

Historicizing *Catcher*: Texts and Contexts

For this final assignment, you'll write your own (brief) new historicist analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye*, focusing on the way that *Catcher* engages with and contributes to a discourse circulating in 1950s America.

Remember that you're considering the ways in which a so-called "literary" text is both *embedded* in and *participates* in history—the contributions it makes to what people know or believe about their own historical moment, as well as its contribution to *our* picture of that historical moment. That is, you're not attempting to recover some "truth" about America in the 1950s which the novel "reflects" (and/or which would ground our interpretation of it); rather, you're considering the novel's relationship to one of several discourses that circulated at the time, and its participation in constructing a particular understanding of its historical moment. A contemporary newspaper account of the rise of teenage delinquency, for instance, doesn't offer an unproblematic objective truth about teenagers; rather, the newspaper, too, engages existing discourses of adolescence, delinquency, the teenage "problem," and so on. Both the article and the novel can be seen as contributing to the *discourse* of adolescence. How, then, would you relate those two texts to each other? Is *Catcher* offering a counter-narrative—a competing discourse to the discourse of delinquency? To what extent does *Catcher* reflect the "confident characterizations" of adolescence that Lesko outlines, and to what extent does it offer some other construction of the adolescent experience? Those are the kinds of questions that might guide your investigation.

The first step in this process is to identify a discourse circulating in the 1950s and to consider where and how the novel engages that discourse. (You might refer to the excerpt from Nancy Lesko for help with this, or you might even turn to *Catcher in the Rye* itself for ideas.) **You should identify a specific passage or two in the text to focus on; this passage (or passages) may form the spine of your paper.** I would advise you to avoid speaking in sweeping generalities about the novel as a whole; that approach almost always leads to hopelessly vague analyses. Start with a particular episode or passage and read it closely; then consider the extent to which what you see there holds true for the rest of the novel.

Some discourses such a paper might consider:

- the discourse of affluence, prosperity, and consumption in postwar America;
- the discourse of suburban versus urban;
- discourses on sexuality or gender (gender roles, gender "norms," etc.);
- discourses on the meaning of American citizenship;
- discourses surrounding racial or class identity;
- discourses of family and domesticity;
- discourses on religion and spirituality;
- discourses about mental illness and psychoanalysis.

There are other possibilities, of course, but this list constitutes a place to start.

One of the more focused and manageable strategies for a new historicist reading is to set the “literary” text side-by-side with a “historical” document or two to consider the kinds of truth both construct, the ways in which both texts engage the discourse. The next step, then, is to identify a text which isn’t strictly literary that, when placed in dialogue with *Catcher*, helps illuminate the discourse. The “*Catcher’s Toolkit*” has several such documents: the short educational films from the National Education Project; the excerpts from Erikson and Riesman; Lionel Trilling’s piece on the Kinsey Report that appeared in the *Partisan Review*. Or you can find a source of your own: peruse the periodicals collection in the library for a popular magazine article defending (or attacking) psychoanalysis, or an editorial celebrating America’s transcendence of social class. You’ll want to consider the genre of the text you choose; what are the rhetorical strategies available in its genre as compared to those of a novel? (For instance, we conventionally think of journalistic accounts as more “objective” than artistic accounts—which means that we might tend to privilege a newspaper story as more authoritative than a “subjective” literary account.) How did/do these texts circulate? Who consumes/consumed them, and how? (See the “Annotated *Rye*” Project for more such prompts for analysis.)

In addition to the novel and your primary source(s), you’ll likely want to find some *secondary* sources on postwar American culture, too. Glancing at a few newspapers won’t, finally, give you a complex picture of the culture of postwar America. Again, a number of secondary sources are available through the “*Catcher’s Toolkit*,” but you should feel free to track down additional commentaries on America as it was constructing itself discursively in the 1950s. If you elect to focus on sexuality, for instance, you might want to find some later or recent analyses of how the Kinsey Reports were received at the time of their publication.

Your essay should have a clearly articulated and specific **thesis** about some discourse that circulated in postwar America, and about how that discourse operates in both *Catcher in the Rye* and your primary text. Your secondary sources may well broaden or inform or clarify your understanding of the era (though of course they, too, are interpretive projects embedded in various discourses).

Remember that a *thesis* is a claim or statement about your topic, the validity of which is not self-evident, that must be supported by a carefully reasoned argument. (A professor I had in graduate school used to say that a good thesis is *narrow* in focus, but *broad* in implications. Keep that advice in mind: make your focus fairly specific, but be aware of its broader implications for the ways in which *Catcher* interacted with its own historical moment.)

A first draft will be due in class on **Thursday, November 19th**. Bring three hard copies. You’ll exchange your draft with two classmates; the third will be handed in to me. We’ll devote some time in class to discussing feedback on work-in-progress: what to look for and how to deliver your insights.

On **Tuesday, December 1st**, you’ll meet to discuss the drafts you received before Thanksgiving Break. You’ll come with a prepared letter for each of your colleagues that will provide written feedback on their drafts, and you’ll spend most of the class session hashing out the strengths and weaknesses of the drafts and advising each other about revision priorities.

Final draft (6 – 8 pages) due Tuesday, December 15th