

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 sparked 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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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

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.⁷

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. Legitimizing 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

CHAPTER 1

Lost Children of Plenty: Growing Up as Rebellion

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't 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.⁴

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.⁸

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.⁹

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.”¹⁰

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.¹¹

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."¹²

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.¹³

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 crumbly stuff," "pervery" 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.¹⁷

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."¹⁸

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?²⁴

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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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.²⁷

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?²⁸

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.²⁹

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

embodied in Allie and Phoebe and the children playing in Holden's field on the edge of the cliff; the other, despite what Holden claims, is the world of the movies. Of course, Allie is dead, and Phoebe, in her almost-parental role, reminds him that he has to like something. Betraying Holden's vision of childhood, she demands to go out west with him. When he says no, she responds by chucking his prized red hunting hat, worn bill-backward like a catcher's cap, at him. She refuses to go back to school and then tells Holden to shut up. It is Holden's, not Phoebe's, fantasy that she lives a beautiful, easy life. He needs her to stay put, to play her role in the school play, to play her role in his life, but Phoebe too wants to be someone else, trying on middle names (this week it is Weatherfield) and alter egos in her journal. The movies provide an image of emotional reality that for Holden is an alternative to childhood. Then again, they are not real. "The goddam movies," he tells us, are just like the children. "They can ruin you. I'm not kidding." Holden cannot be a child again, though, and his life is not a movie.³⁰

The minor characters in *Catcher* suggest some of the other meanings of alienation circulating in *Catcher's* historical moment. As Holden encounters Carl Luce, Mr. Antolini, James Castle, and Dick Slagle, he discovers that these men and boys cannot help him. None of them has the answer. Romanticism, Marxism, Freudian theory, and existentialism, and a growing faith in art as the source of salvation and the anchor of individualism—all of these ways of thinking may offer insight and understanding, but none of them is, in Holden's words, "all true."

Holden's adolescent alienation owes a deep debt to the Romantic poets and their attempt to turn life into art. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British writers William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Lord Byron radically transformed the nature of art and, along with Goethe and other German writers, helped initiate what would become a literary movement by inventing a new kind of poetry, a lyric of the self.³¹

As a young Cambridge student, Wordsworth discovered that his own experiences and emotions were a rich source for his poetry. But the revelation of personal experience was too radical to embrace directly. Instead, he explored as a kind of proxy what he imagined to be the feelings and experiences of the rural people he observed all around him. Wordsworth and Coleridge collaborated on a volume of poems, published as *Lyrical Ballads*, about these people on the margins—children and the elderly, miners and peddlers, the mad and others outside the boundaries of polite society. Their poems, they argued, "were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the

language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure," whether despite its "strangeness and awkwardness" it "contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents." "Humble and rustic life was generally chosen," they wrote, "because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . and speak a plainer and more emphatic language." Together, the two poets helped create a whole new group of poetic subjects.³²

They also helped establish an aesthetic pattern followed by many artists and writers ever since, using outsiders as a route back into the self. For the "humble" folk the poets wrote about gave them something in return, a plainness of form and simplicity of language. It was a short series of steps from empathy for people on the margins through this new language to an emphasis on the poet himself. "Such a holy calm/ Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes/ were utterly forgotten, and what I saw/ Appeared like something in myself, a dream/ A prospect in the mind," Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*. "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence," he later recalled, "and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality." Keats was "certain of nothing" but "the heart's affection and the truth of the imagination." Confusing insides and outsides, trying to make life into art, the Romantic poets helped create a new and more secular and personal form of transcendence.³³

Catcher revisits the legacy of the Romantic poets and their attempt to turn life into art. Holden's wanderings in the city are a middle-class adolescent's version of the Romantic poet's travels, his explorations of the margins of his sheltered New York City childhood. As in Romantic poetry, the outer landscape in *Catcher* blinks quickly into Holden's inner landscape and back. When Holden goes to Central Park to see if the ducks are there in winter, he gets lost. He cannot find the lagoon, even though he has been going there all his life. At last he sees the water: "What it was, it was partly frozen and partly not frozen. But I didn't see any ducks around. I walked all around the whole damn lake—I damn near fell *in* once, in fact—but I didn't see a single duck." Discovering the margins—both people on the border of middle-class white urban life and places like the edge of the water—very quickly becomes both a metaphor for and a means of discovering the self.³⁴

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets' interest in nature and peasant life, in anything outside of respectable society, became

bohemian painters' interest in art, urban workers, and the East, in anything outside middle-class life. As the historian Jerrold Seigel has argued, "bohemia" originated in mid-nineteenth-century France, in Paris, along with the bourgeois way of life it opposed. Bohemians are "all those who, driven by an unstinting sense of calling, enter into art with no other means of existence than art itself," one participant wrote in 1851. "Their everyday existence" was "a work of genius." They turned their life into art. By the mid-nineteenth century, bohemians had already acquired a set of characteristics often adopted by rebels after them: odd dress and long hair, living for the moment, makeshift and transient lodging, sexual freedom and radical politics, heavy drinking and drug use, uneven work habits, and a community based in bars and coffee-houses. Later, self-consciously avant-garde artists took up many features of this bohemian way of life, particularly its insistence on the artist's persona and lifestyle as works of art.³⁵

Nothing was as marginal, as outside respectable society, as sexual freedom, even in the mid-twentieth century. In *Catcher*, Holden's old student advisor Carl Luce, with his preference for Eastern philosophy and his interest in sex as "both a physical and a spiritual experience," takes up a bohemian-style life and attempts to turn his existence into art. Holden had known Luce as an older student at the Whooten School, one of the places Holden went before Pencey. Luce had moved to the city after he graduated to study at Columbia. Holden did not like him much at school, but alone in the city, he called him up anyway. Luce, he recalled, had given these terrific sex talks in the dorm. He could be "very enlightening sometimes." Waiting for Luce in a "swanky" hotel, he noticed "the other end of the bar was full of flits." And Luce, Holden remembered, was kind of "flitty himself, in a way. He was always saying, 'Try this for size,' and then he'd goose the hell out of you while you were going down the corridor. And whenever he went to the can, he always left the goddam door open and *talked* to you while you were brushing your teeth." Holden, of course, cannot help asking Luce about his sex life when he does arrive. Luce keeps telling him to change the subject even as he reveals he is dating a sculptress, recently arrived from China and in her late thirties, who lives in the Village. Holden, he advises, should go to see a psychoanalyst like Luce's dad. Luce, even though his name means "light," can offer Holden no insight. His artsy life is too far from the childhood innocence Holden is trying desperately to save.³⁶

Holden's former teacher Mr. Antolini offers another romantic, bohemian spin on Holden's own alienation. When Holden goes to spend the night with "old Antolini" and his wife (Holden guesses she is sixty years older than her

husband), his ex-teacher lectures him late into the night. "You're a student—whether the idea appeals to you or not. You're in love with knowledge." Other people have made art out of "their troubles": "You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. It isn't education," Antolini insists. "It's history. It's poetry." Holden, tired and more than a little confused, just yawns. Art, the novel suggests when Holden wakes up to find his ex-teacher touching him, is not even enough for Mr. Antolini. And poetry has not saved Allie or even D. B., who is also in his own way dead, abusing his talent for cash in Hollywood. A romantic sense of art as the rarified expression of spiritual alienation and also its cure is simply not going to work for Holden or many other adolescent boys.³⁷

Catcher finds even less to use in the Marxist understanding of alienation as the separation of a person's work from her sense of self. Writing during the postwar Red Scare, Salinger creates a fictional landscape in which there is no ideological left. Alienation exists, but it is not a political and economic problem. Unlike some of the Beat poets, who were then already living their soon to be infamous vision of cultural rebellion, the fictional Holden does not even gesture in the direction of radical politics. None of the characters in *Catcher* suggests any act aimed at transforming America's political economy. Sure, people are alienated from their work in *Catcher*—crabby taxi drivers, corrupt bellhops, martini-drinking lawyers like Holden's dad, and even his brother D. B. But this alienation is presented as an individual and psychological problem. Holden remembers a former roommate at Elkton Hills, Dick Slagle, who coveted Holden's nice Mark Cross suitcases even as he branded them "new and bourgeois." In fact, "bourgeois" is Slagle's favorite word. Everything Holden has is "bourgeois as hell," even his fountain pen, which Slagle of course borrows. After two months, they both ask for a room change. "It's really hard to be roommates with people," Holden confesses, admitting that he liked the boy, "if your suitcases are much better than theirs." Class difference exists, and it affects friendships. But in an America where even the nuns whom Holden has just seen and who trigger his memory of Slagle have at least cheap suitcases, everything is already bourgeois. Politics are nonexistent. People don't kill themselves over class.³⁸

They do, however, kill themselves to make a point about the irrationality of the universe. Salinger wrote *Catcher* over a ten-year period in which existentialism emerged as one of the most important trends in postwar thought. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre published *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, an adaptation of his wildly popular 1945 Paris lecture, in English in 1946.

For Sartre, there was no essential human essence, no universal characteristics of humanity that preceded human existence. People defined their own realities. They created whatever meaning existed. For philosopher Albert Camus, whose influential text *The Rebel* appeared in English in 1954, humans made reality in the act of opposition: "What is a rebel? A man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself." Broadly popularized in America in the years after *Catcher's* publication, existentialism shaped the reception of *Catcher* and Salinger's later books. It did not take much imagination to add Salinger to Camus's list of writers and artists challenging the cherished beliefs of their societies.³⁹

Catcher, however, is not a book that celebrates the act of rebellion. It is not acting but narrating, expressing individual feelings, that gives life meaning in Salinger's novel. James Castle is *Catcher's* existentialist, jumping out of a window to escape humiliation—Holden will not describe the repulsive act—at the hands of a crowd of classmates. Castle has refused to take back his comment that one of these bullies is a very conceited guy. Still, he proves that he can make his own choice, that he can act, at least, as if there is meaning, that he can be free. Even in the shower, Holden hears him hit the ground. Castle had been wearing Holden's turtleneck when he jumped, and "his teeth and blood were all over the place." No one would touch him until Mr. Antolini came, covered him up, and carried his body off to the infirmary. Suicide is certainly a symbolic act, but the meaning conveyed does not much matter to the maker. The actor may be right and true, but he is also dead.⁴⁰

Holden does not go this way, and the best answer others can give him about the meaning of life is Freud. For many educated Americans at mid-century, Freudian thought returned a sense of destiny, of sweep and drama and tragedy, to individual lives, previously provided by religion and history. Holden never tells us why his parents did not send him for psychoanalysis after Allie died and he broke the windows and his hand. They wanted him to go, but somehow he did not. Carl Luce too offers him this advice. And Mr. Antolini tries to give him the answer he is seeking by quoting a psychoanalyst. But since Holden starts his story from "this crummy place" in California that is obviously a mental hospital, it is always clear that analysis is where Holden will end up. Telling the "madman stuff" is part of Holden's time on the couch. Freud the scientist is also Romantic in this sense—he too teaches individuals to read their own lives like a book or a film, to see their own experience as full of telling symbols and metaphors and moments that reveal the plot. The entire novel is Holden's own psychoanalytic reading, a fact that the self-conscious movie scenes make clear.

Art, then, is not the answer in Mr. Antolini's Romantic sense, but art, or more democratically self-expression, enables a person to shape the meaning of her life in a way that suicide, a solitary act of refusal, cannot. In front of an audience, self-expression becomes a larger, less individual and more social act. Salinger turns existentialism's emphasis on action, its acts of refusal, into the act of representing acts of refusal, into autobiography. The actor in life becomes instead an actor in representing that life. And this difference—that the seeker can salvage meaning not just through acting in the world but also by expressing his feelings to the world—will be one of the most important characteristics of postwar rebellion. The idea that to express feelings of alienation, to protest, is to live is not new in 1951. It has deep roots among working-class blacks—the blues—and self-consciously bohemian members of urban artistic enclaves. *Catcher's* accomplishment is to repackage these ideas about self-expression for a young, more affluent audience. Holden is not black or working-class or bohemian, and he does not break the law. If he is richer than most, he is otherwise a fit enough model for every white boy's and more than a few white girls' middle-class angst. And this is mostly how *The Catcher in the Rye* has been and continues to be read. *Catcher's* first reviewers, writing long before the book acquired its cult status, worried over this issue of identification. Taking up Holden's adolescent idiom to re-create a conversation between a teenage boy narrator and "this girl Helga," the *New York Times Book Review* gave the novel a fairly positive review. Some readers, the reviewer suggested in his faux-Holden voice, would love this boy: "You needn't swear, Helga, I said. Know what? This Holden, he's just like you. He finds the whole world's full of people who say one thing and mean another and he doesn't like it." A reviewer who panned the novel feared the appeal of a character like Holden: "He is alive, human, preposterous, profane and pathetic beyond belief . . . Fortunately, there cannot be many of him yet," the reviewer assured readers, "but one fears that a book like this given a wide circulation may multiply his kind." Ernest Jones, a psychoanalyst who had studied with Freud, reviewed *Catcher* for the *Nation*. He was also troubled by the potential popularity of "the unpretentious, mildly affecting chronicle." Readers who should have known better loved the novel, he suggested, because "the book is a mirror . . . It reflects something not at all rich and strange but what every sensitive sixteen-year-old since Rousseau has felt, and of course what each one of us is certain he has felt." *Catcher*, he argued, was "a case history of us all."⁴¹

Reviewers who loved the novel believed Salinger got the speech and feelings of the American teenager exactly right. The Book of the Month Club—*Catcher* was its July selection—raved that the word "brilliant is an unsatisfactory

adjective. That rare miracle of fiction has again come to pass: a human being has been created out of ink, paper and images . . . One can actually hear it [Holden's voice] speaking," the review continued, and "what it has to say is uncannily true, perceptive and compassionate." The daily *New York Times* also praised *Catcher* as a brilliant first novel. "Holden's mercurial moods, his stubborn refusal to admit his own sensitiveness and emotions, his cheerful disregard of what is sometimes known as reality," its reviewer argued, "are typically and heartwarmingly adolescent." He and his friends, a later critic confessed, identified completely with Holden. Another wrote that there were "millions of young Americans who feel closer to Salinger than to any other writer" because "he not only speaks [their language]; he shapes it." And "he expresses their rebellion" as well. Alfred Kazin, one of the most important literary critics at the time, stressed that this identification was at the heart of *Catcher's* appeal. Salinger "is a favorite with that audience of students, intellectuals, instructors, generally literary, sensitive, and sophisticated young people" who believe "that he speaks for them and virtually to them." Holden became a fictional model of rebellion so powerful that he deeply affected the way many readers understood their own lives.⁴²

What Holden offered readers, with his slangy language and his not-exactly-going-anywhere life, was a way for them—for everyone—to be an artist. Rebellion here is not an act. It is not political, in an ideological sense. It is an expression of the inner life. It is a feeling. For Holden, self-expression is enough, and self-expression, the democratization of the modern idea of what it means to be an artist, is the flip side of the problem of mass culture. Sure, mass culture's ever-present images and stories haunt people's imaginations, coloring how they act and feel and experience even their own lives. But people in turn get to craft their own stories. In Holden, Salinger created a seductive character, an artifact of mass culture that critiqued mass culture, a fictional person that in turn shaped how real people think and feel and love.⁴³

None of this magic works, however, without an audience. The connection is through the telling, not the living. Holden has an audience, and he knows it. He speaks directly to his readers, recounting events that are in fact months in the past. "Some things are hard to remember," he confesses. "You'd like her," he says of Phoebe. Of Allie, he assures us, "If you'd known him, you'd know what I mean." The connections Holden makes here occur outside the flow of his fictional life, at a remove, as he is representing it. Telling his story gives the alienated Holden an entirely new set of connections, with his readers whom he addresses directly, with the people who know what he means.⁴⁴

If, as Holden believes, modern life alienates all sensitive, feeling people, then the answer, the only way to live, is to love other outsiders. Holden is lost. He never quite manages to find and connect with any other rebels, despite his New York City wanderings. But he finds them in his readers. And *Catcher* casts childhood as the space of innocence, free of the compromises and failures of adult life, as a place available to us all. This is why Allie's death is such a tragedy, and why Holden, an adolescent on the cusp of manhood (its own kind of margin) yet fighting the beast all the way, is such a good, if not a reliable, narrator. It does not matter if Holden is completely right. It only matters that he tries to maintain his innocence. Resisting the romance of the center, the desire to belong to the adult world all around him, Holden makes many readers love him and also love themselves. In their own self-expression, they can create themselves anew. They can rediscover truth and innocence. They can connect with other rebels. And they can create a new community and even perhaps a different world.

Mass Culture and the Rebel

If mass culture was a problem for some, it was also a solution for many. It was the place people went to live with the Bomb, singing along with "Atom and Evil," drinking "Atomic" cocktails, sending off box tops for "Atomic Bomb Rings," and lusting over a cover girl called "the Anatomic Bomb." It was the place industrial workers looked for relief as many unions traded away workplace democracy for higher wages and benefits for those lucky enough to keep their jobs in the face of automation. It was the place young mothers alone in the suburbs turned to try to hold on to themselves under an ocean of laundry and a tidal wave of toddlers' demands. It was the place scared ex-Communists and their friends imagined to escape McCarthyism, turning their dreams of a working-class democracy into pulp novels and B movies about gangsters who beat the bosses, disguised now as policemen and politicians, and still got the girl. It was the place war couples went flush with pent-up desire and war-salary savings to build a life different from their parents, beyond the old urban neighborhoods, off the failing farms, and outside the sprawling fear of depression and war. It was the place southern blacks traveled to find the shiny new Ford or the stylish new dress that showed up the crackers and shouted "We are not inferior" above the din of segregation's daily humiliations. It was a business that sold meanings and emotions and yet also a medium in which people did not just find but also made a sense of self and a sense of community. It was the

medium both real and imagined that people used to ease the contradictions between their dreams and their realities, literally having it all at last, a world without limits, amen. It was the cause of postwar conformity and also the cure.

For many American intellectuals, especially former leftists who had retained the form if not the content of their past Marxism, contradictions did not simply exist. They aroused people to political action and resolution, unless something intervened to mask the truth. At mid-century, many intellectuals decided that this new opiate of the masses was something they called "mass culture," commercialized, mass-produced forms of expression from popular music and film to clothing and paperback fiction. While mass culture certainly existed before World War II—Tin Pan Alley songs and Hollywood films, for example—these scholars and critics anxiously charted its expansion in the late 1940s and 1950s. With higher wages and greater leisure time, they lamented, Americans rushed to purchase televisions and transistor radios, refrigerators and washing machines, rock and roll 45s and cheap paperbacks, and inexpensive copies of everything from fashion's New Look to Colonial furniture and abstract art. All this consumption, in turn, eroded American individualism. Mass culture alienated Americans from the ideas and artifacts that should be at the center of their culture.

In the 1950s, the ideas of these intellectuals powerfully shaped the romance of the outsider by defining the center as culturally flawed. In their thinking, Americans' problems were increasingly aesthetic, philosophical, and moral rather than economic and political. Their critiques also raised the issue of representation, not in the explicitly political sense of who made decisions for people within the government but in the cultural terms of who created and distributed the words and images and sounds that determined life's meaning. The concept of mass culture enabled intellectuals to think about the relationship of the individual and the larger society without explicitly referencing political ideology at all. It was not a coincidence that the concept of mass culture emerged and spread into broad use in the midst of the cold war.⁴⁵

As intellectuals increasingly defined the culture at the center—mass culture—as the problem, it became a small step to see cultures understood as existing at the margins—the creative expression of outsiders—as part of the solution. In this kind of thinking, opposition, like conformity, took place in cultural terms, on cultural grounds. The mid-twentieth-century rebel figure differed from earlier visions of individuals who opposed their societies. Earlier rebels were people who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War or for the independence of the Philippines or the Spanish Republic, people who engaged in armed political struggles. In the 1940s, a psychologist coined the term "rebel

without a cause” to describe Americans alienated from society in ways simultaneously both more broad (not just political but social and psychological) and more narrow (particular to an individual), people estranged from their parents, teachers, and bosses, their neighborhoods, and the conventions and expectations with which they had been raised. The modifier “without a cause” countered the strong military and political connotations of the word “rebel.” Increasingly in the 1950s, however, the phrase became redundant as a new rebel figure emerged, an image of individual defiance within the very mass culture accused of producing conformity.

“Culture” has always been a notoriously slippery and yet useful term. At mid-century, the meaning of the concept underwent something of a metamorphosis in common usage. Intellectuals since the early twentieth century, led most importantly by the anthropologist Franz Boas and the sociologist Robert Park, had developed a conception of culture as everything a people produces, all its symbols and meanings, its gods and laws and hopes, as well as its clothes and songs and homes. Boas, Park, and their followers used this conception of culture to fight the white supremacist beliefs entrenched in “scientific” thought about human nature and racial hierarchies, promoting in its place a kind of relativism. Differences between people were not natural but cultural in this thinking, and no culture was inherently more valuable than another. Gradually, this definition of culture began to blur the boundaries around an older understanding of the term as what might now be called high culture—classical music, opera, and fine art—coupled with ideas about education, background, respectability, and class. After World War II, intellectuals on both the left and the right used the term “mass culture,” often quite negatively, to split mass-produced varieties of expression from older popular forms. In this view, radio serials, hit songs, pulp fiction, magazines, and movies were different from other cultural forms celebrated as “folk” culture and the “higher” forms of art and learning once known simply as culture.⁴⁶

Although definitions varied, “mass culture” suggested forms of expression created for commercial rather than for artistic purposes and for large anonymous audiences rather than discriminating individuals. While these lines of distinction would prove difficult to draw in practice, at mid-century many intellectuals quickly adopted the concept, focusing on a perceived lack of quality, on the alleged “meaninglessness” of many cultural products. Members of the New York School, an increasingly powerful group of mainly former leftists associated in the postwar period with the magazines *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and *Dissent*, avoided discussion of who controlled production

and the unequal distribution of these other goods, the critique offered by the left during the 1930s and early 1940s. They also avoided judging these products in the traditional moral terms embraced by conservatives, which would have required excluding abstract painting, experimental fiction, and other modernist and avant-garde experimentations. The idea of mass culture enabled critics across the political spectrum to dismiss the cultural products of America’s booming postwar consumption.⁴⁷

New York School intellectuals like Lionel and Diana Trilling, Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, Dwight Macdonald, and Clement Greenberg drew on the ideas of earlier scholars in forming their postwar critiques of mass culture. José Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher and supporter of the Spanish Republic, published his *Revolt of the Masses* in 1930, but his ideas did not have much impact on American thinkers until after the war. “The mass,” in his analysis, was not a “social class, but the kind of man to be found today in all social classes.” “The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select,” he argued. “Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated.” For Ortega y Gasset, this conforming collective destroyed the very possibility of individualism. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the then leftist critics Macdonald and Greenberg began using the German term for rubbish or muck, “kitsch,” to refer to cultural products embraced by large numbers of people. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, part of a group of Marxist intellectuals that fled wartime Europe for America and became known as the Frankfurt School, also denounced mass culture. In *Dialect of the Enlightenment* (1944), they argued that radio and the movies left “no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience . . . They react automatically . . . Capitalist production so confines them [consumers] body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them.” In Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis, mass culture numbed people to their own exploitation, propping up the political economy of capitalism and its class inequalities. In a secularizing age, it was the new opiate of the masses. James Burnham, a liberal anti-Communist rapidly moving to the right, also denounced mass culture. America, he argued, was a “semi-barbarian superstate of the periphery.” “This is the generation, after all, of the triumph of the Book Clubs, columnists, and radio, the relative decrease in the number of book titles published, the Hollywoodization of a continuous series of writers, the persistent banality of opera taste and production, a dull local tradition in painting . . . and a philosophic waste.”⁴⁸

During the Depression, some future members of the New York School, then leftists, had criticized American capitalism for promoting individual

freedom over equality in the realm of the economy. The masses were the many, the good, common folk, and they were being deprived to fatten the few. At mid-century, in reaction to Stalinism and the rise of the cold war, this group of writers and critics including MacDonald, Greenberg, Philip Rahv (cofounder of the influential magazine *Partisan Review*), Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, and others, moved right. The New York intellectuals began criticizing the masses for their willingness to not just endure but to purchase the products of the growing entertainment industries. Mass culture, they argued, was killing in the realm of culture the very individualism American democracy needed in order to defeat the totalitarian menace of the Soviet Union. The masses, in their analysis, became the people whose bad or easily manipulated taste was ruining the culture for the few. For these thinkers, what had been a political category became an aesthetic and cultural category. The old masses had been outsiders politically and economically, people without power. The new masses were insiders culturally, people who read and watched and listened to the products of consumer capitalism. In this new metaphor of space, outsider no longer meant left and insider right. Instead, outsiders were people who lived isolated lives beyond the reach of a brutish, leveling culture. Rebels, their allies, were the artists and writers and intellectuals who actively opposed this bad culture, not people who attacked the state to change the distribution of political and economic power. During the early years of the cold war, this relatively small group of intellectuals shifted the Old Left spirit of opposition from criticism of the political economy to cultural criticism.⁴⁹

Nowhere was this stance clearer than in the editorial statement for the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture." America, the editors argued, "must be defended against Russian totalitarianism." Political theorist Hannah Arendt's 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, traced the commonalities in modern forms of mass politics, Nazism and Stalinism, despite their reliance on different political ideologies. Totalitarianism, she argued, destroyed the possibility of individualism. Clearly drawing on her ideas, the editors of the *Partisan Review* series asserted that American intellectuals and writers understood this threat and therefore no longer thought of themselves as "rebels and exiles" in a political sense. "The democratic values which America either embodies or promises" were "desirable in purely human terms," whatever their "cultural consequences." Still, those consequences had proven daunting. Mass culture created a "new obstacle" for creative people: "The artist and intellectual who wants to be a part of American life is faced with a mass culture which makes him feel that he is still outside looking in." Mass culture eroded the old cultural boundaries and harmed both high and

folk culture. It produced bad art and banal entertainment and deprived important work of an audience. It killed deep thought and real emotions. Committed intellectuals, many contributors to the series argued, needed to oppose cultural alienation, instead of that Old Left target, economic inequality.⁵⁰

Other liberal scholars and writers worried about the fate of the individual in America saw the threat as related not only to mass culture but also to the growing size of entities of all kinds, from businesses and governments to suburban developments and schools, a kind of "massification" of life. For sociologist David Riesman, the problem was less the mass media—he loved the movies—but the bureaucracy growing everywhere, especially in corporations. The motivating spirit of America, he quipped, had shifted from "the invisible hand to the glad hand." The "inner-directed" American, acting according to his own internal moral compass, was disappearing, and an "other-directed man," responding to bureaucratic and social pressures, what his bosses wanted and his neighbors had, was taking his place. Riesman and his coauthors, like most mid-century intellectuals, assumed the individual was a middle-class white man. Other studies made the vulnerability of a particular vision of American masculine autonomy even more clear. In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Sloan Wilson turned the fate of the anonymous corporate mid-level manager searching for a more meaningful life into a best-selling novel. William Whyte, another sociologist, called this kind of American "the organization man" and offered a sad survey of his plight. For Whyte, work in the corporate world and home life in the suburbs both assaulted individuality. The suburbs, he joked, were "a Russia, only with money." The middle-class white American man who acted according to what he thought others wanted him to do was almost as great a threat to individualism and American democracy as Communism. Where exactly this thinking left white middle-class women, who were supposed to live for others, remained unclear.⁵¹

On the right, the philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand saw threats to the survival of the individual everywhere, in the government and the economy and the culture. Her heroes and occasionally heroines, the opposite of Riesman's "other-directed" people, lived purely for themselves. Selfishness, putting the self first, she argued, was the most important virtue, the foundation of her philosophy, objectivism, which she popularized in her novels. From Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* (1943) to John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Rand's businessmen heroes rebelled against what Rand saw as the anti-individualism—what she called collectivism—of contemporary American life. They rejected a world that asked people to always value the taking care of others over the freedom of the individual. They acted for themselves. Though Rand clearly

believed women (including herself) could embrace objectivism, in her novels male characters most fully embody her ideals.⁵²

“The new domesticated male” may have been, as *Life* announced in 1954, “a boon to the household and a boom to industry,” but for many intellectuals he was a problem. He was not the opposite of totalitarian man. He was not the embodiment of the freedom that supposedly flowed from democratic capitalism. He might not even be a real American.⁵³

In response to these fears, the rebel offered a model of hyper-individuality without requiring any explicit reference to politics. Dwight Macdonald described this reaction in reference to the literary marketplace: “The more literature became a branch of industry, the more the craving for the other extreme—individuality. Or rather, a somewhat coarser commodity, Personality.” The biographies of writers, he lamented as part of his critique of mass culture, had become more important than their works. The literary critic Leslie Fiedler took a more historical angle on the issue in *Partisan Review*’s own symposium, contending that “the concept of the ‘alienated artist’ itself was as much a creation of the popular mind as of the artist.” “The melancholy and rebellious artist,” he argued, “has always been a collaborator in American culture.” Intellectuals, writers, and artists could be inside the culture and yet still oppose it. They could be a part of America—not exiles but participants—in their role as critics of mass taste and mass thought. They could save individualism simply by producing original thought and original art, by offering an alternative to conformity and “personality.”⁵⁴

The New York intellectuals and other critics and scholars were at least partly wrong and more than a little self-serving in their diagnosis of a crisis in American culture. The mass production of entertainment was not new, although many Americans had more money to spend on entertainment and more leisure. The cultural boundaries these critics often praised were arbitrary, elitist, racist, and sexist, as scholars ever since have loudly argued. As these thinkers thought through their own place in postwar America, however, they began to change the meanings of concepts like the masses, inside and outside, and the rebel. Instead of fighting the fact that cold war Red-baiting narrowed the range of political choices, they politicized questions of aesthetics and artistic expression. Their fusion of aesthetic and political questions, their sense that every act of expression was political even as they usually ignored the everyday practice of politics, profoundly affected the thinking of people far beyond the readership of their magazines. Paradoxically, they helped create the framework within which the mass media they often criticized—in this case national magazines, newspapers, and television—covered postwar cultural

developments. In their thinking, rebels became men and much less frequently women who self-consciously positioned themselves in opposition to mass culture.⁵⁵

The growing popularity of Freudian thought and psychological theory more broadly also shaped mid-century thinking about the relationship of insiders and outsiders and the meaning of rebellion. Psychologist Robert Lindner’s rebels were the alienated, disaffected people, mostly men, that he cared for in his Baltimore practice, Maryland’s state prisons, and a nearby federal penitentiary. In the fifties, as use of the term “juvenile delinquent” exploded in the popular press along with a corresponding rise in white middle-class anxiety about young criminals, he argued that the cures proposed by educators, religious leaders, doctors, and even social workers only made the problem worse. These professionals simply wanted to “smooth rough-edged personalities so that they [would] not rub too harshly on their fellows.” “Philosophy, recreation, and pediatrics,” he lamented, were all “infused with the rot—producing the idea that the salvation of the individual, and so of society, depends upon conformity and adjustment.” Young people, Lindner said over and over again in his more scholarly works and in articles by and about him in popular magazines, needed more freedom. His piece for *McCall’s* made this point clear in the title: “Raise Your Child to be a Rebel.” “Conformity” was “not a good,” he argued, “but an evil.” It was not “the path to the good life.” And young people were most “affected by” the loss of individuality generated by “the twentieth century’s mass political movements, social and industrial giants, wars, and economic upheavals.” “Mass man,” he asserted, was a “psychopath.” If Americans wanted to save individualism, they needed to start with the teenagers, the most vulnerable members of society. The cure for the juvenile delinquent was “positive rebellion.”⁵⁶

Though Lindner talked specifically about teenagers, adults often responded to his descriptions of growing alienation as well. “The cult of the mass has come in as the standard,” a reader wrote *Time* after a piece about the psychologist’s work appeared in the magazine in 1954. “Mass production, mass education, mass markets for the commercial press, for literature, for art, movies, everything.” Unlike the New York City intellectuals, however, Lindner provided a workable solution. How, for example, could writers and editors and reviewers persuade people to read “better” books? What could they do that they were not already doing? Lindner, a psychologist whose practice was treating individual patients, proposed instead that people oppose the institutions and practices that constrained their self-expression, that they adopt an oppositional stance in the relationship with the world. “Man,” he argued, in *McCall’s*,

not *Partisan Review*, was “by nature a rebel.” Mass culture must be resisted, not on aesthetic and philosophical grounds but for therapeutic reasons. Individual rebellion just might begin to restore Americans’ deteriorating mental health.⁵⁷

People living in this slippery entity called mass culture absorbed a tangle of contradictory messages. Most parents, teachers, ministers, rabbis, and political leaders told them they should be happy, even as some intellectuals, therapists, writers, and professors preached resistance and rebellion. Mass culture provided attractive examples of men and women happily conforming. Nothing captured the ideal of a conventional white middle-class suburban life better than the television show *Father Knows Best*, one of several hit sitcoms in the 1950s that featured these families living in suburbia. Mass culture, however, also made the rebel real. In the episode “Brief Holiday,” which aired in 1957, the mother, Margaret Anderson, played by Jane Wyatt, has become bored with her work as a housewife and takes some time off. When she sits for a portrait by a local artist, she quickly finds herself immersed in the bohemian life. Later, the artist drops off the painting at the Anderson house and her husband, Jim, is jealous. “Brief Holiday” simultaneously makes fun of this form of rebellion and reveals that even a happily married, full-time mother might identify with outsiders. What better place for people to explore their contradictory desires to be a part of the American center and yet separate from it, to fit in and to oppose, than mass culture, this space of contradictions?⁵⁸

For all the intellectual worry about conformity, in the early postwar period rebellion seemed to be breaking out all over American culture. Widely circulated magazines like *Life* helped transform Jackson Pollock, an abstract expressionist artist, into a crossover success, known outside the rarified art world as a crazy “action painter” who used sticks to sling ribbons of house paint at giant canvases. Jazz musicians including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis worked versions of a rebel persona onstage and invented a cool, dissonant, rhythmically complicated sound called bebop that became the soundtrack of late forties–early fifties opposition to the white middle-class center. Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* debuted in 1953 with slickly produced pages, photographs of nude women, and an overtly sexual style of masculinity. The first issue—featuring a Marilyn Monroe centerfold and an article attacking marriage—sold an unprecedented ten thousand copies within days. The television program *The Ed Sullivan Show* brought Elvis Presley’s music and only occasionally censored hips into middle-class homes in late 1956 and early 1957. Jack Kerouac’s autobiographical novel of rebellion, *On the Road*, launched in 1957 by a laudatory review in the *New York Times*, became a paperback best seller. That same year, newspapers and national magazines

covering the effort to censor Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” and criticizing Beat poetry spread knowledge of avant-garde writers far beyond the limited audiences that grew up around literary magazines and small, idiosyncratic bookstores. The rebel persona, in its many guises from bohemian to black, reconciled all the contradictions. It offered a way to salvage individualism through an opposition to mass culture that also remained a very profitable part of mass culture. For white women, who sometimes identified with male rebel characters, this balancing act proved much more complicated and often, much more dangerous.⁵⁹

Lost Girls

Holden Caulfield, the iconic lost boy of mid-century American culture, had no female peers. Models of white middle-class female alienation were hard to find, even as male rebellion became increasingly popular in literature and films. As the sociologist Wini Breines has argued, white middle-class girls growing up in the early postwar period found few compelling models or outlets for their dissatisfaction with visions of adult femininity grounded in white middle-class family life. Alienated middle-class girls existed, she has demonstrated, but they lacked characters they could identify with and use to think through their feelings and organize their rebellion. Doubly lost, left out of the popular culture of the period as well as popular accounts of its history, these young white women did not make their alienation visible until the sixties, when they went to work in the civil rights movement and the New Left and helped create the women’s liberation movement.⁶⁰

Women rebels were uncommon and rarely fared well in the work of the white male writers who dominated literary fiction in the fifties. In *Catcher in the Rye*, the character “old Phoebe,” Caulfield’s younger sister, exists to sharpen her brother’s deep angst. Her role is not to share his alienation but to give him some connection to the world outside himself. In *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger’s 1961 novel published originally in 1955 and 1957 as two separate pieces in the *New Yorker*, Franny Glass also suffers a kind of existential crisis. Yet unlike Holden, who sets out to find meaning in the city, Franny holes up in the family apartment and prays. Even her alienation plays out in a domestic setting. In his 1955 novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, Herman Wouk created perhaps the most compelling portrait of female rebellion published in this period. Nineteen and beautiful, Marjorie Morgenstern leaves her nice middle-class Jewish home, her parents and their values, and even her Jewish name in pursuit of her

dream, becoming an actress. In a sharp reversal at the very end of the novel, however, Wouk buries his female rebel in a conventional marriage and suburban life. "You couldn't write a play about her that would run a week, or a novel that would sell a thousand copies," a character comments near the end of the novel. "The only remarkable thing about Mrs. Schwartz is that she ever hoped to be remarkable, that she ever dreamed of being Marjorie Morningstar." April Wheeler, the heroine of Richard Yates's 1962 novel, *Revolutionary Road*, suffers a worse fate. Living with her husband and two children in a Connecticut suburban neighborhood in the mid-1950s, she concocts a plan to move to Paris, where she will work to support the family while her husband pursues his dream of becoming a real writer or artist of some kind. Frank Wheeler, however, does not really have any repressed creative ambitions. Escape from white middle-class suburban life is April's dream, not his. Relieved when she becomes pregnant, he insists they call off their trip. While he is at work, she tries to give herself an abortion and later dies from the loss of blood.⁶¹

In pulp fiction and films, white middle-class rebel girls had fun, though in the end they suffered for their pleasures or renounced their unconventional ways. They had sex with stable boys, household servants, college coeds, or gang members. They acted up and acted out. They became bad girls and tomboys, refusing the role of the good student, the obedient daughter, or the chaste girlfriend. Like their male counterparts, these girls rejected the model of the future laid out in their parents' lives. Frequently, rebel girl characters seemed created to satisfy the desires of male readers and viewers as much as female ones. Still, as the scholar Leerom Medovoi has argued, bad girls like Natalie Wood's character in the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* and tomboys like Sandra Dee's character in the 1959 film *Gidget* demonstrated that middle-class white girls could be rebels too, especially if they formed friendships or relationships with rebel boys. In this sense, these characters did suggest alternatives. Alienated girls could express their oppositional feelings most easily by identifying with and romanticizing male rebellion.⁶²

Many women writing about female rebellion had also tried to live it, to resist the conventional road from girlhood to mature femininity. A few of them published fiction based on their own experiences. In a letter to her mother, the future poet Sylvia Plath announced boldly, "I need to practice a certain healthy Bohemianism, to swing away from the gray-clad clock-regulated, responsible . . . economical, practical girl." In Plath's account of her young adulthood, *The Bell Jar*, the lost girl character Esther Greenwood describes her state of mind at the start of the story: "I wasn't steering anything, not even myself . . . like a numb trolley-bus . . . still and very empty, the way the

eye of the tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." Working at a women's magazine as an intern, she hopes to find something that will wake her up and make her the driver of her own life. "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from," she confessed. "I want change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket." Over the course of the internship, Greenwood does not figure out how to be those arrows. Instead, she attempts suicide, taking an overdose of pills and crawling under the family house to die in an act modeled on Plath's own first suicide attempt. If Greenwood must live a kind of waking death in middle-class family life, she might as well die in middle-class family life. In early 1963, a month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, Plath stuck her head in an oven while her two children slept in the next room. This time she succeeded.⁶³

Diane Di Prima found change and excitement when she fled college and her life as the academically successful daughter of Italian American parents to become a poet in New York City. In her fictionalized account of her life in the fifties, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Di Prima described the rebellion of a character also named Diane Di Prima. Under pressure from her editor—Di Prima wrote her "memoir" to earn money to support the child she was raising alone—much of the book consists of loosely strung-together sex scenes that are wild, passionate, and often unconventional, full of odd couplings and multiple and overlapping partners. In love with a WASP college friend who wrote like Dylan Thomas and J. D. Salinger, Diane ran away with her to the city. She confessed her "old longing to be a pirate, tall and slim and hard, and not a girl at all." And she followed the rules of "Cool," the implicitly male code of bohemia, which forbade anyone from provoking or displaying emotional vulnerability. In return, she experienced "light and freedom, air and laughter, the outside world." She made a life beyond the "nightmare" of monogamy with its "claustrophobic" and "deadening" boundaries. She lived and made love and art like she pleased, like a man. Still, Di Prima did not publish her account of female rebellion until 1969, too late to provide any guidance for young middle-class white women lacking her courage.⁶⁴

Di Prima grew up in New York City and knew where to find bohemia, in the coffeehouses and bars of Greenwich Village and around the fountain in Washington Square Park, before most middle-class white Americans had even heard of the Beats. Other middle-class women went looking in these places too. Joan Vollmer, a single mother who later married the writer William S. Burroughs, provided the apartment in which the budding literary lives of Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg intersected and sparked in 1944

and 1945. Six years later, Burroughs killed her in a drunken game of William Tell gone awry. Other lost girls also made a small mark in the historical record because they were connected with famous men. Edie Parker, Kerouac's first wife, participated in the life around Vollmer's apartment and lived there for a time. Elise Cowen dated Ginsberg in 1953, spent time with his friends, and wrote poetry. She later killed herself by jumping out a window. In New York City and elsewhere in urban America, white women sat in the audiences in jazz clubs. They performed music and poetry and mingled with the crowds in coffeehouses. They were there, helping create alternatives to "conformity" and what they understood as blind acceptance of mass culture.⁶⁵

Joyce Johnson, a girlfriend of Beat writer Jack Kerouac, and Hettie Jones, the first wife of poet LeRoi Jones, both published retrospective accounts of their transformation from middle-class white girls into bohemians. Their memoirs provided a sense of the sparkling promise of life outside middle-class conventions, and the hard costs as well. For the young Johnson, Greenwich Village in 1957 and 1958 "seemed to promise something I'd never tasted in my life as child—something I told myself was Real Life. This was not the life my parents lived but one that was dramatic, unpredictable, possibly dangerous. Therefore *real*, infinitely more worth having." Out at bars with Kerouac's circle of male friends and fellow writers, Johnson felt she sat "in the exact center of the universe," "the only place in America that is alive," and the place "the dead culture is surely being awakened." Haunting the conversation, listening to the excited talk, "merely being there" was enough. Hettie Jones described the seductiveness of bohemian difference more bluntly: "We lived outside, as if. As if we were men? As if we were newer, freer versions of ourselves." Johnson wondered where these ideas about the greater value of the outsider life originated. "In trying to trace the derivations of this notion of experience, I come into blind alleys," she confessed. "It was simply there all of a sudden, full-fledged, like a fever I'd come down with." The romance of the outsider spread like germs, in her metaphor, carried by the air.⁶⁶

Some middle-class white women clearly identified with male rebel characters, from the fictional Holden to the male artists, writers, and musicians who gathered in Greenwich Village. Growing up in small-town Texas, the future rock star Janis Joplin remembered wanting "something more than bowling alleys and drive-ins." There, she recalled, "you got no one to learn from because there is not a reader down the street you can sneak off and talk too. There's nobody. Nobody. I remember when I read that in *Time* magazine about Jack Kerouac," she confessed. "Otherwise I'd've never known. I said 'Wow!' and split." Mass culture, not the air, spread the romance of the

outsider, and young white middle-class women as well as men felt its power.⁶⁷

The romance of the outsider proved extremely costly for women who tried to live as rebels. Female participants in New York's late 1940s and 1950s bohemian circles paid for their freedoms in emotional pain and financial insecurity. Most difficult, women living beyond white middle-class gender conventions had little ability to shape the behavior of the men who were their lovers. Jones and Di Prima, for example, raised children alone with few resources. More troubling, with families far away and often estranged, and relationships based on "freedom" and being cool, women rebels had little in the way of a safety net. When their physical or mental health deteriorated, they had few options. Vollmer became a drug addict and neglected her children. Cowen killed herself. Parker disappeared. Self-destructiveness and suicide haunted female rebels outside the Beats' New York circle as well. Plath and fellow poet Anne Sexton both killed themselves. Joplin died of a drug overdose. Alienated women who violated the harsh and unforgiving boundaries of white middle-class womanhood not yet stretched by second-wave feminism paid dearly.⁶⁸

Still, male rebels suffered as well. Among the Beats, Ginsberg spent time in a mental hospital. Sometime writer Herbert Hunke was a junkie. Kerouac suffered from alcoholism and eventually drank himself to death. Their friend Lucien Carr spent time in prison for murdering an older man who had stalked and propositioned him. Poet and long-term Ginsberg partner Peter Orlovsky suffered severe mental health problems. Ginsberg's 1955 poem "Howl" famously chronicles the damage suffered by both male and female outsiders trying to live through the fifties, "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," "the angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection." Men as well as women became casualties. The successes, the icons, the models for those rebels that followed, however, were almost always male.⁶⁹

Lost girls lived in a patriarchal world. But they also lived in a place and time in which the logic of mass culture reinforced and to some degree supported white middle-class male rebellion while working against expressions of female alienation. If mass culture threatened to swallow American individualism, as intellectuals feared, then it feminized Americans. Mass culture, at the symbolic level, was a woman. Popular male rebels provided reassurance that an always mythic but no less powerful white middle-class American individualism would survive. Male rebels made mass culture acceptable. Female outsiders, on the other hand, simply ratcheted up anxieties about the emasculating

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effects of “conformity,” consumption, and white-collar work. At the symbolic level, mass culture made space for lost boys even as it worked to strengthen a kind of neo-traditional model of womanhood grounded in the nuclear family and the suburban home. It did not make much space for rebel girls. Alienated white middle-class women often identified with male outsiders and rebels, especially before some of them went to work to create the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s.

CHAPTER 2

Rebel Music: Minstrelsy, Rock and Roll, and Beat Writing

I don't want no other love.
Elvis Presley

If J. D. Salinger had set his coming-of-age novel *The Catcher in the Rye* a decade later, Holden Caulfield would not have needed to wander New York City looking for an alternative to phoniness. By the mid-fifties, rebel music filled the air. The tinny speakers of the new televisions buzzed with the music of segregationists angry at African Americans’ demands. Streets in Little Rock, Montgomery, and elsewhere rang with shouts and barks and sirens speaking through bullhorns, and the footsteps of large crowds. And where middle-class kids lived, black-sounding music blared its shouted and fast beats: on televised teen dance shows, at screenings of the new films, and on the transistor radios and portable record players blasting in urban bedrooms. Within this defiant cacophony, ringing out in contrast to an image of America as a place of rising conformity, middle-class white kids learned that rebellion sounded black.

In the mid-fifties, as the historian Brian Ward has argued, not even Jim Crow America was more racially integrated than the airwaves. Five years after the *Brown* decision, a song recorded by a black rhythm and blues band from the Bronx called the Chords appeared on *Billboard* magazine’s pop chart. Before “Sh-boom,” other records had occasionally crossed over from the hit lists reserved for songs by black musicians. But something was different about this song’s success. “Sh-boom” started a stampede

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