

DISINTEGRATING NATION: ILLUSTRATIONS OF YOUTH  
IN POST-WAR AMERICA IN *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*  
AND *ON THE ROAD*

THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In April, 1997, Allen Ginsberg--the popular, outspoken, American poet of the Beat Generation--died, leaving a frantic legacy of ink and imagination to be either rediscovered or repudiated as the twentieth century lurches toward the uncertain zenith of a new millennium. Before his death at the age of 70, Ginsberg was one of the few surviving "heavy-weights" of the Beat Generation. Four months behind Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs (famed largely for his novel, *Naked Lunch*) died in August at the age of 83. By that time Jack Kerouac, arguably today the most recognizable name of the lot, had been dead nearly 30 years, having passed away in 1969.

I have long harbored an affinity for the Beats--Kerouac in particular, especially *On the Road*. At the same time, I also felt a kinship with J. D. Salinger's young, forlorn hero, Holden Caulfield. Having never recognized their similarities, it was not until I read a tribute to Ginsberg by George F. Will--to which I shall attend momentarily--that I considered comparing the two, though both books had been favorites of mine for some years.

Holden relates his story while in a psychiatric hospital in California. He tells of his three-day wanderings through the streets of New York after being expelled from prep-school. Throughout his adventure he encounters people he is familiar with, as well as strangers, making assessments of their character in contrast with his own. His dead brother, Allie, surfaces throughout, remembered along with Holden's other siblings--an

older brother, D.B., who is now a “prostitute” in Hollywood; and his little sister, Phoebe, who is Holden’s only source of solace and hope. Ultimately, Holden leaves readers as uncertain about his future as he is himself; he is at the “jumping point,” where he must either embrace society or shun it. Indeed, his last words, “Don’t ever tell anybody anything,” evoke an acceptance of Thoreau’s nineteenth-century aphorism, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (111).

Unlike Salinger’s protagonist, Kerouac’s Sal Paradise spends a series of years trekking across America, rather than a three-day spree in New York City. Similarly, though, Sal records his perceptions of people, while assessing his own character as he follows his friend and hero, Dean Moriarty. Sal also finds himself in California (as well as Denver, New York and the South) more than once, making a conscious effort to lead a non-traditional life--trying to make ends meet as a migrant laborer, a screenwriter in Hollywood (like Holden’s brother, D.B.), anything he can. In the end, he returns home more discontented than he left, wondering about the fate of Dean, who can’t stop leading a tumultuous life of aesthetic adventure and glorified self-indulgence. A bit more resigned than Salinger’s Holden, Sal turns away from his life with Dean toward the conventional world he struggled for years to break from, although he seems quite uncomfortable with the exchange.

As I investigate the very real parallels between these two novels, this study will illustrate how both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* challenge previously strict social roles. The Nuclear Family of 1950s America provides an interesting background comparison for the absence of parental authority that figures in both novels. It is, I believe, the dichotomy between these two elements (the nuclear family and the absence of guidance) which creates the moral dilemma for many critics/readers--especially during the period of the novels’ origins. The traditional order of the adult as arbiter of social mores

is challenged, if not overturned. As a result, the adolescent/innocent remains alone, seeking direction and hope in a misguided world of adult malevolence and hypocrisy.

The nearly inexplicable disillusion of Holden Caulfield and Sal Paradise is distinctive--not an imitation of the war-spawned decadence of Hemingway's expatriates. Indeed, the lives of these authors together with the post-war experience in America during the middle of the twentieth century combined to create the phenomena that fostered the sentiments at the core of both stories. Perhaps due to the bombing of Pearl Harbor (an encroachment upon American sovereignty that did not occur during the first World War), the protagonists of *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, quite unlike Hemingway's most celebrated heroes, never physically disassociate themselves from their American soil, though they do disconnect themselves from conventional American values of their time. Ultimately, the freedom these children seek cannot be found, only pined for. The path of excess *may* lead to the palace of wisdom, but it is a lonely place to call home. And the road to salvation remains--as ever--elusive.

### **“The Only Revolution Around” and Other Misconceptions**

In a dubious tribute to Ginsberg syndicated by the *Washington Post* only three days after his death, George F. Will lambasted the poet and his Beat Generation comrades. He accused Ginsberg of “execrating American values,” and in a purely sardonic tone Will added, “It is a distinctive American genius, this ability to transmute attempted subversion into a marketable commodity” (A21). He goes on to belittle the moniker “beat generation,” nearly accusing Kerouac of plagiarism:

The adjective “beat” was appropriated by Jack Kerouac from a drug-addicted Times Square thief and male prostitute, who meant by it the condition of being exhausted by existence. (That man's existence must have been wearying.) Kerouac attached the adjective to the noun “generation,” emulating Gertrude Stein's identification of the “lost

generation” of the 1920s. Soon Life magazine [sic], happy to find some titillating unhappiness in a decade defined by Eisenhower’s smile, was writing about the beats as “The Only Revolution Around.” That’s entertainment. (Will A21)

In a second attack on Kerouac, Will upholds the legend that Kerouac’s first draft of *On the Road* was composed during a three-week, Benzedrine-influenced writing frenzy, sarcastically noting that the rough novel was completed in 1951--the same year Salinger’s novel was published. He presents the opening lines of Kerouac’s famous novel *On the Road*, pausing to beg the question, “Does that tone of voice sound familiar?” followed by a quotation of the first sentence from J.D. Salinger’s signature piece, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Though he never mentions the author’s name (J.D. Salinger), Will closes his diatribe with vehemence, answering his own question:

Yes, “The Catcher in the Rye.” [sic] Holden Caulfield, adolescent scold, strong in disapproving “phonies,” was a precursor of the beats with their passion for “authenticity,” which to Ginsberg meant howling echoes of whatever constituted coffeehouse radicalism of the moment. (“Slaves of plastic!...Striped tie addicts!...Whiskey freaks bombed out on 530 billion cigarettes a year...Steak swallows zonked on Television!”) With a talent that rarely rose to mediocrity, but with a flair for vulgar expressionism, Ginsberg shrewdly advertised his persona as a symptom of a dysfunctional society. He died full of honors, including a front-page (and a full page inside) obituary in the New York Times [sic], a symptom to the end.

(A21)

While not the main focus of Will’s article, Jack Kerouac does figure prominently in an article that exemplifies what I regard as typical negative criticism of Kerouac. Exactly how fond Will is of *The Catcher in the Rye* is not treated in his article; perhaps he will offer more in a similar tribute to Salinger when the time comes. In the meantime, my

inference is that he prefers Salinger over any of the Beats, especially Kerouac, against whom Will employs memories of Salinger's novel to blast the work of a man who had been dead nearly thirty years already and had little to do with the purpose of the article in the first place. Primarily, Will's harangue seems to hinge upon a common belief that the Beats offer little more than a glimpse into the lives of a small band of morally corrupt, overgrown delinquents who lucked into a sympathetic market for their work. Yet Will offers nothing substantial in the way of debunking Ginsberg or Kerouac--submitting no critical observations of their artistic ability or lack of it. Instead, he chastises them for their alternative lifestyles and disaffiliation with mainstream America, criticizing their art by condemning their lives. On this point, Will's choice to compare Kerouac with Salinger is ironic to say the least, since Salinger's Holden Caulfield is a defiant adolescent as full of contempt for conventional 1950s American values as is Kerouac's novel.

Salinger, of course, is not without his own critics. Although he openly rejected the values of mainstream America (French 13), Salinger's most lasting combatants have been school boards and PTA groups. Often cited for a casual regard toward profanity, atheism, sexual licentiousness and promiscuity, *The Catcher in the Rye* is referred to as "the quintessential banned book" by *English Journal* (Rossuck 67)--challenged for removal from school shelves since its publication in 1951 (ALA online) and on at least eighteen separate occasions from 1986-1995 (Donalson 24). What Will and other such critics either fail or neglect to analyze is *why* a sympathetic audience existed to provide a demand for such "anti-American" views in the first place. I find it a telling irony that Will recognized a similarity in *tone* between Kerouac and Salinger and never seemed to ask himself (or his reading public) why that similarity might exist. It is not surprising that critics should find expressions of nontraditional values off-putting when they neither understand the origin of those values nor attempt to investigate the reasons behind such beliefs becoming socially acceptable.



The openings of both novels are quite similar, but not in the incriminating manner Will would have his readers believe. His implication seems to urge a view that Kerouac--rushing to complete a first draft--may have copied Salinger, jumping on the bandwagon of *The Catcher in the Rye*'s success. Unlike Salinger's novel, however, *On the Road* is a veritable autobiography. To be sure, *The Catcher in the Rye* exhibits parallels common to Salinger's life-experience. His attendance at Valley Forge Military Academy, for instance, is considered the likely model for Holden's Pencey Prep (Grunwald 11). At Valley Forge one of Salinger's fellow cadets did jump to his death from a window, *vis-a-vis* James Castle of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and yet "another was expelled, and later wound up in a West Coast mental institution" (19). In fact, during a 1953 interview with a Windsor, Vermont, high school student, Salinger admitted "that his 'boyhood was very much the same as [Holden Caulfield's], and it was a great relief telling people about it'" (Wenke 123). *On the Road*, however, is considered a virtual diary of a short period of Kerouac's life. Kerouac himself attested to this claim, as he wrote to a Hollywood producer interested in the rights to his book: "Please remember, Jerry, this is a true story all the way and that's why it doesn't [sic] have movie melodrama plot structure. (I tell you this in confidence, every word of the story is true.)" (Brinkley 63). Even if every moment of the novel is not quite true, Will neglects to mention that Kerouac's story is at least based on real events which began in 1947 and continued through 1950--a sequence of years that preceded the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Charters 70)<sup>1</sup>. In fact, many scenes that appear in *On the Road* are word-for-word transmissions from Kerouac's journals which date years before 1951 (Brinkley 53). While it is true that Kerouac used Benzedrine to rush out the final draft of his novel, he had spent years mulling it over as he lived it; several months of drafting passed before he finally arrived at a definitive starting point in the spring of 1951 (Charters 128-133).

In apparent deference to *The Catcher in the Rye*, Will's purpose seems to be an act of homage to Salinger's depiction of youthful disillusion--a more tasteful alternative to

similar depictions by Kerouac and the rest of the Beats, whom Will claims are guilty of “execrating American values.” At the heart of most attacks against Kerouac lies the issue of American values, and it is a difficult matter to surmount. What is meant by American values?--the mores of any given era (say, 1940s and ‘50s for instance) or some unshakable, moral foundation stretching far back into early American history? Will seems to imply that these values are best illustrated “in a decade defined by Eisenhower’s smile,” although he fails to suggest how this statement should be interpreted. Kerouac himself, however, envisioned the Beat Generation as a celebration of America--an older America still clinging to its innocence: “Like my grandfather this America was invested with wild selfbelieving [sic] individuality and this had begun to disappear around the end of World War II with so many great guys dead” (“Origins” 72). He chastised those who portrayed the Beat Generation as nothing but “crime, delinquency, immorality, [and] amorality” (76). Kerouac saw America changing for the better with a return to an older American paradigm heralded by the youth. He did not bow to appease those who felt that current American standards were acceptable:

Woe unto those who believe in the atom bomb, who believe in hating mothers and fathers, who deny the most important of the Ten Commandments, woe unto those (though) who don’t believe in the undeniable sweetness of sex love, woe unto those who are the standard bearers of death, woe unto those who believe in conflict and horror and violence and fill our books and screens and livingrooms with all that crap, woe in fact unto those who make evil movies about the Beat Generation where innocent housewives are raped by beatniks! Woe unto those that are the real dreary sinners that even God finds room to forgive . . . . (76)

As the present study will show, this conflict of values between the young and old in America is a continuing theme in *On the Road* as well as *The Catcher in the Rye*. So,

forging “conspiracies” between Salinger and Kerouac based solely upon dates of publication, as Will does, is misleading. Salinger is not so much the precursor to the Beats as he is a contemporary: born in 1919, three years before Kerouac, nearly five years after Burroughs. If the Beats were the only revolution around, Salinger may not have disapproved so much as some may prefer to believe<sup>2</sup>.

Still, I hesitate to further discuss the Beat Generation as a group for several reasons. First of all, this study is not a vindication of the Beat Movement. Second, near the end of his life, Kerouac had practically abandoned his former “colleagues”; he felt they had become too political and immoral, and he did not support many of their public concerns (Charters 365). Finally, the nature of the labeling process creates an enormous wall around Kerouac, thereby ostracizing him from Salinger. At the same time, however, it is a wall that excludes Salinger, seemingly keeping him within the mainstream of the American imagination--a wall buttressed by journalists like Mr. Will. I am uncomfortable with these distinctions, not only because the focus of this study depends on comparing the similarities between the authors, but also due to the fact that I truly believe Salinger and Kerouac share a certain insight regarding the youth of 1950s America and its distance from the conventional American values of its parents. Before his death, Kerouac’s early views of the Beat Generation were no longer in sight. What people were calling “beatniks” was not what he had proposed; instead, he thought the movement was destroying America itself. In a letter to an admirer who had completed a master’s thesis focusing on his work, Kerouac described the situation as “a big move-in from intellectual dissident wrecks of all kinds and now even anti-American, America-haters of all kinds with placards who call themselves ‘beatniks’” (Brinkley 64). Yet, I cannot mention--since he is not talking--to what degree Salinger would have subscribed to the beliefs of the Beat Generation and Kerouac’s prior assertions, if at all.

One of the unfortunate mysteries about studying J. D. Salinger is that, unlike Kerouac, biographical information about the man is hard to come by. In 1953 (four years

before the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road*), after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, he moved to Cornish, New Hampshire, where he began living in seclusion, allowing precious little communication between himself and the rest of the world (Wenke 126). We can only presume that his solitude demonstrates a response to the celebrity of his only novel. Over the years, he has made it clear that he has little interest in discussing his work at length, though he claims that his writing continues (129-130).

By contrast, Jack Kerouac led a terrifically (and often times tragically) public life. Rather than turning his back on the media like Salinger, Kerouac courted the limelight--at least for many years. Yet, even by 1959 (two years after publication of *On the Road*, during which time he published seven other books) he had wearied of fame, "primarily because he was never taken seriously as a writer" (Charters 409, 307). But he was never shy about his writing, and by his own admission Kerouac conceived of *On the Road* as something akin to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (Brinkley 60)--two characters "embarked on a tremendous journey through post-Whitman America to FIND that America and to FIND the inherent goodness in American man" (68).

Anyone who has read both novels knows that one is not a carbon-copy of the other. Still, it is true that *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye* share strong parallels. Both novels tell the stories of two young American men exploring the world they inhabit, seeking direction and hope in a society from which they feel decidedly estranged. Each narrative explores a growing sense of Otherness within their respective protagonists--a disjunction that ostensibly prohibits them from social assimilation. In many ways, however, they also become outsiders by choice, refusing to accept the goals and values that their society promotes. In the end, both characters are compelled to accept what society has to offer or face personal, emotional exile.

## The Study

In chapter two, “On the Verge of Adulthood: an Introduction to the Protagonists,” I discuss the transitional phases of the individual--childhood, adolescence, adulthood--through the physical stages of life, followed by a comparison of social roles and expectations from medieval London and twentieth-century America. This section considers the adolescent characteristics of Holden Caulfield and Sal Paradise as they approach adulthood in an attempt to understand the meaning of human maturity and reconcile critical reception to the characters.

Chapter three, “The Vanishing American Family: A Rousseauian Consideration,” introduces the characters as they have been treated by critics for their “return to childhood” as signifying a Rousseauian paradigm. This chapter also discusses problems with labeling the characters as Rousseauian “noble savages” by investigating Rousseau in greater depth. The remainder of this section presents both works--*The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road*--as Rousseauian from a perspective different from popular criticism. Instead, as a critique of the declining American family, the works demonstrate their similitude to the troubled society Rousseau sought to improve through the Natural Education he offers in *Émile*.

Influenced by the presentation on Rousseau, Chapter four, “A Doomed Quest,” considers the complications of seeking freedom from a restrictive society as presented in the works under consideration by Kerouac and Salinger. On their personal quests for authenticity and freedom, the absence of guidance for Sal and Holden--though still a social criticism--further underscores the departure from Rousseau. Ultimately, the characters’ lack of guidance is shown as concomitant with their eventual failure to successfully attain the freedom both characters appear to seek.

The concluding chapter, “A Vision of Unending Lovelessness,” presents a sweeping look into the similarity of the authors’ backgrounds (post-World War I

up-bringing, Great Depression, W.W.II) and the potential effects of these similarities on the literature produced by Salinger and Kerouac. The previous chapters are summarized in an effort to show the similarity of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road*, and I discuss the implications of considering the novels as “child/ youth literature” as well as their significance as a foundation for an emerging youth counter-culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Accounts vary about this date. According to Neal Cassady, he and Jack met in October of 1946; Jack said they met in '47; and the man who introduced them remembers the date as "shortly before Christmas in 1946" (Charters 74).

<sup>2</sup> I do, of course, imply that G. F. Will is one such person, although his article does not directly substantiate this position. The clearest remark of Salinger's possible antipathy toward the Beats comes from another source; Warren French supposes that Salinger "must have found [the Beats] virtually unspeakably vulgar," though he offers no evidence of the statement's validity. See *J. D. Salinger, Revisited*, p. 13.

## CHAPTER II

### On the Verge of Adulthood: An Introduction to the Novels' Protagonists

In his essay, "The Eye of Innocence," Leslie Fiedler points out that the role of the child in literature is such an accepted feature we scarcely notice unless he/she is absent. "There he is . . . his eye to the keyhole, his ear to the crack in the door, peering, listening, observing in his innocence or lack of it. He is the touchstone, the judge of our world" (218). The eye of innocence, then, is also a critical perspective--an outlook that remains detached from the world it narrates. So, too, can we regard the characters of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* as children: moving in a world of adults, they celebrate the innocence of youth even as that youth is leaving them. As maturity is prescribed to them, Holden Caulfield and Sal Paradise refuse to accept adulthood (and all of its presumably inherent characteristics) as the ultimate and unavoidable pursuit in life. Instead, they show that adulthood as a self-contained value is only a chimera offering no authentic meaning.

Although their desire to linger in a realm of fading youth stands as a criticism of the "adult" world that surrounds them, Holden and Sal also exhibit attributes that traditionally have been considered the hallmark of adulthood. The term "sad and wise" and the qualifications supporting the term have been used (in London, at least) to describe the condition of adulthood since the Middle Ages. Interestingly, the same term has also been applied to describe aspects of Kerouac's novel in the present century. "Sad and wise" may be utilized equally to show the failure of Sal and Holden to meet the expectations placed upon them by adult society. Following this thought, I believe that a



comparison with medieval views and expectations of youth is closer to representations of “proper” maturity as they occur in the novels. And inasmuch as the phrase “sad and wise” connotes a duty to obedience and reason over the bold vivacity of youth, such a comparison offers insight into a fundamental break from tradition evinced in the novels’ characters. At the same time, “sad and wise” in its strictest sense also appears an applicable phrase in describing the characters of Sal and Holden. That is to say, both of them share a certain insight that is at once a sadness also.

### **The Stages of Life**

In an attempt to identify and better understand the nature and social role of adolescence as well as the pertinence of these attributes shared by the primary characters of *Catcher* and *On the Road*, I want to undertake an examination of the stages of life. Discussing the demarcations that separate child from adolescent, adolescent from adult, we may begin to develop a sense of the complexity of such markers and the difficulty of assigning them definitive meaning.

Addressing the physical aspect of the growing child is not a difficult matter. Simply glancing through a standard dictionary will explain that childhood is the period of one’s life from birth to puberty. Puberty signifies the physical maturation of the individual, when he/she becomes capable of sexual reproduction--the primary sex characteristics. The secondary sex characteristics consist of the various changes that continue to occur within the individual during puberty until complete maturation; these changes surface in the voice, illustrated further by breast development in women and the increased growth of facial/ body hair in men--anatomical, physiological and behavioral distinctions that have no direct reproductive function. It is during this period that the individual is called “adolescent”--a transitional time of physical and psychological development that precedes adulthood (maturity). However, defining the final phase--adulthood--becomes somewhat problematic, because definitions remain obscure. For instance, an adult is “one who has

attained maturity or legal age,” or “a fully grown, mature organism,” but these definitions somehow fail to signify what constitutes adulthood from a standpoint of social expectation and verification<sup>1</sup>.

To some degree, perceptions of childhood and adulthood seem subjective. That is, a 40-year-old may consider a 25-year-old a child, while that same 25-year-old (thinking herself mature) may tend to think of a 10 or even 15-year-old as a child, and so on. Demarcations of this subjectivity surface in both novels. Standing at a height of six feet two and a half inches tall with an abundance of gray hair, for example, Holden Caulfield certainly describes himself as physically resembling a fully grown mature organism; even though he says that he is only seventeen, he describes himself as looking rather middle-aged (Salinger 13). When Holden attempts to buy a cocktail at the Lavender Room, however, the bartender does not believe he is twenty-one and asks Holden to verify his age (91). *On the Road*'s Sal Paradise, on the other hand, is considerably older--intimating that he (like his former prep school friend, Remi Boncoeur) is in his middle twenties<sup>2</sup> (Kerouac 61); still, as Sal flirts with a Mexican waitress in Cheyenne, she addresses him as “kid,” although Sal is approximately 25 years old (34). Though Sal does not describe himself quite as Holden does, simply knowing his age should suggest that his physical maturity has reached its maximum; in fact, given Holden's physical description it seems doubtful that he will physically mature much more than he has already. By all points of physical development, then, they are both “adult” by a dictionary standard. Yet both Holden and Sal are frequently regarded by others as younger than they appear or should appear; their medley of adult characteristics fails to signify maturity to those who encounter them.

Thus, as described above, attempting to demarcate childhood from adolescence and, in turn, adolescence from adulthood proves a difficult matter. Among human beings, though, maturity as an indicator of adulthood is not marked merely by the complete physical development of the individual but mental development as well. Knowing these

margins, however, does not clarify the differences at hand. We are left, still, to wonder how to discern when an individual has reached mental maturity and, further, what it means for a person to attain a final level of maturity.

### **A Medieval Comparison**

The difficulty of distinguishing clear limits between the adolescent and adult social worlds is nothing new. In fact, conflict between the young and old and the blurred understandings of “coming of age” have a tradition that far precedes the American cultural clashes represented in either work by Kerouac and Salinger. By looking back toward medieval London, though, we can find some useful information regarding the mental maturity that was (and still is) expected of youth and consider how well it applies to the social expectations of the protagonists from *Catcher* and *On the Road*. In the end, I believe that both Sal and Holden share a struggle with the youth of former ages, and this step back in time should help us develop a greater appreciation for the significance of their attempts to break with that tradition.

According to Barbara Hanawalt, coming of age (reaching adulthood) in medieval London was phrased as becoming “sad and wise” (199). “Usually,” she adds, “this phrase was voiced as a desirable goal or as a reprimand to someone who had not managed to achieve this fine state” (199). To be mature, to be adult, persons were to be ““solid, serious, settled in their ways and gileful [sic],”” implanted with “the mastery and direction of actions, desire for substance, glory, and position and a change from playful, ingenuous error to seriousness, decorum, and ambition”--a turning away from adolescence (201). During the medieval period, Hanawalt says,

Adolescence was conceived of as hot and dry, as are summer and fire, and its humor was red choler. Youths, according to Bede, are “lean (even though they eat heartily), swift-footed, bold, irritable [sic], and active.” . . . Music, drink, mock-fights, and wild companions vie with

obedience and reason, and those other attributes that are to make one  
 “sad and wise.” (109-110)

Adulthood, then, is a “desired goal,” not simply a matter of physical maturity, but a destination to be pursued as an end in itself. In the gulf between young and old, adults stand as the gatekeepers into the final strata; only the “sad and wise” can gain acceptance, and to do so they must appease those who hold the keys. Both *Catcher* and *On the Road* explore this sort of tension between the adolescent and adult social worlds with startling similarity.

Like the youths of medieval London, the modern adolescent must meet certain ambiguous social criteria before attaining adulthood. The acceptable boundaries for the adolescent approaching adulthood are scarcely clear, however. This is seen early in *Catcher* after Holden is expelled from Pencey Prep, as his former history teacher (Mr. Spencer) endorses the advice Holden had received from the school’s headmaster: “‘Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules’” (Salinger 12). Having failed four of five courses in one term, Holden certainly does not play by the rules of social expectation. It is doubtful that he even knows these rules, though others around him seem to better understand what is expected of them. Asked to complete an English assignment by his roommate (Stradlater), for instance, Holden does not meet Stradlater’s approval. Stradlater reproves Holden for not following the general guidelines of the assignment. “No wonder you’re flunking the hell out of here. . .” he tells Holden. “You don’t do *one damn thing* the way you’re supposed to” (53). Actually, Holden has a considerable history with such failures; Pencey, in fact, is not the first institution he has left. He has previously attended and since withdrawn from at least two other preparatory academies--the Whooton School and Elkton Hills (18). Holden claims that he did not flunk out, but “quit” Elkton Hills because it had phonies “coming in the goddam window” (19). He offers no explanation for his departure from Whooton, and we are compelled to imagine that his removal from that school had something to do with not applying

himself--not meeting expectation--much like his expulsion from Pencey (6). Some rules are evident to Holden, however, like not smoking in the dorm, which Holden says he did to annoy Stradlater, because "it drove him crazy when you broke any rules" (54). Holden must surely also be aware that drinking at the age of seventeen is against the rules--against the law, in fact--but this does nothing to stop him from imbibing<sup>3</sup>. Still, these are relatively minor rules and probably posted all around the dorm and at the entrance of every bar. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Holden frequently strays outside socially established parameters.

The rules of social expectation, on the other hand, are not handed to adolescents in orientation booklets; rather they are inferred, learned and assimilated into the consciousness of the individual. These rules are those which require Holden to act his age, although he admits, "sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen" (13). This is an ironic disparity, because at seventeen he physically resembles an adult. Holden's words mimic his father's as a reprimand for failing to move toward the desired goal of adulthood, and since they are not Holden's *own* words we might not accept that he truly believes his father's criticisms. "Sometimes," he admits, "I act a lot older than I am--I really do--but people never notice it. People never notice anything" (13). This, of course, is not true; if people never noticed anything, then Holden would never be criticized for immature behavior. Rather, people--adults, especially--apparently have no interest in Holden until the time comes to reprimand him or otherwise attempt to correct behavior that defies expectation. Here, the unwritten rule is that Holden should act like a 17-year-old drawing ever nearer adulthood; what constitutes that behavior and whether Holden is aware of the acceptable parameters of conduct remain unclear. His inability to play life by these rules, however, is the reason he finds himself in a California psychiatric hospital where "a lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I'm going to apply myself when I go back to school next September" (276). Presumably, "applying" himself means not only working diligently at his coursework, but applying himself to the

rules of life's "game" which require Holden to become a productive member of society, the beginning of which is to stop behaving like a 13-year-old, "act his age" and apply himself at school--in other words: to obey expectation and show progress toward the adult Holden is becoming, rather than the child he is perceived to be by his elders.

*On the Road* also offers glimpses of youth failing to meet the expectations of adult society. Carole Vopat claims that Sal and Dean are in retreat from everything that typifies adulthood: "emotion, maturity, change, decision, purpose, and especially, in the best American tradition, responsibility" (388). In short, they are not ruled by obedience and reason, as the sad and wise should be, but by a passion and self-interest most commonly associated with youth. Like Holden, Sal has no interest in ordinary people or their mundane, work-a-day lives. In order to remain free of worldly labors, he lives "at home" with his aunt while he attends college, but Sal has wearied of school: "my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified" (Kerouac 9-10). Rather than taking a job or attending classes, as expectation might demand of him, Sal sits up nights working to complete a novel. Before Dean enters his life, Sal had "often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off" (3). Needing "new experiences" for his writing career is Sal's original purpose for befriending Dean (9), but he also admits that Dean reminds him "of some long-lost brother" as well as of his own youth, filling Sal with an unshakable excitement that seems to have been missing from his life (10). After meeting Dean, Sal loses his old complacency:

Although my aunt warned me that [Dean] would get me into trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds--what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. (10-11)

In his middle twenties, Sal describes himself as young and slightly carefree. Ignoring the caution of elders who support him (in this case, his aunt), he seeks a life that cannot be found in universities, factories or Madison Avenue. Instead, he ambles after a “young jaillid,” whom Sal’s aunt describes as “a madman” (6). Unlike Holden, Sal has no father telling him that he acts like a 13-year-old. Yet when he hits the road on his first adventure, an insinuating hobo makes a similar paternal remark: “Montana Slim turned to me, pointed at my shoes, and commented, ‘You reckon if you put them things in the ground something’ll grow up?’” (29). Indeed, his actions allow Sal to be viewed as child-like--or at least to perceive his attention to seemingly whimsical motivations as definitively non-adult. The “new horizon” he seeks in following Dean is not governed by the responsibilities of adult life, like those responsibilities which compel Sal’s aunt to care for him. Even Montana Slim recognizes that Sal is not acting his age. Like Holden, Sal may physically resemble a mature adult, but his desire “to take off,” as Vopat acknowledges, represents a departure from the responsibilities and values of adult society (389).

For all of his youthfulness and apparent lack of responsibility, Sal has no real obligations to anyone but himself. Although one might suppose he owes some debt to his aunt, she never complains of Sal’s wanderings. In fact, she encourages Sal to leave on his first trip to California: “she said [the trip] would do me good, I’d been working so hard all winter and staying in too much . . . . All she wanted was for me to come back in one piece” (11). Sal is no longer married, as he mentions at the beginning of his story, and he admits of having no children; such is not the case with Dean, however. Rather, Dean better represents the “freedom” and irresponsibility that Vopat discusses. His autonomy from all ordinary constraints is well detailed by Sal near the end of the novel. After leaving Sal on a sickbed in Mexico City, Dean returns to New York to wed his current sweetheart, Inez; from there, “making logics where there was nothing,” Dean rushes off “to San Francisco to rejoin Camille and the two baby girls. So now he was three times

married, twice divorced, and living with his second wife” (305). But Sal does follow Dean, and part of his interest in so doing is the pursuit of a “new horizon” of liberty that Dean awakens in him. Early in the novel, Sal admits,

I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing . . .

(8)

Amid Dean’s indulgences, Sal may be effectively relegated to the role of a disciple, but the goal he seeks is one driven by a youthful enthusiasm and a desire for deliverance from the ordinary life of adult responsibility.

Although some social theorists have maintained that a lack of separation between childhood and adulthood in medieval society would have made Sal’s extended shambling impossible and Holden’s irresponsibility invisible, newer scholarship suggests that by the twelfth century, at least, London youth were squared in a struggle against adults to assert their own independence (Hanawalt 199). This rivalry was made inevitable by exceedingly long terms of Medieval apprenticeship--the final hurdle before adulthood<sup>4</sup> (203). In the fifteenth century, the age of entry into apprenticeship began between the ages of 16 and 18. Hanawalt points out that “the average length of time served was 10.6 years,” and in some cases apprentices were required to serve their masters an additional one to three years (203). So for a 17-year-old apprentice (the age of Holden at the time he tells his story), entrance into adult life *could* be delayed until the age of 30 (even older than Sal). Accordingly, an ostensibly “enforced” adolescence--if it begins between the ages of 14 and 16--could range from fourteen to sixteen years (203), and this “deprivation of adult status” often led to youth riots and misrule (125). Moreover, the leap from “adolescent” apprentice to adult status in medieval London did not necessarily procure respect from one’s elders. Instead, the most significant reward for achieving adult status was, rather



than legal citizenship, the opportunity to attain financial autonomy, whether through eligibility for paternal inheritance, marriage dowry, or “liveried guild member[ship]” (201). Financial independence, however, is scarcely a concern for either Sal or Holden.

While apprenticeship may be on the decline in twentieth-century America, long terms of academic life can act in its place to protract adolescence. Thus, as students, both Sal and Holden parallel a sort of apprenticeship, working toward a goal while hoping to be released one day into the adult world. Having left school, however, they no longer fit the role of quasi-apprentice, choosing to subvert the order imposed upon them. In their wake, a considerable dilemma ensues. They are not “appropriately” prepared for the rigors of bread-winning, at least not so well as they might be at the completion of their various academic careers. Furthermore, there is a matter of expense to be reckoned for their previous support and care as unencumbered, unemployed apprentice-students.

After departing Pencey, Holden does not have a self-sufficient source of income. The world he presently inhabits and rejects is provided for by his parents. The camel’s-hair coat he had stolen from him, the red hunting hat he purchased in New York (Salinger 24), his new ice-skates (67), the typewriter he sells to a classmate for extra money (68), and the tuition paid to all the schools from which he leaves--all of these items were likely given to Holden by his parents. Even his three-day excursion into New York following his expulsion from Pencey is paid for with money his grandmother had sent him (67). He does entertain ideas of escaping to some place--Massachusetts or Vermont with Sally Hayes (171), a ranch in Colorado (214), and “somewhere out West” (257)--finding a job and creating a life. Sadly, Holden has no idea what he actually wants to do with the single exception of being a catcher in the rye. He tells his sister, Phoebe, that he envisions himself a sort of referee in an enormous rye field bustling with thousands of playing children. There will be no adults in this field; the only “big” person will be Holden, ““standing on the edge of some crazy cliff.” “What I have to do,” he says, “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'" (224). Holden recognizes that his fantasy is "crazy," and possibly this awareness leads him to the later (slightly more prudent) consideration of hitchhiking out West and working at a filling station. But Holden never acts on his capricious desires to become solvent, and without a potential source of regular income, he continues to rely upon his parents and extended family for support. When Holden finally returns home, he becomes a further financial liability to his parents as they place him in a psychiatric facility in California (276). From an economic perspective, then, Holden remains his parents' child.

To some extent, the same is true of Sal--perhaps all the more so because of his age. Still, stating that Sal has no source of income is not accurate. He does receive veteran's benefits, and this assistance pays for his first voyage West where Sal hopes to find work with his friend Remi in order to earn "enough money to support myself in my aunt's house while I finished my book" (Kerouac 11). Before he reaches Remi, though, Sal runs out of money and sends a letter from Denver to his aunt requesting fifty dollars (56)--an event he must repeat before finally arriving back home (98). Eventually, he does find work (though not the sort he had hoped for) and sends money back to his aunt (107). From that point on, though, Sal's work is scarce. After leaving Remi in Mill City, he finds temporary work as a migrant worker before finally pushing his way back home but has to send for money from his aunt to complete the journey (95). On a subsequent trip to San Francisco with Dean, Sal finds himself penniless on the streets, walking in a delirious state of hunger and despair, and must await his "next GI check" before he can return home (177). The only other job he admits having throughout the novel is about two years after his first trip to California--a brief stint at a wholesale fruit market in Denver (179)--and when that fails to provide him any more than anxious straits, "a rich girl [he] knew" gives him one hundred dollars to return to San Francisco and find Dean. Much of the time, Sal relies on funds from "GI education checks" or veteran's benefits, while he works on his novel, which does pay off eventually. "I came into some money from selling my book,"

Sal recalls. "I straightened out my aunt with rent for the rest of the year" (249). Until he finally achieves some success with his writing, however, it could hardly be considered a job--an occupation, maybe, a hobby, a passion even, but little else. Steve Wilson notes a parallel between Kerouac himself and his autobiographical author-characters (like Sal), as Kerouac's vocation met with little approval from the family. "A writer," Wilson states, "to most working-class sensibilities [is] a questionable occupation at best, at worst comfortable and lacking hardship. [Kerouac's] father Leo regularly berated Jack for having no 'real job,' and noted eloquently, 'artist shmartist, ya can't be supported all ya life'" (305). In the end, Sal never fully divulges how much support he takes from "home," but his own narrative (getting by on veteran benefits and odd jobs) seems to imply that he does not quite meet with expectations of his social class, especially considering the real or perceived opportunities an education might grant him. That is, supporting Sal as a student would appear a more prudent investment for his family than supporting his writing career. Nevertheless, the likelihood of becoming a writer is at least within the realm of possibility, unlike becoming a catcher in the rye. Still, it is obvious that Sal's aunt would never allow him to fall so long as she could support him, and her assistance is never denied Sal. Although considerably less so than Holden, Sal remains a dependent.

Failing to take responsibility for themselves and make progress toward financial autonomy, Sal and Holden display a lack of interest in achieving the adult status that would require them to maintain themselves in the world. Their disinterest is underscored by their departure from those systems of education that point them in the direction of adulthood. Having slipped the bonds of their "apprenticeship," they also seem to clash with the general desires of youth from medieval London, who actually struggled and fought for the financial rewards of adulthood.

### **The Sad and The Wise**

Moralists of medieval London expressed great concern over the nature of youth behavior. Some seem to have been of the opinion that children and adolescents were not beaten enough, while others believed that rebellious behavior was the product of over-zealous corporal punishment and that families failed to provide adequate role models pointing children toward proper conduct. Hanawalt surmises,

If [medieval] adults seem as perplexed as modern moralists, psychologists, and parents about this stage of life, it is because they were fully cognizant that it existed and that it was different from childhood and adulthood. Medieval moralists came up with the same explanations that we moderns use because of the similarity between behavior then and now among adolescents and the expectations of those who had to deal with them. (128)

Adolescence, then, presented a peculiar limbo between childhood and adulthood in medieval London, as it has done in twentieth-century America. That is, judgment from the outside (adult society) neither permits behavior characterized as “immature” nor quite assimilates the adolescent into adult society. To be a “mature” adolescent is to negate the nature of adolescence and show progress toward adulthood, but only progress. To be a mature adult, though, one must fully resign youth, conform to social and familial expectation, and become assimilated into the fold. Unlike medieval London, the conflict presented in the novels under scrutiny here is not necessarily bound to a desire for adult status or financial freedom. What stands out is something quite different, indeed. Rather than longing for acceptance into the social world of adults, Sal and Holden seem more than willing to sacrifice their status in order to retain some vestige of youth or individuality.

Considerably older than he was at his first meeting with Dean, Sal has matured since the goings-on that he describes. Vopat considers this narrative approach “a double

vision” that illuminates Sal’s growth, allowing him “to comment on the people and events of the novel as he saw them when they happened, and as he views them now that they are over, a *sadder-but-wiser* hindsight . . . acts as a check upon his naive, indiscriminating exuberances” (392)<sup>5</sup>. In effect, though, this perspective is Sal’s persona and not merely an artistic device. The novel actually begins with Sal discussing that when he “first met Dean,” he had recently recovered from “a serious illness” that he attributes to his failed marriage and the “feeling that everything was dead” (Kerouac 3). Dean’s arrival certainly brings excitement to Sal, but his emotional state from the very start seems to disclose an awareness of life that is more penetrating than Vopatz recognizes. Sal displays this propensity again at the end of his first trek to the West--“Gad, I was sick and tired of life,” he says (106). Arriving in New York finally, Sal describes what appears to be his immediate impressions rather than a matured and altered recollection:

I was back on Times Square . . . seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair [sic] of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream--grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they can be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City. (106)

To be sure, Sal is worn out from his travels at this point, and he will later become anxious again for the road and more adventures with Dean, but Sal’s perceptions on the street in Times Square are, nonetheless, wary. He sees a certain sinister pursuit in America--everyone involved in a race for “the mad dream” which only ends in death--and we know (if we were left uncertain before) that this is a quest Sal himself will never entertain.

This “sadder-but-wiser” hindsight that emanates from the narrator’s double perspective is more pronounced in Kerouac’s novel than that of Salinger, though it certainly surfaces in Holden’s story as well. Perhaps a principle cause for this disparity (aside from the simple fact that the authors are completely different people) is that Holden

rarely recalls moments during his three-day foray upon which he needs such a hindsight to act as a check upon exuberances of any kind. Unlike Sal, Holden rarely appears excited about life, even before he “got pretty run-down and had to [go to a hospital in California] and take it easy” (3). In fact, throughout his narrative Holden sounds greatly wearied by life. We never learn *why* Holden fails to apply himself at Pencey--maybe he simply did not like it there, maybe Pencey was too full of phonies, or perhaps he simply failed to see the purpose of attending. Still, we are left to imagine that most of Holden’s disturbances have something to do with the death of his little brother, Allie, about whom Holden speaks a great deal. Allie died when Holden was thirteen (50), and judging from Holden’s frequent digression into his memories of Allie, the loss is a persistent grief. Through his sorrow, Holden appears capable of certain insights similar to those depicted by Sal. Remembering the advice given him by Mr. Spencer, Holden says, “Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right--I’ll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game” (12). He understands that epigrams about the meaning of life are not the simple equations his instructors might have him believe. He knows that there is another part of life where affluence does not exist and that there are things that wealth can do nothing about, such as little boys with leukemia and teenagers who jump to their deaths from windows. Whether or not they seek entrance into the world of adulthood, Sal and Holden demonstrate leanings toward the serious demeanor the adult world requires.

At length, we find both Holden and Sal in contradictory positions, seeming quite child-like in some respects but also indicating the “sad and wise” attributes that tradition and convention demand. Discussing Holden Caulfield as a late adolescent, this conflict is observed by Arvin Wells, who notes that

Twentieth century psychology has conditioned us to look upon this period [adolescence] . . . as one of more or less aggravated conflict,

a period when an emotional vortex is likely to be set in motion within the individual by the clash between his desire to retain the relative security of childhood and the contrary thrust toward the supposedly unhampered self-expression of adulthood. (148)

Wells' statement, however, presents a single lasting conflict that social assimilation cannot overcome. As Hanawalt and Vopat point out (and the novels' arbiters of adulthood seem to agree), maturity is discerned through behavior that conforms to "obedience and reason." At the same time, Wells describes the conflict as one between the "relative security of childhood" and "the supposedly unhampered self-expression of adulthood." But limitless self-expression cannot conform to obedience, or reason or anything else for that matter. If adulthood truly offered such freedom, Sal and Holden might look forward to the coming days rather than living within their nostalgic visions. Yet, "the rules of life" that everyone expects Sal and Holden to abide by are the same rules that require Mr. Spencer to advocate the headmaster's opinions, the same rules that demanded medieval youth to meet the vague expectations set before them. The game of life and the rules to that game are whatsoever those in authority determine, but those rules remain unclear and startlingly devoid of uniformity--their ultimate goal never firmly fixed. For any self-aware, conscious individual, the search for understanding within such confines is a frightful vortex, indeed, and finally admits only confusion where the "sad and wise" ought to have answers.

Physically mature, Sal and Holden have attained a certain portion of adulthood. But physical maturity does not complete their growth and acceptance into the realm of respectable adulthood; they must first meet the expectations of those in authority. Whether we choose to view Sal and Holden as adolescent, adult or a medley of youth and maturity is of little consequence, because they do not fit the mold of maturity as set forth by those in positions of authority. While their own insights indicate the qualities traditionally associated with adulthood, those same insights also represent direct

challenges to the order of their time. And for arrogating that authority Sal and Holden will always linger outside the walls of society until (if ever) they do resign.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All definitions of adulthood courtesy of *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 2nd college ed. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Sal Paradise is, of course, based on Kerouac. If the events which are recounted here began in 1947 as Kerouac maintained, then Sal would actually be about 25 years old at the beginning of his journeys; Kerouac was born March 12, 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts.

<sup>3</sup> On various occasions Holden talks about consuming liquor. In Chapter 12, he is first served alcohol publicly at a bar called Ernie's (111), although in his previous attempt to get drinks at the Lavender Lounge Holden is asked by the bartender if he can verify that he is twenty-one (91). Later, Holden becomes very drunk after meeting Carl Luce (an old acquaintance from Elkton Hills) at the Wicker Bar (184).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that apprenticeship was only the final stage before adulthood for adolescent males. Marriage was considered the induction into adulthood for females, and unlike men this entrance could occur during a young woman's very early teens. For more information, consult Barbara Hanawalt's *Growing Up in Medieval London*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. See especially chapter 11, "On Becoming Sad and Wise."

<sup>5</sup> Italics mine. Note that Vopat employs a term almost identical to that found by Hanawalt to describe the quality of adulthood in medieval London.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Vanishing American Family: A Rousseauian Consideration

The previous chapter introduces the discussion of Sal and Holden as social critics. This claim is based on Fielder's illustration of the child peering through the keyhole; that is, the child is a natural observer of a world to which he/she does not yet belong but one day will. Perhaps, too, that child spies on the world not to condemn or criticize but to learn how to emulate it. Based on the examples from the last chapter, imitation may not be the best rule of acceptable behavior. Acquiescence seems the only behavior that the "adults" of *Catcher* and *On the Road* would condone. The phrase, "do as I say, not as I do," comes to mind, and none of the characters under consideration behave accordingly. On the verge of adulthood, both Holden and Sal (as well as Dean) place a "moratorium on maturity" (Vopat 395). However unnatural or impossible the reality, they choose to linger in a state of perpetual adolescence--suggestive of an endless, sentimental childhood of some kind--and it is from this vantage that they may be viewed as critics. Still, the outsider need not be a child necessarily. Any old outcast will do, and the very nature of such disassociation creates within that individual the prospect of becoming critical of the thing from which he/she is excluded--whether in the spirit of disdain or jealousy.

Hopefully, though, I have left open the door concerning whether or not the characters ought best to be considered as "children." Yet, the tendency to do so has led some to deem the works Rousseauian and their characters, similarly, as "noble savages." An example of such criticism arises in an article by Heiserman and Miller wherein they

intone the notion, “if we could return to childhood or to noble savagery; or if we could retain the spontaneity of childhood, our social and personal problems would disappear. *Émile*, *Candide* . . . Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield--all lament or seek a return to lost childhood” (35). Their suggestion implies that Holden’s fantasy of becoming a catcher in the rye represents an attempt to mend society by preserving childhood. Leslie Fiedler has a less enthusiastic view. For him, the refusal of adulthood by Salinger’s and Kerouac’s characters are seen as a return to childhood, but only as a poor imitation of Twain’s Huck Finn (231). Also, the primitivism that is especially noted of the Beats by Gregory Stephenson--the emphasis on spontaneity and intuition over rational, logical patterns of thought--bears its genesis from Rousseau to be sure (172).

All of the above characteristics, though, are more romantic than anything Rousseau himself provides for in his *Émile*. Rousseau does not predicate that one should *return* to childhood; instead, he says, “Love childhood” (Archer 89)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, his discourse on the Natural education of children--whence the concept of noble savagery is suggested (his pupil, *Émile*, was to be a sort of savage)--ultimately seeks to develop a man (not a boy, mind you) who is not wrecked by social institutions. In both *Catcher* and *On the Road*, there are very real Rousseauian themes that seem to stem directly from the course Rousseau encourages for his *Émile*, but these are seldom treated in favor of romantic claims that the characters of these novels simply seek to return to childhood. In my view, such claims rob them of any lasting power, because such remarks ultimately render the characters much more foolish than they actually are. Holden, Sal and Dean certainly do celebrate youth, and it is an observance that creates a strong indictment against the world of adult society and its expectations. As we pursue this vein of Rousseauian criticism, we shall find that *Catcher* and *On the Road*--departing Rousseau’s treatment of the ills he had hoped to curb--more accurately illustrate the same symptomatic ailments that Rousseau witnessed wreaking havoc upon society. In the present case, this similitude to Rousseau depicts the decay of the family in 1940s-1950s

America, a transgression from Rousseau's prescriptions that the characters themselves do not always innocently escape.

### **Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Role of Family**

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, explains Leslie Fiedler, "children were, symbolically speaking, beside the point" (221). Christianity may have long before anointed the child as savior, but another great revolution was born when Jean-Jacques Rousseau arrived with his message in the beginning of *Émile*: "Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man" (Archer 55). With these words Rousseau began an enormous and lasting paradigm shift that forever transplanted the child from the periphery to the center of life and art (Fiedler 220-221).

Rousseau's thoughts concerning the education of boys is actually the product of an epiphany he experienced on the road from Vincennes:

Could I ever have written a quarter of what I then saw and felt, how clearly should I have revealed the contradictions of the social system! with what force I should have exposed the abuses of our institutions! with what ease I should have shown that *man is naturally good and only becomes bad through our institutions!*<sup>2</sup> (Archer 23)

The Natural education set forth in Rousseau's *Émile* proposes a counter to the evils of education in a corrupt social order. So, in an attempt to understand Rousseau, the single sentence, "Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man," becomes particularly momentous. At once, he saves children from Original Sin, delivering them to a state of Original Innocence (Fiedler 221). What is more, though, he wrests the corruption of mankind from the hands of religious myth and places the burden as extant upon mankind itself as well as its institutions.

According to Rousseau, parents are actually the first social failure children encounter. At the root of the problem is “a departure from nature.” Mothers are naturally attributed to provide the primary care for a child, but they fail to do so. Instead, he writes, “Mothers scorning their first duty are no longer willing to suckle their own children, and hand them over to hired nurses” (Boyd 16). At the same time, he warns that mothers should not make idols of their children and over-protect them “from the hard knocks that come in the way of nature” (17). Such practices will only weaken the child. Likewise, fathers do not escape Rousseau’s blame. The father is “the right teacher” for the child, just as the mother is “the right nurse.” Even if the father is not a talented teacher, Rousseau acknowledges that wise fathers are better educators of their children than even the most gifted tutor--“Zeal makes up for lack of talent--better than talent does for lack of zeal” (18). Fatherhood--indeed, I might suggest parenthood--does not consist simply of begetting and provisioning one’s children; this is only one-third of the duty, according to Rousseau. *Nothing* can exempt a father from his obligations to care for and educate his children. Nevertheless, Rousseau recognizes that fathers will fail; their busy lives will require them to neglect their children and pay another man to do their work. For those who trust that they can buy their sons substitute fathers, Rousseau warns, “Make no mistake. It is not a teacher but a lackey you are giving him; and this fellow will not be long in making another lackey” (19). Tutoring, he believes, is such a noble occupation that the man who endeavors the task for money proves himself unworthy (19).

Rousseau’s ideal concept of education caters to the individual, not the community. The growing child should only conform to his natural inclinations. “If we have to combat either nature or society,” he writes, “we must choose between making a man or making a citizen. We cannot make both” (13). Rousseau feels that children cannot be properly educated *in the interest of society*, and he finds that the ordinary public education of his day is a failure:

This education makes for two opposite goals [making men as well as citizens] and reaches neither. The men it turns out are double-minded, seemingly concerned for others, but really only concerned for themselves. From this contradiction comes the conflict that we never cease to experience in ourselves. We are drawn in different directions by nature and by man, and take a midway path that leads us nowhere. In this state of confusion we go through life and end up with our contradictions unsolved, never having been any good to ourselves or to other people.

(13-14)

To provide an education for the “natural man,” Rousseau states that he does not care what social vocation his pupil shall inherit (14). Before such worldly concerns, he says, “Life is the business I would have him learn,” adding later that “The man who gets most out of life is not the one who has lived longest, but the one who has felt life most deeply” (15).

For Rousseau, the family unit is the most hallowed of human institutions when it provides a healthy atmosphere. “The charms of family life are the best antidote against corruption of manners,” he writes (Archer 74). However, one of the primary conditions leading to the need for Rousseau’s discourse on a Natural education is that nurturing families do not exist. In the absence of strong familial associations, “children, sent from home and dispersed in boarding-schools, convents, and colleges, will carry their family affection elsewhere, or rather will form the habit of being attached to nothing” (75). Still, children must be educated whether or not their families thrive in the state of perfection Rousseau would like. The logical conclusion to *Émile* is to provide an education that might remedy the schism Rousseau finds in the family, a breakdown perpetuated by a corrupt social system.

Verily, these errors that so disturbed Rousseau are repeated by parents in both *Catcher* and *On the Road*. As noted in the previous chapter, what we learn of Holden’s father is that he represents only a figure of authority or discipline to Holden; Holden

himself implies that his father does not notice whatever Holden might do “correctly.” If he does, he apparently never tells his son as much. Additionally, every fragment of information that we as readers receive regarding Holden’s father (as well as his mother, to a large extent) comes second-hand from Holden and, on one occasion, from Phoebe. The physical absence of Holden’s father from the narrative itself seems plainly symbolic of the absence of Holden’s father from his actual life. Holden’s mother, on the other hand, is spoken of even less, although she does appear once. All Holden divulges of his mother is that she has a propensity toward hysteria, stays up nights smoking, unable to sleep; she is a nervous person and “hasn’t felt too healthy since . . . Allie died” (Salinger 140). Her singular entrance occurs near the end of the story, as she checks on Phoebe after returning from a party with Mr. Caulfield, unaware that Holden is also in the room--hiding because he is still supposed to be away at school. Duane Edwards cites this scene to underscore the “family situation” that Holden (and Phoebe) are compelled to deal with. He notes a familial indifference toward Phoebe since her parents leave her alone at her young age, and especially on the part of the mother for not “object[ing] seriously to what she assumes is smoke from a cigarette Phoebe has been smoking” (155). Although she shows interest in Phoebe, Edwards summarizes her as “a mother incapable of affection” (155). The father, as Edwards has it, shows no concern for Phoebe whatsoever. Unable or unwilling to attend her participation in a Christmas play (he must fly to California, instead, Phoebe tells Holden), he also fails even to check in on Phoebe as her mother does (155). “It’s safe to assume,” Edwards writes, “that [Mr. Caulfield] is generally absent from his children’s lives. He is the aloof father whose inaccessibility makes it impossible for his son to identify with him and thus to develop ‘normally’” (155)<sup>3</sup>. The dichotomy Rousseau noticed between his prescriptions and the reality of dissolving families that he witnessed continues for Holden, near the novel’s end, when he goes to see a former teacher from Elkton Hills, Mr. Antolini. He tells Holden that he has recently spoken to Holden’s father, who--Mr. Antolini assures Holden--is ““terribly concerned about you”” (242). Strangely,

any real concern Holden's father has for Holden himself (mere reprimands aside) only receives its voice from someone who is no relation to the family at all. Holden tells Antolini that he knows of his father's concern; yet, we are left to wonder how he could possibly know such a thing and, further, why he must learn about his father's questionable concern from Antolini rather than his own father. This serious lack of genuine familial love is further accentuated later, when Phoebe tells Holden that she wants to go away with him when he moves out West (266-267). For Phoebe, then, home life is bad enough for her to want to run away with her brother.

Rather than showing the love and concern for their children that Rousseau believes would begin a remedy of social evils, the Caulfields--especially Mr. Caulfield-- are interested most in themselves. They are particularly concerned about appearances. This is offered to us in the opening passage of Holden's testimony, when he tells readers that he is not going to tell everything about himself--"all that David Copperfield kind of crap"--for two reasons: one is that such things bore him; the second is due to the fact that "[his] parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if [he] told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially [his] father" (3). The same sentiment ostensibly resonates in Holden's statement regarding his father's wish for Holden to attend an Ivy League university, much against Holden's own disdain for such institutions (112). And, again, this interest in public display is illustrated several times through their interaction with Holden's instructors. Before his removal from Pencey, for instance, both of his parents attend a conference with the Pencey headmaster to discuss Holden's lack of interest toward his studies. Of course, this may show genuine parental concern on the part of Holden's parents; yet, again, we might remember that his father becomes a fixture in his life only when Holden requires correction for failing to meet some brand of external value, like acting his age. Ultimately, their meeting with the headmaster shows their interest in maintaining the belief system that Holden--through his refusal to meet their expectations--appears to be undermining and Rousseau recognizes as



corrupt. In this case, the interest of Holden's parents is one that brings them closer to the headmaster than it does to their son.

On this point, it is important to note that Holden's father is "a corporation lawyer" (140), as Holden tells us--a product of the depraved institutions Rousseau holds in contempt. To boot, his profession includes him within a structure that widens his distance from his family; that is, the corporate system itself represents another level of social organization--a deepening of corruption--and this position is the product of his education. Furthermore, Holden's mother appears to assume the role of the silent and passive wife, but her submissive role is only a public façade. Elsewhere, Holden implies that he has "heard [his] mother and father having a terrific fight in the bathroom" (158). He does not elaborate upon whether such quarrels are physical or merely verbal, but that is rather beside the point. Since they do not fight openly, the significance of Holden's statement is that his parents hide (or attempt to hide) the harsh reality of adult, married life from their children as well as others. This reality is tucked behind the pretenses that Holden's parents publicly uphold and fundamentally runs counter to the lessons Rousseau promotes for parents--not to hold back the rough truth of life from one's children for fear of making them weak. Perhaps in this instance, though, such harsh realities might not exist if Holden's parents subscribed to Rousseau's belief in the sanctity of family. Still another example of this tendency of shielding children to their detriment is suggested when Holden tells Phoebe that following his father's course into law does not appeal to him. Lawyers are only good, he believes, if they are dedicated to saving the innocent. "But," he says, "you don't *do* that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" (223). Holden submits that even if a lawyer does save people he could never know whether he acts out of a virtuous love for humanity or simply for self-interest and personal gain; he would not have the clarity to know whether or not he is being phony (224). Of course, this is Holden's perception of his father, and it is subtly heavy-handed. Knowing his father

works for a corporation, Holden is aware that his father is not a *good* lawyer, because he is not dedicated to saving innocent people. Instead, his father, as well as his profession, is suspect of duplicity. The only value he sees his father displaying is the sort of life Holden condemns--the life of a hot-shot, the only people for whom life is a game.

Without overtly judging them himself, Holden places his parents on display for us--his readers--to judge instead. His parents are perhaps the most immediate and static models of adulthood that Holden encounters; yet, his silent awareness of their pretensions reveals them as the primary source for Holden's doubting perspective that most people he meets are "phony" or "affected." These affectations also surface in Holden himself, who manages to get along with people by hiding his dislike for them, as well as the manner in which he tells a story of his disillusion without directly (publicly) describing that disillusion to his audience. By Rousseau's standards, Holden's parents are of the same character as those whom Rousseau blames for begetting and fostering social discord.

In place of the solid, affectionate family life which Rousseau calls for and reveres most highly, Holden (and as I will show later, Sal and Dean as well) has been, by turns, shuttled into institutions of education. Rather than providing him with the tools he needs or desires to make his way through life, these institutions have left him in the dilapidated condition about which Rousseau warns. In *Catcher* this idea illustrates that such institutions only uphold the "phoniness" Holden learns from his parents--in particular, he is bombarded by the notion that the ultimate value of adulthood rests in the pursuit of transitory gain. Mr. Ossenburger, the revered Pencey alumnus, represents this value.

Holden explains that Ossenburger "made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pencey," by developing a nationwide chain of mortuaries (22). Having donated money to the school, he has been immortalized by a new dormitory named in his honor. Ossenburger still attends football games--arriving in a "big goddam Cadillac"--and gives speeches to the students, instructing them to "always pray to God" (22-23). Holden recalls, "[Ossenburger] told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy

and all. He said *he* talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car. That killed me. I can just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiff” (23). Ostensibly, Holden recognizes the profane implications of lauding such an example before the youth of Pencey. Although Holden’s familiarity with biblical instruction is not clearly expressed in this passage, his recognition of the falsehood perpetuated by Ossenburger (as well as Pencey for its appreciation of him), however, seems to smack of an awareness of spiritual perversion. That is, a man valued only for his wealth is offering them spiritual guidance, while Christ told his disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Lk 10:25)<sup>4</sup>. In this instance, by supporting Ossenburger, Pencey proves its guilt for upholding values that threaten to lead its students to confusion by celebrating a man whose own values appear to be muddled.

Later, during a conversation with Sally Hayes, Holden more directly condemns Pencey and all the other prep schools he has ever attended for the false values they endorse. He tells her that all of these schools are ““full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac someday”” (Salinger 170). Holden goes on to tell her that Pencey and other such institutions require people like him to feign interest in things they might otherwise care nothing about, like the performance of the school’s football team, as well as a concern for the inclusion in private cliques and their snooty conversation (170). To her protests, he admits that other people ““get more out of school than *that*”” (170). ““But,”” he tells her, ““that’s all *I* get out of it. See? That’s my point. . . . I don’t get hardly anything out of anything”” (171). This last statement reminds that nothing *from* nothing *is* nothing, which is the sum of Holden’s education--either from his parents or the academies to whose charge he is continually abandoned. Rather than teaching Holden the business of life and the true meaning of manhood, as Rousseau would prefer, both Holden’s parents and the institutions to which they entrust his upbringing subscribe to values that neither Holden

nor Rousseau endorses--namely, the pursuit of financial and social success. Following this pattern, we should not be surprised to find that when Holden returns home completely wracked by life (rather than being cared for by a tender family), he is quickly whisked to a psychiatric facility in California, which we are left to conclude operates in part to facilitate a greater physical distance between Holden and his family. Interestingly, though, this facility represents only another social institution, the purpose of which is to help Holden to adjust himself to the pursuits and values of a world that Holden implies (and Rousseau insists) is corrupt.

Turning to look at *On the Road*, we confront a different twist on the same dilemma of familial decline. Sal, it should be noted, does have what appears to be a supportive family in his relationship to his aunt. She appears to embrace the midway path called for by Rousseau. As noted in the previous chapter, she aids Sal not only financially when need arises, but she also understands his need to break away and supports Sal's inclinations to travel. Even so, although Sal does show an increasing sense of obligation to his aunt throughout the novel, he seems to find the company of an affectionate family as stifling as his collegiate experience. His appreciation for his aunt's hospitality is marred by his desire to escape those trappings, along with his general disinterest in the simple pleasures of a compassionate family. Just before his first trip with Dean, for instance, Sal describes, "I had been spending a quiet Christmas in the country, as I realized when . . . I saw the Christmas tree, the presents, and smelled the roasting turkey and listened to the talk of the relatives, but now the bug was on me again, and the bug's name was Dean Moriarty and I was off . . ." (Kerouac 115). Something appears to remain amiss within this cohesive unit, for which Sal shows stirrings of appreciation; otherwise, he would have little interest in leaving his family to go off with Dean.

In part, we might attribute Sal's growing distance between himself and his aunt as a reaction to the degenerated state of his nuclear family. The issue is seldom raised in *On the Road*, and information regarding Sal's absent parents is scarce. Not until late in the

novel--just before Sal, Dean and Stan Shephard leave for Mexico--does Sal finally admit plainly that his father is dead (267). What has become of Sal's mother, on the other hand, is never clarified. The only reference to her--indirect as it is--occurs when Sal is abandoned in San Francisco and recounts seeing a woman whom he believes "was [his] mother of about two hundred years ago, and . . . [he] was her footpad son, returning from gaol to haunt her honest labors in the hashery" (172). Without either parent, Sal has been remanded to the custody of his aunt for an unspecified period of time. Unfortunately, Rousseau does not account for the difficulties children will experience should their parents, rather than neglecting their children, die. Instead, he professes concern over the mortality of children and the likelihood that they will not survive their youth. Since Rousseau does not directly approach Sal's dilemma, it is tempting to regard the loss of Sal's parents as symbolic of the disintegration of families concurrent with Rousseau. Considering that Sal does have a caretaker (and that in the person of a family member), however, I am convinced that treating symbolically the absence of his parents would be deceptive--especially since Sal's aunt seems to promote the ideals of Rousseau. Even Rousseau's idea of the corrupt social institution taking the place of the abandoned child's parents does not seem to affect Sal as directly as Holden. Beyond Sal's declaration that his college life had become stultified, he offers little information attending this matter. Instead, we can only look to his rambling behavior that was especially noted in the previous chapter of this study as a protest of the convention that we might expect to be upheld in educational institutions. If the aim of education in Sal's world is anything like that which Holden recounts to Sally Hayes (i.e. a pursuit of financial reward), then we only need to recall Sal's distaste for the scene he encounters on Times Square at the end of his first journey west to relinquish any doubt as to his perception of such an objective. This detail is presented in the previous chapter, exhibiting Sal's disillusion with the masses of New York City and their rush for "the mad dream" (106), when all he wants is to return home. Unlike Holden, however, Sal is not completely left to the care of the institution;

while he attends classes at the university, Sal lives at home with his aunt. Still, unsatisfied with her devotion, Sal frequently turns to Dean to fill part of his emptiness. By examining Dean, then, we might better understand what pulls Sal away from the seemingly nurturing environment his aunt provides in pursuit of the road life.

Like Sal, Dean has neither father nor mother. His mother died when Dean was young. Dean's father, however, is still living; and much of Dean's youth was spent caring for his father, whom Sal notes was "once a respectable and hardworking tinsmith, [who] had become a wine alcoholic . . . and was reduced to riding freights to Texas in the winter and back to Denver in the summer" (39). Although Dean learned "to plead in court" for his father's release from jail and panhandle money for himself and his father to subsist, it appears that having a father present in his youth availed the young Moriarty little. "From the age of eleven to seventeen," Sal says, "[Dean] was usually in reform school" (39). Although he had living relatives on his mother's side (39), Dean's education was left largely to the street, having "spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library" (7).

Ultimately, how much Dean is a product of the reformatory or the freedom and hardship of the streets is arguable. Nevertheless, Dean's "wildness" is quite likely the primitivism to which Stephenson refers as extant in *On the Road*. He notes that "Dean most clearly embodies those qualities [Sal] admires. . . .possess[ing] the instincts, innocence, and energies of a modern, urban noble savage" (23). Arriving at such a conclusion regarding Dean is tempting, if we assume that Dean sheltered away his innocence at a young age--never being touched by the cruelty of the world he encountered as a boy. Sal's persistent view of Dean as "a mystic" (Kerouac 121), a prophet with "the secret that we're all busting to find" (195), and at other moments "an Angel . . . like any Angel . . . [with] rages and furies" (263), as well as his images of Dean sweetly adoring a music box while sitting on the floor in "tremendous amazement" (119) and "swaying in the middle of the room, eating his cake and looking at everyone with awe" (263), certainly

cultivates a sense of innocent purity surrounding Dean. On the other hand, growing up locked away in reformatories would seem a terribly rigorous exercise in forced conformity, where the freedom of the noble savage would surely be quelled. To this end, Sal insinuates that Dean's behavior is at least partly a reaction to his restricted youth, especially the time he has spent in jail: "Prison is where you promise yourself the right to live. Dean had never seen his mother's face. Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment" (132). Yet Sal's allowances for Dean reintroduce the issue of family about which Rousseau is candidly adamant.

Dean's "suffering bulk and bursting ecstasies" (259) do not present great difficulties for himself. Indeed, he manages to thrive in life either way, partly due to his belief that "'God exists without qualms. . . . positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us'" (120), and also due to a confidence-man's understanding of people, as he assures Sal "I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it's the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do" (120-121). Nevertheless, his manner of life causes problems for others and in its egocentrism represents an anti-Rousseauian ethic regarding the family issues that concern Rousseau. Rather, Dean's behavior serves to illustrate the fracture that Rousseau recognized in the families of his day. This can be observed in Dean's several broken marriages, children who do not know him (and for whom he is never present to care and guide), and as many divorces as suit his convenience. By the end of the novel, for instance, we find Dean on his third marriage, divorced twice with four children. Throughout *On the Road*, in fact, his ambivalence toward familial responsibility is an issue of concern for everyone except Dean. During a tribunal of friends, whom Sal notes had been former disciples of Dean, Dean is attacked for his behavior: "'Camille [Dean's second wife] has to stay home and mind the baby now [that] you're gone--how can she keep her job?--and she never wants to see you again and I don't blame her'" (194). Later, he receives a similar reproof from Sal's aunt when she tells him, "'I hope you'll be able to take care of your new baby that's coming and stay

married this time,”” adding, ““You can’t go all over the country having babies like that. Those poor little things’ll grow up helpless. You’ve got to offer them a chance to live”” (253).

So, rather than providing the correction to social and personal dilemmas that Heiserman and Miller entrust to noble savagery, we see that Dean’s strange education between the streets and reformatories has left him with a passion for life that is purely directed at the self. Perhaps his actions do simulate the primitivism that Stephenson suggests. However, his consideration of Dean as an “urban noble savage” is antithetical to what Rousseau proposes. One of Rousseau’s primary targets for corruption, in fact, are cities, which he regards as “the graves of mankind” (Archer 77). Instead, he suggests, “it is always the country which regenerates the stock. Send your children therefore to renew their strength in the country, and to recover in the open fields that vigour which is lost in the unwholesome air of popular cities” (77). Given this, we should not confuse the difference between romantic primitivism and Rousseau. In his exuberant self-indulgence, Dean repeats the same fatherly failures of his own father, leaving behind him not only a trail of tears and broken hearts, but children who may have to fend for themselves in the same manner that Dean was required to do. He does not fulfill his part in the affectionate family that would curb Rousseau’s need to conceive a new way of educating children, but he does illustrate Rousseau’s argument. If we are inclined, still, to consider Dean’s upbringing as akin to that of the noble savage, the fruits of such training appear lost on Dean. Rousseau warns of the affects of primitivism usurping the social order; noble savagery is only a stage in the development of the child. Left unchecked, however, it will also lead to corruption, developing a man who “Ever contradicting himself, ever wavering between duty and inclination . . . will be good for nothing either to himself or to others. He will be *the modern man* . . . he will be--nothing” (Archer 60).

Following after Dean, Sal appears to dwell in a state of confusion that seems to have something to do with the desire to get married. He wants a wife, he confides to



Dean, “so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time--all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something” (Kerouac 116). By this time, though, Sal has already been married and divorced, as he states in the opening passage of the book. He has also experienced the most intimate relationship with a woman that occurs in *On the Road*--Terry, a young, Hispanic, single mother from the San Joaquin Valley who, according to Sal, has left her husband. They spend fifteen days together (Sal, Terry and her son, Johnny), but Sal slips out when the rigors of cotton picking and subsistence living prove too great a hardship. Remembering Rousseau’s call to repair oneself in the countryside, this episode between Sal and Terry is especially interesting in conjunction with the present discussion. After a fashion that perhaps Rousseau would have approved, Sal describes his work in the California cotton fields as idyllic: “The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road. Johnny and I played all the time . . . . Terry sat mending my clothes. I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be, in Paterson” (97). Yet much like the family to which Sal is finally unable to commit, he also leaves behind the simple Rousseauian pleasures of country life to return to the evil influences of the city and--in the following section of the book--his first voyage with Dean, wherein Sal divulges his desire to seek respite through marriage.

Departing the ease of country life and the comforts of a family for the company of Dean and the city is ironic if we accept that Sal might have found the repose he seeks via the prescriptions of Rousseau. However, this attests to the confused state of mankind that Rousseau acknowledges--being neither useful to one’s own purposes or to others. Instead, we should be compelled to notice that a good deal of Sal’s confusion comes into view due to his interest in following Dean, whose own interest in marriage and familial obligation is absent of the responsibility that Rousseau holds as essential. Sal is pulled between his own conflicting Rousseauian desires and his belief that Dean possesses a secret knowledge that may, in time, be revealed. To follow Dean, though, Sal cannot

pursue his other interests, because Dean does not advocate those interests unless they provide pure self-gratification. Exactly what has led Sal to his confused condition is not entirely clear. Dean's corrupt influence (in the eyes of Rousseau, at least) probably does not help, and perhaps Sal's predicament is as simple as that: Dean as "*the modern man*," filled with his own dissolution, is the primary source of corruption for Sal. If so, it is not surprising to find Sal talking later of another doomed relationship with Lucille, whom he claims he would marry if she would proceed with a divorce from her husband. But Sal confesses, "the whole thing was hopeless . . . Lucille would never understand me because I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. . . . I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (126). Still, we must acknowledge that Sal's original discontent--the thing that leads him to pursue Dean in the first place--must spring from some other source. Following this line, all of Sal's influences--family, as well as school--are suspect of failure.

As cross-breeds of social institutions and natural inclinations, both Sal and Dean demonstrate themselves as the double-minded confused men that Rousseau forecasts as products of such an environment. This is especially true in regard to family. With the obligations and responsibilities that Rousseau claims are elemental within the family unit, both men--especially Dean--proceed through their lives with their personal confusions unresolved. These confusions lead Sal to consistently fail himself, while Dean's chaotic manner causes him--at the very least--to fail those who depend on him.

Whether or not the protagonists of *Catcher* and *On the Road* finally propose remedies to the social problems they encounter remains to be seen. But in order to consider them as noble savages in line with *Émile*, I believe that we should demand more from them. Implicitly or explicitly, the recognition of social ills that occurs in these novels actually places them more in the role of Rousseau himself than that of his pupil. I do not deny that the characters of these novels are searching for some relief from the dilemmas they encounter--indeed, as much is suggested in the previous chapter *sans* Rousseau--but,

as I hope to illustrate next, such a solution never materializes. Until then, if we must invoke Rousseau and *Émile* into the present discussion, I believe that we must also consider the background pertaining to his treatment of childhood. We should acknowledge that Rousseau would not agree that any of these characters distinguish themselves as the noble savages he condoned. Nevertheless, their narratives are potent, and we cannot deny that the same problems Rousseau sought to correct have not vanished since his instruction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the presentation on Rousseau's *Émile* I have conflated selections translated by R. L. Archer and William Boyd; the former offers a more refined literary translation, while the latter is much easier to follow.

<sup>2</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards' concern for *normal development* in the present case is a matter of sexuality. His contention is that Holden exhibits "severe sexual conflicts" which are a product (at least in part) of Holden's unfortunate family life and, especially, the absence of his father. My own observations have nothing to do with this analysis; I am merely interested in Edwards' observations regarding Holden's family.

<sup>4</sup> From the Holy Bible, King James version. Holden's awareness of biblical stories is more fully expressed in Chapter 14 (130-131).

## CHAPTER IV

### A Doomed Quest

In the introduction to this study, I note a remark by George F. Will, who compares the similarity of the openings of both *Catcher* and *On the Road*. They are, in fact, particularly akin to one another. Both narrators begin their tales by describing an illness that has befallen them. Holden says, “the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born . . . and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it . . . I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me . . . just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy” (Salinger 3). A similar problem also affects Sal in the beginning of his story, as he describes that he first met Dean after having broken off with his wife and “just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead” (Kerouac 3). From these introductions, we can determine that Sal and Holden suffer from some kind of psychic wound that produced what Holden regards as a sort of madness and Sal considers spiritual death. Thus, they both admit, as Steve Wilson says of Sal, that they are “on a quest for enlightenment--a search for a spiritual cure” (305).

The source of this ailment, however, doubtfully resides entirely within the slight details either Sal or Holden divulge. Actually, they both tell us that they do not wish to discuss the matter at length, which may indicate more to their woes than what they offer in their introductions. Certainly at hand are the issues this study has encountered thus far, especially their disenchantment with the “adult” world they are trying hard to

circumnavigate. To this end, the journeys of Sal and Holden can be viewed as a desire to move beyond the values of a confining, conformist society--an endeavor many have termed a quest for authenticity. Recalling the previous chapter, though, we are also aware (even as we turn presently to earlier sections of the novels) that a substantial portion of Sal's and Holden's disillusion and confusion originates within the walls of home and extending further into the halls of academia, where the models of adulthood offer little promise and even less guidance.

Of *On the Road*, noting this absence in the characters' lives, Edward Foster encapsulates the plot as "a search for the father, or at least someone who will have the vision and the wisdom that traditionally were the father's, a prophet to speak 'the Word'" (40). Foster adds that this fatherly role becomes incarnate through the apostrophized character of Dean Moriarty, Sr. (father of Sal's accomplice). Having rejected the values and restrictions imposed upon him by respectable society, the older Moriarty--responsible for siring "a western kinsman of the sun" (Kerouac 10)--epitomizes the myth of the American West--the father who might show Sal "what his own father could not" (Foster 41) and thereby offer Sal the guidance he needs for his journey toward enlightenment. Similarly, Holden's search requires an alternative form of guidance, as Jonathan Baumach recognizes when he notes that "[Holden] is looking for an exemplar, a wise-good father whose example will justify his own initiation into manhood. Before Holden can become a catcher in the rye, he must find another catcher in the rye to show him how it is done" (56)<sup>1</sup>.

Ultimately, if Sal and Holden are seeking to transcend the society in which they live, they will need guidance to do so; both Foster and Baumach insinuate as much. To find that guidance, however, they are required to look outside of their immediate families--a situation that further emphasizes the point of Chapter III. Émile could not become the mold-shattering Natural man without the guidance of Rousseau; left alone, he would turn either to the ways of society or the anti-Émile given to excess primitivism.

Likewise, as Sal and Holden seek to break from a restrictive society, their quests are finally doomed to failure for a lack of appropriate guidance.

### **Of Wounds and Fathers**

Lingering briefly on this issue of fathers, we are reminded from the presentation in Chapter III that fathers, as well as mothers, scarcely exist in the worlds of these novels. While the spiritual wounds that afflict both Sal and Holden are patently ambiguous, there is some evidence--as suggested earlier--that the absence of guidance and familial concern for these characters is, at least in part, the source of their damage.

Telling confirmation concerning the significance of the absent father in *On the Road* surfaces in Kerouac's original, unedited manuscript. As illustrated above, the published version of *On the Road* begins with Sal describing his first meeting with Dean. He tells of having recently recovered from "a serious illness" (3) when he first met Dean--an illness Sal attributes to the break from his wife "and [his] feeling that everything was dead" (3). The original manuscript (circa 1951, reproduced via photocopy in a recent article by Douglas Brinkley), however, is slightly different and shows Kerouac employing a beginning that parallels his own life<sup>2</sup>: "I first met Neal not long *after my father died* . . . [sic] I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about except that it really had something [sic] to do with *my father's death* and my awful feeling that everything was dead" (Brinkley 72)<sup>3</sup>. Such a revision is paramount, because it entirely alters the way we experience Kerouac's novel. From the published version, we may be slightly more inclined to give greater attention to Sal's relationships with women; this is especially true since they are a frequent topic throughout the work. But focusing on Sal's personal relationships in this manner will detract from our view regarding the significance of his dead father. This vital information still exists within the narrative, but with our focus elsewhere, we may neglect it. Had Kerouac not scrapped his original words (in this instance, at least), I suspect that we would be inclined make much less of his relationships

with his feminine acquaintances throughout the story; instead, they would only be details to a much greater, much graver matter: that Sal is wandering America with precious little direction, all the while aching for his father--all the while searching, hoping to find a paternal replacement or perhaps (as with the Ghost of the Susquehanna near the end of Part I) a ghost of his father who can still reach him (*à la* "Hamlet") with information that may give his life purpose. At the same time, had Kerouac not altered the manuscript, readers might excuse or simplify Sal's wayward ramblings and seeming lack of responsibility due to his own personal tragedy, just as Sal continually forgives Dean; indeed, Sal is probably attracted to Dean, not simply due to the excitement Dean is capable of inspiring within him, but also because they both suffer from fatherlessness.

While Sal's wound may be primarily related to the death of his father, it has mutated into something greater. Sal's fear that everything is dead is not merely his evaluation of the external world, it is also a qualitative self-analysis. He suggests as much early in Part I when describing a strange occurrence in a hotel room in Des Moines: "I didn't know who I was . . . for about fifteen strange seconds. . . . I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost" (Kerouac 17). Sal's disturbing vision rests in the sudden realization that he has lost any sense of self, and this loss of identity is probably connected to the loss of his father (to mention nothing of the mysterious absence of his mother). Those whose charge it was to mold and help guide Sal no longer exist, and without that anchor--excepting Sal's aunt--he is compelled to drift in search of a harbor.

Holden's father, on the other hand, is still alive. As presented in Chapter III, though, we know what a shadowy figure the elder Caulfield represents to Holden. But the significance of his dim presence comes to light during Holden's dialogue about the movie production of *Hamlet*, starring Sir Lawrence Olivier, to which his brother had once taken him. Originally, Holden had been excited to see the film but became disappointed, because Olivier portrayed Hamlet "too much like a goddam general, instead of a sad,



screwed-up guy” (Salinger 152). Instead, what he enjoyed most about the movie was Act One: Scene Three, when Polonius offers advice to his departing son, Laertes, while “old Ophelia was sort of horsing around with her brother . . . while he was trying to look interested in the bull his father was shooting” (153). This scene probably reminds Holden’s of his partings from home for a new campus: moments in which his father, like Polonius, was undoubtedly trying to give Holden worldly advice about success in the new school, while Phoebe (like Ophelia) represented something closer to the ideal of purity and innocence that Holden could appreciate. “The bull his father was shooting,” suggests that Holden considers Polonius’ advice--“This above all: to thine own self be true,/ and it must follow, as the night the day,/ Thou canst not then be false to any man” (*Hamlet* I.iii. 78-80)<sup>4</sup>--bogus, much like all the advice Holden receives from his elders about playing life by “the rules,” (such as Mr. Spencer maintains) and his own father, whose only “parenting” is to reprimand Holden for not acting his age. Furthermore, as Polonius’s position of royal counselor is consistently undercut by his tendency to assume the part of a fool (providing the tragedy with a comic relief that once was the place of the since-deceased Yorick), so, too, should we remember that the role of Holden’s father as family authoritarian is likewise undermined by Holden’s insinuation of his father’s professional hypocrisy--that he is a corporate lawyer rather than a *good* lawyer. By showing what Holden lacks, the presentation of this scene also illustrates what Holden seeks: a father or guide who, finally, will not only tell but also show him the path toward a life of authenticity, away from a world of affectation wherein falsehood toward others is valued above honesty.

The failure of Holden’s father (or mother, for that matter) to provide Holden with guidance is only part of his problem, and their absence from his life is not the same wound as Sal’s. In contrast to Sal, Holden experiences several imaginary wounds throughout the narrative: he pretends to be blind (29); he tells a schoolmate’s mother that he has a small brain tumor (75); he tells a prostitute that he had surgery on his spinal cord (126); after

being beaten up by her pimp, he pretends to have been gut-shot (135)--a condition he imagines again, during a phone conversation with Sally Hayes (196). Gerald Rosen explains that the first of these wounds reveals Holden's "terribly anguished isolation from his parents" (100), because in his pretended blindness he asks for his mother's hand. Rosen does not clearly define that Holden's request for his mother's hand may be symbolic of his need for someone to guide him, not only through the dark but through life as well. Furthermore, although the request may exemplify nothing more than a desire for maternal nurturing, Holden's request for his mother in place of his father continues to pronounce the absence of his father. Even so, in this imagined episode, Holden's request is denied, as he asks, "Why won't you give me your *hand*?" (29). Excepting the belly wound, Rosen ignores Holden's other imagined injuries and describes Holden's family as the source of his wound (100). However, it seems much more likely that Allie's death is that source and that, moreover, Holden's imagined wounds are merely symbolic of a greater psychic injury (brought on by his brother's death) of which he may not be fully aware. Nevertheless, the distanced parent-child relationship that Rosen describes certainly brings to the fore the realization that Holden's parents seem unable to offer him solace for his anguish; indeed, Holden implies as much when he tells that his parents wanted him to undergo psychoanalysis after Allie's death, "because [he] broke all the windows in the garage" (50).

At last, it seems that the individual quests for spiritual healing that both Sal and Holden undertake are rooted in the home. The wounds from which they suffer are inextricably woven into the loose fabric of their disintegrating family bonds. It is little wonder, then, that they must look elsewhere for guidance along their respective journeys.

### **Bound for Authenticity**

The desire to move beyond the values of a confining, conformist society, is an endeavor many have termed a quest for authenticity. Wilson finds that the pursuit of

meaning in Kerouac's novel leads the characters to search beyond the realm of Anglo propriety--living "with hobos, befriending criminals and drug users," as well as people of other races, "not merely studying Blacks, Mexicans, criminals, but attempting actually to *become* them for a time" (302-303)<sup>5</sup>--hoping to discover "a certain essential humanness" that their own culture has lost and that will help them to heal their spiritual ailments (303)<sup>6</sup>. Although Holden never searches too far beyond the confines of middle-class respectability, it is true that he sometimes identifies himself with the dispossessed. He, too, seeks some curative power that his own environment cannot provide. Ever at the core of their respective journeys, however, is the absence of the guide--the possibility of finding that someone who might hold the secrets Foster claims were traditionally the father's remains always around the next corner. That is, as long as the quest continues, until viable answers and the impetus to live those answers out arrive, the quest for salvation is also a quest for guidance.

For Sal, the guidance and energy of Dean's "wild yea-saying burst of American joy" (Kerouac 10) engenders his own quest, providing Sal with respite--however temporary--from his feeling of spiritual death. Dean's intensity also stands in contrast to the stale atmosphere of Sal's intellectual friends, who "were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons" (10). Dean, on the other hand, "just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other" (10). Sal's weariness leads him to develop a friendship with Dean, "because Dean has led a life that should have extinguished his joy for living," much the way Sal's joy has vanished (Wilson 305). He becomes enthused by Dean's excitement and, through him, "finds a guide for his own journey toward meaning" (305). At the same time, having grown up "on the streets of Denver with his alcoholic, drifter father," (306) Dean himself represents Sal's ideal of the marginalized of society who have learned to appreciate life through their hardships, "rather than the sanitized life being sold by American mainstream society" (306). He becomes for

Sal a supplanted version of Moriarty Sr., who might, as Foster states, point the way to a life of worth, free of social constraints.

In the end, though, Dean proves an unfortunate choice for guidance. His discovery of "IT," described by Wilson as "the essence of human existence: to be in the moment and living without the need for . . . 'reaching irritably after facts and reason,'" never becomes attainable for Sal (306). Sal states repeatedly how life fares under Dean's influence: "everything was falling apart" in San Francisco with Remi (Kerouac 77), "everything was collapsing" with Terry in the San Joaquin Valley (99). Later, at the end of Part Two and his first voyage with Dean, Sal concludes, "It was the end; I wanted out. . . . We were all thinking we'd never see each other again and we didn't care" (178). This pattern repeats in Part Three, when "Everything was collapsing," in Denver because of Dean's excesses (220). Hence, every journey Sal begins with zeal ends in disillusioned despair, because Sal and Dean never fully embrace the same values; each is only ever an interloper in the other's world. This becomes exceedingly clear in Part Four when Dean tells Sal,

Someday you and me'll be coming down an alley together at sundown and looking in the cans to see. . . . There's no harm in ending that way. You spend your whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you . . . . (251)

Sal's response to Dean illustrates the difference between them: "All I hope, Dean, is someday we'll be able to live on the same street with our families and get to be a couple of oldtimers together" (254)<sup>7</sup>. At last, then, Sal discovers that all the younger Moriarty can offer is a vision of life that he cannot abide. As well, during the course of this conversation Dean divulges that he has heard from his father, yet for all of his varied cross-country ramblings Dean shows little interest in going to see his father (252). Although Sal mentions nothing of Dean's indifference toward his father, the scene is a significant one for Sal. From this point forward, he must be aware that Moriarty Sr. will

never be found; any guidance Sal might have hoped to derive from him can only reach Sal through Dean. And Dean, as shown above, can no longer offer Sal the guidance he needs.

Part Four represents a serious turning point in the book. Vopat marks Sal's leaving his Denver doldrums in search of Dean in San Francisco within Part Three as the crucial moment when Sal begins to provide direction for Dean (they plan to go to Italy together but never make it) (400)<sup>8</sup>. This is certainly accurate; however, Part Four begins with Sal having come "into some money from selling [his] book" (Kerouac 249), which portrays him as finally assuming a respectable social role as well as the adult responsibility he had been attempting to avoid--"I straightened out my aunt with rent for the rest of the year" (249). He is turning away from his life with Dean, and on his ensuing trip to Denver Sal takes a bus the entire way, with little time to get hung up hitchhiking and digging the common folk, as per Dean's objectives. Sal becomes more of a tourist on this voyage and relaxes rather than frantically scrambling after "IT." As he says, "I was having a wonderful time in Denver and the whole world opened up before me because I had no dreams" (258). Preparing to continue his vacation into Mexico with Stan Shephard, Sal gets news of Dean's imminent arrival and, for the first time, views the coming of Dean as tragic, even foreboding:

Suddenly I had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveler on the plain, bearing down on me. I saw his huge face over the plains with the mad, bony purpose and the gleaming eyes; I saw his winds; I saw his old jalopy chariot with thousands of sparking flames shooting out from it; I saw the path it burned over the road; it even made its own road and went over the corn, through the cities, destroying bridges, drying rivers. It came like the wrath to the West. I knew Dean had gone mad again. There was no money to send either wife if he took all his savings out of the bank and

bought a car. Everything was up, the jig and all. Behind him charred ruins smoked. (259)

Sal's vision is filled with negative and distorted images--pictures of ruin, destruction and suffering--and he expresses concern, finally, for the women and children in Dean's life. Sal appears to be moving away from the confusion that has befallen him since he began following Dean, as noted in Chapter III. His concern for Dean's families shows him embracing the conventions of responsibility shared by those who place Dean in the middle of an impromptu inquisition in San Francisco. Nonetheless, Dean is permitted to go along to Mexico to procure a cheap divorce.

At last, on this final adventure into the "magic *south*," Sal and Dean finally find the thing that has eluded them for so long. Guidance--paternal or otherwise--would never surface on the roads of America, but driving through Mexico, Sal discovers that

These people . . . were not fools, they were not clowns, they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it. . . And they knew this when we passed, ostensibly self-important moneybag Americans on a lark in their land; they knew who was the father and who was the son of antique life on earth, and made no comment. (280-281)

Wilson describes Mexico as the place where "[Sal] finds a poor society that relies on trust and openness rather than the repression he feels in the U.S." (305). So, if Sal's final purpose is to slip the constraints of American society, as he might have hoped to learn from Dean's father, and arrive at an essence of humanity, then this should be it--"IT"--no more need to worry about the poor white ambitions he bemoans in Denver. For Dean, this trip may offer only a simple divorce and kicks to boot, but Sal seems to have found *his* father--the ultimate guidance from "the source of mankind." However, Sal has promised Dean "that [he] would get him a girl," (Kerouac 281) and once again the spell of Dean's frantic confusion causes Sal to lose sight of his vision.

What seems at once a land where “the sun rose pure on pure and ancient activities,” soon turns into another tea (marijuana) party, and the magic and spiritualism of Mexico quickly becomes “some gloriously riddled glittering treasure-box that you’re afraid to look at because...the riches and the treasures are too much to take all at once” (Kerouac 285). Their new friend Victor takes them to a brothel where they all (excepting Victor) partake in a fantastic, orgiastic gala in typical, White-American-tourist fashion, fully debasing the ethereal imaginings Sal has during his first private moments in Mexico (186-291). The fall continues as they push on for Mexico City, when they encounter young “Indian girls” who want to barter their “little pieces of rock crystal,” for which Dean trades a wristwatch, symbolic of *his* knowledge of Time (298). This trade represents a razed exchange of values; if the children are pure, that is (as Sal, Dean and Stan seem to think), and their primitive lives have ensured that purity, then what the children receive is a small chink in their sheltered world<sup>9</sup>. It is fitting, therefore, that their debauched efforts to finally shed their American constraints in the magic south should culminate in Sal’s imminent sickness. The dysentery that forces upon him deliriums, fever and unconsciousness may symbolize a form of penance for a great missed opportunity to claim his prodigal heritage in the ancestral grove of his fellahin fatherland (302). And the great division between Sal and Dean is underscored at this moment when Dean abandons Sal to “get back to [his] life” (302). Sal’s realization “is that authenticity in life [as shown by Dean] requires abandoning our need for personal ties. We must focus our energies on obtaining our own kicks, and mustn’t let any obligations to others get in our way” (Wilson 307). Such prescriptions, however, Sal cannot uphold; and his options for guidance continue to diminish.

Significantly, Holden’s journey is not the same rambling sort of search that Sal endeavors beneath the tutelage of Dean Moriarty. His entire journey is largely a solitary search for guidance, as noted by Jonathan Baumach earlier in this chapter. Like Sal, Holden is seeking some escape from a conformist society to which he is effectively

condemned, and the guidance he seeks is the sort that might help him facilitate that escape. This desire to flee social constraints is demonstrated plainly through Holden's expulsion from Pencey (as well as the other schools that he departed) inasmuch as such institutions only prepare students to embrace the culture and values that is offered them. This desire to break away from society is also evinced on several other occasions within the story, which are noted in Chapter II as escaping some place into the countryside with Sally Hayes, a ranch in Colorado and some arbitrary location in the West, where he hopes to create a life for himself. The most telling of these fancies are the first, last and one which has yet to be mentioned.

In the first instance with Sally Hayes, Holden proposes an escape to avert the life he sees coming to him, a life that promises to be filled with not only success, but conformity. He tells Sally,

We'll stay in these cabin camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out. Then, when the dough runs out, I could get a job somewhere and we could live somewhere with a brook and all and, later on, we could get married or something. I could chop all our own wood in the wintertime and all. Honest to God, we could have a terrific time! Wuddaya say?

(Salinger 171)

Sally's response to Holden is deflating. She tells him that his fantasy is not practical and assures him, "we'll have oodles of time to do those things--all those things. . . . after you go to college and all . . ." (172). But Holden does not believe her; he knows that everything will be different then, that he will be confined by conformity to expectations and reliance on the unseemly luxuries of success. The implication of this scene is not fully clear until much later, when Holden tells Phoebe about an old Pencey alumnus who wandered into his dorm room during a Veterans' Day homecoming. The alumnus wants asks if he can be directed to the bathroom to find out whether the initials he carved into the bathroom stall were still visible. Holden adds, "He kept talking to us the whole time,



telling us how when he was at Pencey they were the happiest days of his life, and giving us a lot of advice about the future and all. Boy, did he depress me!” (219). Although he does not admit it, this is what Holden fears and wants desperately to avoid. The life for which Pencey prepared this alumnus has not turned out--by Holden’s standards--a pleasant one. And Holden’s urgent pleading with Sally comes down to his suspicion that if he does not act soon, he will be condemned to always looking back to this time in his life for happiness--a time which presently offers him no happiness at all. Furthermore, his need for Sally to accompany him functions much like Sal’s need of Dean to provide the guidance and impetus for adventure, to restore some lost vitality and help him overcome the wounds that prohibit him from acting on his desire to seek a truly merited life. Unfortunately for Holden, Sally’s values mirror those pressed upon her, and she cannot offer him the support he needs.

Holden’s next likely prospect is to run away “somewhere out West,” where he imagines he might take a job at a filling station. Whatever mode of employment he must take does not matter to him, he says, “Just so people didn’t know me and I didn’t know anybody. I thought what I’d do was I’d pretend to be one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody” (257). He goes on to imagine that he would build “a little cabin somewhere,” find another deaf-mute girl he could marry--they would communicate by writing notes to each other--and if they had children, “we’d hide them somewhere. We could buy them a lot of books and teach them how to read and write by ourselves” (258). Holden’s scheme is filled with the ideals of non-interference as proposed by Dean, but it also includes the luxury of family--and not the sort of family that Holden is accustomed to, but a close family. Interestingly, the entire proposal is anti-social, quite in vein with Thoreau’s decision to go to the woods and live deliberately, and it is also tinged with the reparation of country life that Rousseau supports. Much like Sal’s effort to enjoy an idyllic life as “a man of the earth” with Terry and her son in California, however, we might imagine that

Holden's strange vision of living simply would have failed had he attempted it--due in part, at least, to his lack of guidance and obtusely romantic imaginings. Nevertheless, his failure to actualize this dream does not detract from the obvious desire for escape that dwells within him, and we are reminded of Sal who had long dreamed of going West but never does so until he meets Dean. Holden, however, has no such accomplice.

To some degree, Holden receives guidance from his dead brother, Allie. His thoughts and digressive statements continually return to Allie. But Allie can only direct Holden toward the one goal that Holden will reach whether he eludes the phony life he so detests or not--death--and this is a consideration that is not lost on Holden. Critics are at odds concerning Holden's propensity toward suicide, but the idea comes to him twice: once after being beaten by a pimp, Maurice, who extorts money from him, Holden admits that he wants to jump from the window of his hotel ("I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory" [136]); and again later he says, "I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it [the bomb]. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will" (183). Admittedly, Holden later seems less interested in death when he steps off the curb and feels that he will not reach the other side of the street, that "[he'd] just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see [him] again" (256). And he prays, "Allie, don't let me disappear" (257). Unfortunately, Allie remains even more absent from Holden's life than his father, even if he lives in Holden's thoughts more prominently; Allie may represent something of a saint, but Holden needs an earthly guide if he is not going to preserve the remains of his innocence by committing suicide.

Holden's only real hope of finding guidance rests in Mr. Antolini, a former teacher of Holden's from Elkton Hills who now teaches at New York University. Holden has a fondness for Antolini, because "he was about the best teacher [he] ever had" (226), as well as the fact that "[Antolini] was the one that finally picked up that boy that jumped from

the window . . . James Castle. Old Mr. Antolini felt his pulse and all, and then he took off his coat and put it over James Castle and carried him all the way over to the infirmary” (226). The memory Holden has of Antolini is, as Baumach notes, one of a sensitive and generous man; yet,

For all his good intentions, [Mr. Antolini] was unable to catch James Castle or prevent his fall; he could only pick him up after he had died. The episode of the suicide is one of the looming shadows darkening Holden’s world; Holden seeks out Antolini because he hopes that the gentle teacher--the substitute father--will “pick him up” before he is irrevocably fallen. (56)

The meeting with Antolini, then, is beset by this failure that Holden does not see beforehand; Antolini’s “inability to save Holden has been prophesied in his failure to save James Castle” (57). Mr. Antolini tells Holden, “I have a feeling that you’re riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall” (Salinger 242); and offers him the advice, “The mark of an immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of a mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (244), followed by a longer discourse regarding the virtues of an academic education. We already know what Holden thinks about academia, though; yet Antolini may offer him more insight into the possibilities of education--possibilities that may have never been presented to Holden before. Also, if we lend credence to Antolini’s advice regarding maturity, then--in a way--we can view Holden as mature, since dying for a cause (suicide/immaturity) has already been averted. Whatever the value of his advice, however, Antolini negates his position of respect with Holden through a gesture that Holden construes as a homosexual advance. The truth about Antolini’s actions is never clear. Later, even Holden questions his initial judgment: “maybe I was wrong about thinking [Antolini] was making a flitty pass at me. . . maybe he just liked to pat guys on the head when they’re asleep. I mean how can you tell about that stuff for sure? You can’t” (253). Uncertainty has not stopped critical evaluation over the

matter, however. Baumach, for instance, regards the gesture as a homosexual overture. But the most appropriate observation yet comes from Warren French, who states, “[Antolini’s] specific intentions are really beside the point. What matters is that he is guilty of a seriously faulty judgement; for if he had perceived the depth of [Holden’s] disturbance, he would have done nothing that might puzzle or startle him” (113). The final truth about Antolini is that he fails Holden; the only adult he actually seeks out for support turns out to be a part of the same phony world Holden wants to avoid.

Ultimately, the saving grace of guidance is often attributed to Phoebe. Rosen, for instance, states that she is “the only person who has *seen* where [Holden] is and who has *acted* truly in his behalf” (108), and Baumach distinguishes Phoebe as Holden’s personal catcher in the rye (63). Recalling Chapter III, though, we know that Phoebe wants to go away with Holden on his trek “out West”--she, too, is seeking some form of guidance and escape that apparently only Holden can offer. In the end, though, Holden forsakes his trip West for Phoebe, because he is not willing to bring her with him, and he does not want her to be angry with him for being rejected (Salinger 268). Possibly, we might view Holden’s decision to stay as an unconscious desire to offer Phoebe the guidance he cannot find for himself. If Phoebe is a guide, she guides Holden directly back to the thing he attempts to flee--family, responsibility, expectation--much in the way that Sal returns to similar values. It is then that Holden has his sad revelation regarding his dream of being a catcher in the rye. Watching his sister ride on a carousel, he sees all of the children reaching “for the gold ring,” and he fears that Phoebe may fall but says nothing. “The thing with kids is,” he says, “if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them” (273-274). Possibly, the metaphor is dualistic: perhaps Holden realizes that his desire to save children from the “crazy cliff” of adulthood is an empty, unrealistic dream, but he may also be referring to his own situation. Although he is not grasping at the traditional golden (brass) ring, Holden is nonetheless searching for something. Considering the preponderance of

advice and reproof his own actions elicit, perhaps he would prefer people to simply keep quiet and allow him to continue his quest, whether or not he is destined to fail. Also, “it’s bad if you say anything to them,” because no one appears capable of telling (or especially showing) children what they need to know without somehow debasing their own position of authority, like Antolini.

### **Failure of Attainment**

Considering the inability (I am inclined to suggest impossibility) of Holden and Sal to find guides suitable to their needs, as well as their own basic lack of activation toward a viable sense of individualism, it should come as no surprise where their searches for authenticity or spiritual cleansing ultimately bring them. The end of each quest is already anticipated.

Alone, Sal is frequently sent visions and messengers, just like his meeting with the Ghost of Susquehanna near the end of Part I. The ghost, described by Sal as “just a semi-respectable walking hobo of some kind” (Kerouac 104), Vopatz observes “function[ing] as a genuine prophet, offering through his example a warning and a prophesy: he and Sal are traveling on the same road. . . . [he] is an aging reflection of Sal himself . . .” (Vopatz 397). But Sal does not understand the importance of his vision; he has not been taught how to interpret such signs as this ghost offers him. At the end of Kerouac’s novel, as Sal winds his way back home from Mexico, he is approached by the last such messenger he will encounter: “a tall old man with flowing white hair came clomping by with a pack on his back, and when he saw me as he passed, he said, ‘*Go moan for man,*’ and clomped on back to his dark” (306). Earlier, Sal has a vision of this same man during his Denver days in Part I, as he and his friends stay in mountains near Central City: “somewhere an old man with white hair was probably walking toward us with the Word, and would arrive any minute and make us silent” (55). The significance of this man cannot be dodged, and Sal is aware of this. He asks himself, “Did this mean that

I should at last go on my pilgrimage on foot on the dark roads around America?" (306). If he is still reaching for guidance, we might expect Sal to take heed of the white-haired man and his new message of lamentation; his Word is not Dean's but a message, ostensibly, of self-sacrifice for the sake of man, rather than self-indulgence. However, Sal's quest is over, and he forsakes the vision once again, anxious to return to New York where he hopes to find his old friends. In their stead, Sal finds "the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes I had always searched for and for so long. We agreed to love each other madly" (306).

At long last, Sal finally shows himself giving up his hopes of discovering "IT" and begins to settle down into what appears to be a conformist, monogamous relationship--a value that kept him in constant conflict with the life Dean showed him. The bohemian life itself becomes assimilated into mainstream civilization. And when Dean, the "western kinsman of the sun," comes all the way from San Francisco to see Sal, he is left in the cold, damp streets of New York, as Sal, his last disciple, drives off in a Cadillac limousine for the Metropolitan Opera to attend a Duke Ellington concert (308-309). This is a portrait reminiscent of what Holden considers the life of a "hot-shot": nice cars, the Met and old Remi Boncoeur ("fat and sad now but still the eager and formal gentleman, . . . [who] wanted to do things the *right way* . . .") with his corny necktie covered with "sad jokes" and "favorite sayings such as 'You can't teach the old maestro a new tune'" (309). And it is that saying, in fact, that underscores the entire theme of the novel. What Sal hoped to find with Dean--"a new tune," "IT," or some better mode of life, a life that transcends doings that are considered "the right way"--is doomed to end where it began--without answers. As Foster remarks, "*On the Road* is exactly what a generation of readers took it to be: a guide to ways out of a conformist civilization--but in the end it admits that all these roads lead back to where they began. There is no final way out" (41-42). Instead, Sal is relegated to sitting "on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey . . ." with the realization that "nobody, nobody

knows anything about anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old,” and it is then that he admits, “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (Kerouac 309-310). In a forlorn manner, Sal’s nostalgic memories still seem to cling to Dean and, perhaps, his message of spontaneity and self-indulgence also. Sal does not mention that he sits on the pier with his new girlfriend; his mind is not on her. Rather, his thoughts imply that life itself is somewhat spontaneous, excepting the ravages of Time, and that perhaps he has not found the girl with whom he can finally rest his soul forever. Sal does not seem completely at ease with his compromise, but his alternatives--for lack of guidance--have diminished considerably. Even so, “Old Dean Moriarty” is out there somewhere.

Dealing with Holden’s last moments is a bit more puzzling. Part of the problem with reconciling the end of his story belongs to the critics. Too many demand that Holden’s vision at the park with Phoebe represents a final epiphany. Consequently, given that Holden is “resting” at a hospital in the following chapter, people like James Lundquist note that the end of the novel can mistakenly propose “some unsettled psychoanalytical questions concerning Holden’s experiences and his future” (52). Instead, he believes that “Holden has been sick, but he has already been cured . . .” (52). If this is true, though, what is the purpose of the last chapter? French remarks that “if the novel were only the story of the overstrained Holden’s search for something ‘nice’ in a phony world, it would end with his admiring Phoebe riding the carousel” (115): “I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy . . . I don’t know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could’ve been there” (Salinger 275). If this is an epiphany, we would also expect that Holden would be inclined to take heed. We would expect in him already the resignation that is requested of him in the subsequent chapter of the novel. The novel is not that sanitized, however. The psychoanalyst who speaks to Holden asks him whether he has resigned himself to life and the expectations others have of him--that is, as Holden envisions it, the

normal, traditional life of a sad and wise adulthood, consumed by the pursuit of money, bridge games, martinis, fast cars and movies. Holden does not know. He asks, “how do you know what you’re going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don’t. I *think* I am, but how do I know?” (276). This realization is not the result of some great epiphany; it is the knowledge of life’s uncertainty--just as Holden *thought* he would go “somewhere out West,” but did not actually *do* it. If Holden had resigned himself to “the acceptance of life *as* life” (Lundquist 53), he would never find himself in a hospital at all. However, he simply cannot or will not allow himself to be resigned to the pursuits others expect of him. This may seem like a lack of resolve, but Holden’s statements are much closer to that hidden thrust toward spontaneity that courses through Sal’s final passage. When Holden’s brother, D. B., asks him what he thinks about everything Holden tells about, Holden remains uncertain. “If you want to know the truth,” he says, “I don’t *know* what I *think* about it” (Salinger 277). Holden’s mind is still open; he has not yet abdicated his defiant quest, and we are left with the impression that he is only biding his time--still waiting or searching for his guide.

In the end, neither Holden nor Sal find their hoped for guidance. Without that direction they never attain the spiritual cure they seek to remedy the wounds from which they suffer. On some level, they are the forgotten Émile still awaiting their Rousseau. In his absence, they have sought elsewhere for the solution to their personal dilemmas. Ultimately, though their journeys represent a society failing to provide for its youth, Sal and Holden are relegated to the social roles and modes of life that are provided for them by that society--roles that they are expected to fulfill and roles they have no chance of avoiding without proper guidance. Even so, the desire to flee from such constraints seems to linger within them both.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For other critical analysis denoting Holden's quest for guidance, see: Rosen, Gerald. "A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*." *J. D. Salinger*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1987, 95-109.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Kerouac's father, Leo, died in 1946; Jack met Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty) about a year later. See: Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography*. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973 (65, 71).

<sup>3</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> Although he is attributed the position of counselor to the king, the role Polonius assumes is rather that of a fool; so, whether he knowingly employs the double negative, "canst not," is certainly arguable. Even more questionable--and more at issue--is how Holden interprets such syntax; however, he clearly states that such advice is "bull." And since *Hamlet* plays on ideas of success through deceit (i.e. King Claudius murdering his brother for the throne and his wife, the poison tipped sword that steals the younger Hamlet's life, etc.), I understand the double negative to be purposeful and, therefore, representative of a society in which falsehood toward others may bring success to those who need only be true to themselves. While Holden does play this part (he calls himself a liar), he is moreover concerned with eradicating the phoniness that he witnesses within the world that he lives.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson's essay makes a connection here with Buddhism, which I presently choose to ignore; see: Wilson, Steve. "Buddha Writing": The Author and the Search for Authenticity in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*." *Midwest Quarterly* 40 (1999): 302-315.

<sup>6</sup> This premise of Sal and Dean (as well as Kerouac) that the dispossessed, non-white American races maintained a spiritual purity has attracted a portion of criticism. For more information, see: Holton, Robert. "Kerouac Among the Fellahin: *On the Road* to the Postmodern." *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (1995): 265-283. Also: Edburne, Jonathan Paul. "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43 (1997): 53-92.

<sup>7</sup> Both Vopat and Foster acknowledge the dichotomy between Sal and Dean at this point in the novel's narrative, but neither demonstrate that the difference represents a basic schism between the individual values of Sal and Dean: Vopat, p. 402 and Foster, p. 42. For other representations of this scene see: Hunt, Tim. *Kerouac's Crooked Road*. Hamden: Archon Books, 1981, p. 56-58.

<sup>8</sup> For another presentation of Part Three, see again Tim Hunt: p. 35-55.

<sup>9</sup> Hunt regards this scene as "inherently allegorical," noting that, "Dean attempts to give away his awareness of time and language for the timelessness and pure silence of the mountain Indian. And yet Dean can no more give away time with his wristwatch than the girl can assume Dean's awareness of history with it." *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, p. 69-70. My interpretation is more critical of Dean's actions.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion: “A Vision of Unending Lovelessness”<sup>1</sup>

In the conclusion of the last chapter, I underscore the similarities in both novels, which G. F. Will (as presented in the introduction of this study) utilizes to mock Kerouac. But my purpose here has not been to illustrate the differences that I believe exist between these works. Indeed, I am concerned with what I regard as a conspicuous likeness, but not a likeness that is suspect of artistic robbery on the part of Kerouac, as I believe Will's article suggests. In the introduction, I accuse Will and others like him of failing to investigate the potential reasons behind the existence of an audience hungry for the ostensibly subversive views offered by Kerouac (which I hope I have also shown as present in Salinger's novel, although Will does not recognize this sentiment). Hence, it is the potential sources of that similitude which I shall attempt to probe at present.

Although Salinger and Kerouac both hail from New England, they come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Salinger's father (Sol), for instance, was a Jewish merchant who imported hams and cheeses and eventually became “a very prosperous man” (Lundquist 6); J. D.'s mother (Marie), however, was Scotch-Irish. Leo Kerouac, on the other hand, was French-Canadian, as was his wife, Gabrielle. Leo worked as “a typesetter, reporter, writer and translator” as well as an insurance salesman for Metropolitan Life (Nicosia 23). Most of the senior Kerouac's life was spent in the printing business with varying degrees of success and failure, but he was never terrifically prosperous, and in later years (especially as Leo grew increasingly ill) Gabrielle had to work to help support the family. Nevertheless, J. D. and Jack do share

an historical similarity that seems important to their development as writers and especially so in regards to the works for which they are best known. Both were born in the wake of World War I, into an America that was high on the boom of “the Roaring 20s.” Whether or not it might have affected their families directly, Salinger and Kerouac spent their childhoods under the cloud of the Great Depression that ravaged a great deal of the American populace. And they were both young men when America entered the sequel to “The War to End All Wars”--World War II.

Both men had military experiences during the war. Drafted into the army in 1942, Salinger participated in the D-Day landing on Utah Beach, serving in the Army Intelligence Corps and even staying on in France after his discharge to work “as a civilian for the Department of Defense” (Wenke 124)<sup>2</sup>. Kerouac, on the other hand, signed up for cadet training “in the naval air force V-12 program” (Nicosia 93). Before that would come to fruition, however, Jack “was officially sworn in” by the United States Marine Corps; yet, within hours, he also contracted himself to the Coast Guard. Shortly thereafter, though, he signed on to the *S.S. Dorchester* with the merchant marine and went to Greenland (Charters 37). Following his return and a short-lived reunion with Columbia University, the Navy called on Jack. But his Navy career “lasted barely six months, most of the time under observation in the hospital,” and he was honorably discharged for indifference of character (38-39). With the exception of another trip as a merchant marine seaman (this time to London on the bomb-laden *S.S. George Weems*), Kerouac’s service career ends there (41).

To what extent the war affected Salinger and Kerouac is certainly arguable. Nonetheless, we cannot deny the impact of war on their lives. The end of the war appears also to mark the end of their childhood--the end of the innocence that is so valued in their novels; it appears to supply a final cap on two childhoods that were always marked by the struggles of a nation and especially its people. Kerouac himself remarked that the old America of his grandfather that had been abundant with “wild, self-believing

individualism” seemed to be vanishing increasingly after the war “with so many great guys dead” (Kerouac, “Origins” 72). Whatever Salinger’s personal opinions about the significance of the war remain locked away with him in his home in Cornish, New Hampshire. All we have of him is his literature, from which James Lundquist draws the conclusion that “a war atmosphere permeates [Salinger’s stories]--and it is not one of patriotism. . . . Instead, there is a quiet mood, one almost of despair . . . a sense that whatever the ideological banner, the state inevitably becomes omnivorous and omnipotent and the individual is helpless against it” (3).

The industrial society that had been growing at an alarming rate since the beginning of the century mushroomed in the aftermath of WWII, opening into the frightening flowers of Cold War paranoia; McCarthyism and the Red Scare; and--by the middle 1950s--mass consumerism, bolstered by the beginning of the information age with the ensuing popularity of television. It was a time, as Steve Wilson remarks, “when conformity was seen as a civic good” (302). In fact, Allen Ginsberg stated that Kerouac realized ““something really hard and terrible was coming to America . . . . Kerouac had a very clear and direct picture of that hard military police-state that was descending on America”” and inhibiting the freedom of its citizens (Foster 40). This is the society that *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* illuminate and react against.

The validity of these works as depictions of a society shackled by a feeling of isolation and desperate for some remedy from a spiritual/cultural crisis is given testimony by the large readership enjoyed by both novels. The successes of Salinger and Kerouac visited upon them a cult status that has yet to dissipate and seems to indicate an audience that identifies with the plights of the novels’ protagonists. Lundquist states that, “from the time *The Catcher in the Rye* came out, [Salinger] was perceived by his readers--many of whom, we must admit, were very young--as a writer with a message” (31). And “in *On the Road*,” Ann Charters remarks, “[Kerouac] captured the spirit of his own generation, their restlessness and confusions in the years immediately following World War II” (286),

adding later that “the young people who responded to the book . . . recognized that Kerouac was on their side, the side of youth and freedom,” and while he did not offer “any real alternative to the conformity of twentieth-century industrial America . . . He offered instead a vision of freedom . . . that no other world could ever intrude [upon] for long” (288).

In my own quest to explore the significance of two distinctive novels that distinguish themselves in mid-century, I have paid particular attention to their acknowledgment of a youth in search of values. Along this journey, I stumbled across the idea of the novels as children’s literature. I have found that mentioning the words “children’s literature” in reference to *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye* often produces quizzical looks and--more frequently--probing questions of disbelief. Perhaps this skepticism arises in part from a preconception of what appropriately constitutes children’s literature and an apparent failure of both works to meet that expectation with any degree of satisfaction. On the other side of the issue is a problem I broach slightly in the second chapter of this study: trying to delineate justifiable ages of childhood. When does childhood end and adolescence begin? When does adolescence finally merge into adulthood? Inherent within this dilemma, of course, is the matter of whether such distinctions *can*, in fact, be made--not only for the stages of life of the individual but for the literature that addresses those life-stages as well--and whether these distinctions are productive.

It is neither my place nor aim to decide once and for all what we should definitively label as children’s literature. In the present case, at least, we may do well simply to admit that *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* represent a literature about (and, hence, quite likely directed toward) American youth. That their works had a profound effect upon young readers seems clear enough, however. At their respective ages, in fact, Salinger and Kerouac could have been fathers during the baby-boom that proceeded WWII--a generation of American youth that later converged into the bright youth culture

of the 1960s. What they fathered, instead, was a literature that would later fuel the 60s youth movement--ripe with adolescent disaffiliation from mainstream expectations--within which individuality and self-expression were paramount, as was the tendency of clinging to youth in opposition to "maturity" (hence the term, "flower-*child*"). Chapter II, in fact, is intended to illustrate how Kerouac and Salinger helped pave a road that diverges from a long tradition of bland social assimilation. This chapter shows the conflict present between the social worlds of adults and adolescents. Rather than seeking inclusion within a realm that offers an ambiguous climax, the protagonists defer their growth by perpetuating adolescence. Attempting, thus, to retain some trace of individuality, they also challenge the authority of their elders.

Kerouac always repudiated the public's tendency to associate him with the hippies of the 60s, but his comrades recognize his role. In an interview with Lewis MacAdams, acknowledging Kerouac's slight against the 60s youth counter-culture, William Burroughs maintains that Jack "started a cultural revolution of unprecedented, world-wide extent" (Burroughs). He concedes that "the Beats were originally non-political," but that the activists of the 60s "who were political were really following the Beat movement to its logical conclusion" (Burroughs). Salinger's inclusion in this movement is questioned. Stephen Whitfield, for example, denounces the potential to associate *Catcher* as a social influence upon the subversive attitudes of the 60s youth culture, because he finds that the book "is utterly apolitical . . ." (587). He further states, "Salinger's book . . . promotes no class consciousness, racial consciousness, or ethnic consciousness of any sort" (589). Whitfield's statements may well be true, but they stand as a rejection much like that which Kerouac maintained regarding his own influential role on the counter-culture that followed him. Toward both problems, we can cite Burroughs' objection to MacAdams concerning Kerouac's own denial: "Jesus Christ said, 'by their fruits, ye shall know them,' not by their disclaimers" (Burroughs). If we then accept Joyce Rowe's evaluation that within Holden's insistence on spontaneity toward a "sense of 'freedom' one can already see

foreshadowed the celebrated road imagery of the Beats” (90-91), and we likewise accept Kerouac’s role on the youth of the 60s, then it seems to follow that Salinger should be included among those influences as well.

The baby-boom generation would have first experienced *Catcher* near the age of ten and very likely been influenced by *On the Road* in their mid-late teens. While perhaps these works might not have reached baby-boomers during their “childhood,” *Catcher* and *On the Road* would certainly have influenced them within their formative years. Through these works, Kerouac and Salinger became not only fathers of a literature that touched a generation, they were--to no small degree--its educators also. But if young Americans were in pursuit of guidance and heroes in the same manner as the characters of *Catcher* and *On the Road*, their own quests for meaning and prophets bearing “the Word, [who] would arrive . . . and make [them] silent” (Kerouac, *OTR* 55) produced a degenerative effect in the men from whom they hoped to learn. By the time *On the Road* was published in 1957, Salinger had already been in seclusion in the New Hampshire countryside for years--ostensibly as a response to the celebrity that followed him after the publication of *Catcher* (Wenke 126). Likewise, Kerouac soon found wearying the fame he had sought so long, making attempts at reclusiveness but always coming out for a drink with the kids who located him (Charters 296, 315); he ultimately retired into a belligerent, conservative Catholic Orthodoxy and a bent toward alcoholism that indirectly took his life in 1969 (344-345, 366).

There is still a strange nostalgia for the 1940s-'50s that permeates the contemporary American consciousness. We hear it almost daily from politicians who intone words like “family” and “values” and recall to our minds images like those old re-runs of “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Father Knows Best” and “Leave it to Beaver.” Among some, it appears that the black and white simplicity of TV America is the lens that best amplifies the reality of an age in the midst of post-war affluence. But life in America was not so

clean, and the novels that have been examined here illustrate that. Instead, America was full of phonies and values that the young could not embrace.

The conflict that surfaced between the American social climate and the romantic memory of American individualism--first evinced, perhaps, in the fiction of Hemingway and Fitzgerald--was still present at mid-century. The dilemmas of the individual could no longer be circumvented by running away to Europe, as fractures began appearing in the most wholesome and basic unit of American sanctity--the family. As Chapter III suggests, rather than appreciated as beloved offspring with problems to be sorted through in thirty to sixty minute time-slots, children were herded into institutions of various kinds to impress upon them the desires of their parents and the expectations of their society. For those who had them, mothers and fathers fought in the bathroom. But often fathers were never home, and mothers were up half the night smoking cigarettes. The presentation on Rousseau testifies to this disintegration in the family. In the fray, children were forgotten--not always, perhaps, but perhaps more frequently than the posterity of 1950s television would have us believe. And always looming in everyone's consciousness was the awareness and fear of "the Bomb"-- never discussed in those popular, old family television shows. With this understanding that the family is not providing the appropriate environment for the development of youth, Chapter IV shows the characters of *Catcher* and *On the Road* in search of a remedy. Rather than sitting helplessly absorbing the values forced upon them, some young people actually dared to strike out on their own. Unlike Rousseau's Émile, however, they are provided with no guidance that can suit their needs. Although they may seek guidance as ardently as they pursue an escape from the constraints surrounding them, neither surface. In the end, both novels suggest that without appropriate direction, their attempts at freedom are doomed.

In this document I have not tried to prove that *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* are perfect novels. Neither am I attempting to canonize them as "the great American novel." I would not even say that they are the greatest of the twentieth-century



in American literature, though some may disagree with me on that point. What I do sincerely hope to convey, however, is that they are both significant novels--especially in regard to the post-WWII era they represent. In a time that America was "defined by Eisenhower's smile" (I admit that I do not quite know what G. F. Will means by this statement), these novels by Kerouac and Salinger indicate the discontent and apparent disharmony of a society in the throes of post-war prosperity--a society that *should* have had a great deal to offer its youth so that they might find excitement in thoughts of joining the ranks of adulthood with their fellow countrymen. And now, in an age where politicians and their rhetoric propound 1950s America as the "glory days" of family values and general social harmony, *Catcher* and *On the Road* testify to such mockery shouted from the soapbox.

As we push on toward the ever-nearing climax of a dying millennium--whether we conceive of ourselves as Americans or (as seems increasingly the case) global citizens--those of us with an uneasiness for *status quo* and a penchant for revolt recognize (and perhaps mourn) that we have few literary rebels today. Where is the messianic author of the 21st century? Holden Caulfield, Sal Paradise, and Dean Moriarty are as young today as they were nearly fifty years ago, but the gauzy veil of Time hides them from view. And journalists like George F. Will muffle their desperation. The solipsist ravings of Salinger and Kerouac may be little more than personal echoes of their own dissatisfaction, but we have difficulty denying their galvanizing effect upon the Baby-Boom generation. Make no mistake--we continue to celebrate the self. But today, that celebration is not the "wild yea-saying burst of American joy" (Kerouac, *OTR* 10); it is the screeching of our mass information age--from the television where our children play video games well into puberty, to personal home computers and their alluring Virtual Reality, to the Ding-Dong doorbell ringing ("Dinner's arrived!"). It is the sound of commerce and the last gasp of the defiant individual. We are still as hemmed-in today as America was when *Catcher* and *On the Road* were published. Kerouac said that he and

Neal Cassady were in search of Whitman's lost America; he felt that America was dying. Considering the recent, seemingly incessant and increasingly banal "White House scandals," the tabloid media coverage that paid these events such incredible lip-service, and the public that impotently gobbled it all up, we would be hard put to disagree with Kerouac about the health of America. "This is the story of America," Sal Paradise says. "Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do" (Kerouac, *OTR* 72). What he does not say--though the statement implies as much--is that everyone is *not* doing what they *should* do. Kerouac himself doubtfully knew what America should be doing. Still, I would be much more comforted by the thought that there are--right now--young people from all over travelling the country, roaming the streets of their cities and towns, not as urban terrorists looking for the next mark, but as young *people* simply looking for answers and other avenues, questioning everything they've been taught to believe, that the future may not rest in the Information Super Highway. And I hope they are reading these books; I hope they are reading many books. And--by God--I hope they are writing, too!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The title originates from *Go*, a novel by John Clellan Holmes--friend and contemporary of Kerouac. "A vision of unending lovelessness" occurs to the narrator, Paul Hobbes, who believes the same vision came to Agatson, corrupting him and causing him to jump to his death from the window of a moving subway train. A person with such visions "would lose hope," and become desperate with a feeling of violation, ultimately driven to pure hatred and destruction (Foster 21).

<sup>2</sup> During his time in the Army, Salinger published several stories in American periodicals from which some material is used in *The Catcher in the Rye*; see: John Wenke, p. 124. A note of interest: Salinger met Ernest Hemingway while in France--"Hemingway was reportedly pleased with Salinger's work" (Lundquist 14). For more information on this subject, see: Baker, Carlos. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*. New York: Bantam, 1970, p. 533.

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## VITA

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