

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 a discourse circulating in 1950s America.

Remember, as you work out your analysis, that you're considering the ways in which this literary text is both *embedded* in and *participates* in history. You're studying its contribution to some aspect of its 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 involvement in constructing that discourse. 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 about adolescence, delinquency, the teenage "problem," and so on. Both the article and the novel, in other words, can be seen as contributing to a discourse of adolescence. How, then, would you relate those two texts to each other? Is *Catcher* offering a counter-narrative—a commentary or 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 sorts 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 it. (Nancy Lesko foregrounds various aspects of the discourses of "adolescence" and "containment"; looking at *Catcher in the Rye* itself may give you other ideas.) **You should then identify a specific passage or two in *Catcher* to focus on that "speaks to" this discourse; 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; too often such an approach leads to hopelessly vague analyses. Start with particular episodes or passages and read them closely; then consider the extent to which what you see there says something bigger about the novel as a whole.

Other discourses of postwar America that such a paper might consider:

- discourses of affluence, prosperity, consumption, and/or class;
- the discourse of cities and/or suburbs, of the urbane and the bohemian;
- discourses of sexuality or gender (gender roles, gender "norms," gender identity, "proper" and "perverse" sexual behavior, etc.);
- discourses of race, racism, racial difference, and racial identity (including "whiteness");
- discourses of family and domesticity;
- discourses of philosophy, religion, and/or spirituality;
- discourses about mental illness, psychology and psychoanalysis.

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

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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 compare the ways they frame or construct their subject, the kinds of truth they establish and the ways they do so, the rhetorical strategies and tropes used by each genre. (For the last assignment, you may already have selected a text which, when placed in dialogue with *Catcher*, helps illuminate your chosen 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*. You could search for other sources on your own: peruse the library’s periodicals collection for a magazine article from the 1950s defending or attacking psychoanalysis, or an editorial celebrating America’s prosperity or its transcendence of social class.) But you’ll also want to consider certain contextual factors. How did/do these texts circulate? Who consumes/consumed them, and how? Would a journalistic account have been considered more “objective” or authoritative than an artistic one? And so on. (See the “Annotated *Rye*” Project for more such prompts for analysis.)

In addition to the novel and your primary text(s), you’ll likely want to find some *secondary* sources on postwar American culture, too, since glancing at a few newspapers or educational films won’t, finally, give you a complex picture of the culture of postwar America. (And you want to have at least *some* broader sense of the overall parameters of the particular discourse you’re studying.) 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 more 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 mindful 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 **Wednesday, April 20th**. 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 **Monday, April 25th**, you’ll meet to discuss the drafts you read over the weekend. You’ll come with a 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 Wednesday, May 11th