

“You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful”:

The Adolescent Identity in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

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### Dedication

I dedicate this work of scholarship to my husband Scott for his constant love and encouragement and to my family for their prayers and continual support. I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Marybeth Baggett for her guidance, patience, and ever-joyful spirit in leading me; this work would not have been a success without her as my committee chair. In addition, my readers Dr. Emily Heady and Dr. Matthew Towles have earned my utmost appreciation for their diligence and commitment to aiding me in the writing process.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis, as all other work, to the Almighty God, whose grace and providence have allowed me this special opportunity.

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## Abstract

Many consider *The Catcher in the Rye* the most poignant and popular story of adolescence in American literature, challenged only perhaps by Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Reading reviews, examining the public reception, and uncovering depths of research would evidence this well. However, the value of the novel rests not in its popularity—a simple sign of its inherent value—but in its ability to resonate truth. More than merely telling a story, Salinger creates a life, or at the very least a glimpse of a life, through the actions and attitude of his ornery adolescent character Holden Caulfield. This life serves as the most astute representation of the modern adolescent identity in literature.

But the novel holds its own beyond the realm of literary imagination and resounds with the same such nuanced reality when viewed through a quite different lens. Theories of adolescence and the role of social factors on human development are relatively recent in the field of psychology. Salinger's novel provokes a clear sense of what the modern adolescent looks like, what he says, what he does, what he believes. It is in Holden that many readers even see themselves 65 years after the novel's initial publication. Presenting Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as a lens through which to view and understand Salinger's adolescent character provides a uniquely harmonious perspective, demonstrating the value of taking literature seriously, to the extent that a character is analyzed much like a real person would be. Sitting across the room and listening to his story, one sees Holden as a literary character come to life, the notion of the adolescent identity personified.

Key Words: Holden Caulfield, adolescence, J. D. Salinger, Erik Erikson, psychosocial stages

## Chapter 1: Introducing Adolescence in *The Catcher in the Rye*

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* provides one of the most accurate pictures of the modern adolescent in all of contemporary fiction, offering insights into the struggles and strengths common of youth across a span of generations. The process by which a child turns into an adult has been celebrated, mourned, awaited patiently and excitedly, dreaded, rushed, and delayed by cultures and communities worldwide. Perhaps the most significant indicators of adolescence are grounded in cultural ideas of what it means to be a child and what it means to be an adult, with a picture of the adolescent straddling both sides, yet belonging fully to neither.

This unique place of an adolescent has become more significant in the social sphere, as it provides a platform for cultural critiques. Like other relics of humanity, literature has had its hand in attempting to further our understanding of such a phenomenon as adolescence, how it begins, what it looks like, the importance and implications of its continued study, and the cultural changes the evolving definition reflects. Through all the intermediary texts, however, one stands out. In the literary world, one must look no further than *The Catcher in the Rye* to see a true and lasting representation of American adolescence. The novel's narrator and beloved young man, Holden Caulfield, serves as a groundbreaking figure in establishing the modern conception of adolescence, demonstrating adolescence not merely as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, but as an identity in itself.

### **Foundations for Analysis**

To navigate Holden's particular resistance to the notion of adolescence as merely an "in-between" stage of human development, the work of psychosocial theorist Erik Erikson proves

essential. Erikson's emphasis on the importance of identity formation in adolescence is of particular interest in studying Holden, especially the problems that arise when an individual fails to establish an identity. One may study such a complex struggle, Erikson argues, "in the lives of individuals who could resolve it for themselves only by offering to their contemporaries a new model of resolution such as that expressed in works of art or in original deeds, and who furthermore are eager to tell us all about it in diaries, letters, and self-representations" (Identity: Youth and Crisis 134). Holden offers such a work of art, an original deed, and a kind of letter to the reader in *The Catcher in the Rye*, presenting to the reader an inside perspective on the struggles, passions, and questions unique to adolescence—a role that often provokes the most staggering and astute social critiques.

Published in 1951, the novel serves as both an artifact of the post-war culture in which it was written and a work of literature that continues to reflect and inform the popular understanding of adolescence. Its lasting contribution to American literature and the American imagination is perhaps most easily explained and understood by its depiction of young Holden Caulfield, the at-once protagonist, anti-hero, narrator, and commentator of his own story. He speaks to readers from the walls of a mental hospital, reflecting on his experience of some "madman stuff" that led to his current situation. Simultaneously genuine and hypocritical, painfully naïve yet equally insightful, starry-eyed and cynical, Holden appears as perhaps the most honest and accurate representation of the modern adolescent to have ever appeared on the pages of American literature.

Through the eyes of this seventeen-year-old boy, one sees how the world of post-war America appears to its rising generation, revealing the roots of the harsh criticisms of cultural norms and societal expectations so frequently avowed by the counter-culture breeding beneath

the calm surface of 1950s conformity. Demanding, cruel, and phony, yet full of possibility—the world in Holden’s eyes appears broken but redeemable. This duality of perspectives lead some to believe that Holden toggles between viewing the world as a child would and viewing it as an adult would. However, it is his unique and distinct position as an adolescent that allows him to see differently from both child and adult, and such extraordinary vision presents him with the opportunity to closely critique his culture. Nothing escapes his keen critical eye. The expectations he faces as a son, a student, a brother, a friend, and ultimately as an adult rise up against Holden from every avenue; he runs from the ever-expanding expectations he faces only to encounter them at a different front. His story is one of a particular time and culture, but it is also one that resonates still today.

Though it has been over sixty years since the novel’s initial publication, critical discussion on Holden has remained generally consistent, aimed at analysis of his role as an adolescent, indicating that his character and the book itself are quintessential representations of the transition from childhood to adulthood. What remains open for exploration is exactly how Holden has earned this role. In discovering the answer, one finds, perhaps more importantly, that Holden’s character shows adolescence is more than just a space between childhood and adulthood, but rather, a place in its own right.

As Harold Bloom points out, critics most often compare Holden to Mark Twain’s Huck Finn or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway, other characters with unique perspectives on the world and strong narrative voices (1); regardless of the similarities, however, these characters help to situate further Holden’s exclusive voice as an adolescent. Most consider Huck Finn to still be a child, and Nick Carraway is an adult. These positions limit the narrators’ views of the world. Huck is defined by his endless hope and wonder as a child while Nick is characterized by

the harrowing world-weariness of an aged soul. With these strong central characters for comparison, a picture of Holden emerges as one of the many famous narrators across time, giving voice to the social climate of his world. And much like Carraway and Finn, Holden's voice still echoes. These storytellers all bear witness to change—in their own lives and in the lives of the culture in which they live—by offering an insider's viewpoint to readers honestly and without reserve; they give insights into nuanced elements of time and culture that may be otherwise lost in third person points of view. However, Holden's words rise loudly over these other narrators, appearing to readers not only as a genuine and true voice of his time but as one that seems almost timeless.

Even more central to Holden's lasting impact is his role as a social critic, one especially keen to the nuances and undercurrents of society because of his role as an adolescent. Because he is not fully acquainted with the ways of what Holden himself terms the "phonies" of the grown-up world, readers come to trust his fresh perspective on adults. And though he fails to remain fully separate from the phoniness he so despises, his seeming hypocrisy indicates his underlying desire to be an adult. He is beyond childhood and not yet fully mature, residing wholly in adolescence. Such a position both allows and requires him to attempt a genuine search for self. It also requires him to experience true adult situations despite his hesitations. This journey for identity is the central component to Erikson's theory of adolescent development and the key element to understanding Holden's extraordinary ability to serve as a critical voice for his time and generations to come.

The voice of Holden resonates through a span of generations, reaching readers on a personal level and critiquing the culture at large all at once. Many refer to Holden as transcending his own time and place in history, speaking beyond the time in which he tells his

story. Whether implicit or explicit, the arguments that present Holden as a universal adolescent figure that transcends time are frequent. Frederic I. Carpenter, Warren French, Harold Bloom, and many others like them all characterize Holden as the exemplary adolescent. However, no matter how many times this assertion has been included in reviews, research, or even conversations on the topic, no one author has accomplished an outright proof or detailed explanation. There seems a shared yet unspoken understanding that it is an accurate measure of Holden's place, though there appears no clear expression of Holden's adolescent identity as one very much separate from that of a child and from that of an adult. In addition, bits and pieces of evidence to support Holden as a prototypical adolescent are scattered among criticism that focus on one or more elements of his character in the novel, but they are rarely the central figures of any singular piece. It is as if claiming Holden's adolescence is a springboard for other arguments, but never the key component for examination. Moreover, although Holden as an image of adolescence during his time is a conclusion arrived at through a variety of approaches, no author has detailed how his adolescent identity works to inform the notion of adolescence beyond his place in time. Erikson's theory sheds light on these many facets of the adolescent phenomenon Holden exemplifies by providing a framework with which to see Holden not as transitioning between two sides of human social roles, but very much distinct from either.

### **Combining the Literary with the Psychological**

To approach this exploration—the journey to uncover Holden as a representation of the quintessential adolescent identity—one must begin with a strong historical foundation of both the novel and the role of adolescence across time. An understanding of these links Salinger's work with Erikson's, an admittedly strange combination. Years have passed since the publications of

both *The Catcher in the Rye* and the foundational works of Erikson, and the world has faced remarkable change; yet the spirit of Holden's adolescent identity seems alive and well in the youth culture of today. Accurate to his time yet still remarkably relevant now, Holden has garnered exceptional literary significance because of his ability to offer a clear picture of the teenage attitude of the 1950s while simultaneously presenting an image of the unique adolescent perspective still central to the youth across a span of decades and into the early twenty-first century. Though the social climate in which Holden originally made his appearance has altered dramatically, he remains a constant. By first examining his role as an adolescent in the context of his own time and then uncovering the underlying universal elements of his character that make him exemplary of the adolescent situation outside and beyond that particular context, one may use Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as a lens to pinpoint the particulars of what so many critics have argued in generalities but so few, if any, have yet to clearly and directly spell out—how exactly Holden can be both the essential adolescent figure of his time and also, more importantly, an accurate representative of the modern adolescent identity over half a decade later. Utilizing Erikson's foundational studies in adolescent identity development to study Holden as the key adolescent figure of American literature, one may find a true understanding of what Holden signifies about his unique position in life. Even now, we look to both Holden and Erikson to understand adolescence.

Discovering the lasting characteristics of adolescence in Holden is important because without such a knowledge, readers may overlook the true value of the novel, as well as fail to acknowledge the insightful work of Erikson himself. Fortunately, the book and the psychologist still render large applause, much like their initial receptions. Upon publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, critics and casual readers alike swiftly recognized Salinger's genius in creating such an

astute picture of adolescence through Holden. However, not everyone agreed that the novel was worthy of applause. A glimpse into some of the reviews of the time serves to demonstrate the impact the novel had on audiences from the start and reveal the beginnings of the controversies that continue to surround the novel to this day, crucial components of the work to understand if the complexities of Holden are to be sorted out and understood through Erikson's lens.

### **Reception of *The Catcher in the Rye***

Salinger garnered praise for his novel's depiction of youth culture almost instantly. In 1951, the *Atlantic Monthly*'s Harvey Breit claims the novel as "a brilliant *tour de force*" (7), the same descriptor used just a month prior in Anne Goodman's review for *The New Republic* (qtd. in Salzman 5). David Stevenson in *The Nation* pronounces Salinger as "a beautifully deft, professional performer who gives us a chance to catch quick, half-amused, half-frightened glimpses of ourselves and our contemporaries, as he confronts us with his brilliant mirror images" (qtd. in Bryfonski 43). The novel would continue to garner similar reviews from critics across the board, a trend that has yet to dissipate.

Although it seems that *The Catcher in the Rye* calls forth endless admiration for its author and its story, the work is not without its opponents. Both *Christian Science Monitor* and *Catholic World* critiqued the book quickly, within months of the novel's publication, claiming that the content and language were neither realistic in terms of representing adolescent dialect nor appropriate for consumption, opinions that parents and educators alike supported, leading to the banning of the novel in classrooms and libraries countrywide. While most modern public libraries gladly boast the presence of the book on their shelves now, the debate on whether the novel is appropriate for the classroom, even for seniors in high school, is still relevant. In fact,

Jack Salzman argues that *The Catcher in the Rye* is not only one of the most popular books in literary history, but also the most commonly banned by schools in the United States (15).

According to June Edwards in “Censorship in the Schools: What’s Moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*?” the usual complaints are that the novel is “obscene” and often “blasphemous” based on the abundance of swearing and Holden’s criticism of organized religion. “*Catcher*,” she continues, “has become a symbol for critics of what they perceive to be a vile, ungodly plot on the part of schools to undermine the morals of American school children” (39). Scenes of underage drinking, sexual encounters, and instances of vulgar language were all pointed to in opposition of the novel’s consumption by younger audiences, namely those adolescent readers who were viewed as likely to be negatively influenced by the book’s content, like school-aged youth. The cultural climate of the rise of the teenager during the 1950s indicates that this was not a pointed and singular condemnation of the book, but also a reflection on the social atmosphere of the time. Parents were losing control, and perhaps *The Catcher in the Rye* made the perfect scapegoat.

Though arguments over the novel’s use in pedagogy were fierce, *The Catcher in the Rye* nonetheless resonated with the adolescent youth and disillusioned young adults of the time, countless of whom found the piece rousing and captivating, a trend that has yet to dissipate. It was an instant hit. By 1961, just ten years after its initial publication, the novel had sold more than 1.5 million copies solely in the United States (qtd. in Salzman 1). So strong was the conviction of the readers that Salinger had tapped into some hidden truth of their unique social situation that he became to many a voice for their outrages. Critics continued to remark on the effects of the novel on the general community of readers, explaining the significance of the work to the social climate beyond literary criticism. In “Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in *The Catcher*

*in the Rye*” Christopher Brookeman explains that the impact of the novel on everyday readers was so significant that it reached cult status, as they perceived Holden as “a generalized champion of American individualism and indicator of the psychic disturbances caused by the stress of postindustrial society,” a conception of the young narrator supported by history textbooks and cultural critics alike (58). A commentary by Paul Breslow asserts the novel can be “read as a beat allegory of the middle-class American reconciling himself to a nonsensical existence” (15). Readers, adolescent or not, frequently found a type of solace in the novel’s ability to accurately reflect the real world of problems that they experienced in their everyday lives. S. N. Behrman concentrates on Holden’s ability to resonate with readers of all ages, explaining that “[g]rown men sometimes find the emblazoned obscenities of life too much for them, and leave this world indecorously, so the fact that a 16-year old boy is overwhelmed should not be surprising” (qtd. in Draper 3016). The adolescent experience speaks not only to those in the same situation but to those that are on the other side of it, having passed through the phase earlier in their own lives. The 1950s were not the only times in American history that the adolescent culture reflected the needs and feelings of the generation before them, only with louder voices and more fearless conviction, a vision that reflects the current social atmosphere.

While sifting through the seemingly endless number of reviews and research on *The Catcher in the Rye* to pinpoint a consensus on the character of Holden is no simple undertaking, Holden’s popularity serves to demonstrate just how influential he is as an adolescent figure and these insights provide important clues as to why readers still identify with his character. Author David D. Galloway puts it succinctly: “Few heroes of contemporary literature have aroused so much devotion, imitation, or controversy as J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield” (21). Thus, the commentary is extensive. However, differences in opinion on the details set aside, one can

usually find a common ground between diverging viewpoints, a ground to stand on and move forward.

Holden's distinct and seemingly timeless adolescent outlook is what most readers notice, making him a lasting figure. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner's commentary, in which they prophetically argue that "some day Holden Caulfield may be as well known an American boy as Huck Finn" (13), has come to life in the overwhelming amount of commentary on Holden throughout the years since *The Catcher in the Rye's* initial publication. Carpenter compares Holden to Huck Finn as well, saying what makes them "brother under the skin" is a "common hatred of hypocrisy and search for integrity" (12). Riley Hughes joins in on the Holden-Huck comparison with a critical eye on Holden's language, maintaining that his "formidably excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language" makes Holden, like Huck, "monotonous and phony" (8). Like Huck, Holden "has become a mythic figure of adolescent rebellion in American culture" argues Brookeman (57), though unlike Huck who seems perpetually flung back into childhood, Holden's adolescence rings true in that he is distinct from his own childhood identity. In 1951, T. Morris Longstreth describes Holden as "alive, human, preposterous, profane and pathetic beyond belief" (6). Ernest Jones simplifies Holden: "Bravado and buffoonery imperfectly disguise his conviction of madness and guilt" (7). Breit sees Holden through the lens of many readers: "We see Holden as a smiling adult sees a boy, and we smile at his spectral, incredible world" (6). A highly controversial viewpoint by John W. Aldridge presented in 1956 states that Holden "remains at the end what he was at the beginning—cynical, defiant and blind" (131), a notion that French later claims in 1988 is responsible for "what has become a classic misreading of the novel" (39). Even William Faulkner contributes to the conversation in 1958 saying Holden "didn't want money, he didn't want position, anything, he just wanted to find man

and wanted something to love, and he couldn't" (13). Charles H. Kegel asserts that Holden's "problem is one of communication" (9), while Christopher Parker sums up Holden's challenge as "trying desperately to be sincere in an insincere world" (15). But it doesn't end there.

Holden's reputation continues in the classroom as well. Alvin D. Alley's perspective gives insight into how students perceive Holden:

Every student of mine who has read *Catcher in the Rye* (which includes those of low, average, and high intelligence) has really identified himself with its hero, Holden Caulfield. They see in him, not the ideal young man, but a young man in search of himself, in search of his place in the human scheme of things, and in conflict with the narrowness of the society in which he lives. (16)

But few have said it better than James E. Miller in 1965 with a review that holds true to this day: "There can be no doubt that for today's American youth, Holden is an embodiment of their secret terrors and their accumulated hostilities, their slender joys and their magnified agonies" (20). He also asserts quite accurately the way in which readers would perceive Holden for generations to come:

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a deceptively simple, enormously rich book whose sources of appeals run in deep and complexly varied veins. The very young are likely to identify with Holden and to see that the adult world in which he sojourns as completely phony and worthless; the book thus becomes a handbook for rebels and a guide to identification of squares. The older generation is likely to identify with some part of the society that is satirized, and to see Holden as a bright but sick boy whose psyche needs adjustment before he can, as he will, find his niche and settle down. (8)

Holden sees this niche as adulthood; the book depicts a call to join society, a call that Holden resists. He does, however, eventually answer the call of adolescence, to rest in his present identity, not needing to take on a role as an adult, a role he is not prepared to fully embrace, in order to form a self-concept. He remains who he is, an adolescent, and uses his unique vision to see what others have become blind to. Breit asserts the most fundamental element of Holden's role in telling his story when he writes, "[T]he novel, for all its surface guilelessness, is a critique of the contemporary, grown-up world" (6). Holden is allowed such a critical perspective because he is able to acknowledge his present location in the social sphere as more than a transitional phase, but as a true resting place to find himself in and from which to look out on the rest of the world.

What links all of these perspectives on Holden is the underlying recognition of elements that make Holden both incredibly unique to his time and still able to speak to contemporary culture, the astute characterization of adolescence that he embodies, the everlasting identity of youth. For in Holden, the reader sees the central attitude of the adolescent identity of his or her own world. The face of modern youth seems ever changing, but the element of cultural criticism remains. Through each phase of American life since the initial publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's Holden appears anew. The 1950s Holden rebelled against conformity and rules. The 1960s Holden spoke out against war and violence. The 1970s saw a Holden that encouraged individual liberty and exploration. Holden in the 1980s offered a critique of the moral downfall of society. In the 1990s, Holden represented economic and social privilege. In each passing decade, readers see Holden's attitude in light of whatever social, political, cultural or economic atmosphere most central to their time, indicating that his adolescent status frequently allows him to speak to the most pressing topic in a given cultural moment. Though the details of his own

cultural criticisms remain relegated to his own time and place, his social and moral outrage remain central to the adolescent identity.

What marks consistency among Holden's differing roles in these centuries is his elemental adolescent identity. There is something so blatant and at the same time elusive about his specific stage in life that admirers and adversaries alike come to perceive. A struggle to hold on to simplicity and innocence while simultaneously feeling propelled forward, yet all the while standing wholly in a distinct role marks the passage that everyone must go through to join the adult world; this struggle is so tangible and alive in Holden's story, so palpable. It rings so true that the fiction becomes familiar. And so it has been since *The Catcher in the Rye* was first published. Reactions include a slew of praises sprinkled with criticisms and individual perspectives on the meaning of the novel in cultural, literary, and historical context. Despite drastic social and cultural changes, the initial praises of *The Catcher in the Rye* have consistently echoed throughout the years, and so have the initial disapprovals. Parker warns, "I think most fellows who read *The Catcher* don't think about it enough—what's really behind it all" (16). Perhaps that closer examination will yield an understanding of what's really behind it all, that there is something more universal than what so many critics focus on, what so many have taken for granted. It seems that the further one traverses into the novel, the more literary genius is discovered, the basis of which rests in the novel's ability to communicate a truly remarkable picture of the adolescent experience—the element behind it all.

The sheer quantity of criticism on the character of Holden indicates a depth beyond what many see in him at first glance. The perpetual use of *The Catcher in the Rye* in the classroom in particular speaks to the relevance of the text today, continually offering new opportunities to transpose the novel into the language and experiences of the current culture while simultaneously

incorporating a historical viewpoint essential to unearthing contextual meaning in literature. As a character, Holden both calls forth questions about adolescence and answers them. Exploring these questions and answers about the concept of adolescence as an identity in the 1950s and today, as well as the means by which Holden has informed that understanding, will be the focus of this study.

In addition to the consistent appearance of *The Catcher in the Rye* on high school syllabi countrywide, the absence of Salinger's participating in the continued conversation surrounding the novel, particularly elements related to the character of Holden, prompts further study. Just like Holden does throughout the novel, Salinger cut ties with most of the outside world, refusing requests for appearances, interviews, and denying responses to letters and emails. The popularity the novel has amassed seems to have pushed Salinger back into his own world, rendering the author forever silent on the topic of *The Catcher in the Rye* and unavailable for any comment or insights on Holden. Herein lies an interesting situation for everyday readers and critics alike, provoking audiences to take a closer look into the novel and the character of Holden without hope of guidance from the author. Extended study of Holden becomes even more relevant and intriguing when his creator remains outside the discussion. The mystery Salinger leaves in his absence simultaneously prods and justifies the continual evaluation and understanding of Holden as an adolescent figure.

## Chapter 2: A Brief History of Adolescence

Though the delineation between child and adult has long been a part of culture, the recognition of adolescence as a specific stage in human development is a relatively recent event. In Western culture, the rise of the adolescent falls in line with the rise of the industrialized society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Author Lisa Crocket explains that there are three trends associated with this change: a decrease in demand for child labor, an increase in the emphasis on education, and the alteration of the view of children in culture. Child workers were needed less as the advances in technology progressed; in effect, their schooling was seen as more important. The child then became less economically valuable to a family because of this shift, so the sentimental value of youth increased. They were to be cherished and loved, not put to work, an idea that brought about movements to stop child labor (29). Crocket concludes that these events “profoundly altered the social roles and daily contexts of children and adolescents” and that the “progressive exclusion of children from adult work created separate institutional bases for young people and adults and effectively segregated adolescents from adult society” (30). This shift resulted in the term “adolescence” first gaining traction in the cultural sense. Though the term had been in use in academia dating back to as early as the seventeenth century, only now were there clear markings of a separate social culture in which the term was represented; having the social and economic freedom to linger between child and adult, the adolescent was born.

The history of the academic study of adolescence seems to be as hazy as the phenomenon itself. One is able to identify the most important theories and contributors, however, can by recognizing their impact on the understanding of adolescence today. *Adolescence and*

*Psychoanalysis: The Story and the History* offers a background of these contributors and explains the many ways in which the field evolved. The official study of adolescence through a psychological perspective began relatively recently, commencing with the publication of “Adolescence in 1904” by G. Stanley Hall, influenced largely by Sigmund Freud’s psychodynamic theory. The study aimed at applying psychological treatments to youth, mobilizing the treatment of mental health disorders and study of human development to a more specified stage in life. Here were clear beginnings of the practice of child psychology. Hall also applied Darwin’s theory of evolution to the maturation process, arguing that adolescence serves a physical manifestation of the transition that man made from a pre-civilized culture to a civilized one. These psychological perspectives reflect on the changes that a child undergoes in the process of maturing. Linking physical development to psychological and cognitive change helped to illuminate the phenomenon of adolescence, creating a field of study that would continue to grow beyond the application of psychological analysis and treatment. Freud and Hall were colleagues and friends and shared similar views on this unique stage in human development, with Hall’s focus on adolescence as a period of conflict and readjustment--utilizing the terms “storm” and “stress”--and Freud’s on the physiological and psychosexual changes that occur in the individual. Both Freud and Hall agreed that adolescence occurs universally and affects various components of the individual. Both examined elements of adolescence through lenses that are still utilized in the study and treatment of youth today. However, the field of exploration in understanding adolescence in the cultural sense (rather than the biological and physiological sense) did not begin until years later (xi).

Theories in adolescent psychology remained largely unchallenged until the 1950s, when a new wave of scholars approached the subject. Though it is unknown whether or not Salinger was

aware of this new way of looking at things (he was famously silent on his work), his writing suggests that at least on some level, he was in a similar mindset about the nature of human development. The simultaneous occurrence of Erikson's foundational theory on adolescent development and Salinger's creation of the character of Holden signifies a shift in culture that extends beyond the fields of literature and psychology in themselves. These two separate manifestations of a culture signify the establishment of adolescence as a distinctive phase of life rather than a transitory one. That such frequently differentiated fields of study spoke to the same subject in much the same way at the same time demonstrates that the shift in the nature of adolescence during this period was grounded in the root of culture itself. For the adolescent in society, it was the beginning of something wholly new and elusive.

This particular generation provoked a new discussion on the process of children maturing into adults with the rise of the youth-aged counter culture that was born from post-war society in America. The term "teenager" was coined during this period, a significant event that indicated a change in the way society viewed children during the progression from innocence into adulthood. While the terms "adolescent" and "teenager" are not exclusively synonymous, the timeframes in which an individual experiences both phenomena are commonly simultaneous. While reaching the age of 13 does not necessitate the start of adolescence, many changes characteristic of the stage of adolescence begin around this time, ending also around the late teen years into the early 20s. However, while teenage years are easily quantifiable, the process of adolescence is malleable and shifting, able to extend both before and after the ages of 13-19. Nonetheless, the coining of the term "teenager" in the 1950s came about in conjunction with a rapid increase in the study of adolescence as culturally and socially driven. The autonomy sought by rebellious teenagers and their simultaneous refusal of adult responsibilities illustrated the multi-faceted

quality of the adolescent period. The culture provoked adolescence to evolve into a place more distinct from both childhood and adulthood than ever before.

The rise of the teenager in this unique time in history exposed other avenues by which to approach the study of adolescence. Freud's own daughter, Anna, was part of this new methodology of understanding adolescence. Anna Freud's studies in childhood psychology began with her first works in the early 1920s but continued into the late 1960s. Rather than concentrating purely on the biological factors apparent in adolescence, behavioral, cognitive, and cultural functions were exposed. The attempt by an adolescent to gain balance between the id, ego, and superego was the concentration of Anna Freud's studies. Much like her father, Anna Freud was influenced by his own peers in the field, as many of them frequently visited at their home. She studied in Vienna, later moving to London to teach and continue research. Her works became critical in the increased understanding of child psychology and analytics, sparking many of her successors to build upon her conclusions that the formation of identity was the most central aspect of the journey through adolescence. Understanding the search for identity became an essential part of understanding the process of adolescence, and Anna Freud's student Erik Erikson carried on this emphasis.

Using both Sigmund Freud's and Anna Freud's previous research and conclusions, Erikson formulated a specific theory of the stages of psychosocial development, the framework upon which the analysis of Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* will be based, both because the novel lends itself to such an application and also because their publications are so close together, indicating an underlying shared cultural foundation. While using a psychological lens for literary analysis may appear dissonant, one must recall what liveliness and relatability is so inherent in the character of Holden. When enjoying *The Catcher in the Rye*, it seems not that one is reading

a novel but bearing witness to a real story told by a real young man. Here Salinger's talent for storytelling becomes all the more apparent, as his own authorial voice slips away and all that remains is Holden. Readers enjoy Holden, or disapprove of him, much as they would a person in their own lives. The praise and clamor his character calls forth reveal a passion in his readership, a passion normally relegated to the adolescents of "real life." His complexity and nuanced personality reveal a more precise representation of the adolescent psyche than perhaps any before seen in literature. Because of Salinger's tenacity in writing such an accurate depiction of adolescence as it truly appears in 1950s culture, Holden is character that somehow seems to live beyond the pages of the novel. One is likely to approach Holden as if he is a real person, drawing conclusions and making connections with "real life" adolescents as a way of better understanding the world outside the novel, and vice-versa. Salinger characterizes Holden so acutely that he appears real. Therefore, for purposes here, we shall regard Holden as just that.

Erikson's theory illuminates the character of Holden when approaching him as a real person. In his first major work in 1950, *Childhood and Society*, Erikson discusses the stages of human development in depth and presents the concept of the "identity crisis." Written so soon before the initial publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Erikson's work and approach will serve to contextualize the analysis of Holden as an adolescent searching for identity in a particular social climate. It is at this point of convergence, between the psychological perspective and the social perspective, that the understanding of adolescence appears most comprehensive. What is essential to remember then, when approaching an analysis of the adolescent on an individual level, is that adolescence operates both inside and outside of the human body as a process of both physical and psychological change as well as social and cultural development. One does not, and perhaps cannot, grow into an adult outside of culture. Adolescence expresses a new way of

understating the maturation process by means of this cultural interaction. The rise of the teenager in the social sphere called more attention to the idea of adolescence, an idea that Holden embodies throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*.

According to Erikson, characteristics of the adolescent journey are centrally located around the development of identity, both in the personal interactions between an individual and the worldview developed in reaction to the surrounding society in which the adolescent lives. The individual forms his identity by progressively building relationships with the outside world, both personal and public. This development alters one's associations with parents, siblings, and peers as one leaves childhood and advances towards maturity. These experiences are where an adolescent develops an identity in his own personal sphere. This gradual changing of interpersonal relationships often occurs in sequence with the individual's development of an identity outside these relationships, with a focus on his or her identity in terms of the society in which the adolescent lives. Herein lies the process of change in an adolescent in terms of a cultural identity, a place within the public sphere.

These foundational elements of the adolescent experience will be examined using Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, with a concentration on a single stage—"fidelity." This particular phase in development is one in which the individual faces the essential questions of identity: Who am I? Who can I become? Answering these questions is a result of reflection on and search for a unique identity and therefore becomes central in the journey of adolescence. 1950s America saw in Holden their teenager: careless, courageous, condemning. A hodgepodge of child and adult mixed into one, straddling the gap while being on neither side, a social conundrum. Holden presents to readers now these same questions of adolescence, only transposed onto an ever-changing face. Examining these questions as they arise in different

aspects of Holden's life in particular will reveal an understanding of the ways in which he continues to inform and reveal American adolescence on its most fundamental level.

### Chapter 3: Elements of Holden's Adolescence

Because closely examining Holden's unique journey allows for a better understanding of the adolescent journey at large, even outside of literature, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development provides the framework for understanding Holden as the quintessential adolescent. Erikson's foundational argument insists that like the physical stages of growth, the growth of personality must follow the "proper rate and the proper sequence" which rule such development, though this process differs slightly for individuals across cultures (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 54). Using a diagram similar in structure to that of Sigmund Freud's psychosexual stages, Erikson presents a series of stages that an individual must go through to achieve a healthy adult personality. Each stage encompasses an encounter and a coinciding crisis, due to a changing perspective, both in the physical sense of growth and psychological awareness and in the social sense in exposure to certain people and situations (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 57). Applying Erikson's theory to the character of Holden in the context of his unique psychological and social situations gives Erikson's model a face but more importantly explains Holden's oftentimes-confounding behavior, allowing room for a more in-depth understanding of the elements that make Holden a prototypical adolescent.

While Erikson began his study of human development years before, the publication of *Childhood and Society* in 1950 lays the framework and details the specific elements of his complete theory. Developed to explain the problems that may arise when an individual veers off the typical course of growing into maturity, Erikson's system contains multiple stages. To preface an interview with Erikson, Daniel Goleman of the *New York Times* gives a brief background of Erikson's theory, explaining that with his wife—a frequent research partner and editor—Erikson

first presented his theory of the stages of human development for a conference at the White House in 1950 (“Erikson”). Richard Stevens explains in *Erik H. Erikson: Explorer of Identity and the Life Cycle* that Erikson continued discussion and development of his theory throughout many of his works, focusing on the importance of identity, a theme that was introduced first in *Childhood and Society*, and then later expanded on in *Identity and the Life Cycle* in 1959 and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* in 1968 (60). These works combine to create a comprehensive picture of Erikson’s theory as a whole as well as the significance of identity formation in the process of human development. In each stage of Erikson’s proposed sequence, the individual must face and conquer certain challenges, both psychological and social. While overcoming these specific hurdles is not necessary to move on to the next stage, psychological problems arise if one fails to conquer a challenge. Maturity may be stunted at that particular stage, preventing the individual from gaining the experience needed to face the next obstacle, or the individual may continue on without ever having gained a foothold. Elements left untried will prove problematic in the future, as the experiences needed to develop into a healthy, mature adult accumulate through each stage and the lack of any certain triumph leaves the individual unbalanced. No stage can be left untried without future consequences. For Erikson, there is no skipping ahead unmarred. The changing social atmosphere and psychological growth of the individual present these challenges as development continues.

In *Developmental Psychology: Childhood & Adolescence: Childhood and Adolescence*, David R. Shaffer and Katherine Kipp give a basic overview of the many elements of Erikson’s theory. They explain that while some criticize Erikson’s theory for lack of clear explanation of how or why development occurs, it is extremely useful as a tool for *describing* this process of human psychosocial growth (46). The authors go on to explain the varying steps Erikson

presents in his many works. Each stage of this theory encompasses one elemental challenge, totaling to eight “Life Crises” or “psychosocial stages” as Erikson calls them. The first stage in Erikson’s theory is the development of a basic sense of trust. The baby relies on the parent for survival, requiring a level of comfort and dependency on the caregiver. The next stage involves a conflict between autonomy and shame and doubt, a place in which children learn how to take care of themselves in basic ways, such as feeding, clothing and using the restroom alone. Without mastering these skills, children will doubt their own abilities and be ashamed of their failure to be autonomous (44).

The authors continue to describe the third stage of development, which involves children taking on responsibilities possibly beyond their capacity, demonstrating a sense of initiative. Next, children enter a stage of learning social skills and honing academic performance, often comparing themselves to peers to gain a sense of where they stand to establish a sense of industry. The journey between childhood and adulthood is the central component in Erikson’s fifth stage of development wherein the individual must answer the essential question “Who am I?” by establishing a sense of self within the social context of culture. This sense of identity comes from navigating peer and family relationships as well as identifying a potential occupation for adulthood, all in the context of societal norms. Without properly and thoroughly exploring this essential question, adolescents face “role confusion,” a disorientation of their place in the world and what they believe. The next stage of development focuses on establishing intimate relationships, followed by the seventh stage of becoming productive at work and in family life. Lastly, the eighth stage incorporates a looking back on the lifetime and evaluating its merit, the final life crisis to be overcome (Shaffer and Kipp 44).

Through these stages, the physical body and psychological development of the individual progress, though not always chronologically. Erikson's perspective on development allows for overlapping and continuing progress as well as the potential for revisiting a stage that one may have been unsuccessful in completing later in life. Thus, all hope is not lost if an individual is unable to face the challenge of a particular stage that presents itself. One may return to fix mishaps or missteps when an environment provides experience and opportunity to do so.

Because Erikson believes that the obstacles adolescents face differ vastly from those of young children or mature adults (Shaffer and Kipp 44), a study of the fifth stage of development—the one in which an adolescent must negotiate a self-identity—reveals unique elements unseen in other areas of life, incorporating descriptions of typical adolescence that Holden proves to exemplify. While the exact timeframe of adolescence is still up for debate, most consider it to begin around the first signs of puberty and to end when these changes have formed an individual into a fully physically mature adult. Erikson himself is hesitant to designate a specific age range for adolescence beyond these parameters, suggesting that the beginning and end of adolescence are not distinctive, but rather flow from childhood and into adulthood fluidly. However, this suggested ending does not satisfy some who argue that adolescence reaches beyond the physical changes experienced and well into early adulthood. The strict definition of such a term, culturally and scientifically, is therefore seemingly still malleable. Though this may leave questions to how to identify a quintessential adolescent, using the details given of Holden's physical, psychological, and social states indicate a case strong enough to deem him worthy of the exemplary role.

The age of a person does not necessitate the initiation or completion of adolescence, yet as Erikson concludes, the teenage years are closely tied with the journey of adolescence,

frequently occurring at the same pace. However, one must keep in mind that an individual will experience adolescence as a gradual process with no clear delineations to trigger its commencement or end. Unlike age, one cannot mark adolescence on a calendar. Nonetheless, adolescence and the teenager are inextricably connected in the popular imagination. With the general coinciding timelines of the teenage years and the process of adolescence, we will consider the physical changes associated with each of these processes one and the same for the purposes here. Examining Holden's physical changes as a teenager going through puberty forms the primary foundation for situating him as an adolescent figure.

Holden's physical state rarely appears in the novel except for the occasional commentary on his appearance or previous sickness, though one may consider these signs as clear indications of his adolescent nature in the biological sense. The first sign of Holden's physical adolescence is his age. Holden narrates his own story from what is most likely a psychiatric facility; here he mentions the story begins when he was 16. The reader soon finds out that it has only been a few months since the start of Holden's story, as he is currently a 17 year old. Though the timeframe of the teenage years and adolescence do not always match up exactly, Holden's age situates him centrally in both typical timeframes. The second sign of Holden's physical adolescence is his bodily appearance. Holden also stands over six feet two inches tall, an enigma for his age as well as his society, with the average American male measuring just under 5'8 in the 1950s. Lastly, Holden mentions that he "practically got t.b" as result of his incredible growth spurt, which caused him to grow six and a half inches in a year (Salinger 7). These physical characteristics and changes demonstrate that Holden has grown beyond the stages of childhood, and has done so at a rapid pace.

Though Holden appears beyond the stage of childhood physically, he himself admits that his biological growth is actually “ironical” because he often acts as though he is only twelve or thirteen (Salinger 11). Weighed in terms of his behavior in his particular social situation, Holden’s psychological immaturity balances the physical components that seem to indicate his maturity. Crockett explains that even though the process is “influenced by biological and psychological growth, adolescent development is also molded by the social and cultural context in which it occurs” (2). Therefore, the journey Holden takes is not only part of the biology of human development world-wide, but also part of the unique social situation of Holden’s time and place in that world.

Erikson was one of the first scholar in the field of psychology to propose this notion of social influence. Just like there is a series of physical developments of the individual, each one unique and building upon the last, part of a series that makes up the whole body, such as the development of the psyche, though at birth, the child “leaves the chemical exchange of the womb for the social exchange system of his society, where his gradually increasing capacities meet the opportunities and limitations of his culture” according to Erikson (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 53); therefore, the growth of the personality is relegated now also to external forces beyond the physical body. Erikson emphasizes that the healthy personality comes from the overcoming of conflicts, both internal and external, causing an increased sense of personal identity, good judgment, and the constant improvement in the ability to do well. However, this last element, the increased ability to do well, is measured not by the individual, but by those that surround the individual. Therefore, one must contextualize success within a certain culture (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 53). For Holden, these conflicts appear not only in his physical characteristics but also in his psychological state and social role.

Because Erikson's theory covers these two basic areas of an individual's life—the psychological and the social—exploring both elements of Holden's life is critical in applying the theory to Holden's story. His attitude and behavior towards his family, peers, and members of the adult world outside these immediate relationships all reveal the ways in which Holden's culture contributes to, influences, and guides his adolescent journey. Both Holden's psychological state and social atmosphere together to create a picture of adolescence, one that rings true of the culture of the 1950s as well as one that marks characteristics of the modern adolescent identity as understood today.

Identifying the features of Holden's adolescence rests in first being able to decipher his unique character from the overall content of the novel, something many readers struggle to do. Oftentimes, the content of *The Catcher in the Rye* overshadows the analysis of Holden's character; however, what the book contains and the way that Holden handles these things differ greatly. According to Robert P. Moore, what the "unseeing, unperceptive, and puritanical eye" so oft misses is that while "there is dirt and crudeness and subversion and immorality" in the book, "it is the world around Holden that is negative [. . .], that writes the dirty words on the walls, that does the crude things that make the sensitive cringe, that is immoral and duplicitous and vengeful [but] never Holden himself" (21). Virgilia Peterson also comes to Holden's defense, adding that the crudities in which Holden's world is covered are "merely the devils that try him externally," but "inside, his spirit is intact" (qtd. in Laser and Fruman). The recurrent moments that demonstrate Holden's aggressive and insistent fight against these immoralities show just how different he is from the world surrounding him, like his visceral reaction to reading the words "fuck you" scrawled in numerous places around New York and his immediate and frantic attempts to erase the phrase wherever it appears. Though they are frequent and overt, the similar

instances of “social grime” in the novel situate Holden in a place not merely to experience them (or to simply expose the reader to them), but to fight them—his reactions to the evils in society demonstrate his disapproval of them. Understanding occurrences like these requires separating the novel’s content from the character of Holden. Without doing so, one may overlook Holden’s struggle specifically as an adolescent to define himself in relation to his environment and instead lump him together with the rest of his world. Adolescence for Holden is a matter of distinction; he aims to mature without becoming just another “phony,” but rather aims to be something greater. The first step in understanding Holden as an adolescent figure is simple enough then. The reader must see Holden as Holden and not as the world in which he lives or the situations in which he finds himself. His reaction to the world and to these situations will tell of his character and ultimately of his typically adolescent identity. Here Erikson’s theory works again to explain Holden’s aggressive repudiation of his society: “[W]here man does not have enemies he often must invent them in order to create boundaries against which he can assert the leeway of the new man he must become” (qtd. in Stevens 66). In this light, Holden’s demonization of the society that surrounds him and his resulting fight against joining that society reveals his adolescent struggle to form a unique identity as distinct from his own culture.

Once a clear line has been drawn between the content of the novel and the character of Holden, one may develop a more concentrated analysis of Holden’s adolescent journey that prods him to answer the question “Who am I?” that Erikson emphasizes as the most important in forming an identity. The basis on which Holden forms the answer to this question rests in both his psychological state and his social state, two elements that can be pinpointed through close examination of Holden’s commentary and behavior throughout the novel, elements that reveal Holden’s adolescent state as his identity in its own right.

Holden's psychological state is the first element one must examine to understand better his way of approaching the formation of identity as an adolescent. While there are many varying elements that contribute to an individual's identity development, one of the most common and essential components is the occurrence of an "identity crisis," a term coined by Erikson indicating "a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or the other, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (*Identity: Youth in Crisis* 16). For Holden, this identity crisis comes with the death of his younger brother Allie, an event that challenges what he believes of the world. In discussing this traumatic event, Holden appears incredibly casual, indicating that perhaps Holden himself is unaware of the impact the event made on him. Holden begins to talk about Allie's baseball glove, which Allie covered in poems for when he got bored in the outfield. Holden's roommate needs Holden to write a descriptive essay, and Holden chooses to write about the mitt. In the middle of describing Allie, Holden abruptly states, "He's dead now," and the reader learns that Holden's younger brother by two years passed away from leukemia (Salinger 43). Holden goes on to praise Allie for his intelligence, kindness, patience, bright red hair, and humor, and then turns back to the time of the event:

I was only thirteen and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't. 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 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, but you didn't know Allie. (Salinger 44)

The tragedy of losing his brother propels Holden to violence and aggression, creating in him an urge that he neither understands nor is able to control. This loss of control as a result of traumatic experience is not uncommon, Erikson argues. In fact, he states that through trauma an individual often becomes “impaired in that central control over themselves” (*Identity: Youth in Crisis* 17) much like Holden does the night Allie dies. Upon recognizing that they were right to try to have him speak to a therapist, however, Holden demonstrates that he has some sort of understanding that his actions were not completely sane. L. C. Terr emphasizes this as a common occurrence as well, explaining that “youth who have experienced trauma in childhood may reevaluate their past experiences as they develop new cognitive capabilities” (qtd. in Levesque 2121). Holden’s reflections on this event as a time where he lost control and his understanding that it was a cause for concern show a gained perspective and understanding of the situation, though not a fully comprehensive one. He still asserts that his actions were “for the hell of it” rather than a result of feelings of shock and mourning. Even after four years have passed, Holden sees now only partially what an adult might see when looking at the event—that there was an extreme mental and emotional disturbance, one that would be concerning for any mature adult to witness in a child. Standing between childhood and adulthood, Holden recalls and comments on the event that started his identity crisis with both naïveté and maturity, a mixture of characteristic responses typical in adolescence.

Holden’s encounter with this tragedy comes at a critical time in his life—the beginning of his teenage years—catapulting him into the simultaneous stage of adolescence. One may pinpoint Holden’s identity crisis here in the loss of his brother, an event that will appear as the central marker for the resistance Holden feels towards becoming an adult but also as the facilitator of his development towards maturity. The idea of maturing is at once intimidating and

intriguing to Holden. He appears caught between holding onto innocence and also wanting to be mature, striving to form his own unique identity but also craving to be a part of the larger social atmosphere, desiring a meaningful place in the scheme of the adult world but resisting the phoniness he sees as inherent in it. Most importantly, growing up requires Holden to move beyond his place as a child, which to him means leaving behind Allie, forever immortalized in Holden's mind as youthful innocence embodied. Maturing means moving beyond the place Holden and Allie shared as children together and into a life that Allie was never given the chance to experience. In many ways, Holden is an adolescent resistant to adulthood because of a sense of survivor's guilt from Allie's death, an event that changes Holden's conception of the world from one of fairness to one of evil. This experience forges Holden's adolescent identity, provoking him to take his place as an adolescent.

Though Allie's death seems to be the reason for Holden's resistance to joining the adult world, it is also the catalyst for Holden's adolescent journey and realization of his identity. Traumatic events can propel a person along the route to maturity, encouraging and requiring growth of the individual to deal with unfamiliar events and emotions. Erikson believes such trauma can serve as a hurdle for development. However, for Holden, Allie's death becomes a propulsion into a world with which he has previously been unfamiliar. The life he knew has drastically changed; he has become disoriented, his place in the world disrupted. Such a dramatic change in his personal life forces Holden to reconcile the experience of Allie's death with the world in which it happened. This reconciliation requires of him an examination into what he knows of the world and an altering of the lens through which he views it. To Holden, Allie's death is proof that things are not fair, not right, not good. Everything he encounters is painted with the memory of the loss of genuine, innocent Allie, and the world is what took him. The

world rewards the phonies and punishes the genuine. “I’m always saying ‘Glad to’ve met you’ to somebody I’m not glad at *all* I met,” Holden comments, adding, “If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff though” (Salinger 98). This worldview, that survival in society means being disingenuous, is what most plagues Holden’s thoughts and encourages his behaviors throughout the novel; it also indicates Holden’s transition from a child to an adolescent. Holden’s sense of aggression and dissatisfaction with the world is an example of the main disturbance Erikson identified in “severely conflicted young people whose sense of confusion is due...to war within themselves, and in confused rebels and destructive delinquents who war on their society” (*Identity: Youth in Crisis* 17). By initiating a fight within Holden about the nature of the world, Allie’s death propels Holden into having to navigate his own place in it, an essential piece of discovering his personal identity in his adolescence.

Holden’s judgmental perspective on the world seems reasonable in light of Allie’s death, though without Erikson’s insight, there is room for disapproval nonetheless. While Holden’s language and “adult” situations he encounters are perhaps the most commonly condemned elements of the novel, some critics argue that this strong opposition to such relatively normal components in the lives of adolescents is simply masking an underlying discomfort, a discomfort stemming not from what Holden says and does but from his general approach to the society in which he lives, in his attitude towards the world. For example, Holden’s outlook towards most of the other characters is usually negative throughout the novel, as he is constantly criticizing them for lacking intelligence, humor, tact, honesty, and so on. He finds very little praise to give others (except when speaking of Allie). Most commonly, Holden refers to others as phonies or morons, his frequent use of which French suggests “indicates a contemptuous condescension toward the failure of his society to measure up to his expectations” (37), a common marker of the adolescent

identity. While some present the defense that Holden refers to himself by less than kind terms as well, such as a “madman,” French argues, “this term implies a kind of superiority, someone who is more a threat to the world than its victim,” and continues, “It is probably a sense of this condescension on Holden’s part that has upset conformist critics of the novel even if they have not been able to articulate their discomfort and have sought a scapegoat in the objectionable language that also expresses to polite society” (37). To Holden, this act of seeing himself as superior, if that is truly the case, may be a means of coping with the problems he faces in accepting the adult world. “This is beat realism,” explains Breslow, “the softening of the agony of disillusionment through a conviction of personal emotional superiority” (15). The world doesn’t hold up to Holden’s standards, so he looks down on it, a behavior exemplary of the idealist characteristics Erikson argues is common of the adolescent identity.

Perhaps Holden directs his sense of disillusionment towards the outside world as a whole, but upon closer examination, the attitude presents itself as a specific reaction to Allie’s death. The cruel and harsh world took the only person Holden holds above himself, the only good and kind and genuine person Holden recognizes around him. Working as a catalyst of Holden’s personal attitude, the death of Allie propels Holden into the development of an individualized worldview, which in turn affects the way he interacts with those around him. Erikson argues that a personal loss—like Holden losing Allie—oftentimes results in the type of crisis that provokes growth and development in the adolescent as it shifts external situations and challenges any previously held sense of identity (Stevens 68). Holden has been an older brother to Allie for most of his life, so such a drastic change in his family structure traumatizes what minimal sense of identity Holden has as part of that family. Though one may see Holden’s drastic change in attitude towards the world as an act of mourning, the particular time that Allie’s

death occurs as well as the identity confusion Holden experiences as a result of it prove that Holden is an individual not yet grounded in a solid concept of who he is, especially outside his familial role. Erikson explains that such disorientation is common to the adolescent negotiation of identity (*Identity: Youth and Crisis*).

Although Holden's development as an adolescent has been initiated by the passing of Allie, an event that has strongly affected his psychological state, many social influences also contribute to Holden's navigation of a self-identity. Since the formation of a unique identity does not occur within a vacuum but rather involves the "critical role of social conditions [to mold] contemporary adolescence" (Crocket 28), Holden's social interactions inform and reflect his adolescent journey.

Surrounding Holden is a multitude of social influences, all of which Holden navigates like a typical adolescent would. Faced with what Erikson considers the central question of identity—"Who am I?"—Holden strives to find an answer in differentiating himself from the crowd. If Holden is successful in finding a true identity, there is hope that he can be genuine and sincere, or develop "fidelity" as Erikson calls it, the goal Holden seems to aim for. By examining what Holden recalls of certain events, situations, and relationships, the reader can then put together a comprehensive picture of the particular social context in which Holden finds himself as an adolescent. Striving to create an identity apart from external influences, Holden struggles against the expectations placed on him by society as a friend, lover, son, and brother.

One sees Holden's process of identity formation throughout the novel, beginning with the first lines of the novel. He begins his story by saying what he is *not* going to tell the reader, like "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (Salinger 3). Instead, he is going to talk about "this madman stuff" that happened before he had to "take it easy" where he is now (a location he fails

to identify). The reader learns that Holden is a prep school boy. Not only has Holden been in prep school for a few years, he has been in a variety of prep schools. Being kicked out seems to be a common occurrence. The first sign of Holden's adolescent rebellion appears here, as he briefly explains his distaste for school in regards to its social environment. "You were supposed to commit suicide or something if Pencey didn't win," he comments begrudgingly as he stands alone at the top of the hill overlooking the crowded football stadium during the last game of the semester, in which "practically the whole school" was in attendance, except of course for him (Salinger 4). This picture of isolation sets the tone for most of novel, as Holden decides to leave school early before winter break starts and venture through the city just wasting time until he can go home so that his parents do not find out about his expulsion. This demonstration of independence and isolation situates Holden as an outsider, disconnected from the people that surround him, including friends and family, a solitude deemed highly dangerous by Erikson.

The majority of Holden's commentary may merely skirt around the subject of this shying away from interpersonal relationships, but what Holden does reveal about his interactions with the people in his life is incredibly telling of his process in developing an identity. Holden often displays behaviors that are offensive or abrasive towards those closest to him, pushing them away whenever he can, a clear indication of his place in Erikson's adolescent stage. Erikson explains that it is during this stage that adolescents, in seeking to clarify their own identities, can be "remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others" who differ from them in race, intellect, appearance and other such signifiers of membership in the in-group or out-group (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 132). However, he does add that "such intolerance may be, for a while, a necessary defense against a sense of identity loss," at least in principle (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 133). Holden demonstrates clearly the sense of exclusion to which Erikson refers,

behavior that many readers are quick to notice as well. Jones articulates the essential picture of Holden's personal ties: "His sense of alienation is almost complete—from parents, from friends, from society in general as represented by the prep school from which he has been expelled and the night-club and hotel world of New York in which he endures a week-end exile while hiding out from his family" (7). Holden hardly reveals a relationship—aside from the one with his younger sister Phoebe—that demonstrates any ties to the living. In *J.D. Salinger: A Life*, Kenneth Slawenski notes that from the first few pages, the reader sees that Holden is an outcast, separated from his fellow classmates and watching from a distance, and it is apparent that he is alienated from those around him (206). Through various scenes that follow this initial one, Holden progresses through a slew of clumsy interactions with his peers, all of which reflect how separated he is from them. This seclusion is problematic because according to Erikson, peer relationships are the most essential in identity formation during adolescence. By inspecting Holden's approach to these relationships, the reader can identify elements common of the adolescent struggle for identity. "Identity then is in large part relational, that is, it is conceived in terms of comparison with others – with those we are like as well as those we are quite definitely not. Developing a coherent identity requires repudiation as well as identification, as when we make clear what we will never become or reject what we once were," explains Stevens in examining Erikson's theory (66). One may see Holden's relational separation from his peers as a means of creating a self-identity most readily in his interactions with his fellow roommates and classmates at Pencey Prep. Economic status, level of sexual activity, personal hygiene habits, intellectual snobbery—all are differences Holden uses to put barriers between himself and his peers.

One of the most prominent features of Holden's adolescence is the way he interacts with and reacts to people based on their socioeconomic status, frequently drawing distinctions between himself and others based on this single factor; he very clearly demonstrates the sense of exclusion that Erikson deems common (and problematic) in adolescence. Holden meets a couple of nuns that have cheap suitcases in a diner during a morning in New York. "It isn't important, I know, but I hate it when somebody has cheap suitcases. It sounds terrible to say it, but I can even get to hate somebody, just *looking* at them, if they have cheap suitcases with them," he admits (Salinger 120). This comment is immediately followed by a story of "something [that] happened once" to Holden at school. He recalls a roommate that called Holden's belongings "bourgeois," focusing specifically on a set of Holden's suitcases that were high quality. The boy would hide his own suitcases under his bed so no one would see them, causing Holden to feel so sorry for him that it "depressed the holy hell" out of him so much that he wanted to throw his out or even trade with the boy. "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. The thing is, it's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs—if yours are really *good* ones and theirs aren't," Holden tells the reader (Salinger 121).

Both Holden and his roommate request to be moved after just two months of rooming together, and Holden admits that this tension was one of the reasons why he decided to room "with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine," Holden justifies (Salinger 122). While Holden describes this particular roommate as intelligent with a good sense of humor, the socio-economic disparities between them caused too much tension. In Holden's mind, it should be easy enough for someone not to care who has better suitcases. "But

they do. They really do” (Salinger 122). Both the situations with the nuns and the roommate show Holden’s sensitivity to differences in economic status, the suitcases representing how wealthy a person is. For Holden, the quality of a suitcase is clear sign of how much money someone has, a certain marker for differences that to him are too difficult to negotiate. Erikson explains that youth can often demonstrate “a sharp and intolerant readiness to discard and disavow people” when searching for an identity (qtd. in Stevens 65). Willing to sacrifice a potentially great friendship with a peer at school, Holden resorts to discarding this roommate to find one whose financial situations is similar to his own to avoid any future discomforts. This tendency to dismiss others is central to Holden’s adolescent identity, as is revealed further in Holden’s other peer relationships.

Holden continues to demonstrate dismissive tendencies typical of adolescents as the novel continues. The young man that lives in the room connected to Holden’s, Robert Ackley, is another peer Holden finds distasteful. Ackley is in the dorm when Holden gets back into his room. Like Holden, Ackley isn’t at the game either. Holden describes Ackley as peculiar, having especially bad teeth, very pimply, with a terrible personality: “He was also sort of a nasty guy. I wasn’t too crazy about him, to tell you the truth,” Holden scoffs (Salinger 23). Ackley comes into the room where Holden is sitting and Holden explains that Ackley only comes over when Holden’s roommate isn’t there because Ackley “hated everybody’s guts, damn near” (Salinger 23). From the interaction between these two boys, the reader can tell that Ackley attempts conversation with Holden, asking about the game and picking up objects throughout the room and asking about them. Holden is bothered by all of this behavior, annoyed that Ackley won’t leave him alone. However, Holden admits that he feels sorry for Ackley. Here there appear elements of compassion in Holden, a consciousness that he has towards Ackley. Even in their

mutual isolation away from the game and the rest of their peers, however, Holden fails to recognize the potential friendship with Ackley, disliking his physical appearance and writing him off as “nasty” because of it. Here again, Erikson’s argument about the potential cruelty and inclinations to dismiss of the adolescent age come to life in Holden’s story.

The other roommate Holden finds turns out to be just as disappointing as the first, and once again, Holden reveals his firm standing in the adolescent identity by disapproving of another peer. Ward Stradlater is almost as tall as Holden but nearly twice as broad. Holden seems to both admire and condemn many of Stradlater’s qualities at the same time. When Stradlater enters the room, he says hello to Ackley, a gesture that Holden admits is friendly, even though it is a “phony kind of friendly” (Salinger 30). Holden also criticizes Stradlater for being a slob, but explains that Stradlater is a secret slob. “He always *looked* good when he was fixing himself up, but he was a secret slob anyway, if you knew him the way I did” Holden complains (Salinger 31).

Holden also criticizes Stradlater for his beaming self-confidence while also admitting that Stradlater is a very handsome young man indeed. Because of Stradlater’s attractiveness, he has no trouble getting girls to date him. Holden, on the other hand, is reluctant and shy when it comes to females. As Stradlater prepares for one of these dates, Holden finds out that it is with one of his friends, a girl he knows from the previous summer. “I damn near dropped dead,” Holden says in response to finding out Stradlater is taking out his friend Jean Gallagher (Salinger 35). Growing progressively more wound up and nervous, Holden starts to ask questions about what Stradlater plans to do with Jane, but gets no clear answers. Stradlater leaves and Holden is frozen turning over the potential situations in his mind, just sitting for an hour and a half: “I just sat in my chair, not doing anything. I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy

bastard Stradlater was” (Salinger 39). Here the reader sees Holden struggle with what appears to be a sense of inferiority or jealousy towards Stradlater, and then a sense of fear with what he might do with Holden’s friend. The jealousy that underlies this fear is part of the societal role and expectation of young men to be seductive and charming that Holden recognizes but struggles to adopt wholesale, though the reader sees Holden attempting to mimic Stradlater’s approach to dealing with women later on in the novel. As this particular situation continues to unravel, Holden’s attitude towards Stradlater appears as a reflection on his own struggle for identity as a young male in his society. Holden attempts to form a unique self-concept, but fails to separate himself completely from his culture’s norms of male behavior—represented here by Stradlater’s attitudes towards women. Erikson explains that an individual, like Holden, cannot fully negotiate an identity outside of cultural expectations because the process of identity formation “is ‘located’ *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*” (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 22). As Erikson’s perspective reveals, Holden cannot escape the world in which he is situated, nor can he ignore it if he truly wants to understand himself.

However, Holden’s internal struggle as an adolescent against such cultural constructs reaches beyond a mere mental battle as it manifests itself outwardly once Stradlater returns from the date. Holden admits he was incredibly worried: “If you knew Stradlater, you’d have been worried, too. I’d double-dated with that bastard a couple of times, and I know what I’m talking about. He was unscrupulous. He really was,” Holden warns the reader (Salinger 45). When Holden confronts Stradlater about the date, asking if he gave Jane “the time” in the back of a borrowed car. Stradlater answers him, teasing, “That’s a professional secret, buddy” (Salinger 49). Though Holden says he doesn’t remember what comes next, he does confess to trying to attack Stradlater: “I tried to sock him, with all my might, right smack in the toothbrush, so it

would split his goddam throat open” (Salinger 49). This provokes a brawl, resulting in Stradlater hitting Holden square in the face. “You never saw such gore in your life,” Holden tells the reader in response to looking at himself in the mirror, with a seeming sense of personal pride (Salinger 51). This fight reflects a deeper conflict in Holden that resists the notion of what society expects a young male to behave like, at least in terms of peer expectations. For Holden, fighting Stradlater means fighting against what he stands for and serves as a ground upon which Holden can try to distinguish himself. Erikson refers to this as *negative identification*, or the process by which an individual works to establish an identity by rejecting a role offered by family, or in this case, surrounding community (Stevens 66). With this particular fight, Holden distinguishes himself from and then dismisses another peer in an attempt to establish his own unique identity, though this resistance just further demonstrates his role as a typical adolescent figure.

Holden’s roommates are not the only peers he cuts ties with as he navigates Erikson’s question of identity, however, as he aims to distinguish himself further from others. Carl Luce, Holden’s previous student adviser from Whooton, is another peer Holden can’t quite seem to connect with. “The only thing he ever did, though, was give these sex talks and all, late at night when there was a bunch of guys in his room. He knew quite a bit about sex, especially perverts and all,” Holden explains (Salinger 158). Constantly talking about “flits,” Luce warns the boys that they each could turn into one almost overnight. Holden mentions, though, that he thinks Carl himself might be a flit, always leaving the bathroom door open and trying to wrestle with the boys. “That stuff’s sort of flitty. It really is. I’ve known quite a few real flits, at schools and all, and they’re always doing stuff like that, and that’s why I always had my doubts about old Luce. He was a pretty intelligent guy, though” (Salinger 159). While Luce’s intelligence seems to be a redeeming factor here, Holden quickly returns to the habit of scrutinizing his peers.

Holden attacks Luce as being boring as well as an intellectual snob. When Holden tries to bring up Luce's favorite topic—perverts and flits—Luce reacts by telling Holden he doesn't want to talk about that, but rather, that he wants to have a quiet, peaceful conversation. Holden tells the reader, "That's the trouble with these intellectual guys. They never want to discuss anything serious unless *they* feel like it," adding that Luce in particular was "afraid somebody'd say something smarter than *he* had" (Salinger 163). Again, Holden finds things to pick apart in someone that could potentially be a good friend, keeping Luce at a distance because of his intellectual snobbery. Holden thinks of himself in contrast to Luce, making room for an identity that does not include an emphasis on intelligence but rather on genuine conversation, showing yet another way Holden's behavior fits into Erikson's description of *negative identification* as a means for personal identity formation.

The conversation with Luce also brings up another social pressure that Holden faces as he tries to navigate his adolescent search for identity through interactions with his peers: romance. Luce explains to Holden that he regards sex "as both a physical and spiritual experience," to which Holden replies, "So do I! So do I regard it as a wuddayacallit—a physical and spiritual experience and all. I really do" (Salinger 162). Holden's interactions with one of the female characters in the novel, Sally Hayes, reveals his struggle to assume a place in society as a lover and companion.

Erikson's theory allows for a specific perspective on Holden's experiences with peers, even those with girls. For Erikson, adolescent romance has its own characteristics, often misjudged or misguided. Though Holden criticizes the intelligence of his male friends frequently, he often misjudges the intelligence of his female peers, usually distracted by the sexual tension he experiences in his interactions with them. Sally Hayes is one of Holden's past romances, a girl

that took him particularly long to discover was not very smart. “I used to think she was quite intelligent, in my stupidity [. . .] think I’d have found it out a lot sooner if we hadn’t necked so damn much. My big trouble is, I always sort of think whoever I’m necking is a pretty intelligent person. It hasn’t got a goddam thing to do with it, but I keep thinking it anyway” (Salinger 117). Holden invites Sally to a movie and they agree to meet at a hotel and ride together. When Sally arrives, Holden is mesmerized by how she looks, telling the reader he felt like marrying her the minute he sees her even though he “didn’t even *like* her that much” and adding that Sally was always “a pain in the ass” but she “got away with it because she was so damn good-looking” (Salinger 138). Holden forgives Sally for her annoying habits because she is pretty but also because she gives in to him physically, something that happens in the cab on the way to the movie. He recalls, “We horsed around a little bit in the cab on the way over to the theater. At first she didn’t want to, but I was being seductive as hell and she didn’t have any alternative” (Salinger 139), a comment that reveals his identity as a male as powerful and persuasive, a socially constructed image of masculinity during the time.

Holden continues playing the part of a lover and tells Sally he loves her. “It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I *meant* it when I said it. I’m crazy. I swear to God I am” (Salinger 139). This scene signifies that Holden is navigating his way through romantic relationships and trying to find his own personal identity as a man in them. Even though he admits to lying about loving Sally, the notion that he means what he says indicates his fierce effort to play the role of lover, even to the point of deceiving himself in the process. “To a considerable extent, adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified,” argues Erikson (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 130). Holden uses Sally to practice being in romantic relationship and to navigate his

identity as a lover by projecting his desires onto her even though she is not truly an object of his affection. Erikson's description of the effort of many adolescents to negotiate an identity via means of "romantic" relationships explains Holden's first interactions with Sally, but the charade continues.

As the day moves forward, Holden's efforts to use Sally to help his own efforts at forming an identity become even clearer. After complaining about school and how much he dislikes it, Holden gets an idea. He proposes that Sally run away with him, to which Sally says no, igniting a fight between the two. Sally is in tears by the end of it, and Holden admits that they "both hated each other's guts by that time" (Salinger 148). Reflecting on his intentions and purpose in asking Sally to run away with him, Holden is baffled: "I probably wouldn't have taken her even if she'd wanted to go with me [. . .] The terrible part is, though, is that I *meant* it when I asked her. That's the terrible part. I swear to God I'm a madman" (Salinger 148). Holden's use of this phrase "madman" points directly back to his intentions with telling his story, remembering all the "madman stuff" that has happened. However, now that the reader sees Holden's attempt to fit into the role of the lover as part of negotiating his identity as an adult, this "madman stuff" Holden discusses now seems to represent his adolescent journey. Holden believes himself crazy for asking Sally to run away with him to escape their lives as "practically *children*," as Sally puts it, but really, this desire to be independent and free with a companion is merely an indicator of Holden's desire to grow up and be a real lover, a desire that Erikson describes as beginning in adolescence.

The way Holden negotiates relationships with his peers, both male and female, reflects his struggle to find his own identity in the midst of external social pressures. Holden's problems with forming genuine and lasting friendships as well as romantic relationships indicates a

discomfort and rigidity with others. He is unable to accept his peers with their flaws, often dismissing them for characteristics that are reflections neither of their true characters nor their worth as companions. Holden continues to develop his own identity by recognizing what he does not want to be—by comparing himself to his male friends—but also what he desires as an adult—in his yearning for love with Sally. These behaviors leave Holden isolated from his peers, without close male friends and without love interests. Since the influence of peers is so essential in Erikson's theory of development, Holden must continue to create an identity through other influences as well, regarding those closest to him as a means by which to form a concept of who he is. By turning to his family, Holden's adolescent journey to realize his identity as an adolescent continues as he explores his role as a son and brother.

The first occurrence of family in the novel appears in the first few lines when Holden mentions his parents, though overall there are very few instances of them throughout the rest of the book. Relegated to the background even when he does mention them, Holden's parents appear distant and obscure. Since Holden is the one narrating his own story, this detachment demonstrates Holden's attempt to distance himself from his parents as he ventures through adolescence, a common sign of the adolescent experience discussed in Erikson's theory. Nevertheless, the appearances of Holden's parents in the novel reveal Holden's attitude towards them and perhaps the influence they have on him as he finds his identity apart from them in adolescence.

Holden's relationship with his parents appears in small fragments and quick glimpses that are very much a part of the background in the novel, reflecting the distance that exists between Holden's parents and himself and indicating that Holden's struggle to form an identity may be in part due to his parents' absence. This distance also tells of Holden's identity as an adolescent that

is distinct from that of a child, whose identity is so often intertwined with parental figures. Holden begins his narrative by explaining that his parents would be wildly displeased if he revealed anything personal about them. For the most part, Holden does avoid discussion of them in this manner. The scenes where they do appear, however, give glimpses into what they are like and how Holden deals with them. In multiple instances, for example, Holden describes his mother as being “nervous” or “touchy” and explains that she has never quite gotten over Allie’s death. Holden also explains that his parents are different religions, but that all their children are all atheists (Salinger 112). Holden tells the reader his father is “quite wealthy,” though Holden does not know how much he makes since his father has never shared that information with Holden. Holden knows he is wealthy because he is a corporate lawyer and those “boys really haul it in” (Salinger 119). In addition to having a high paying job, Holden’s father also spends a lot of money investing in Broadway shows; they usually flop, though, which drives Holden’s mother crazy (Salinger 120). Besides these small insights, Holden leaves his audience with very little knowledge of his parents, though what Holden does reveal explains certain elements of his adolescent journey. The lack of his commentary about his parents indicates his attempt to distance himself, while the information about his mother’s mental health explains why Holden would have “hated like hell for her to know [he] got the ax again” (Salinger 120). The absence of Holden’s parents throughout the narrative also indicates their lack of influence in his life, a distance that Erikson asserts is common as a child enters and finds an identity in adolescence. Separating himself from his parents, Holden behaves as many adolescents do, attempting to form an identity that is unique apart from parental influences as well as former childhood identities.

Even though Holden’s parents appear very infrequently in the novel, the presence of commentary on his siblings is much more prominent, coinciding with the role of peers that

Erikson emphasizes in discussing adolescent development. While the role of Allie in Holden's life is evident throughout the novel, Holden's relationship with his older brother D.B. is also important. In addition to Holden's brothers, Holden's younger sister Phoebe, who is just 10 years old, plays an important role in helping him to navigate adolescence. Holden has very different relationships with all three of his siblings, though each one indicates his struggle to find an identity in his role as a brother.

Holden navigates his personal identity through his own perceptions of his role as a brother, a focus that could easily be explained by the traumatic experience of losing Allie; however, Holden's older brother D.B. is an essential figure in Holden's identity formation as an adolescent as well. The discussion of D.B. throughout the novel is mainly positive, similar to that of a younger brother looking up to an older one. However, Holden, as usual, finds something to criticize. Besides referring to D.B. as a "prostitute" multiple times—a sign of the hatred that Holden feels towards his brother's career in the entertainment industry—Holden mentions that D.B. used to take him out to a club in Greenwich Village, a sign that D.B. included Holden in his outings as he himself explored his own time of youthful exploration. It is also D.B. who is most helpful to Holden at the very end of the book when Holden is looking back from the hospital where he tells his story. D.B. asks a lot of questions, but one very important one. "D.B. asked me what I thought about all this stuff I just finished telling you about," says Holden, adding, "I didn't know what the hell to say. If you want to know the truth, I don't *know* what I think about it" (Salinger 234). Here at the end, D.B. poses this question trying to determine what Holden has garnered from all of his experiences, if he has grown. Holden's answer that he does not know does not necessarily indicate that he has learned nothing but rather signifies that he is still in the process of sorting through it all.

While Erikson's theory of development supports Holden's role as an adolescent who seeks an identity, Holden's reaction to and interaction with D.B, his adult brother, shows that Holden's adolescence in itself is an identity. Simply beginning to ponder the question of what it all means is the first step Holden can take to uncover meaning in his experiences, something that D.B., as an adult, has most likely come to understand through his own process of maturing. However, Holden's identity as an adolescent does not require him to have the answers that an adult is expected to have. Not knowing, then, is a means by which Holden can find a concept of self. Through the provocation of D.B.'s simple question, Holden can start to look back at his experiences to see how they have molded him and shaped him, but because he is not an adult, maintaining his place as an adolescent, Holden seems to understand that not knowing is part of who he is at this moment in his life. The impact D.B. has on Holden as his older brother is influential in allowing him to suggest to Holden that there are things in his life that are worth really taking a closer look at, like all this "madman stuff" Holden goes through. But D.B.'s role in the novel also allows the reader to see the adult Holden has yet to become, just as Phoebe represents the child Holden has grown beyond. Just as his siblings are in their own particular stages of life, finding their own identities in those places, Holden also takes on adolescence as an identity in itself.

The events that D.B. took Holden to in his earlier years, the clubs, as well as many movies, are two examples of adult situations that Holden seems both drawn to and repulsed by, feelings that Erikson claims are a common part of the adolescent experience. Holden reflects his own culture's hesitation to buy into all that was offered by status and wealth; David Halberstam explains in his book *The Fifties* that "many people were already beginning to question the purpose of their lives and whether that purpose had indeed become, almost involuntarily, too

much about material things” (3). Even still, most of the community happily participated in the conformist and capitalistic culture that surrounded them, even if they felt uncomfortable with it at some level. Holden’s role as an adolescent allows him to show such discomfort and reflect these hesitations through his actions. The world forgives him for his disillusioned “whining” because he is still so young and naïve, which is also why he, along with adolescents just like him, are often ignored. Erikson’s theory shows that these oversights may be products of the established adolescent sense of idealism that is so common among youth. People come to see adolescents in a certain light, overlooking their valuable and unique perspectives. Oftentimes, society has discounted perhaps the most discerning social criticisms because of the misconceptions surrounding adolescents and their value in creating a self-aware public.

These social criticisms often make their way to the surface not through well-articulated communication, but by behaviors and actions. One must look closely or confuse them with hypocrisy, as many do with Holden. Though Holden states various times throughout the novel that he hates the movies, Holden invites Sally Hayes to one for a date. He also visits various nightclubs but always ends up complaining about the atmosphere and people there. These two places where D.B. brought him previously seem to remind Holden of growing up, of places where adults take a date or spend time with their other adult friends. Holden sees this example in D.B.’s life, so Holden links these places and his brother in his own mind. Since D.B. is an adult, these places signify adult situations to Holden, explaining why he is so drawn to them during this time in his adolescence where the adult world is both alluring and perhaps intimidating. Erikson’s forms his clear depiction of the adolescent identity on the notion that there is a sense of pull from childhood and adulthood, yet adolescence, as seen in Holden’s situation especially, stands on its own as a separate identity rather than merely a transitional period.

Holden's relationships with his other siblings further establish his adolescent identity as well. Although Holden's other brother Allie has been deceased for four years, Holden still references their time spent together as he tells the reader his story. Allie's death has a major impact on Holden's adolescent journey, acting as the catalyst for mental and emotional growth. In addition to serving in this role, the memory of Allie itself helps Holden to negotiate his own identity as an older brother. Holden continually refers to Allie as an excellent child, a "wizard" when it comes to intelligence and the nicest kid Holden knows. In fact, Holden frequently refers to Allie in the present tense, even when visiting Allie in the cemetery. Visiting Allie's grave is something that Holden's parents do routinely, though Holden says—once again—that he has "cut it out" because he doesn't "enjoy seeing him in that crazy cemetery. Surrounded by dead guys and tombstones and all" (Salinger 172). Holden describes a day when they went to visit Allie, and then it started to rain. Everyone ran to their cars to keep from getting wet, which drove Holden crazy because "the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner--everybody except Allie," he tells the reader, adding, "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" (Salinger 172). Though Holden seems to understand that Allie is no longer part of his world, Holden still regards him as existing in the present tense. The role that Allie plays in shaping Holden's sense of identity is therefore still very active, even after Allie's death. Being Allie's brother is not a past identity for Holden, but rather a way to identify himself now, demonstrating the monumental impact Allie has on Holden's process of growing up, even after Holden's experience of Allie's passing.

In addition to discussion of his brothers, Holden also talks about his "kid sister" Phoebe, who is mentioned the most of the Caulfield children throughout the novel. Holden tells the reader

about her after recalling a particularly long night in the city when he wanted to phone someone up and chat, "someone with sense and all" (Salinger 75). Phoebe is Holden's smartest sibling, with pretty ears and hair like Allie's. Holden remembers how smart Phoebe used to be, even as a child, a characteristic that has only grown more evident through the years: "I mean if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about. I mean you can even take her anywhere with you" (Salinger 75). It is Phoebe that Holden reaches out to when he is his most lonely and depressed and Phoebe with whom Holden finds the most comfort in spending time. He sneaks home in the middle of the night to see her, and once he gets into her bedroom without his parents waking up, his mood changes from one of depression and sadness that has continually plagued him until now to one of peace and happiness. "I felt swell, for change...I just felt good, for a change" (Salinger 176).

When Holden wakes Phoebe up, she is ecstatic to see him. They talk for a while about school and classes, but Phoebe suddenly realizes that Holden is home too early for break. She asks Holden if he failed out, but before he can even finish making up a lie, she yells, "You did get kicked out! You did!" to which he says, "Boy you have to watch her every minute. If you don't think she's smart, you're mad" (Salinger 182). Phoebe's intelligence and her keen awareness are characteristics that ultimately help Holden to identify his disillusionment with the adult world. After trying to explain why he flunked out of Pencey, Holden is faced with Phoebe's accusation that he doesn't like anything. When Holden responds that that isn't true, Phoebe challenges him: "Name one thing," she says, and Holden says he likes Allie and sitting with Phoebe, "talking and thinking about stuff" (Salinger 189). When Phoebe exclaims that Allie is dead, Holden defends his answer fiercely: "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 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" (Salinger 189). Here Holden reveals to Phoebe, through her provocation, his disillusionment with the world he finds himself in, a typical trait of adolescence explained by Erikson.

Compared to spending time with Allie or Phoebe, the adult world—a world that D.B is now wholly a part of—is not something Holden likes. He likes the innocence of children compared to the cruelty of adults. Through this conversation with Phoebe, Holden reveals an essential struggle in his search for identity. He does not like what he sees ahead of him for the future, of being part of a group of people he not only does not relate to, but doesn't like. He prefers the presence of children, of being safe as a child, of staying behind in the world where Phoebe and, in many ways, Allie still live. His identity as a brother, younger than D.B., older than Allie and Phoebe, defines him but is also challenged as he continues in his adolescent growth. Holden's identity is perhaps so difficult for him to pinpoint because he seeks to be more than he is now. Adolescence is an identity, and Holden's relationships all lead him to acknowledge this at the close of the novel.

The relationships Holden forms with his peers and family become the structures between which Holden attempts to negotiate his identity as he ventures through adolescence. The distance he keeps from his peers by criticizing them functions similarly to the space he puts between himself and his parents, while the proximity he craves with Allie and Phoebe indicates a resistance to persist into adulthood. The social role Holden plays, therefore, sequesters him in the adolescent place, between childhood and adulthood, existing wholly outside each realm, distinct and separate in itself. Feeling the need to balance these pulls, Holden mistakenly seeks a role that allows him a place in both worlds, pinpointing the new role in society he wishes to take on. Erikson's theory of development recognizes this identifying of a place in society by the

adolescent as an essential step in maturation. For Holden, his dream is to stand forever between the worlds of the child and the adult, playing "the catcher in the rye." Holden shares this dream with Phoebe:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this 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. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy.

(Salinger 191)

Holden's disillusionment with the adult world provokes him to want to stop others from maturing as well, acting as the savior of children in the "field" of childhood and stopping them from going "over the cliff" much like his experience with Allie's death that launched his own adolescent journey. In this way as well, Holden can make up for not being able to save Allie by saving other children and at the same time remain in the world of children as their protector, playing a sort of grown up role without having to be part of the society that he is so repulsed by. His identity is caught up in this image of himself as the catcher, one to which he must adjust if he hopes to ever come to realize his true identity as an adolescent.

Although Holden's literary genesis relegates him to world strictly within the text of *The Catcher in the Rye*, unable to move beyond the story itself, Erikson's perspective allows a glimpse into the potential life of Holden outside of Salinger's world. By examining Holden as a real person, the dimensions of adolescence come to life with the possibility of change and

advancement, the future of Holden opening by applying Erikson's stage theory. One sees Holden where he is, an adolescent fully entrenched in all that the phase encompasses. However, in this light, Holden also appears to live beyond the pages of the novel. To see his potential is to see in him hope for a life in the adult world in which he is so hesitant to join. To believe Holden will make it, even though in the literary sense he will always and forever be exactly where he is, is what makes the book so extraordinary for many readers. And because of the presence of such hope, viewing Holden as a real person is not only important, but essential to understanding the novel as a whole. Salinger's insistence that the novel is just a "silly book" satisfies no one, for in *The Catcher in the Rye*, so many people see themselves, their loved ones, their past lives. We root for Holden as if he is alive because the novel's hope makes him so. Erikson's viewpoint allows one to see Holden's situation in the novel as just a glimpse of his life as a whole, adding a complexity and richness to Salinger's story that all at once explains and provokes admiration. To so many, Holden is much more than words on a page, and using Erikson's understanding of real adolescents, one may discover the depth of Salinger's most beloved character.

## Chapter 4: Holden in 1950s Culture

Like all other adolescents, Holden's journey entails a search for an individual identity apart from outside influences, but it also includes a passage to becoming a part of the very society that surrounds him. Stevens explains, "Erikson conceives of identity as psychosocial. 'We deal with a process "located" in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture'. This development of identity involves an individual's relationship with his cultural context (62). This balance between self and society is a common thread for the adolescent, much like biological and psychological changes are. However, the details of how this attempt to fit in looks differs from one culture to another. Psychology scholar Lisa Crocket explores this further:

The integral connection between adolescence and the societal context means that, despite universals such as puberty and cognitive development, adolescents' experiences will vary across cultures and over history. The settings in which young people develop, the skills they are expected to acquire, and the ways in which their progress toward adulthood is marked and celebrated depend on the cultural and historical contexts. (2)

Keeping in mind Holden's specific cultural context, therefore, allows the reader to see him more readily as a product of his time as well as a representative of the larger social sphere of which he is a part. In contrast to previous approaches to understanding identity formation, namely Freud's theories of development, Erikson's theory takes into consideration the changes in society due to the industrialization of America, the result of which Holden experiences first-hand. "The nature of society will be reflected in the psychological problems characteristically experienced by

members of that society,” explains Stevens; he continues, “In Freud’s time, Erikson argues, inhibition and repression were predominant concerns. But the complexity, mechanization and rootlessness of contemporary industrial society has led to a shift in emphasis” (60). For Holden, this means that his struggle is to find an identity to become part of the society in which he lives rather than negotiate how to integrate and control who he is already to join that society. Erikson explains simply, “The patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should – or, indeed might – be or become” (qtd. in Stevens 60). Therefore, the study of identity as it developed in society became the central focus of the 1950s and beyond. Holden exemplifies the adolescent journey specific to these cultural and historical contexts throughout his language and behavior in *Catcher in the Rye*. The post-war culture started by the end of World War II, followed by the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War, all help to define the social structure that surrounds Holden during his adolescence.

People generally view the culture of the 1950s as a time of economic prosperity, social conformity, and national strength. But the 1950s also saw the rapid rise of a new counter-culture, driven by the ever-developing population of “teenagers.” Having survived World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, the adult generation of the 1950s were no strangers to suffering and hardship. However, the generation following this one grew up during a time of general peace, comfort, safety and conformity (Halberstam 3). Because financial problems or war-stricken families were seemingly issues of the past, the rising generation during the 1950s didn’t need to grow up quite as fast. These years right after World War II, then, are the true inception of the society in which Holden Caulfield arrives at adolescence. Sarah Graham explains that “[a]lthough *Catcher* is understood to be a novel that captures the unease of American society in the 1950s and articulates the emerging phenomenon of adolescent identity,

the novel is in many ways a product of the 1940s,” continuing on to add that World War II “so dominates the decade that the post-war 1940s tend to be forgotten, but those years saw the beginning of social changes in the US that would shape the 1950s and 1960s” (7). Halberstam argues that “the pace of the fifties seemed slower, almost languid” compared to those of later decades, adding, “Social ferment, however, was beginning just beneath this placid surface” (1). The start of basic research for the birth control pill, changes in the nature of previously conservative sexual practices, the popularity of the television – all are examples of the brewing changes in 1950s society, changes that showed their true impact only later (Halberstam 1). Though these particular changes in the social atmosphere exist only in the background of Holden’s cultural context, there is an underlying discomfort that shows through the novel as a reflection of these changing scenes. Holden’s lasting impact, therefore, is due to his role as an adolescent figure who transcends his own particular time and place in history by representing social unease, demonstrated both in his language as well as his attitudes towards his culture.

Critic James Lundquist asserts that one of the most distinctive qualities of *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden’s language, the analysis of which is crucial to appreciating the creative genius of Salinger in making Holden the spokesperson for an entire counter-culture. He asserts that the novel “appeared in a sober and realistic time, a period when (by comparison with the 1960s, at any rate) there was a general disenchantment with ideologies, with schemes for the salvation of the world,” ideas that are reflected in Holden’s language (114). Though Holden’s language appears vulgar in isolation from the context in which it is used, it is Salinger’s careful use of this language that creates the lasting impact of the novel, and that marks Holden’s adolescent journey as part of the nation’s counter-cultural movement. In addition, the language is the rationale for many attacks on the novel, but it is also one of the most attention-grabbing elements, making the

book stand out among others. Through this language, Holden articulates many of the same feelings that disillusioned youth of the 1950s felt in a way that rang true to the typical vernacular of the day.

Holden's common teenage cynicism appears readily throughout his commentary in the novel, as he curses and uses slang frequently, elements that reflect his status as an adolescent. Donald P. Costello looks closely at elements like this in his critical essay "The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*." It is through very lively language that Holden appears as a representative of his time while all the while remaining a unique character. Costello explains that Salinger made special use of typical teenage vernacular of the time to demonstrate Holden's place as part of his larger social atmosphere but also an individual:

Holden had to speak a recognizable teenage language, and at the same time had to be identifiable as an individual. This difficult task Salinger achieved by giving Holden an extremely trite and typical teenage speech, overlaid with strong personal idiosyncrasies. There are two major speech habits which are Holden's own, which are endlessly repeated throughout the book, and which are, nevertheless, typical enough of teenage speech so that Holden can be both typical and individual in his use of them. (42)

These speech habits include Holden's use of particular phrases common to the teenage language. Lundquist asserts, "Like other teenagers of his time and place, Holden repeats *and all* and *I really did*, as well as the famous, *if you want to know the truth*" (124), phrases that appear readily throughout the novel. Because Holden's speech patterns match so readily with 1950s teenage language, Costello believes that the book will serve as a cultural relic, worthy of anthropological examination as an example of the way adolescents spoke during the time. He adds that "[a]n

examination of the reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* proves that the language of Holden Caulfield [. . .] struck the ear of the contemporary reader as an accurate rendering of the informal speech of an intelligent, educated, Northeastern American adolescent” (41).

Commentators and critics across decades have continued to recognize the validity of Holden’s speech as representative of his time and his age and even his geographic and social location within the United States. Slawenski agrees that the book provides “observation of mankind as seen through the lens of an adolescent and rendered in a language true to the narrator’s location and age” (205), while Breit adds that Holden came across to him “as an urban, a transplanted Huck Finn. He has a colloquialism as marked as Huck’s” (6). Conversely, the majority of the less favorable reviews of the novel at the time of its publication as well as recent reviews generally revolve around expressing distaste for the particular language of the book. While today’s audience may be a bit more accustomed to crudities in literature, Americans in 1951 would have considered certain phrases and word choices included in the novel to be exceptionally vulgar. Consistent cursing tends to be the main offender in the novel, followed by Holden’s discussion of (or rather self-reflection on) his sexual desires. Comments such as these are frequent, yet there exists more to Holden’s language than that which transcribes his place and time or centers him as an inappropriate figure for adolescent reading.

Though thorough examinations of the way Holden uses language are not common, Costello introduces many of the characteristics of these elements well. To Costello, the language of the novel is so exact he predicts it serving as a cultural artifact for future study: “In coming decades, *The Catcher in the Rye* will be studied, I feel, not only as a literary work, but also as an example of teenage vernacular in the 1950s. As such, the book will be a significant historical linguistic record of a type of speech rarely made available in permanent form. Its linguistic

importance will increase as the American speech records become less current” (41). Countless reviews from the time of publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* cite the authenticity of the book’s language and the accuracy of Holden’s speech as representing teenage speech of the time. Only the *Catholic World* and the *Christian Science Monitor* (both faith based publications) disagreed, stating that Holden’s language with its obscenities and vulgarities was not realistic (Costello 41).

While the language of *The Catcher in the Rye* grounds Holden in the particular teenage culture of 1950s youth, the repeated use of phrases like “I really did” creates a unique character that stands out from among the crowd. This unique characterization mimics Holden’s own attempt to create a unique identity apart from his cultural surroundings. “Holden uses these phrases to such an overpowering degree that they become a clear part of the flavor of the book; they become, more, a part of Holden himself, and actually help to characterize him,” explains Costello (42). Readers see in Holden a boy that speaks like most boys did during his time but with such an individual emphasis on convincing the reader that he is being genuine that he is remembered for his language. “But these repetitions have a purpose beyond simple realism,” asserts Lundquist, adding that “Holden repeats *and all* because of his eventual mystic ability to find the all in one as he moves toward his final vision. And he repeats *if you want to know the truth* because that is what the book at last is about” (124). With these simple phrases signifying something beyond mere colloquial language, Salinger’s use of Holden’s language reveals an attempt to communicate a particular message, one that speaks to Holden’s character.

In addition to Holden’s repeated use of certain phrases, his choice of the particular swear words he uses also reveals his unique character. Though instances of vulgarity are common throughout the novel, like the frequent appearances of “goddam” and “bastard,” Holden does show personal restraint in what he chooses not to use. Lundquist explains that though “Holden’s

speech at first seems to be typical schoolboy vulgarity,” Holden’s cursing does not include the most commonly offensive terms. For example, the “word *fuck* appears four times, but it is never a part of Holden’s speech. Holden uses *goddam* often, but never the more offensive *Jesus Christ* or even *for Chrissake* except in repeated the speech of others” (124). He adds that while some of these offensive terms do appear in the novel, garnering harsh criticisms from some readers, they are used to show the vulgarity that Holden resists in the world around him and actually provide further evidence to Holden’s unique character and sensitivity (124). This sensitivity appears in Holden’s offense at the appearances of the phrase “fuck you” that he encounters at various scenes in the novel. While he may have his own set of foul language, he is not disposed to using this form. In fact, the only time these words appear in the novel are in places where Holden tries to erase them. He neither uses them in his own diction nor does he quote anyone else saying them. They appear as markers of grime and depravity, and each time Holden comes across them, he is eager to wipe them away.

Holden’s use of language throughout the novel suggest that he is both part of the teenage crowd and a unique individual that stands out from the rest. This balance between being part of a larger social structure while demonstrating distinctiveness is part of Erikson’s reflections on the adolescent struggle between conformity and individuality. In this particular instance, language is what includes and separates Holden from the world around him. His use of cursing and slang indicate in him a need to join in the adult world, but his resistance to using the most offensive terms suggest that he is not quite ready to become fully part of that world. There is in him still an innocence, a modesty, and an integrity that carries through from his childish ideals. “Young people need something to believe in. In the search for identity, they experiment with ideas, actions and devotions. Erikson detects polarities in this process—a need for freedom and yet a

capacity for discipline, a yearning for adventure and yet a love of tradition. There is too a concern both for individuality and being part of a group or community,” explains Stevens (65). These ideals along with the need to balance individuality with community serve to be influential in another part of Holden’s approach to the world that relegate him to the adolescent sphere: his attitude towards the ills of his society.

Holden’s cynicism towards the society in which he lives is apparent in many specific instances throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* but is also apparent in his overall attitude, rendering him a figure for other cynics and idealists to look to for inspiration. As previously discussed, Holden’s worldview centers very much on his reactions to Allie’s death and his interpretation of that event as a reflection of the unfairness of life. Such an outlook predisposes Holden to mistrust, driving him to adopt what Erikson indicates is common in the adolescent journey—an aggressive, antagonistic attitude towards society. Erikson explains that while adolescents seek to find trust in themselves and others during their search for identity, they also may fear “a foolish, all too trusting commitment, and will, paradoxically, express [their] need for faith in loud and cynical mistrust” (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 129). A voice as loud as Holden’s was sure to gain attention, especially by those that related to his cries. According to Graham, this was precisely what happened, as he “expresses challenging ideas about life in modern America that struck a chord with post-war youth hungry for new perspectives” (6). Through Holden’s attitudes towards society, a generation of teenagers found a voice that resonated with their own personal struggles for identity and individuality in a society from which they revolted. Many people “were made uneasy by the degree of conformity around them, as if the middle-class living standard had been delivered in an obvious tradeoff for blind acceptance of the status quo,” argues Halberstam (3).

Holden's insistence on remaining antagonistic towards the social conformity around him, then, makes him the perfect mouthpiece for social unrest.

Though America was feeling at ease after overcoming the Great Depression by efforts during the Second World War, there arose a new threat to America, one that is reflected in Holden's attitude towards his society as a whole. Holden's disgust towards phonies as well as his anti-war sentiment represent "the ethos of post-war America, which was pre-occupied with matters of secret and security" explains Graham of the societal shift of Holden's culture (8). While economic pressures were eased after World War II, ended by the atomic bomb, social pressures to fit in rose with the start of the Cold War. The fear of outsiders turned to a fear of insiders, and the American people began suspecting neighbors of treason. Alan Nadel argues that Holden's attitude inherent in his language "reflects the pressure and contradictions prevalent in the Cold War society from which it was forged" (153). The emphasis on revealing truth and identifying phony people was central in the societal structure of Holden's culture; therefore, his reactions towards society demonstrate again his own way of fitting in while also remaining independent of the crowd. Such a place also demonstrates his role as an adolescent within his culture. By being able to see the trends of society around him, Holden may—even unknowingly—participate in them, but he also has a fresh set of eyes, a new perspective of seeing things. Holden sees the ills and cruelties and nuances of culture that a child is naïve to but has yet to adjust to them like a mature adult. This unique position allows him a very unique sight, a sight that defines him in itself, a sight that is the adolescent identity.

Because of his place as an adolescent during these times, Holden is able to identify with some inherent insight the suspicious attitudes of adults around him and society as a whole but is unable to apply this attitude accurately in his own personal life. Rather than being suspicious of

potential spies or traitors, Holden is suspicious of everyone. And what he sees arouses not only his mistrust but his distaste. His reactions to phonies do not bring about fear but nausea in himself. “Constantly, legislation, hearings, speeches, and editorials warned Americans to be suspicious of phonies, wary of associates, circumspect about their past, and cautious about their speech” explains Nadel (155). Holden sees the signs for what he is supposed to do in his society, but since he has yet to enter the adult world, he is unable to identify how to narrow his search for phoniness. “Since uncovering duplicity was the quest of the day, in thinking constantly about who or what was phony, Caulfield was doing no more than following the instructions of J. Edgar Hoover, the California Board of Regents, *The Nation*, the Smith Act, and the Hollywood Ten, to name a very few,” adds Nadel (155). However, Holden assumes the role of detective for every person he comes across, including his close friends and family, a misstep that leaves him isolated from important influences as he tries to be part of his society at large.

In addition to trying to pinpoint elements of phoniness in others, Holden is determined to remain free of phoniness himself. Here Holden’s adolescent identity comes forth again. The innocence of childhood and the knowledge of adulthood call at once to Holden. But rather than being stuck in between the two, straddling two worlds at once, Holden is relegated to his own specific and separate place. The adolescent need not balance either world, for he belongs to neither. Rather, he must see that there is no need to choose, at least for the moment, to move forward or to lean backward. Adolescence is a destination in itself, an identity to be accepted and tried on for size with the knowledge that it perhaps may not be forever, but is nonetheless, a state of being. However, Holden has yet to see that he does not need to choose. Therefore, he is in a constant state of tug of war between innocence and corruption. He is so intent on proving that he is not a phony that his attitude appears desperate at certain points; he “constantly provides ample

examples and illustrations to prove each assertion,” says Nadel, adding that “such rhetorical performances abounded in the media” during the years Salinger was working on the novel (156). Here again Holden mimics the social atmosphere in which he lives, applying it to his personal life and individual character. Erikson’s theory identifies this type of application, from society to self, as part of the adolescent journey for identity as well. However, Holden does not emerge as fully free from the phoniness he so despises in others and tries to negate from his own behavior. He says he hates the movies, but he willingly attends multiple theater events. He claims to be honest but repeatedly lies about his age and identity. Even though critics usually attack this apparent hypocrisy or explain it as Salinger’s attempt to make Holden a more believable character, Holden’s “inconsistencies reflect as well the contradictions inherent in a society plagued by loyalty oaths,” explains Nadel (157). His character is a reflection of the larger culture in which he is entrenched, casting *The Catcher in the Rye* as a period piece and Holden as a representation of his time in his attempts to free himself of the phoniness he witnesses in society around him. This struggle demonstrates Holden’s adolescent identity, one that he has yet to take on as his own as he struggles to navigate between two worlds rather than accepting his place where he is.

The underlying trend of the counter-cultural movement starting in the 1950s, a culture in which Holden was fully emerged, was the ultimate search for a unique identity outside an adult society plagued by phonies. After the World Wars and Great Depression, “the American Dream was to exercise personal freedom not in social and political terms, but rather in economic ones,” an ideal that left many people fervent to display wealth and prosperity (Halberstam 2). In addition to social pressures to appear prosperous, the rising fear of Communism and a Third World War began to surround the public. To tell the truth seemed to be the ultimate challenge in a

time where falsities and deceit abounded. It is the truth also that is Holden's ultimate goal in telling the reader his story. After all, by using the phrase "if you want to know the truth" (Salinger 3) in the first few lines of the novel, he tells the reader of this very purpose. However, much like his failings at freeing himself of phoniness, Holden also fails at telling the truth, "constantly reflecting rather than negotiating the contradictions of his world" (Nadel 163). Once again, Holden becomes an embodiment of the culture that he tries so desperately to break away from in his adolescent struggle for identity, providing a clear example of Erikson's theory that the individual must navigate a social identity that works within his or her own cultural context while at the same time developing a sense of distinctiveness from that culture.

Through these examples, the reader sees how Holden's role as an adolescent representative of the 1950s is determined by his language and his attitude, but Lundquist argues that the readers also "find out what has happened generally to human ideas on some simple and ultimate questions in the years following World War II," and suggest that questions like "Is it possible to reconcile self and society? Is it any longer possible to separate the authentic from the phony?" are just some of the ideas that Salinger attempts to tackle with *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel "that has often been ignored or simply not taken seriously" (114). These insights and various perspectives on the novel give weight to its significance as an important reflection on 1950s culture and provide evidence to suggest that Holden stands clearly as a quintessential adolescent of his time. Lundquist defends the novel for this reason, saying that "the climate of ideas surrounding the novel is dense, and that the book is not just the extended and anguished cries of a wise-guy adolescent whose main trouble is that he does not want to grow up" (114). Rather, Holden stands a significant figure in demonstrating the struggle of the individual in

trying to negotiate a unique identity as an adolescent while also trying to formulate a plan to join the adult world, a fight reflected in the very culture in which he is rooted.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Holden represents the quintessential adolescent of the 1950s, but his character also works to demonstrate adolescence beyond his cultural context as new readers continue to see his lasting adolescent identity as a keen cultural critic, rendering him one of the most prominent literary figures in modern literature. “All readers receive him into their affection, which may be the largest clue to his book’s enduring charm,” argues Bloom, adding, “As a representation of a sixteen-year-old-youth, the portrait of Holden achieves a timeless quality that is at variance with the novel’s true status as a period piece, a vision of America in the aftermath of World War II” (1). Graham agrees that *The Catcher* “spoke to its moment in a way that no one could have predicted” but more importantly, emphasizes that “the novel would continue to resonate with new readers around the world, never going out of fashion or coming to seem irrelevant or out-dated,” which was surprising “given the enormous changes in American society in the decades following the Second World War” (82). By means of his quintessential adolescent identity, Holden serves as both a reflection of the social climate of his time as well as a lasting figure of adolescence.

Although Holden is a unique character in many ways, his foundational characteristics of typical adolescence place him as more of a prototypical adolescent figure than an outlier. Holden “does have what Faulkner calls an ‘instinct’ to love man, but this makes him a typical, rather than extraordinary, teenager. It’s what causes him to want to join the human race,” claims Duane Edwards (112). Through examining this common thread, one can see how “the text has a cultural weight that allows it to be used to symbolize a certain way of responding to the world” (Graham

94), especially in terms of providing a picture of the adolescent struggle across varying social climates.

Holden represents his specific social atmosphere of 1950s America and also serves to act as a continuing face of adolescence even today, melding and bending to the changing cultural climate as time goes on. In each decade, Holden's role as a model adolescent is proven stronger as he continues to act as representative of underlying human modes of existence. Erikson argues that "the neuroses of a given period reflect the ever-present inner chaos of man's existence in a new way" (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 134). It is in this light that Holden's specific cultural situations are reflected so accurately through him and also how his character seems to resonate so closely with audiences 65 years later. Functioning as far more than a simple period piece, the novel is able to "validate aspects of adolescent experience (anxiety, alienation, confusion) that many readers have identified as comparable to their own experiences" (Graham 94), reflecting the larger aspect of the adolescent experience as part of every human journey through life. This type of relatability is evident also in the popularity of Erikson's theory itself, which presents a concept of development that is easily applied to personal experience, drawing out memories of past encounters with the challenges presented, obstacles that people may currently face, or even ones that can be anticipated in the future (Shaffer and Kipp 45). By founding his theory in the recognizable everyday realities of people across cultures and time, Erikson reveals what Holden himself does: the lasting qualities of what it means to be an adolescent in modern America. "In contemporary Western society, the phase of adolescence has taken a particular form as a consequence of economic and social changes associated the process of industrialization," explains Crocket, adding that the "length and timing of adolescence, its distinctness as a phase of life, and the ambiguities that currently characterize this period are rooted in the institutional

arrangements of industrialized society (28). The advances in technology that the world has seen in the last 65 years has only further added to the advancement of industrialization and the increase in the need to further examine the journey of adolescence that has become so prevalent in modern society. Erikson reveals that as “technological advances put more and more time between early school life and the young person’s final access to specialized work, the stage of adolescence becomes an even more marked and conscious period and, as it has always been in some cultures and some periods, almost a way of life between childhood and adulthood,” a way of life central to American society (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 128).

One of the most essential of these lasting qualities of the “way of life” of the adolescent is the mindset that strives to balance personal ideals and a larger social reality at a single time, an attitude that *The Catcher in the Rye* clearly presents through Holden as he ventures into the space between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents seek to enter into the adult world while simultaneously attempting to maintain their lively passion and oftentimes-childish idealism in whatever forms those attitudes present themselves. Erikson reveals, “In any given period of history, then, that part of youth will have the most affirmatively exciting time of it which finds itself in the wave of a technological, economic, or ideological trend seemingly promising all that youthful vitality could ask for” (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 129). For *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden embodies this attitude both in the 1950s American culture in which he lives and the cultural atmosphere of the country beyond his own time as well, serving as an example of what the extension of adolescence provides to youth: the opportunity to critique culture with a discerning eye.

Graham concludes that Salinger gives Holden just the right vantage point to make him a voice for adolescence beyond his own time because “his hatred of hypocrisy and injustice, and

his willingness to reject the aspirations and values of his society made him a figure ideally suited to the growing counter-culture of the 1950s, the radicalized 1960s and 1970s and beyond” (82). For Holden in the 1950s, this meant a fight against all that was phony in the world. For decades after it would mean a fight against conformity, war, corruption, and other social and cultural workings. Beyond the obvious counter-cultural movements present through the 1970s, Holden continues to speak to modern audiences. In 1984, R.J. Huber asserts, “Holden aptly describes flaws in our society” (148). In the 1990s, Bloom argues of Holden, “Forty years of readership have not dimmed his poignance, his ability to represent the idealism and the refusal to be deceived that have marked the American tradition of representing adolescence” (1). In the 2000s, Graham declares that the novel is still the text “against which all other texts about adolescence are judged” including the recent novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in 2005 and the 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffery Eugenide, yet “for many there is no need for a new *Catcher*, since the original does not yet seem dated or irrelevant to those who encounter it for the first time every year” (93).

In addition to Holden’s continued relevance with each coming year, readers find his appeal in more than in his ability to be molded and bent into the current cultural context. For Bloom, Holden’s appeal is grounded in a rich history of tradition in America: “What Toqueville called our ‘habits of the heart,’ the American balances between individualism and social concern, continue to find a crucial representative in Holden” (1). Other critics agree that Holden remains a figure for American adolescence at the core as well. Slawenski praises the novel’s accomplishment of influencing so strongly the nation’s ideas of what it means to grow up: “The achievement was a catharsis. It was confession, purging, prayer, and enlightenment all encased in a voice so distinct that it would alter American culture” (193), adding later that the book is so

important to the concept of adolescence that it would serve to “alter the path of American culture and help define its psyche for generations (205). More than just a reminder of the face of adolescence in the 1950s, Holden continues to inform and reflect the understanding of what it means to be growing up, especially in his own home country of the United States.

Understanding Holden’s struggle ultimately rests in being able to identify what he fights against and what he, in the end, may conquer. Without such an understanding, one misses the underlying message of *The Catcher in the Rye*. While a quest for identity is key to Holden’s adolescent journey, as it is for all other adolescents, it is the negotiation of this identity in a vast and ever-changing world that remains the final hurdle. Erikson explains that to overcome the obstacle of an identity crisis, adolescents must be able to persevere through hardship, motivating themselves to reach the goal of adulthood by adjusting their viewpoints on the world:

In order not to become cynically or apathetically lost, young people somehow be able to convince themselves that those who succeed in their anticipated adult world thereby shoulder the obligation of being best. For it is through their ideology that social systems enter into the fiber of the next generation and attempt to absorb into their lifeblood the rejuvenative power of youth. Adolescence is thus a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution, for youth can offer its loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance. (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 134)

In order to change all that adolescents see wrong with the societies in which they live, they must join those worlds to affect change from within. It is with this realization that the adolescent comes to understand the necessity of compromise, of letting go of ideals and embracing a broken

world full of broken people. Therefore, the “challenge that Holden encounters is to reevaluate his perceptions in order to find a place in the world of the living” (Slawenski 208). Without finding this place, Holden is forever lost. And without understanding the victory in Holden’s final resolution to become part of the adult world, readers miss the hope inherent in his adolescent struggle to find his own identity within society.

Holden remains a lasting figure of the modern adolescent identity because he holds both idealism and perception all at once, struggling against a world that so often refuses to bend to such strict notions of what it should be. His adolescence depicts the war to balance the longing for innocence and the desire for knowledge, the longing for solitude and the desire for community—a balance that each individual must master, standing wholly in and owning completely the adolescent identity before moving into adulthood. Holden shows readers that though the path may be brutal, may be long, may be winding, ultimately, it is worthwhile. Because people are worthwhile. To become part of a world that is less than hoped for is to accept people as they are but to remain hopeful nonetheless. To see the darkness and to call it out and to then travel forward with light is the ultimate hope—for Holden, for the adolescent, and for us all. The adolescent has a special place in society, an opportunity to see what adults have become blind to and what children have yet to discern, a unique vision. This unique vision reveals a world of flawed people, an oftentimes-ugly reality. The adolescent must choose to become part of the broken world in order to change it from within or otherwise resign to a life of solitude, a lonely end. That’s why I think the book is good,” says Parker; “it shows the dilemma of needing people and yet not wanting them” (16). As Holden comes to realize, to find a place in the world, to know oneself in the midst of all others, to see and to accept, always with the promise of hope, is the only way to truly live. Erikson’s wife Joan sums it up decisively: "Life doesn't make any

sense without interdependence," she avows in an interview with *The New York Times*, concluding, "We need each other and the sooner we learn that the better for us all" ("Erikson"). It is here, in a whole world of people who need each other, that Holden may at last find "a place that's nice and peaceful".

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