A NATION OF OUTSIDERS

How the White Middle-Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America

GRACE ELIZABETH HALE
A Nation of Outsiders
For Sarah and Emma,
for always asking questions
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A Nation of Outsiders
Introduction: Outsiders and Rebels

[We have become] a nation of outsiders, a country in which the mainstream, however mythic, has lost its compelling energy and its magnetic attraction.
Peter Schraf, Harper’s (1970)

This book begins with two simple questions. Why did so many white middle-class people see themselves as outsiders in the second half of the twentieth century? And what effect did this vision have on American culture and society? Answering these questions requires tracing the history of a knot of desire, fantasy, and identification I call the romance of the outsider, the belief that people somehow marginal to society possess cultural resources and values missing among other Americans. To tell this story, I follow this romance at work in the novels, memoirs, musical recordings, photographs, films, cultural criticism, political organizing efforts, and other pieces of the expressive culture of the period, and examine how individuals used this romance, how it channeled their creativity and actions and produced new ways of thinking about history and the agency of individuals.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the romance of the outsider began to appear among self-conscious white bohemians and in books, music, and movies made for white youth. It often started with longing, desire, what we might call love. In the 1953 film The Wild One, it sparkled in the way the small-town teen-aged girl smiled in reaction to Marlon Brando’s bad boy character, the leader of a motorcycle gang in the city, who answered her question “What are you rebelling against?” by snarling, “Whaddaya got?” It danced in the voice of Sal
Paradise, Beat writer Jack Kerouac’s fictionalized stand-in in his 1957 novel *On the Road*:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night . . . I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a “white man” disillusioned.

It hit readers like a sledgehammer in Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro”:

And in the wedding of white and black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry . . . he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks . . . the pleasures of the body . . . and in his music he gave voice to . . . his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm.

It animated campus journalist and Kerouac fan Tom Hayden’s description of hearing participants in the southern sit-in movement speak in 1960. These black and white activists “lived on a fuller level of feeling than any people I’d ever seen,” he wrote. “Here were the models of charismatic commitment I was seeking. I wanted to live like them.”¹

Popular music—postwar jazz, rock and roll, and especially folk music—served as a key medium for this romance. It sang in New York City painter, photographer, and musician John Cohen’s account of meeting Roscoe Holcomb, a banjo player and impoverished former coal miner, in eastern Kentucky in 1959 and listening to him play a song he had written: “My hair stood up on end. I couldn’t tell whether I was hearing something ancient, like a Gregorian Chant, or something very contemporary and avant-garde. It was the most moving, touching, dynamic, powerful song I’d ever experienced.” It moved within a critic and fan’s description of the people who made folk music: “There are beautiful, relatively uncomplicated people living in the country close to the soil, who have their own identities, their own backgrounds. They know who they are, and they know what their culture is because they make it themselves . . . mostly in their singing.” It rang in music collector Larry Cohn’s description of hearing blues musician Son House sing in New York City in 1965: “I had never seen nor imagined that anyone could sing with such intensity
and not drop dead on the spot. Because every song was a complete catharsis. I mean it was so emotional.” It danced through future musician Janis Joplin’s first encounter with the blues: “They were playing that fifties crap on the radio. It seemed so shallow, all oop-boop. It had nothing. Then I heard Leadbelly, and it was like a flash. It mattered to me.”2

By the mid-1960s, it was hard to imagine youth culture without this romance. It echoed through the hippie counterculture, into the back-to-the-land movement, and everywhere young Americans self-consciously created new communities. It flourished in the Jesus People movement, as hippies rebelled against not just the lifestyle but also the liberal religion of middle-class America and took up conservative forms of Christianity. And it thrived among young political conservatives who followed William F. Buckley in seeing themselves as rebels in an era dominated by liberalism. By the end of the seventies, it had even worked its way into fundamentalist and Pentecostal strands of Christianity, where rejuvenated believers used the romance of the outsider to transform their isolation and separatism into strengths, markers of difference reworked into sources of power.

White middle-class Americans imagined people living on the margins, without economic or political or social privilege, as possessing something vital, some essential quality that had somehow been lost from their own lives. They often found this depth of meaning and feeling in what they took to be the expressive culture of black people, but other outsiders served as well. However the margins and center were defined, the key imaginative act was the “discovery” of difference. These encounters with outsiders enabled some middle-class whites to cut themselves free of their own social origins and their own histories and in identifying with these others to imaginatively regain what they understood as previously lost values and feelings. They remade themselves. They became outsiders too. The romance of the outsider spread throughout American culture because it provided an imaginary resolution for an intractable mid-century cultural and political conflict, the contradiction between the desire for self-determination and autonomy and the desire for a grounded, morally and emotionally meaningful life. Politically supple, it registered people’s conflicting longings for affective, aesthetic, and social freedoms and yet also for social and historical connections.

By the end of the twentieth century, the romance of the outsider had become so pervasive that few scholars questioned how odd and uncanny it was, how historically unprecedented, to understand politically and economically enfranchised people as marginal and alienated. A critical mass of white middle-class Americans had developed alternative measures of the relationship
of the individual to society, geographies mapped not with class, race, gender, and citizenship but according to less material measures of value like depth of feeling and belief. In the process, they changed the very meaning of ideas like authenticity and community. This book traces the history and consequences of this romance.

Images of and stories about outsiders did not appear suddenly in the aftermath of World War II. The postwar white middle-class's attraction to outsiders and rebels (their self-conscious cousins) was not new. It had deep roots in earlier oppositional modes and expressive traditions. Historical precedents fill entire genres of literature, for example, from picaresque fiction to Romantic poetry and travel writing. In the late 1820s and 1830s, white working-class interest in and identification with African Americans generated new forms of theater as white entertainers painted their faces black, danced, and sang. Minstrelsy, or “acting black,” wildly popular through the early twentieth century, powerfully shaped America’s emerging popular culture and future forms of white rebellion.

In the late nineteenth century, interest in outsiders inspired “song catching,” or the study of Appalachian music and the collection of American Indian artifacts. It produced new fields of academic research, from anthropology and folklore studies to ethnomusicology. And it sparked new kinds of art. Fascination with outsiders was crucial to modernism as an artistic movement as visual artists in retreat from realism embraced “primitivism,” modes of representation imagined as belonging to people living “outside” Western culture. As America’s first self-conscious bohemia emerged, members took up the Romanticism that had inspired earlier European communities of artists, writers, and others fleeing the constraints of middle-class respectability. In the 1930s, the American left welded these ideas about outsiders together to create a cultural politics that positioned a culture of the folk, understood as a particularly American counterpart to the proletariat, against a commercialized and compromised popular culture.

Equally as important as these secular sources, faith taught many middle-class Americans to see outsiders—people who opposed received wisdom and accepted behavior—as morally superior. In the Second Great Awakening, for example, believers followed itinerant preachers and joined upstart denominations in opposition to more established churches and learned to value their own individual, interior relationships with God. Across the nineteenth century, evangelical Christians increasingly focused on their inner lives and embraced what their critics saw as excessive emotional displays, rather than good works, as symbols of their salvation. Some believers formed utopian

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communities like the Shakers’ Hancock Village in Massachusetts and the Perfectionists’ Oneida Community in upstate New York to achieve godliness by self-consciously separating themselves from the fallen world. In the early twentieth century, some evangelical Christians followed yet another set of rebellious ministers and lay leaders into self-conscious opposition to a powerful and liberalizing Protestantism they believed had gone too far in accommodating modernity. Their answer, announced in a series of books called The Fundamentals, was to return to a Bible-centered faith, shun the larger world, and emphasize the difference and separateness of true believers. Across the twentieth century, conservative Christians cultivated their self-consciously oppositional culture and their own romance of the outsider.

After World War II, broad historical changes long under way—migration to cities and suburbs, the rise of white-collar corporate employment, the growth of government and corporate bureaucracies, and the changing nature of family life—continued to erode middle-class whites’ sense of control over their lives and their feelings of rootedness in place and community. The emergence of the cold war and the possibility of nuclear annihilation as well as African Americans’ growing demand for greater rights only increased middle-class white fears. Organic community (grounding in time and place and a web of human relationships) and individualism (white male self-determination disguised as a universal ideal) may have always been more myths than realities, but the existence and compatibility of these ideals lay at the core of middle-class whites’ conception of citizenship. Could they be reconciled? Could they survive?

What was new in this postwar period was the way historical trends coalesced to make the figure of the outsider seem like a solution to the conflict between these ideals. The rapid expansion of photographic journalism, television, radio, and leisure tourism put the lives of people who were not white or not middle-class or not American increasingly on display. Middle-class Americans after 1945 had easier and more varied access to people who seemed marginal, exotic, or primitive than they had possessed before this period. Life magazine, the television news, and the songs on rapidly diversifying radio stations enabled middle-class people to eavesdrop on and peer into other people’s lives, to hear their music and their stories, and to see where and how they lived, from the comfort and safety of their middle-class homes. In this context, people understood as outsiders seemed readily available as resources for white middle-class needs and desires.

The convergence of these historical trends spread a love for outsiders from self-consciously oppositional enclaves into the very unlikely arena of
mass culture, the commercialized ideas, values, visions of the good life, and expressive forms that dominated the nation at mid-century. Mass culture, allegedly breeding conformity and destroying more authentic “folk” cultures, seemed to be part of the problem. But in this historical moment, beginning in the 1950s, it also seemed to become part of the solution, adeptly spreading knowledge of people not living middle-class suburban lives. Romanticizing outsiders enabled some middle-class whites to see themselves as different and alienated too. They learned to use mass culture—understood as the American way of life and as their culture—to critique mass culture. By the end of the twentieth century, the outsider romance had become an essential characteristic of white middle-class subjectivity.

At the level of imagination and identification, the romance of the outsider reconciled incompatible yearnings for self-determination and emotional and social connection in three related and often overlapping ways. First, middle-class whites often displaced these contradictions onto their fantasies of outsiders and remade themselves through identification with these marginal figures. Second, middle-class whites sometimes split conflicts between individual autonomy and social grounding into two different spaces. Separation from a space imagined as the arena of the dominant culture appeared, then, as an act of self-determination, and social connection became possible in a separate place imagined as existing on the margins. Third, middle-class whites sometimes dissolved the contradictions in ecstatic, mystical experiences that radically altered consciousness and intensified both emotional and physical sensations. Listening to or playing music, dancing, taking drugs, meditating, chanting, or praying, some participants experienced an alternative place without physically traveling at all, a space free of alienation. With increasing frequency across the half century after 1945, white middle-class Americans used these strategies to balance individual autonomy and social grounding at the symbolic level.

All of these ways of wielding the romance of the outsider worked within a left-to-right political continuum and an earnest-to-ironic emotional range. Yet observers have persisted in describing the process in dualistic terms, as either good or bad, as resisting or strengthening the political order. For many scholars who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, rebellion was subversive and transgressive and therefore good. In the work of Wini Breines, George Lipsitz, and other scholars, as well as sixties activists turned writers like Tom Hayden, Constance Curry, and Bill Ayers, outsiders and rebels created the spaces where political resistance emerged and left emancipatory politics began.6
Yet the romance of the outsider proved as useful in building the New Right as in building the New Left. William F. Buckley and others grasped this fact and used it to rebuild American conservatism. Always politically promiscuous, rebellion can work for any kind of oppositional politics, but it can also be an essential part of how a particular political and social order maintains its hegemony. Recent scholars, however, have erred too far in this direction, seeing the romance of the outsider and white middle-class love of rebellion as a new kind of opiate of the masses. For Leerom Medovoi, Thomas Frank, Sean McCann, and Michael Szalay, cultural rebellion works in the interests of U.S. capitalism and the nation-state, co-opting any radical potential that might lie within American popular culture. This book argues that just as the romance of the outsider is inherently neither right nor left, it is also neither completely separate from nor completely a tool of the U.S. political economy. Its power in fact derives from precisely this slipperiness, the fact that it can be simultaneously both inside and outside. Dancing between the established political and social categories, the outsider romance upends and redefines these social and political geographies even as it momentarily reconciles individual autonomy and the collective good.

Part I, “Learning to Love Outsiders,” surveys historical movements, figures, novels, films, and songs through which middle-class whites learned to love outsiders and their use of that identification to fuel their own rebellion. Chapter 1, “Lost Children of Plenty: Growing Up as Rebellion,” begins with an examination of J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, the best-selling 1951 novel that simultaneously represented and also helped create the idea of white middle-class teenage alienation. Holden Caulfield managed to exist both inside and outside the privileged life he found so “phony” and became the first in a string of iconic and popular fictional rebels. Salinger’s novel offered one of the first important and widely read critiques of what critics increasingly called mass culture—commercialized forms of cultural expression that reached (or tried to reach) large audiences—from within mass culture. Yet the love for outsiders and rebellion on display in Catcher also redeemed mass culture, seemingly opening a space within for difference, opposition, and individualism. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the complicated ways in which white middle-class teenage girls and young women embraced the romance of the outsider and yet faced particular hardships when they tried to move beyond their love for male rebels and remake themselves as outsiders.

Chapter 2, “Rebel Music: Minstrelsy, Rock and Roll, and Beat Writing,” explores the emergence of the outsider romance in the white youth culture of
the 1950s. “Black” sounds, from the music of Elvis Presley and the jazzy prose of Jack Kerouac to the bebop that formed the soundtrack for beatnik life, taught middle-class whites to love blackness. Young whites learned to use forms of expression understood as black as emotional and aesthetic resources for expressing their own needs and desires. Chapter 3, “Black as Folk: The Folk Music Revival, the Civil Rights Movement, and Bob Dylan,” traces how a surging interest in folk music taught white middle-class young people to love poor rural people, especially in the South, as “the folk.” The folk music revival played a crucial role in democratizing bohemian rebellion and spreading knowledge about and interest in leftist politics and the civil rights movement. For a moment in the mid-sixties, Bob Dylan embodied the fantasy that middle-class whites and poor blacks could create a new politics out of a shared sense of alienation from American society.

Chapter 4, “Rebels on the Right: Conservatives as Outsiders in Liberal America,” examines William F. Buckley, Young Americans for Freedom (the group of young conservatives he helped organize), the growth of libertarianism, and Hunter S. Thompson. In the 1950s, Buckley built a career as a conservative journalist, journal editor, and scholar by arguing that conservatives were the real outsiders in liberal America. Inspired by Buckley’s rebel persona and Ayn Rand’s libertarian novels, young middle-class whites created a conservative youth movement that challenged the New Left. By the end of the sixties, the libertarian-leaning, gun-loving, self-proclaimed Democrat Hunter S. Thompson made clear just how much white middle-class rebels on the right and left actually shared.

Part II, “Romance in Action,” traces the role of the romance of the outsider in postwar politics. Chapter 5, “The New White Negroes in Action: Students for a Democratic Society, the Economic Research and Action Project, and Freedom Summer,” examines white middle-class romanticism at work in New Left political organizing. SDS built its organization by linking politically minded white students outside the South with news of the black civil rights rebels within the region. By 1964, however, a faction of SDS’s leadership wanted to move the student organization into the kind of community organizing in the North that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was creating in the South. ERAP, which mostly floundered on its organizers’ romanticism, was the result. The chapter ends with an examination of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project as a high point in the left’s mobilization of the romance of the outsider. Chapter 6, “Too Much Love: Black Power and the Search for Other Outsiders,” traces what happened when African Americans explicitly rejected white “love.” Many white activists retained their romanticism by shifting their
fantasies to other outsiders, like the Vietnamese resistance fighters. Others responded to African Americans’ demand that they work in their own communities. Defining exactly what constituted their communities then became a form of activism, as white college students, white women, and white draftees organized to fight their own oppression. Still other white activists like the Weather faction of SDS and the White Panther Party took up a new romantic image of black militants and their revolutionary authenticity in place of the old image of blacks as the folk.

Chapter 7, “The Making of Christian Countercultures: God’s Outsiders from the Jesus People to Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority,” examines how the Jesus People movement and Christian fundamentalists in the 1970s and 1980s romanticized outsiders and acts of rebellion. In the 1970s, Jesus “freaks” braided together theologically conservative Christianity with countercultural attitudes toward music, dress, and emotional expression and built the basis for the explosion of mega-churches in the next decade. Many Christian fundamentalists, having chosen separatism from modern society since the Scopes trial, missed these cultural developments. At the end of the seventies, Jerry Falwell began to use the romance of the outsider to push these fundamentalists to see their marginality as an asset. Most fundamentalists believed their moral authority grew out of their religious practices. Yet in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, oppressed outsiders possessed broad cultural authority. Falwell used the romance of the outsider to bring his oppressed “majority”—“Bible-believing Christians”—back into politics. Chapter 8, “Rescue: Christian Outsiders in Action in the Anti-Abortion Movement,” explores what happened when Randall Terry took this call for Christian rebellion all the way into civil disobedience. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Terry and his organization Operation Rescue positioned their work as the civil rights movement of the day and transformed the anti-abortion fight into the right’s mass protest movement.

In the present, the romance of the outsider continues to influence how middle-class whites understand the overlapping relationships between culture and politics, individuals and the larger society. Love of outsiders enables many middle-class whites to imagine these links as matters of individual choice in which history and social structures do not matter. In this way, white middle-class romanticism remakes individualism (with its elite, white, male privilege) for white middle-class men and, to a more limited degree, women, in an age in which it cannot work structurally but can work psychologically and emotionally. The outsider romance also shapes contemporary life by
perpetuating inequalities under the guise of identification and love. Legitimating a destructive refusal to acknowledge limits and to discuss the trade-offs necessary to make a good life for the most people, it reconstitutes privileges by rejecting them and creates agency out of the disavowal of power. At the level of social thought, white middle-class love for outsiders and rebellion makes the connection between culture and politics appear transparent and direct. Under this assumption, increasing people’s ability to represent themselves culturally—a kind of representational self-determination—increases their political power as well. In practice, however, political and cultural agency have proved to be not so clearly or easily linked.

Because the reconciliation of the contradiction between autonomy and connection is always threatening to come undone in the material world, love of outsiders mediates and undermines at the same time and generates an increasing obsession with authenticity. As the belief that people’s individual feelings and perceptions, their interior lives, are the most important gauges of reality and truth grows, however, the meaning of authenticity changes. Instead of a way of testing an artifact or person’s fidelity to some external material or historical standard, it has become an emotional measure, a fantasy that can reconcile contradictory desires and make the impossible seem true. As a result, we live in an age when illusions—the idea that black culture is more authentic and middle-class whites are outsiders—rule. The romance of the outsider perpetuates a disavowal of power that damages us all.
PART I

Learning to Love Outsiders
When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don’t know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, “Sleep tight, ya morons!” I’ll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out.

J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye

After 1951, if a person wanted to be a rebel she could just read the book. Later there would be other things to read—Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, and Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. But J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye was the first best seller to imagine a striking shift in the meaning of alienation in the postwar period, a sense that something besides Europe still needed saving. The success of this book and the many other novels, autobiographies, and films that followed its pattern made the concept of adolescent alienation commonplace, but in the postwar era the very idea shocked many Americans. Adults who had lived through depression and war believed that children growing up in peace and prosperity—Life named them “the luckiest generation”—should be happy. Salinger’s antihero Holden Caulfield was a particularly unlikely rebel. He lived unconstrained by poverty, racism, or anti-Semitism, and he did not face the narrow options available for ambitious girls.
Instead, Holden’s alienation was personal, psychological, and spiritual. Salinger’s novel helped create a model for the rebel of the future by popularizing the problem of middle-class adolescent alienation.¹

In The Catcher in the Rye’s first line, Holden Caulfield shuns his parents and his own audience and, at least in terms of his readers, reels many of them in forever instead:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’ feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

This, Holden tells us right off, is not going to be a story that grounds its young character in the warm nest of the family.

In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them . . . They’re nice and all—I’m not saying that—but they’re touchy as hell. Besides, I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas.

If none of the normal connections can be assumed, however, Holden admits in the very act of telling that he has not given up on the search.²

By the end of the novel, Holden has found something to mourn and regret and even love, something that will last, past his own and his sister Phoebe’s childhood, past his sudden happiness at Phoebe’s looking “so damn nice . . . going around and around, in her blue coat and all” on the carousel: “All I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about . . . It’s funny. Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.” If meaning is absent in the larger world, Holden makes it in the act of telling. He falls in love with the story he has created out of and about his own alienation. Readers are invited to share this love, for Holden’s own tale but also for the stories they can think or write or play or sing about their own alienation and for the redemption they might find there too. In Catcher, Salinger pushes the romance of the outsider out of the marginal minstrel fantasies of bohemia and popular culture and into upper-middle-class adolescence, the seemingly idyllic center of white postwar America. There, lodged on high school reading lists—despite off-and-on attempts to ban it because Salinger uses the word “fuck”—both the book and the romance have remained.³
Holden Caulfield becomes a rebel that both intellectuals and young middle-class Americans can bond with and even love. These readers feel connected to Holden and sometimes in turn to other *Catcher* fans in a kind of pop cultural community of outsiders. The act of telling, Holden's expression of his own alienation, helps create both a new model of the white well-off adolescent as outsider and a new kind of belonging. In this way, *Catcher* satisfies contradictory feelings, the urge to be self-determining through resisting social rules and conventions, and the urge to be a part of a community. And despite Caulfield's gender, this reconciliation of contradictory desires through identifying with outsiders and rebels seems to work for some female as well as male readers. A first-person narrative about a person who is neither an adult nor a child, the novel displaces the incompatibility of these desires into the borderlands of adolescence.

Like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, *Catcher* is a radical portrayal of disillusionment with America disguised by its author as a tale of childhood adventure. Critics and scholars have remarked on the connections between the two coming-of-age novels with their white boy protagonists since soon after *Catcher* was published. Huck's running away with the slave Jim is the equivalent of Holden's screaming, “Sleep tight, ya morons!” as he leaves Pencey Prep. Their upthrust fingers in the faces of their worlds, their attacks on what their societies most value—slave property and a secure, upper-middle-class future—in both cases, rebellion preserves the boys' innocence and dramatizes their refusal to conform, to accept the compromises adults make with their respective societies. Each novel became a part of the popular culture of its era even as it offered a serious comment on the limits of that culture.  

In Holden, critics and reviewers found a character acutely sensitive to the conformity and spiritual numbness that modern life generates in the world imagined in the novel. One fictional character's experience of alienation, of course, mattered little historically. *Catcher* became a powerful model of adolescent alienation across the postwar era because of the intersection of broad historical trends with Salinger's skill as a writer and changes in the publishing industry. In the 1950s, the paperback revolution transformed book publishing and made novels almost as cheap as magazines. At the same time, the postwar economic boom gave white middle-class teenagers more money to spend and more leisure time in which to enjoy their purchases. Paradoxically, the novel also got a boost from journalists' and intellectuals' anxiety about “mass culture”; *Catcher* sold 1.5 million copies in paperback in its first decade. *Catcher in the Rye* offered
a model for rebellion against mass culture even as it was also a very profitable part of mass culture.\(^5\)

Though the novel predates the invention of two new popular culture genres aimed at the same white middle-class youth market, *Catcher*, rock and roll music, and teenpics (films made for teenagers) all shared an oppositional stance toward conventions and norms imagined as central to American life. In fact, the very idea of white middle-class adolescent alienation became increasingly powerful because older observers like journalists and white middle-class adolescent fans themselves connected their rebellion to the oppositional positions of other groups: the “plague” of juvenile delinquency among working-class urban youth, the self-conscious rebellions of bohemians and artists, and, even more importantly, African Americans’ historic position as outsiders in America.\(^6\)

It also helped that the adolescents in those homes lay on their twin beds flipping the radio dial and the pages of magazines looking for something different. No one used mass culture to resist mass culture better than middle-class white teenagers. For the first time, in the postwar period, a critical mass of adolescents had the money and the leisure time to cultivate their own cultural tastes. Their parents saw this prosperity and could not understand how these kids could have any problems. Businesses like radio stations, record companies, and Hollywood saw this prosperity and thought about how to reach these new consumers. Radio and the movies, in particular, needed new markets, as television became the family entertainment of choice in the growing suburbs. As *Esquire* argued in 1965 in an article entitled “In the Time It Takes You to Read These Lines the American Teenager Will Have Spent $2,378.22,” “this vague no-man’s-land of adolescence” had become “a subculture rather than a transition.”\(^7\)

What many of these teenagers wanted was separation, something, anything to distinguish and distance them from their parents and other adults. With help from the music, movie, and radio industries, they created a new teen culture grounded in a mood of opposition to their parents and their plenty. In contrast to a more respectable emotional repression, white teenagers increasingly valued the expression of passion and desire. In place of their parents’ controlled and polished forms of entertainment, they sought the raw and frenetic. And in defiance of the white norms of middle-class America, they embraced popular black music and fantasies of African American life. For teenagers and college students, mass culture was not just a problem, as many intellectuals argued in the mid-twentieth century. It was a solution. It was not just the space of a conformity that killed American individualism. It was a
space of resistance. It was not just the household of the organization man. It was the home of the rebel. Most importantly, it gave white teenagers a window, however smudged, on black cultural expression.

In the 1950s and 1960s, mass culture gave some young white Americans a glimpse of redemption. Rebels and outsiders were out there. Other possibilities existed. A novel or rock and roll song or a film could be a vehicle for expressing feelings of alienation, for thinking about a different kind of life. The fact that many outsider characters were male did not stop young white women from seeking alternatives too, although rebellion was always more dangerous for them. Holden Caulfield may not have had the answers, but he suggested how some white middle-class white kids could start asking the questions.

**The Alienation of Holden Caulfield**

By the end of the decade, marketing experts and advice columnists, ministers and law enforcement officials, politicians and academics had all discovered adolescent rebellion. In 1951, however, J. D. Salinger walked Holden Caulfield right into the middle of a time when most white kids at least were supposed to be happy. Sure, American troops were fighting and losing in Korea. A book called *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb* seriously advised people in danger to drop to the ground and shield their eyes and keep their heads. But these kids lived in a nation of growing prosperity and unchallenged economic power. Their parents and their president and the products for sale everywhere promised them a world free from the hardships adults had so recently endured. With a little preparation and the right stuff, they were told, even a nuclear holocaust would be easier to survive than the Great Depression. Before the Beats and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), before movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and *West Side Story* (1961), before Elvis Presley’s first hits and the invention of rock and roll, before comic books could make people crazy, before gangs and knife fights, greased-back hair, and black leather jackets became part of popular culture, before most people had even heard of juvenile delinquency, the adolescent antihero of *The Catcher in the Rye* got kicked out of Pencey Prep.

Pencey Prep is not Holden Caulfield’s first school. He has been expelled before, from Whooton and Elkton Hills. None of these places are public high schools. Holden is middle-class, upper-middle-class more precisely. His parents and his younger sister, Phoebe, live in a spacious if not elegant apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. His father, a lawyer, makes “dough” and
buys cars, plays golf and bridge, drinks martinis and misses school plays because of work. He looks “like a hot shot.” And Holden, despite his failures, expects to be successful too. He tells Sally Hayes, a girl he sort of dates, about his future, what he imagines as a typical grown-up American life: “After I went to college and all . . . I’d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies.” But Holden has stepped into a mess. Even more than the white kids, upper-middle-class white adults are supposed to be happy. The middle-class lifestyle, “the American way of life,” after all, is the United States’ best weapon against the Communists, the highest achievement of postwar American life. Holden’s slangy sketch of WASP security skewers everything many postwar Americans were hoping to achieve.

What exactly is it, then, that alienates Holden Caulfield? With his name and credentials, he is not black or ethnic or newly arrived. Holden is not even, despite some literary critics’ references to Salinger’s hiding in his writing the traces of his own half-Jewish ancestry, a Jew. He is not a young woman facing a world of restricted choices. He is not poor and never expects to be without his parents’ money or, in later life, his own well-paying white-collar job. Holden’s sense of prosperity, in fact, is so secure, a decade after World War II wiped away the last of the Great Depression, that his fear as he wanders alone in New York City after leaving Pencey Prep before the end of the term and even the fact that he spends one night in a train station only add to the romantic aura of his rebellion. He has by then already slipped back into the family apartment once. The reader knows he can just go home. He has the key.

Still, Holden is alienated, estranged from what his parents, teachers, and acquaintances—he does not seem to have any friends—expect of him. And *Catcher* is about more than the teenage angst the novel helped invent. At the start of the 1950s, few Americans were articulating this new mood of discontent, what the poet Allen Ginsberg, the writer Norman Mailer, the theorist Paul Goodman, the critic Susan Sontag, and others would later call the new consciousness, the great refusal, the new sensibility. C. Wright Mills, an academic sociologist, came closest at the time to describing a form of psychological and cultural alienation remarkable like Holden’s but not limited to teenagers. Mills’s *White Collar*, a sociological investigation of contemporary middle-class life, and *Catcher*, both begun before the war, worried over for a decade, and published in the same year, have more than a little in common despite differences of genre and tone. Mills’s letters to friends and family about what he thought he was doing in *White Collar* describe *Catcher* as well: “It’s all
about the little man and how he lives and what he suffers and what his chances are going to be; and it is also about the world he lives in, has to live [in], doesn’t want to live in.” Everybody, Mills insisted, denying that class distinctions make much difference in the experience of alienation, is “a little man.” Mills wanted to put all of America in *White Collar*: “the alienation, and apathy and dry rot and immensity and razzle dazzle and bullshit and wonderfulness and how lonesome it is, really, how terribly lonesome and rich and vulgar.” “To be politically conscious,” Mills argued in *White Collar*, “is to see a political meaning in one’s own insecurities and desires.”

In Holden’s teenage idiom, Salinger actually employs a more accessible language for making this point, “the great refusal,” than Mills’s own sociological abstractions. When Phoebe asks her big brother to name something he likes, something he would like to be, and suggests a lawyer, he replies, “Lawyers are all right, I guess—but it doesn’t appeal to me. I mean they’re all right if they go around saving innocent guys’ lives all the time, and like that, but you don’t do that kind of stuff if you’re a lawyer.” To be successful in any then current meaning of the term, to have money, dates, friends, to have a purpose even, a person has to be a phony. For Holden, being a phony is the very definition of failure. Then Holden breaks through to an answer:

Even if you did go around saving guys’ lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really wanted to save guys’ lives, or because you did it because what you really wanted to do was to be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you wouldn’t.

In the movie-saturated world of mid-twentieth-century America, Holden suggests, self-consciousness and reflexivity abound. When people are able to imagine watching themselves like characters on a screen, to be both inside and outside themselves simultaneously, how can they separate pure guiding purpose from reaction and effect? Negotiating this dilemma, trying to live with the “rot” and the “razzle dazzle,” will become an essential part of the postwar rebellion that *Catcher* helps shape.

Holden, narrating his story of “madman stuff that happened to me,” first uses the word “phony” on page 3. Even Pencey’s headmaster’s daughter, he insists, knows her father, “old Thurmer,” is a “phony slob.” When Holden goes to say good-bye to the one teacher at Pencey he likes, “old Spencer” recalls
meeting Holden’s parents and calls them “grand people.” Stopping the scene, Holden says to his readers: “There’s a word I really hate. It’s a phony. I could puke every time I hear it.” Holden tells Mr. Spencer he left another school, Elkton Hills, “because I was surrounded by phonies . . . They were coming in the goddam window.” Of a pious and wealthy alum who started a national chain of discount “undertaking parlors” and prayed in his car, Holden tells us, his audience, “I can just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiff s.” Ward Stradlater, Holden’s roommate at Pencey, is a “phony kind of friendly.” In New York and lonely, Holden thinks of calling “this girl I used to go around with quite frequently, Sally Hayes,” who had written him “this long phony letter inviting me over to help her trim the Christmas tree.” Holden tells his audience in another aside that he was almost in a movie once, “but I changed my mind at the last minute. I figured that anybody that hates the movies as much as I do, I’d be a phony if I let them stick me in a movie short.” At a jazz club, the phonies in the audience solicit “a very phony, humble bow” from “old Ernie” the piano player, who is really “a big snob.” “People always clap for the wrong things,” Holden snaps. “If I were a piano player, I’d play in the goddam closet.”

To Holden, his classmates, teachers, advisors, parents, and his brother D. B., who has given up his short stories to write for the movies, are all phonies. Lies, hypocrisy, and untruth are everywhere, and almost everyone occasionally succumbs. The word “phony” so saturates Holden’s language that it becomes a mantra, a chant that somehow provides him with a thread of meaning in an otherwise empty world. The one thing Holden knows he wants is what he does not want, to be a phony. The irony is that as Holden sets off from his prep school to find something real, he cannot avoid phoniness himself. He lies to his classmate Ernie Morrow’s mother on the train. He lies in bars to buy drinks. He lies to the prostitute he hires and then is too scared to sleep with when she comes to his hotel room. “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life,” he tells us.

In Catcher’s urban picaresque, Holden tours the liminal spaces of the city—downtown hotels, jazz clubs, bars, and Central Park and Penn Station at night, places where different kinds of people collide, places on the margins of his white upper-middle-class world—looking for that opposite of phoniness, authenticity, but he does not find it. His hotel is full of “perverts and morons,” “screwballs all over the place!” He watches a gray-haired “distinguished looking guy” wearing only his shorts “dress up in real women’s clothes—silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, brassiere, and one of those corsets with the straps hanging down and all,” and then “a very tight black evening dress.” The hotel
bellboy Maurice, pimping the young prostitute named Sunny that Holden hires, smacks him when he refuses to pay a jacked-up rate. In Central Park at night, a place he knows “like the back of my hand,” Holden gets lost in the spooky dark looking for the duck pond. No one and no place is what it seems to be.14

Visiting the best teacher he ever had, “old Antolini,” at a very “swanky apartment” on Sutton Place, Holden seems poised at last to find some meaning. Antolini cautions him against his romantic fatalism, against “dying nobly” for an unworthy cause. “You’ll find that you’re not the first person who was ever confused or frightened and even sickened by human behavior,” Antolini insists. “Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now.” But after Holden falls asleep on the couch, Mr. Antolini makes a pass at him. He wakes up in the dark to find his former teacher “petting” or “patting” his head. Scared, Holden leaves. Yet another potential guide has failed him.15

In his travels, Holden finds phoniness— that contradiction between appearance and reality— everywhere, even in himself. “I’m some sort of an atheist,” he insists, but “I feel like Jesus and all.” “I’m an illiterate,” he argues elsewhere, “but I read a lot.” If there is ever another war, he will not fight, Holden explains, but he is glad “they’ve got the atomic bomb invented.” But nothing for Holden is more contradictory than sex. “In my mind,” Holden confesses, “I’m probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw”; he even fantasizes about “very crumby stuff,” “perverty” stuff, with a girl. The problem is that Holden believes he should not have sex or even “horse around” with girls he does not like, but with girls he does like, he wants to be careful. “Sex,” Holden admits, “is something I just don’t understand.” Even his appearance is contradictory: “I act quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then . . . and sometimes I act like I’m about thirteen. It’s really ironical, because I’m six foot two and a half and I have gray hair.” Others, especially his father, think he is immature: “It’s pretty true, too, but it isn’t all true. People always think something’s all true.” Holden even contradicts himself here. Truths that are all true are exactly what he is looking for, truths that, unlike the adults he encounters, stand firm. Like echoes, like the repetition of the word “phony,” the partial truths in Catcher emphasize the tension between Holden’s rebellion and his deep desire for connection and meaning.16

With no one to guide him, Holden refuses to grow up and remains a mass of contradictions. Getting kicked out of school means he never has to graduate. Being a virgin means he never has to think about his interactions with women like Sally, that girl Jane Gallagher that he really liked who keeps her
kings in the back row when she plays checkers, or anyone else in more complicated terms. Old Spencer tells him that life is a game and a person has to play by the rules. Holden's adventures, his explorations of the margins of middle-class propriety, never change his answer: “Game my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I 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.” Why grow up when life, Holden insists, like a million teenagers after him, is just not fair.  

But the game that Holden cannot see the point of playing here is not just adulthood. It is adult manhood. At Pencey, Holden fails at sports as well as his classes. He could not care less about the big football game, and his attempt to participate, as the manager of the fencing team, ends in debacle when on the way to a meet he leaves the foils on the subway. He fails at fighting too. Aiming at Stradlater while he is brushing his teeth, Holden tries to “split his goddam throat open” with the brush but grazes the side of his head instead. He has lost, Holden confesses, the only two fights he has been in: “I’m not tough. I’m a pacifist, if you want to know the truth.” Later, he does not even duck as Maurice the bellboy pimp punches him in the stomach. Holden is still a virgin, he tells us, because he listens to girls: “Most of the time when you’re coming pretty close to doing it with a girl . . . she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop.” He has “trouble just finding what I’m looking for,” he confesses, knowing what and where and how to touch a woman. And when he notices that the prostitute Sunny is almost a kid herself, he cannot go through with it. Sex seems too much like taking something from or harming a girl—and Holden really likes both women and girls: his classmates’ mother on the train, the tourist he dances with in the bar, even the phony Sally Hayes that he fights with, his old friend Jane Gallagher, and his sister, Phoebe. “You don’t always have to get too sexy to get to know a girl,” he tells us. “Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not too much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall half in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are.”

Growing up, becoming a man, means accepting limits, the fact that bad things happen, especially the greatest fraud, the seeming security of white middle-class life and the fact that people die. Three years earlier, Holden’s younger brother, Allie, only eleven, died of leukemia. Allie was smart and sensitive and lyrical. He wrote poetry all over his baseball mitt to have something to read while he stood in the outfield. The one aggressive act Holden admits to in his tale occurred when he smashed the windows in the garage with his fists the night Allie died, breaking his hand, which still hurts when it rains. The
suicide of Holden’s classmate at Elkton Hills, James Castle, “a skinny little weak-looking guy with wrists about as big as pencils,” only aggravates the wound. Holden cannot get over it, cannot go on with life like his father and his older brother, D. B. He senses that his mother, distracted and suffering from frequent headaches, cannot get over Allie’s death either. She is not even good at faking it. At least she is more like Holden, even if she cannot help him. 19

As Phoebe pushes him to name something he loves, something besides the dead Allie, something besides the lawyer that he would like to be, Holden replies, mangling a poem by Robert Burns:

You know that song, “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye”? I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they’re running and they don’t want to look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.

He will be the adult, the parent who can actually protect the children, the one who makes the seeming security of middle-class life real. He will erase the gap that generates phoniness; he will eliminate the consequences of the limits of life and thus the limits themselves; he will catch and save not just Allie and the other children but childhood itself as a space of innocence. 20

Phoniness is not the only thread that winds through Holden’s wanderings. Again and again, Holden wonders where the ducks in Central Park go when the lagoon is frozen. He asks taxicab drivers, who think he is crazy. Does the city come and get them and haul them to a warm home? Do they fly south, migrating out of the winter like retirees? Do they bed down and tough it out in the woods and brush, along the shore? Later, investigating the lagoon himself, he tromps along its frozen messy edges in the dark. Wondering about the ducks is a child’s way of dealing with death, of hoping that the missing will return. Is a dead person like the snow that melts and then falls again or the sun that sets and then rises the next day? Holden wants the world to be like this childish vision. Allie and even James Castle will not have to die then. And Holden, who calls out, “Allie don’t let me disappear. Allie don’t let me disappear,” will be able to save his own dissolving self. 21

When Maurice the pimp hits Holden as Sunny takes his money, he falls to the bathroom floor and thinks he is dying. Then he starts pretending that he
has a bullet in his guts. Holden “pictures himself” drinking a shot of bourbon and getting his gun. In his life as a movie scene, he will hunt old Maurice down and “plug” “six shots right through his fat hairy belly.” He will be a man of action. As the end of the film in his mind slaps the reel, he thinks about the gap between this movie fantasy and reality. Then he crawls into bed and contemplates killing himself. Only his fear that no one will cover him up, that bystanders will see him “all gory,” keeps him off the window ledge. The melodrama and the spectacle, the heightened emotions lent the scene by a thousand pulp novels, plays, and films, would fill even his own desperate last act with phoniness. And so Holden, like a million middle-class teenagers after him, survives. Rebellion against the world’s compromises, Holden Caulfield tells us, is the only way to the fight the phoniness, the only way to act morally, the only way, at last, to live.22

For all its intensity, its insistence that every gesture and emotion is significant, The Catcher in the Rye is not the kind of realist novel that grounds its character development in descriptions of goods or clothing or landscapes, in the fully fleshed-out texture of the material world. No contemporary events appear in Catcher—no details of a year around 1949 or 1950, no political events like the Soviet Union’s successful testing of its own atomic bomb, the end of the Berlin airlift, or Truman’s Fair Deal, and no cultural markers like fashion’s “New Look,” a turn toward fuller skirts, or the release of Pinky, a hit film about racial conflict. External events that are mentioned, like the Radio City Rockettes’ Christmas show, occur every year. The jazz pianist Ernie could be playing in a bar anytime in the forties or fifties. The world that Holden cannot live in is not located precisely in historical time, in either cultural or political history. The history on display here is instead more abstract, more difficult to date precisely but nevertheless powerful.23

In Catcher, Salinger offers his readers a survey of the ways people have rebelled in the past and a model for how they might rebel in the future. Collectively, Holden’s stories about the people he meets suggest many of the possibilities for understanding the relationship of the individual to society available in twentieth-century America. The novel presents not so much a distinct historical period as an account of the critical moment when media images’ colonization of peoples’ emotions and even their sense of their own most individual and intimate experiences reach some sort of saturation point. In particular, motion pictures—a stand-in for the whole vast world of popular culture—generate a great deal of Holden’s feelings of alienation even as they also provide a model of emotional reality. How could Holden feel at
home and figure out what was meaningful in a world in which “real” life could never live up to life as imagined in the movies?  

Paradoxically, then, given his obsession with phoniness, Holden borrows his most revealing moments from movie scenes. In the dorm at Pencey, for example, he imitates decades of film melodramas as he pulls his red hunting hat down over his eyes and says in a “very hoarse voice,” “I think I’m going blind. Mother darling, everything’s getting so dark in here . . . Mother darling, give me your hand. Why won’t you give me your hand?” Horsing around for his classmate is the closest Holden ever comes to asking his mother to help him, to come back out of her grief. Later, after Maurice the pimp punches him, Holden again escapes from his inability to act in his life into a film scene, into his ability to act for an audience. When suicidal despair later breaks through this fantasy, the fact that his death will not be neat like a movie keeps Holden alive until dawn. The next night, sick and lost and unable to find the ducks in the dark, Holden sits on a bench with ice in his hair and imagines his death: “I started picturing millions of jerks coming to my funeral and all . . . What a mob’d be there. They all came when Allie died, the whole goddam stupid bunch of them.” Holden, in the hospital with his broken hand, missed Allie’s funeral, but in his mind he lives through his own.  

There are many of these movie-like scenes in Catcher, places where Holden confesses he is playacting his life and more subtle passages when he leaves his borrowed stories—the stock plots of a hundred pulp novels, cheap plays, and popular movies—for his readers to find. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies,” he tells us, even as he imitates them. Holden craves the audience—“I’m an exhibitionist”—that this borrowed drama at least potentially provides, people who might care about him. But he also turns to the movies when he does not want to probe too deeply, when he does not really want to feel.  

Holden’s one actual trip to the movies makes the novel’s most direct historical reference: to war, the history, of course, that haunts adults in the late forties and early fifties. The film Holden sees, the 1942 World War I film Random Harvest, sentimentalizes wartime sacrifice, turning loss and pain into a romance. An injured soldier, an amnesiac, falls in love with a music hall star and writes a best seller, only to discover his lost past of aristocratic privilege and almost lose his new love. The movies create false emotions, Holden warns us, describing how he wanted to “puke” while watching the film. The woman next to him, he offers as an example, cried the whole time and yet did not care enough for her child to take him to the bathroom. Films produce feelings that cannot be trusted in the world outside the screen.
Still, war movies not surprisingly make Holden think about war. Like Salinger, Holden’s brother D. B., now a “prostitute” working in Hollywood instead of being a “real” writer, landed in Normandy on D-day. D. B. hates the army. After the war, he tells Allie and Holden “the Army was practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were.” When Allie asked him if being a soldier was not good for a writer, D. B. answers by asking whether Rupert Brooke or Emily Dickinson is the better war poet. Allie replies Dickinson. Salinger here, intentionally or not, offers a critique of novelists like Norman Mailer who talked about the war and other horrors as great experiences for writers and paraded their own presence in battle as the source of their works’ authenticity and truth. “Real” life can be all too romantic, and people can know, like Dickinson, what they do not directly take part in or witness. The invented and imagined can be the “real.” D. B. can hate the war and the army and yet love A Farewell to Arms, which Holden feels is full of phonies. Representations, poetry and novels and movies by and about people who were not there, can generate deep insight. How, then, Holden needs to know, can a young man tell which phonies—which fictions or fakes—are indeed true?

Waiting for Phoebe to leave school at lunch and meet him the next day, Holden unwinds a final film in his head. His vague plan is to escape out west and live in a cabin, and he imagines his return home at long last at the ripe old age of thirty-five.

I knew my mother’d get nervous as hell and start to cry and beg me to stay home and not go back to my cabin, but I’d go anyway. I’d be casual as hell. I’d ask them all to visit me sometime if they wanted to, but I wouldn’t insist or anything. What I’d do, I’d let old Phoebe come out and visit me in the summertime and on Christmas vacation and Easter vacation. And I’d let D. B. come... but he couldn’t write any movies in my cabin, only stories and books. I’d have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn’t stay.

The problem, of course, is that the scene itself is false, a movie melodrama that Holden will never live. He has already sneaked into his home like a thief. He does not recount his actual homecoming in that “madman” time. Yet he must have ended up at his parents’ apartment, sometime after watching Phoebe in all her radiant innocence going around and around on the carousel. He admits he writes from a mental hospital. And that is all.

There are two sources of the golden age, then, of the good life before the fall, in The Catcher in the Rye: One is the innocent world of childhood as