

### **Annotated *Rye*: Scrutinizing Sources as a New Historicist**

One of the basic assumptions of new historicist approaches to literary studies is that any text participates in various ways in the discourses circulating at the moment of its composition and the moment of its consumption. And it's pretty clear that *The Catcher in the Rye* was consciously written, at least in part, as a commentary on contemporary conditions. The novel itself offers its readers—even its original readers—an interpretive lens, a perspective, for understanding those conditions. Still, Salinger's novel isn't the only perspective available; along with many other "texts," it contributed to a variety of discourses that shaped how people understood, and continue to understand, aspects of America in the 1950s.

What *were* some of those discourses, and how might we understand *Catcher's* relationship to them? That will be the guiding question of the *final* paper of the semester. (Coming soon!) The present project will help you prepare for that assignment.

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In undertaking a new historicist analysis, the critic tries to avoid seeing non-fiction texts as establishing an objective foundation, an empirical background, or a factual "control" for the wild flights of fancy of literary analysis. Rather, a new historicist regards such "primary" sources as co-texts that also provide perspectives on the events and conditions they purport to document "objectively." As new historicists see it, both historical and literary texts are informed by—and partake in—the same discourses.

For this assignment, you'll choose one (or at most, two) "primary" historical sources to analyze, as they participated in and contributed to some discourse circulating in post-war America—a discourse to which *Catcher in the Rye* also contributes. That is, you'll read this text (or these texts) not in order to better understand the "reality" of postwar America, but to better understand some of the ways in which that reality was being constructed at the time.

We've already begun to discuss some of the discourses that inform *Catcher in the Rye*—specifically, discourses related to adolescence and the panic over teenage rebellion and delinquency. Over the next few days, you'll identify a specific discourse at work within *Catcher* to serve as the basis of your final paper, and you'll begin searching for additional documents related to that discourse to examine alongside the novel. You'll then select one or two such documents to use for this assignment.

I've provided a few such sources to choose from in "A *Catcher's* Toolkit," which is available on the course website. But you're free—encouraged, even—to research and discover other texts on your own.

When you've identified the document(s) you'd like to focus your energies on, you'll write up what will amount to an extended informal assignment that considers the source(s) using the following questions to provoke your thinking. **Note:** this will require some judgment on your part: not all questions will be pertinent to all resources, and in some cases you may also want to

slightly revise a question to tailor it to a specific resource. Remember that these questions are intellectual *promptings* or catalysts; you needn't respond mechanically to each and every question, but you should invest some thought in the ones that *do* strike you as relevant, and your thinking should go beyond giving a literal answer to the question as posed. The questions are meant to encourage you to think about a text from a variety of perspectives, in order to understand better how it participates in the discourse in which it's embedded. Some—many?—of your answers may serve primarily as “pre-writing” or preliminary thinking. Still, the more widely you allow yourself to range in your inquiry, the more depth your final paper is likely to have.

**Begin** by writing a short summary or description of (each of) your text(s); this should be no longer than a long paragraph, and it should try to represent the text as accurately as possible: What is it (an educational film? an advertisement? a brochure? an opinion piece? a congressional report?); Where does it come from/where would it originally have appeared; What form does it take; What does it do or set out to do; Who do you assume to have been its intended audience, etc..

The rest of your response should grow out of your selected answers to some of the following questions. Try to edit, organize and synthesize your answers into a unified piece of prose rather than a series of piecemeal answers.

### **I. Immediate contexts and participants:**

- Where and when are *you yourself* situated historically as you read (and thereby reproduce) this text?
- Who are you in terms of class, status, occupation, education; gender, race, nationality, age?
- What's the situation—that is, why are you reading this? What larger institutional forces and functions are at work? In what larger context is the text being delivered to you (e.g., in a textbook anthology? as a photocopied handout? on a cable documentary channel? on a website?) and how does that “frame” present the material?
- What motivates your own reading?

### **II. Author-reader relations:**

- What do you know, or can you infer, about the author/producer/creator's social relations to her or his readers? To his or her subject matter?
- What do you know (or do you infer) about the author's ideas, tastes, values, beliefs? Do they make a difference in how you understand the text?

### **III. Text as product:**

- What were the general modes of economic production and social organization at the time the text was written? (E.g., was the society chiefly “slave,” “feudal,” “bourgeois,” “capitalist”? Industrial or pre-industrial?)
- Why was this text produced? What purpose was it meant to serve? To entertain? To document? To protest? And so on.
- To what genre does the text belong? What are/were the functions of that genre? What conventions of that genre does the text follow, and what conventions does it subvert, undermine, ignore, deviate from? How does the genre affect the meaning of the text?

#### IV. Relations to the rest of the world—then and now:

- What sections of society are represented as central—and what sections are arguably mis- or under- or *un*represented? Why? What, if anything, do these omissions suggest about the intentions of the producer(s) of this text?
- Is the society presented contemporary with that of the author, before or after the author's own time, or from some other imagined time and place entirely?
- What ideologies would you characterize as *dominant* in the text? What other ideologies are present? That is, what sorts of values and social structures are presented as “normal” or “natural”? What values and social structures are presented as abnormal, dangerous, regrettable, unjust, ill-conceived? And what values and social structures are repressed or only hinted at in the text?
- Does the writer express or imply a preference for any particular set of values and/or social structures?
- What gave the author the “authority” to tell this story?
- What relevance to your own time and society does the work seem to have?

Adapted from *The English Studies Book* by Rob Pope (London: Routledge, 1998)

**Due:** at the start of class on Monday, April 18<sup>th</sup>.