Holden join her on the ride: "When the ride was over she got off her horse and came over to me. 'You ride once, too, this time,' she said. 'No, I'll just watch ya. I think I'll just watch'" (212). Holden accepts that he is not a child and the carousel is no longer for him, and he needs to allow Phoebe to have the opportunity to fall off. He cannot force childhood on Phoebe; rather, his attempt to preserve her innocence and sincerity is actually a violation of her sincerity, a realization of postmodern irony. Miller describes how Holden watching Phoebe on the carousel is his acceptance of the impossibility of sincerity: "Holden delights in circles—a comforting, bounded figure which yet connotes hopelessness... Holden's Quest takes him outside society... So Holden seeks the one role which would allow him to be a catcher, and that role is the role of the child... But it is Holden's tragedy that he is sixteen" (5). Mikhail Epstein describes how the cyclical nature of postmodernism—trying something new only to affirm what has already been done—is an acceptance that progress does not exist: "Postmodernism announced an 'end to time,' but any end serves to open at least a crack in time for what is to come after and, thus, indicates the self-irony of finality, which turns into yet another beginning" (331). Holden claims he is happy watching Phoebe go around in circles, but his happiness is simply an acceptance that his efforts to protect and preserve a childlike sincerity are self-defeating and circular.⁴³ Similar to the way that Allie's death serves as a literal symbol for a loss of childlike innocence, the end of Holden's narrative is the death of Holden's childhood. Similar to the way that postmodernism self-destructs as a theory, Holden's desire to be a catcher causes him to in fact ruin a childlike sincerity. The irony of this realization

⁴³ The image of Phoebe circling around on the carousel makes Holden happy, an image that Holden emphasizes in order to exemplify that she is simply doing the same motion over and over again and not actually progressing anywhere: "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around... It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around" (213).

is confirmed in the way that *Catcher* ends with Holden in the same position he began in: an institutionalized product of society.

The postmodern qualities of the novel are ultimately confirmed in its conclusion when Holden's journey away from the institution has only brought him back to the institution. Holden begins his story in an academic institution, a social structure which attempts to prepare people to fit into society, and the novel ends with Holden in a mental institution, another social structure that is trying to make Holden once again become a functioning member of society. Holden confirms this cyclical nature of the narrative as he describes how the end goal of the psych ward is to make him go back to school and succeed: "A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I'm going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It's such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you are going to do until you *do* it. The answer is, you don't. I *think* I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question" (213). The psychiatrist wants Holden to return to where he was before, but Holden responds that he cannot know what he is going to do next because he sees no new experience or expression in the future. Largely due to the fact that his entire journey simply led him right back to where he began, Holden refuses to answer that he will do a certain thing because there really is no way for him to sincerely do anything original, an attitude that Esra Kilicci describes as a doubt for hope and sincerity in the future:

Holden leaves the reader with the same sense of doubt as to what the future holds for him...In this passage it is evident that Holden does not make a decision...

Holden frequently uses the word "phony" with regard to the situations and people in his surroundings, which is not an open attitude towards growth and self-awareness. His perception of reality is basically negative, and there is no

indication by Salinger that Holden's life in the future will become authentic (143-144).

Holden cannot choose what he will do next because he has no personal identity to make decisions from; rather, he is trapped in circular repetition, only defining himself through previous definitions of structure and meaning, confirming Jameson's cyclical definition of postmodernism where it is "not as that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis, but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever *new* modernisms in the stricter sense" (xvi). Holden's insanity and institutionalization is a symbol of the postmodern life—that is, his efforts to escape structure and definition only placed him back into even more structured environment.

It is through this postmodern irony that countercultural youth also rallied around the novel, ironically celebrating it as a novel that expressed the inability of sincere expression. Youth counterculture, in its struggles for sincerity and authenticity, viewed Holden as a sincere representation of their movement. Cheever discusses how "Holden belongs to a time when people started talking about 'alienation' and 'conformity' and 'the youth culture'" (25), and Holden represents "the possibilities of youth culture as a means of authenticity" (27). Laraine Flemming comments on how countercultural youth rallied around Holden: "But Holden won over the young, especially the 1960s generation who saw themselves in the disaffected preppy... The skepticism, the belief in purity of the soul against the tawdry, trashy culture plays very well in the counterculture" (672). Morris Dickstein argues that Holden's voice is what actually provided definition to the counterculture: "Only Salinger successfully captured the exact accent and rhythm of the adolescent voice and sensibility; only in his work did the young recognize themselves as they were or as they dreamed of being" (91). Dickstein claims that Holden was a

medium of self-recognition for youth—meaning, youth created an identity in Holden and formed a community through their response to his narrative.

The countercultural response to the novel exemplified postmodern irony: a group of individuals who called into question the meaning of structure and identity developed a structure and identity through their collective attachment to Holden's story. It is through this structure that the novel ironically became a type of social institution for the counterculture; it created a community of readers who developed a common ground in their interpretation of *Catcher*. Much like the way a religious institution causes a community of people to unite under a certain belief, countercultural youth united and formed a community through *Catcher*. The community aspect of the novel is seen through a collection of letters entitled *Letters to J.D. Salinger* that fans, teachers, and writers wrote to J.D. Salinger after his death, and author Cris Mazza describes how Holden provided a voice for her generation during the 1960s: "[I]t was the book that incited some of us, like Holden, to tell our stories in our own honest, naïve, earnest, digressive voices. Actually ours were imitations of Holden's voice, but despite the differences in worlds, his voice, it seemed, *sounded* like ours. So we took it. I took it" (80). Elwood Watson further comments on how Holden became a unifying figure for the counterculture: "Although he was a product of the early years of cold war paranoia, conformity, and quiet angst, many of us could identify with his resentments and struggles in our late teens and early to mid-twenties. Our feelings of rebellion were strong at the time even if they were not acted upon. Thus, in retrospect, Holden Caulfield epitomized much of the iconoclastic mindset associated with our generation" (viii). Grant Guimont describes how the counterculture viewed *Catcher* the same way the religious might view the Bible: "*The Catcher in the Rye* became the working, living bible for an entire movement... It was deeply ridden in the angst of the young. In the '60s, there was no angst until

they introduced it to the world. Angst is all that we have now. I guess, in a way, angst is what that generation willed us to like a sorted last testament. It almost feels like some divine law” (12). Postmodern, youthful angst still gravitated towards structure and meaning in order to express that angst—similar to the way that Holden needed to create a set of standards in order to go against adult structures, the counterculture found it necessary to celebrate Holden as a structural, narrative, defined explanation for their movement.

The self-defeating irony of postmodernism is in the fact that it requires structure, language, and history in order to exist as a theory; similarly, the self-defeating irony of the counterculture was that their resistance of standards actually required culture, structure, and history to even exist as a movement. *Catcher* is the novel that caused countercultural youth to fulfill this irony—in response to the oppression of their parents and society, youth pointed to Holden and his standards and demanded that the rest of the society follow suit or become the phonies who Holden hates. This adoption of Holden and his ways brought youth back to exactly where they started—a movement that started as a rejection of culture and standards ironically became a clearly defined culture full of rules, regulations, and definitions. Holden’s journey was an attempt to escape the restrictive structure of society and discover sincerity, but conversely this journey in and of itself became the antithesis of sincerity. *Catcher*’s postmodern influence is first seen in Holden’s self-defeating irony and second in how it caused youth to fulfill this irony. In a postmodern age where a resistance to definition and meaning only creates meaning and definition, Holden’s influence during the counterculture existed in the fact that youth celebrated him as a sincere character. Youth surrendered their originality to Holden and asked him to signify their movement, ironically repeating and identifying with the structures of their parents and society.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Catcher's popularity during the countercultural era of the 1960s was largely due to Holden's introspective honesty about himself and others around him. Following an era of intense nationalism during the 1950s, countercultural youth gravitated towards Holden as a representative voice for their dissatisfaction with the "American Way" of their parents. Much like Holden, youth of the 1960s were willing to question their culture, question their parents, and question themselves; however, similar to Holden, the answer to that question brought them right back to where they began: community, definition, and identity. Holden's postmodern influence on the counterculture exists in the very fact that he became a literary figure for countercultural youth. Rather than accepting an identity in their parents or their culture, many countercultural youth looked to Holden as an embodiment of their identity. The novel's popularity, especially among youth, following the 1960s speaks not only for the novel's literary qualities but also for its ability to connect with youth culture during and after the countercultural era.

Catcher's influence on teenager culture following the 1960s is largely a result of the postmodern influence of the novel. Rather than viewing Holden as a literary figure from the 1960s, many youth still connect with him as a voice for their generation, perhaps because of his influence on American culture as a whole: "In a sense, the persona of Holden Caulfield is a contemporary continuation of a figure which has a long social and literary tradition in our culture... Holden speaks in a language uniquely his own... He uses this language strategically to re-create the world around him. The reader is thus 'shown' the world through the particular perspective of a sixteen-year old teenager" (16). This "recreation" of the world is what establishes *Catcher* as both a postmodern novel as well as a novel that influences youth culture; the counterculture emphasized a perception that adolescence was a time when a young person

was supposed to develop his own view of the world.⁴⁴ Holden's narration is an image of a teenager trying to view the world through his own perception, attempting to recreate a childlike image of the world. This quest for a sincere view of the world is what many adolescents did and still currently do as a reaction against parental and social standards about the world, and Holden's narration is still a prominent literary example of teenage angst. The novel's commercial as well as academic popularity since its publication is evidence that American culture still finds Holden's tale and his grip on teenagers fascinating.

Commercially speaking, *Catcher* has retained if not increased its popularity and relevance as a poignant observation of what it truly means to be a teenager in American society. Graham discusses that since its publication, the novel has become one of the most famous works of American literature: "*The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most famous novels written in the United States of America in the twentieth century. With sales of more than 60 million copies, it has made Holden Caulfield famous to generations of readers... it is consistently achieved the status of being simultaneously one of America's best-loved and most-frequently banned novels" (3). Paul Alexander describes how the novel has experienced a drastic spike in popularity among youth during the grunge movement of the 1990s, and how in 1997 the novel was still present in the mid seventies on the *USA Today* Top 100 paperback best-seller list (n. pag.). Peter G. Beidler comments on how the novel was still generating millions of sales during the 2000s alone, more than fifty years after the original publication: "Salinger's novel continues to sell impressively in the new century. BookScan, a division of Nielsen Media Research, which tracks book sales for the publishing industry, reports that by early 2007, the mass-market edition of *The Catcher in the Rye* had, since January 1, 2001, sold more than a million-and-a-half copies, while the trade paper

⁴⁴ Margaret Anderson and Howard Taylor describe how the counterculture philosophy was that a youth should develop a worldview that was strictly based on "[n]onconformity to the dominant culture" (67), a lasting perception about teenagers that lasted past the 1960s into the present day (67).

edition sold nearly another half million” (57). While it is difficult to identify how many of these sales were by young people, the novel’s presence in pop culture is another indicator of its relevance among contemporary youth.

The novel, as well as J.D. Salinger’s hauntingly mysterious personal life, has gained widespread popularity among contemporary youth culture as various musicians, movies, TV shows, and documentaries have expressed homage, satire, and recognition for the novel’s influence on contemporary youth culture. Shortly after the death of Salinger, the extremely popular teenage-focused cartoon *South Park* released an episode satirizing the public reaction to the novel as well as the frequent over-interpretation of its themes,⁴⁵ Guns N’ Roses released a song entitled “The Catcher in the Rye” in 2008⁴⁶, celebrating the novel’s message of youthful alienation from adulthood, and the documentary *Salinger* was released in 2013, presenting a chronicled view of Salinger’s story and his motivation behind his writing. Nathan Rabin describes *Catcher*’s lasting influence among contemporary teenagers and the novel’s curious ability to avoid the stigma of boring irrelevance attached to many novels assigned in high school: “Where most novels that pop up on high school syllabi come off as dead books written in dead tongues by dead people, *The Catcher in the Rye* is like the charismatic kid with the anarchy symbol scrawled in permanent marker on his jacket...Like so few adults, J.D. Salinger understands the teenage psyche” (62). His ability to not only understand teenagers but also create a character who could accurately explain the confusions and frustrations of teenage angst caused Salinger to have a celebrity status, a title he worked his entire life to escape.

⁴⁵ Sean O’Neal states that this episode was a quiet way for the creators to both pay homage to Salinger as well as mock people that advocated censoring the novel (n. pag.).

⁴⁶ Mick Wall discusses how the song’s release in 2008 is an indication that a more youthful audience would still understand and connect to the novel (280).

The commercialization of *Catcher* as well as the continuing positive youthful response is also ironic, a contrary principle to Holden's hatred of self-glorifying people. Graham comments that Holden is a character who loathes self-glorification and self-marketing—using one's passions for money or fame—, but she further argues that the character of Holden ironically became a source of great fame and financial success for both Salinger and his publisher: “He [Holden] criticises people who place themselves on sale... One irony in this contradictory situation is that Holden himself, in the form of Salinger's novel, rapidly became a commodified part [of] youth culture and Salinger became an unwilling star who found himself on sale” (n. pag.). While Holden does not understand nor appreciate commercialization and using art for self-glorification and money, his story became a source of great wealth and fame for Salinger.

While the popularity of the novel during the counterculture helped to develop community among youth, symbolizing postmodern irony, the lasting popularity of the novel indicates how present generations still seek to form a community around Holden, praising his story as an accurate representation of the teenage experience. Anita Silvey describes how Holden's popularity among contemporary teenagers is largely due to the fact that he became a cathartic fictional character for contemporary youth:

Taking for his protagonist a boy who is bewildered, lonely, ludicrous, and pitiful, Salinger renders his mercurial change of mood, stubbornness, and disregard for reality in precise detail. Since his appearance, Holden has served as the prototypical cynical adolescent in rebellion and has spawned generations of descendants in books for young adults. Young readers find him a kindred spirit, someone they understand and who would understand them. “I am Holden

Caulfield,” one young fan has written; for over fifty years, millions of adolescents have made the same claim (35).

Similar to the way that Holden hates the actor who tries to become Hamlet (117), adolescents of the counterculture and after attempt to become Holden. They embody his struggle, mimic his behavior, and commercialize his story, an act of unoriginal copying that Holden would easily classify as an example of phoniness. In an era where new and sincere expression are questioned and meaning and definition are forgotten, Holden’s narrative remains as a postmodern reminder that even teenage angst and confusion have ultimately been expressed. Youth culture of the 1960s and beyond are attracted to *Catcher* because of its ability to express existential questions of identity, meaning, and a person’s place society, and their remaining connection to the novel is an indication of the current state of youth culture.

Catcher became the novel of the counterculture, a representation of youth angst during the postmodern era, and its impact on the counterculture and future generations indicates the postmodern qualities of the novel. Its uniqueness exists not in the novel’s narration style nor Holden’s frustrated experience; rather, *Catcher*’s lasting popularity in postmodern American culture is due to the novel’s lack of definition or agenda. Instead of progressing as a story, exemplifying the development of a protagonist who learns from his experience, Holden journeys right back to where he started, unable to escape the standards and forced definitions of societal institutions. It is through the cultural response to the novel that we also see this cyclical journey of postmodern irony: youth, in rebellion to their parents, decided to read the book that their parents read when they were in rebellion against their parents. While the contemporary response to the novel may differ slightly, the novel’s lasting popularity exemplifies the postmodern idea that no new form of expression, original meaning, or unique story exists. Holden’s claim that

“[p]eople are always ruining things for you” (87) was a postmodern frustration that sincere expression is always ruined by others who have already voiced that thought, told that story, and felt that emotion. Ironically for the counterculture as well as all other future youth cultures, Holden became the person that ruined their sincerity of expression, and the youthful connection to his story is an acceptance of this postmodern irony.

It is my hope that further study regarding *Catcher*'s impact on youth culture will not focus on how to morally improve youth or correct their behavior. *Catcher*'s relevance among millennials is just as strong if not growing in popularity, and using the book as a tool for psychoanalyzing and correcting youth is contrary to the purpose of the novel. Ultimately, *Catcher* is a novel that resonates with youth largely because of its honesty and ability to literally voice the confusion of teenage angst, and I hope this study will help others to view the book as a tool of understanding rather than a book of moral guidance. At times it is refreshing to appreciate art and beauty free from guidance and correction, and further study regarding *Catcher*'s influence on youth cultures should approach the novel devoid of preconceived judgments and stereotypes about Salinger and his exceedingly controversial novel. While Holden as a hippie certainly invites many interesting discussions, Holden as a millennial hipster certainly has just as much credibility. Further studies about Salinger and *Catcher* should focus on the novel's universality among past, present, and future youth generations.

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