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“[B]reaking down the walls, and crying to the mountains”—Isaiah 22:5:

Dystopia and Ethics of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Megan Marie Toone

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“[B]reaking down the walls, and crying to the mountains”—Isaiah 22:5:
Dystopia and Ethics of *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Reading *The Catcher in the Rye* as dystopian fiction requires critical responsibility to evaluate the ethicality of the protagonist's sense of others and self, to assess the moral nature of the novel's dystopian world, and to evaluate the protagonist's agency or capacity to change his world or himself. The novel presents a multifaceted dystopia existing on multiple planes in the social dogma, the reality of the presented world, and Holden's mind before and after his paradigm shift. The dystopian aspects present in the novel highlight basic ideological systems as well as agency and action within the structure. The dystopian elements of the novel alter standards for ethical judgment. The ethical discussion shifts to focus on the possibility of agency, ability to change, and perceptions. Using these standards shows the dystopian-saturated world and reveals Holden as a changed character who transitions from unethical, complicit victim to ethical agent. *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a case study of corrupted societal structure and the possible outcomes for readers and critics. The dystopian genre expands through the inclusion of *The Catcher in the Rye* and extends the standards for ethical analysis to other dystopian novels.

Keywords: dystopia, ethics, catcher

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

INTRODUCTION 1

DEFINING HOLDEN’S DYSTOPIA 5

ETHICALITY OF HOLDEN’S SENSE OF OTHERS AND SELF 8

ETHICAL NATURE OF THE NOVEL’S DYSTOPIAN WORLD 12

HOLDEN’S CAPACITY TO CHANGE..... 14

IMPLICATIONS FOR READING DYSTOPIAN NOVELS 18

WORKS CITED 26

WORKS CONSULTED 29

Introduction

Academic analysis of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* benefits from recognizing the dystopian lens through which Holden Caulfield views his world and nearly all of his experiences. *The Catcher in the Rye* has made it onto lists of dystopian novels, yet there is a lack of academic conversation focusing on that aspect of the book. A resurgence in the academic conversation about *The Catcher in the Rye* with dystopia as a focus rather than a given or a side note further elucidates the events and characters. Dystopia underlies and propels every aspect of the novel and its main character. Holden's view of the world remains truthful and revealing, yet detrimentally skewed, given that he processes his observations and experiences according to a black-and-white paradigm. His disillusion with and immersion in the underside of New York society reinforce the polarities of his thoughts and influence his focus on the negative.

As the novel unfolds, Holden's breakdown forces a change in perception and action to allow for the tempering gray area of reality. His "vacation" reveals a society mottled with dystopian influence. He zeroes in on the perversion and corruption veiled by a flimsy societal facade of happiness and maturity. Holden refers to this as "phoniness," for lack of a better term. He ignores the gray areas and the good around him that defy his amplified dystopia. The depraved elements of society overwhelm him. His desperation and confusion create a damning conceptual dystopia where corruption or stagnation is inevitable. Unable to correlate his constructed world with reality and his desire to act, Holden eventually suffers a psychological collapse and forced ideological reconstruction.

Contrasting with acknowledged dystopian novels like *1984* and, more recently, *The Road* and *The Hunger Games*, *The Catcher in the Rye* takes the reader into the perspective of a young man whose confusion amplifies the dystopian elements of real life as opposed to a character

immersed in a tangible, societal acknowledgment of them. Thus, *The Catcher in the Rye* unfolds in a setting closer to reality than those of iconic dystopian texts whose inhabited worlds are separate from, yet resonant with, historical human existence.

The actions that are constantly obstructed by dystopian features define the ethics and the possibility of ethics in *The Catcher in the Rye* and within the larger dystopian genre. The dystopia of *The Catcher in the Rye* complicates Holden's ethics-based attempts and perceptions. The ethics must account for the impediments of action and the thought distortion of the dystopian genre. How should ethics apply in an imperfect, bad-as-possible world? If people are victims to a world, how and in what capacity do they become agents? How do they exercise ethics? These are the questions Holden confronts throughout the course of his vacation, also stirring up questions of what he needs to do and how he needs to think. Subsequently, paradigm shifts and deconstruction inevitably follow.

As a dystopian novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* cannot use straightforward ethical analysis without ignoring the unique confines of its created dystopia. Basic principles of ethical analysis still remain in the genre even as the ethics themselves are altered and strained. Ethical criticism focuses on simulations that show future outcomes or options. Literature gives perspectives about how to live and what values should be accepted (Booth, "Why" 23) and stands as "thought experiments" allowing for the exploration of future outcomes (Rosenstand 153). These outcomes provide aspirations, warnings, and mirrors for the individual and for society.

While utilizing the hallmarks of ethical criticism, dystopia complicates ethics. The extremes associated with the dystopian genre—extreme regimes, polarized doctrines, intense victimization, horrific conditions, high stakes, and characters forced into action—simultaneously heighten ethical awareness while focusing on the most basic ideas and actions of society. This

puts extreme pressure on individuals within the system that paradoxically creates impediments while forcing characters to act in response in one form or another. As victims of a system that will forever scar them there is the added difficulty of being able to act from their debased positions and questions to what extent they are responsible for and capable of within the system. They are not washed of all responsibility, but the standards of judgment adjust to the dystopia. Merely being able to act as an individual against the dystopia for betterment and change is problematic. Characters are isolated mentally, physically, or ideologically which hinder connections that would provide empathy and awareness of others that would inform ethical behavior. The genre forces characters to face the dystopia and its weapons, which pressures and amplifies ethics.

The dystopian genre implicitly asks, “How is a sense of personal responsibility influenced by corrupted societal structures?” *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a case study of a well-meaning, apparently ethical protagonist swallowed up by corrupt structures and his own skewed perceptions of them—and posits possible ethical outcomes of the protagonist’s situation. Besides showing the fears and flaws of society, dystopian literature provides a tool for the individualization of social problems as well as a place to wrestle with politics and social problems in an increasingly apolitical and cyber-pseudo-connected world (Ames; Babae). *The Catcher in the Rye* utilizes these trends to apply the concepts of dystopia to the troubles of reality during the process of re-identification and ontological reconstruction.

The Catcher in the Rye has garnered an abundance of critical attention since its publication in 1951. Critics have tended to treat Salinger’s novel as an anecdotal collection of acts of aggression and regression (Bryan), a portrait of Holden’s inability to cope with his brother’s death (Miller), a casebook of maladaptive behavior stemming from a keen “sense of

justice and human kindness” that ultimately “isolates and punishes [Holden]” (Gaynor 88), and a study of the social damage occasioned by the Cold War (Yahya). Robert E. Evans discusses Holden and the events of the novel as a result of alienation from others, self, and God. Evans states,

Holden Caulfield ... seems alienated from most of his teachers and schoolmates, much of his family, and much of society at large ... he is estranged and distant from others and even, to some degree, from himself. He has no real deep friendships; most of his interactions are superficial, and many of his relationships are insincere.... [People], in turn, appear to exist—at least as they are perceived and described by Holden—in shallow, unfulfilling, and insubstantial relationships, not only with Holden but also with one another. Very few characters in Salinger’s book appear to enjoy satisfying and purposeful existences; instead, they are living lives that are essentially self-centered, calculating, and insincere—lives that Holden, in perhaps the most famous word used in this book, considers fundamentally “phony.” (41)

This idea of alienation pervades most discussions of *The Catcher in the Rye* and seems the overriding reality of the novel itself. Holden’s alienation correlates on some levels with estrangement from religion (46). Evans explains how Holden’s profane references to God indicate a perception of his damned existence. Other scholars assess the novel as a reflective metaphor for the post-WWII era and its displacement of an “innocent and idealistic childhood” with numbing horror and despair and with an intense awareness of the empty promise of the “pursuit of status and power” (Steinle 4).

Perhaps the longest-running scholarly discussion of the novel is the one focused on Holden as a champion—straightforward or otherwise—of innocence. While all such criticism employs worthwhile and sophisticated readings of Salinger’s novel, analyzing Holden’s thoughts and actions through a dystopian lens reveals Holden’s questioning and deterioration in ways that the time period, Holden’s age, and acts of repression alone cannot. An ethical reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* as dystopian fiction will attend to the ethicality of the protagonist’s sense of others and self, the moral nature of the novel’s dystopian world, and the protagonist’s agency or capacity to change his world and himself.

Defining Holden’s Dystopia

Dystopia refers to a place where “everything is as bad as possible” (“Dystopia,” def. 1), an existence defined by difficulty, abnormality, dysfunction, or wickedness. The concept of dystopia is all too real: “In a universe subjected to increasing entropy, one finds that there are many more ways for planning to go wrong than to go right, more ways to generate dystopia.... And crucially, dystopia—precisely because it is so much more common—bears the aspect of lived *experience*” (Gordin 1). Dystopia thus has overlapping possibilities: a wicked world or chaos. The highly flawed world Holden occupies is made dystopian by his black-and-white perceptions of it. For example, while maturity arguably brings knowledge. Given the inevitability of the loss of innocence, his world proves increasingly bad as he eaves adolescence behind: there is no way out and no deliverance. His internally created dystopia is centered on a perverted and chaotic structure of adult society—and is therefore dystopian.

Holden’s worldview transforms over the course of the novel, a transformation changing the dystopia of the novel from closed to open. A closed dystopia exhibits pure, flat, anti-utopian aspects. Essentially, it is a world without hope and where “improvement” is either futile or will

make things worse (Freedman 239). A closed system is the bleakest embodiment of the bad-as-possible world. Its corrupting influence is inevitable and all-encompassing, impeding individual agency to in any way influence one's surroundings.

Open dystopian systems, in contrast, permit hope through retention of "the spirit of utopia." While still a dystopian existence, the "open" system implicitly holds the "possibility of collective resistance and improvement, and so maintains a stubborn, if sometimes small, margin of utopian hope" (Freedman 239). Given enough resistance or action against the system, characters can influence or change or even overthrow it. The agency of the characters continually fights against dystopian victimization. There is no guarantee that character will successfully transform their dystopian existence, but the hope is there in open systems. *The Catcher in the Rye* features an open system because its dystopia is at least partly of Holden's own malady. By novel's end, Holden has not escaped his dystopia and is not yet free of the binding forces of the world he inhabits, but he has begun to demonstrate a clearer perception of his world, together with the ability to act and change.

The created dystopian scenarios vary widely with the creativity and purpose of the authors; yet, there are common hallmarks. Authors often write about "wicked adults who seek to harm or control children" (Garrison 56). While not always centering on youth, authors of dystopian fiction often use youth to highlight, exaggerate, and explain the factors that make the created world dystopian. This is somewhat true of *The Catcher in the Rye*. There are adult figures at Holden's school that seek to control him and make him conform. While running around New York, he runs into adults who prey on his vulnerability, like the situation with Maurice, or who try to make him accept and accede to their shallow lifestyles. Many of the adults Holden meets try to control him. Some are well-intentioned; others mean him harm.

A common trend amongst dystopian novels is the portrayal of education and its power to indoctrinate (Garrison 56-57). Youth are vulnerable and pliable, perfect objects of conditioning, training, and influence. Youth and youthful characteristics give characters the ability to remain vulnerable while escaping adults who are a physical manifestation of reigning governance: “Adolescent heroes and heroines must take matters into their own hands” (Hintz 260). Their vulnerability forces them to act and make decisions by default and necessity while simultaneously putting great pressure on them to do so. They are the ones who can act and have yet to accept their positions concretely. Positions within the system, along with vulnerability, spark questions and actions within the dystopia. This sets up the characters for ethical responsibilities.

While not as extreme as other dystopian novels in regards to education as a means of control, *The Catcher in the Rye* does explore this idea through Holden’s explanation of Pencey Prep and his less formal education in the city. Holden begins his tale by explaining how the school claims to make men out of boys, or at least their version of what men *should* be. His disapproval and disenchantment keeps him from participating and aligning himself with the teachings of Pencey. This is not the only school where Holden has diverted from school teachings and assimilation. Similar occurrences happened at previous institutions. A less formal education occurs through Holden’s observations of what is deemed “acceptable” by society and through stated and implied expectations of adults. The education he receives perpetuates the phoniness Holden abhors.

Dystopian fiction acts like a case study or future projection that can be used for analysis of ideologies and practices: “Dystopia uses fiction to portray institutions based on intellectual mythology and essays prophecy and prognostication....The literature of dystopia examines the

possible effects intellectual mythology can have on individuals and society” (Kaplan 200).

Literature can be used to scrutinize and play out ideological structures. Dystopian scenarios prey on some of the deepest fears and most problematic issues of society and self. This helps showcase ideologies that would otherwise be obscured. Dystopia creates a world of possibilities—erring towards darkness and alarm—where diagnoses and projections are presented to individuals for examination. Seeing the dystopia takes away the blinding nature of the “dream world” others inhabit.

The Catcher in the Rye maintains the standards of the genre, which helps to solidify its place as a dystopian novel. Beginning with the feeling often associated with dystopia, the mood is usually “dark, pessimistic, and often reflects paranoia, alarm, or hysteria” (Kaplan). This stereotypical mood helps drive Holden’s progression through the dystopia. He experiences the alarm, the darkness, and the fear. His outcome represents a possible overall outcome for society; his system as open or closed will be theirs along with his future.

Ethicality of Holden’s Sense of Others and Self

Holden’s perspective of others and self correlates with dystopia through the extreme perceptions of corruption, hopelessly impeded action, and bad-as-possible classifications. He feels trapped in a system that oppresses and damages people who would in other circumstances show potential for goodness, sincerity, and morality. Holden sees himself as being in the inevitable transition into the dystopian-created phoniness. This fuels his desperation and his confusion. His extreme views of self and others perpetuate his personal dystopia by setting up a system where only dystopian elements enter into his outlook. While Holden desires to act ethically, his personal dystopia hinders his attempts to do so by tainting his sight and promoting the denigration of everyone to the point that they are beyond goodness and redemption.

The way Holden sees the world, others, and himself defines the nature of dystopia and the standard for ethical behavior. With a black-and-white mental construction, he tries to categorize people and behavior so that he can protect others from corruption and create definition for the world and self in the process. His dystopia includes the struggle between the extremes of innocence and phoniness. Simply stated, Holden's binary is erroneous and false because it places innocence and phoniness in opposition to one another. Innocence includes more than just purity unbesmirched by the corruption and hollowness of maturity. Innocence denotes a lack of experience, knowledge, and progression ("Innocent," def. 1). The opposite of phoniness, given its insincere and fake nature, is genuineness. The opposite of innocence is knowledge. The two categories create a problematically false black-and-white world.

Holden's categorizations further his dystopian worldview. Phony actions, regardless of any sincerity and individuality shown under different circumstances, make the character "phony" by Holden's standards. Readers encounter this categorization of phoniness with his roommate Stradlater who is a "nice guy," but is also self-centered and a real "bastard" (Salinger 32, 38, 49). Holden is internally confused by Stradlater's socially "acceptable" behavior that undermines his decent appearance. Another phony on Holden's list is Sunny the prostitute. Even here, the flat phoniness category shows problems. It is reasonable to assume that Sunny's situation comprises more than just growing up and becoming corrupt. Her youth and the extreme nature of her occupation connote something more complex. On some level, Holden has started to see the complexity that undermines the simple binary as well as the roundness of individuals that fights against flat perceptions and categorizations. The cost of flat categorizations is that Holden does not act ethically toward such individuals and he does not exercise agency in the dystopia. When the gray areas show through, he must change his actions to account for the deviation and, thusly,

afford more humanity and complexity to others.

The characters Holden sees as innocent starkly contrast with the phonies, reinforcing the false mental dystopian construct and making Holden even more desperate to preserve the innocence. Among those characters are the children he encounters: the kid at the museum who zips up his pants without shame or cover and the girl Holden helps with her ice skates who is so detached from the world that she does not worry about the days of the week or the names of the museums. His sister, Phoebe, tops his touchstones of innocence. Holden sees each of these characters as detached from the world. In his mind, the only way to avoid becoming phony is through disconnection. This disconnect continues with Jane. Jane—the untainted memory of childhood Jane, as opposed to whatever she has become during partial adolescent maturity—will stay innocent in his mind through his intentional ignorance.

Holden finds himself vacillating between phony and innocent extremes and never quite fitting into either category. This undercuts the ideological construction and accelerates his mental breakdown. His physical appearance and personality speaks to this confusion. He is a teenager, a liminal space between the childhood and adulthood extremes that leave his world undefined. Readers are informed of Holden's paradoxical appearance (Salinger 11-12). He is a contradiction—a mix of adult and childlike characteristics. While in New York, he checks into hotels, goes to bars, and tries to embrace phoniness in an attempt to fit in. Just like the patch of gray hair doesn't quite fit his youth, he cannot quite fit in with this segment of society. When he attempts to hold on to his innocence, he alienates those around him. During those innocent phases, he once again finds that he does not fit in. Holden wants innocence and wishes for a life behind glass like the exhibits at the museum that stay the same day after day, but he knows that this cannot happen. He unconsciously sees himself as not innocent and not phony, and he seeks

to define others to define himself. If he can figure other people out by placing them into a finite, uncomplicated category, he can see himself by comparison. He knows that he cannot be part of the innocence he initially holds in high esteem. Instead he settles for trying to save others from phoniness, seeing himself as an aberration in the system that is somehow more than just black or white. Keeping his self-identification as a person outside of the system hinders his ethical abilities because it compromises his influence and gives him the delusion of detachment to a system manipulating him. His perception of self intertwines with his readings of others within the dystopia.

There is more to Holden than people see and more than people understand—something Holden acknowledges about himself but refuses to grant to others. This hypocrisy perpetuates his inhabited dystopia because it amplifies his mental construction. After explaining that he sometimes looks old for his age, he states, “And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It’s partly true, too, but it isn’t all true. People always think something’s all true.... Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything” (Salinger 12). He acknowledges that he is more than the phony person who lied to a nice woman on the train or the innocent kid who punched through the glass of all the windows in the garage. Yet, when he looks at others, he only sees facades or isolated instances, only flat categorizations of “phony” or “innocent” denying roundness of character. He cannot be ethical or act as an agent as long as he continues to use his false binary to define others—and, by extension, his world. He essentially tries to damn and hold back individuals by keeping them phony or keeping them innocent and ignorant. This perpetuates stagnation and victimization and inhibits actions and thoughts that go against the dystopian ideology. Even his initial attempts to escape the dystopia exist in dream worlds—

dream worlds that are not only impossible, but also ultimately undesirable and harmful—like the one he blames others for inhabiting. He escapes with ideas of a New York vacation, the rye field, the deaf mute existence, the cabin in the woods, the West, and the life behind the glass at the museum (Salinger 58, 191, 218,135)—The irrational and impossible utopian states he creates reinforce the dystopia because of their complete disconnection and continuation of dystopian victimization. Holden wants and tries to act ethically, but the altered ethics of the dystopia initially confound him. His failed attempts buy into the dystopian ideology and embrace a closed system.

Ethical Nature of the Novel's Dystopian World

Holden's dystopian world is a combination of how he sees the world and how the world actually is. His dystopia includes his skewed and filtered perceptions. However, the foundation of his dystopia is based on aspects present in the real world around him. The information and experience he filters come from real perversion and corruption of society. The ideas about what is expected of him and how society functions are based on experience and counsel from teachers, school leaders, older students, his parents, and adult acquaintances. All of society does not subscribe to the perversion and phoniness, but the society is mottled with dystopian elements to the point that much of society is corrupt. While Holden's extreme mindset is faulty, his observations of corruption are real. His mindset amplifies what is there, highlighting the detrimental problems of society.

While perceptive, Holden's view becomes limited, filtered, and untrue. He constructs a completely dystopian society in his mind, ignoring any aspects of society that do not fit into the binary-based social construct he initially attempts to use. Certain dystopian world elements remain outside himself in reality; other elements are clearly internal and embody his perceptions

only. One feeds the other. In this psychological filtration and construction, Holden embraces a similar ignorance to the idea of a perfect world while wading through the mire of reality, but instead of ignoring the dystopia to feign utopia, he does the reverse. He sees society as corrupted and continuing to sully itself. These broken societal ideas are further amplified as he constructs his own truths about society in his head as he tries to compensate for a faulty belief in absolutes.

The merged world of external and internal dystopia leads to unethical action. In this filtered mental dystopia, Holden sees in black and white in an effort to find the stability and definition he needs. He sees others as flat with easy, set categorizations. He sees himself as someone who does not fit anywhere, but is having to choose one side. Since what he sees is false, he falls apart instead of creating stability and definition. The cost is that he unintentionally attempts to damn others and self and that he creates in his mind perpetual victims who are incapable of agency or are corrupted through their actions. If he sees others as set and tries to keep people where they are, he promotes stagnation and helplessness. His disillusionment eventually is tempered as the filters break away. Too many people and situations don't comply with Holden's categorizations. This mixed with psychological and emotional strain removes some of the filters. The good can be seen and acknowledged along with the hollowness and depravity, which makes Holden's perceived world less polarized and bleak. How Holden views his family, his faulty plans of escape, his return home, and the city show a fundamental shift. The reality behind his mental construction still exists, but is less amplified in Holden's mind. The confusion and victimization remain a part of the reality, as does the lack of definition.

The Catcher in the Rye shows the individual's role in the creation of dystopia, both in external reality and mental creation. Impediments come from the reigning structure and ideology. The extent to which individual action is permitted starts within the mentally established dystopia

of the individual. Various dystopian systems influence the degree to which individuals create and control mental construction. This focus on internal perceptions does not negate problems with society that exist outside of the mind. External dystopian factors remain real and problematic. However, effective control goes beyond the external to complete and ensure the dystopian structure. Individuals still are ethically responsible for their ability to act. Society and the individual are also responsible for the outcomes of dystopia, such as the hand *The Catcher in the Rye*'s dystopia plays in the suicide of James Castle, who ends up a casualty of the system. The life of Castle as told by Holden seems to parallel some of the same problems Holden struggles with. Castle was bullied and people tried to force him to conform. In a fatal incident with some of his abusers Castle refuses to lie and accept falsity. Instead, he jumps out the window to his death. While it is likely that there is more to Castle's suicide than Holden can see, the horrific and shady circumstances propelling Castle's death thrust some responsibility on the systems and individuals involved.

Holden's Capacity to Change

Holden's capacity to change is at the heart of the ethicality of the novel. Individual action makes ethical behavior possible. In a world that victimizes its inhabitants, ethical action and a move away from being the victim create people capable of exerting influence. Characters are given options and the characters are responsible for their subsequent actions. The options create opportunities for influencing the present and the future. In a sullied system like Holden's, there is a specific responsibility to disrupt the dystopia and become an ethical agent. Holden has to change his initial perceptions and actions to avoid the damnation of stagnation and corruption. His change from a victim to an agent undermines the dystopian influence.

Holden's evolving agency is a continuous process. His journey revolves around the

necessary fall into the tangles of constructed societal illusions. This forces acknowledgement of the contradictions, shortcomings, and traumatic flaws of his learned and accepted perception of the world. Unlike the neat categories and simple solutions to which he initially holds, Holden finds himself in the mire of a reality where he has to sort through fragmented understanding of the world if he wants to be ethical and survive, and even change, the dystopia. His encounters with Stradlater, Sunny, his teachers, and his sister create opportunities for him to perceive the inadequacies of his worldview and for him to reevaluate what life is.

When the binary shatters, he goes into chaos—still dystopian, but without the utopic reflection of the impossible catcher saving children in the rye field. He loses the defining influence of the social construct of the binary. Holden finds that his attempts to help others maintain innocence and hold off maturity prove damning. To sentence individuals to a purely innocent life condemns them to a life without living, to stagnation and ignorance, simply replacing the hell from which Holden attempts to save them with a new and possibly more terrible one. Having nothing with which to ground himself, he spirals downward in a manifestation of such feelings as falling off the curb into an abyss. The curb is the point where the sidewalk is divided from the street. When Holden steps over the curb he is between these two spaces, creating a momentary placelessness where he resides in an in-between, ambiguous state of liminality. Holden once again finds himself in a place where there is no definition to which his mind can cling. His world has shattered through his analysis. The problems he encounters in New York bring him to a point where he is forced to discard his worldview. Mr. Antolini—a character that Holden can't completely understand—predicted this “fall” earlier in the novel. In advising Holden, he states,

This fall I think you're riding for—it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The

man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit the bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn't supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really got started. You follow me? (Salinger 207)

Holden fell, regardless of Mr. Antolini's advice. Holden has both seen the flaws in his own mental dystopia and broken the real dystopian binary, explaining his lack of definition.

Only in his shattered reality can Holden see clearly and attempt to rebuild a better, more accurate, and healthier ideology. The transition toward understanding and agency continues as Holden rebuilds his worldview by allowing for possibilities that he previously ignores. Once Holden perceives the illusion of the binary, he begins to see the limitations of innocence and the potential desirability of knowledge and experience. Gray scale enters Holden's philosophical system.

The truth about Phoebe is found among the fragments of Holden's mind. Holden's breakdown forces a review of how he sees his sister. Phoebe is shown to be much more complex than initially described by Holden. He has a connection with her, and he references her frequently. She is the one he seeks out during his trip even though he avoided contacting his other family members. She is the one to whom he wants to say goodbye when he decides to leave. Later Holden meets up with Phoebe, who had decided to pack a bag and accompany him. Phoebe is willing to follow him west: an immature act because of its implausibility and irrationality. Her stubbornness of staying away from Holden after his refusal to take her away from New York with him can be seen as childish, yet it is also an emotional response based on

experience and awareness that does not completely correlate with childlike innocence. She knows her brother; she is aware of her own feelings and understands the situation arguably better than he does. This shows a maturity and understanding unbecoming of a purely innocent child. Furthermore, her forgiveness of Holden is not an arbitrary, baseless response. Just as Holden stated that he sometimes acted younger than his age and that other times he acted older, Phoebe proves to be more than simply childish. She is young, her conversations recorded in her notebooks exhibit very young behavior (Salinger 177), but, like Holden, she fluctuates, except without the extreme instability because she has yet to be initiated into the corrupt, false binary.

At the end of the novel, when Holden allows Phoebe to run to the carousel uninhibited, he no longer embraces ignorance. This solidifies his change and maturation. He accepts more than the filtered perception of reality making his world a pure dystopia—the good that he did not initially realize existed can now intermix with the bad. The awareness of reality changes Holden and allows him to be an agent as opposed to reacting as a victim to a false paradigm. This shift is part of his fulfillment of his ethical responsibilities of pushing against and analyzing societal ideologies. Phoebe thinks she is too old to ride the carousel, but essentially, she is never too old. However, she is not so young that she needs Holden to go with her. Holden's change can be witnessed here. He is no longer desperately rubbing swearwords off walls to keep children from seeing them, nor is he wallowing in the idea of life behind glass like the scenes in the museum where the figures stay the same day after day. Phoebe can go off while he watches. He can sit back in the rain, acknowledging that this new construct, or at least the beginning of this construct, is not perfect, but it is not hopelessly flawed either. He no longer fears the death of Phoebe's innocence or the loss of childhood. Coming out of Eden does not mean transitioning straight into Hell. A broken binary has come down, opening up the opportunity for a different,

better fitting ideological structure to influence and define society. The phonies exist, the innocent people exist, but between them there is now room for reality and truth.

Ethics within the dystopian genre show the necessity of awareness of reality as a means of agency and influence. The goal of the dystopian protagonist usually isn't to just navigate the landscape, but to act upon it. Disconnections, "dream worlds," and the like have their place, but a correct perception of reality aids agency. This agency allows people to act instead of being acted upon by the dystopia. This creates a fundamental change that disrupts dystopia.

Identifying the false constructions is not enough, as shown in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden takes the necessary step of flinging himself against the structure where goodness, misconstrued as pure innocence, cannot be preserved, where all must succumb to the detriment of hollowness and falsity, and where members of society remain as standards of intentional ignorance to their own circumstances. Holden confronts the constructs, and while he only attempts to take on the parts he perceives as damaging, more than just the undesirable elements are affected. Holden's created dystopia crumbles simultaneously with his emotional breakdown, and the story very well could have ended there with everything in pieces. Holden does end up in a rest home in California. However, he starts to rebuild with Phoebe. Holden escapes his dystopia as an individual agent capable of making changes to himself. As an ethical agent he can then influence others and society as a whole by not perpetuating the system, assisting others towards agency and action, and creating a different ideology that opposes the corrupt structure.

Implications for Reading Dystopian Novels

Reading *The Catcher in the Rye* as dystopian fiction underscores the novel's ethical standards and agentic responsibilities of its characters. The protagonist's perception of self and others, the nature of the world the protagonist inhabits, and the protagonist's capacity to change

the self and the world determine standards for ethics and the potential for ethical action—these factors reveal Holden’s transition towards being an ethical agent in a dystopian-influenced world. Holden is a disillusioned teenager disenfranchised by his own negativity and idealism. The inadequacy of his vocabulary initially hinders his ability to describe his understanding of his world. Perceptive enough to see past the detrimental ideologies that are veiled by the pretense of success and happiness, Holden is able to take his observations and turn them into action—action that results in change in himself and affects others. This indicates that the dystopias of *The Catcher in the Rye* are open systems susceptible to individual action and influence. Ethical analysis with an emphasis on dystopian ethics reveals Holden as an ethical character by the end of the novel. The altered perception of the ethics helps to avoid hang-ups on foul language, issues of sexual questions and situations, substance abuse, and pure adolescent angst. Ethics instead focuses on Holden’s ability to act and to navigate within the dystopia. The ethical case study of *The Catcher of the Rye* is based on these ethics and Holden’s subsequent actions. The warning of the study pertains to the danger of unmitigated and untried categories and binaries upheld and built by society as well as the responsibilities to question, analyze, and act on dystopian ideologies. This warning emphasizes the individual’s part in creating and testing dystopia.

Overtly dystopian novels such as *1984*, *The Road*, and *The Hunger Games* may be considered from this same ethical paradigm. In each of the three dystopian novels there is an attempt to control and victimize with the aim being indoctrination and conformity, which is similar to Holden’s situation. All of these characters are forced to act and those actions bring ethical responsibilities and consequences. As with *The Catcher in the Rye*, the standards of measuring the success, ethics, and options of the characters are altered to accommodate the

dystopia. The protagonist's views of others and self, perceptions of the world, and capacity for change dictate the ethicality present in the respective novels.

George Orwell's *1984* portrays a very different dystopia than the one found in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Winston Smith's dystopia exists outside of himself with the strict control, police, and traps. In part, however, the dystopia also exists in his mind. The language controls his thinking. The fear of thinking anything contrary to the ruling party is so prevalent that it prohibits action or individuality. Winston's rebellion does not shake the dystopia created by Big Brother. It does not have the opportunity to get that far because Winston is trapped and tortured before any real analysis or attack takes place. Eventually, he embraces the closed system dystopia and betrays his lover and fellow would-be dissenter. He is unable to be anything but a victim and is re-indoctrinated into not seeing the dystopia by the end of the novel.

Winston's actions, or inaction, are not ethical nor is there a possibility of ethical behavior in *1984*. Big Brother stands firm without significant contestation. Winston starts out with the hope of change. This hope is projected outward onto mysterious groups. These groups offer the potential for rebellion and individual thought. Others are believed to have the capacity to push against the system, but Winston feels he does not. He has to work up to the point where the ethical power afforded to others can be extended to himself. The desire to act ethically and overcome the dystopian victimization proves futile. The rebel groups and support to which Winston clings for respite from Big Brother are part of the powers that created the dystopian world. There was never the possibility for an existence beyond the dystopia; there was only the flimsy illusion that was demolished quickly. The dystopia of the novel does not allow ethical behavior because the only alternative presented is momentary rebellious delusion followed by complete conversion to the ideology of the dystopia. Ethical actions facilitated through

awareness of self, others, and surroundings are not possible in the dystopia. Thus, ethics-based judgment of Winston's submission allows for the impossibility of agency and ethics.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents a modern presentation of the dystopian world that can be analyzed through the same dystopian-based questions posed by *The Catcher in the Rye*. The dystopia itself is underemphasized during the narration. There is no explanation of what destroyed the world, even though events such as a nuclear Holocaust can be inferred (Knickerbocker). The extreme focus on the relationship between the father and the son pushes the dystopian world to the background and makes the interaction and responsibilities of the characters paramount over the setting. Because of the father-son dynamic, it has been referred to as a "horror story with a conscience" (Knickerbocker). The father is the protagonist of the novel even though he is part of a symbiotic team with his son. The ethical questions presented in *The Catcher in the Rye* as dystopian fiction—the protagonist's view of self and other, view of the world, and capacity for agency—show the necessity of the present, mitigated by humanism, in *The Road*.

The father's interaction with his son answers the question of how he sees himself and others because he defines and sees himself through his son. The son is the carrier of the light, and the father is the carrier and protector of the son. Everyone and everything else are separate, opposing, and dystopian regardless of whether or not they are affiliated with the cannibal groups. This often creates blinders for the father, but the humanity of the son prevents the father from undermining his own purpose of protecting the light.

The father sees the world as both hopeless and necessary: hopeless in that the world is ruined and necessary in that he cannot give up on it as long as his son exists. He has to be mentally and emotionally present instead of embracing the impulses and ideas of his damning

dreams. The world is dystopian; the dreams of the father are unrealistic and separate from the dystopia. The father sees these dreams as dangerous because they prevent presence and drive in reality. However, the son grounds the father and gives him purpose and values.

The father's actions reflect his view of the world and his son. He facilitates their survival and some happy tender moments for the boy when he can manage it. The dystopia opposes such action with its savagery, unyielding landscape, and cannibalism; however, the father manages to navigate his victimization and act on behalf of his son. Even amid the dystopia, the father is able to bring his child to relative safety after his own death: an act of agency and freewill that does not correlate with the dystopia.

Reading *The Road* through this ethical paradigm reinforces the love story of father and son while simultaneously advocating humanism and relationships as the center of communal groups and society as a whole. The father's interactions and unyielding nature may undermine ethical standards when viewed outside of its dystopian setting. The different questions and standards of dystopia emphasize the ethical responsibilities and actions of the father in regards to his son and the world. The dystopian setting thus becomes a means of highlighting the messages and actions of the novel as opposed to obfuscating them amid the moral debauchery that could so easily become the focus if ethics are ignored.

Following the journey of a surly teen, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series mirrors the process taken by Holden. Katniss Everdeen sees and is affected by her perception of dystopia. She is caught in a system that perpetuates the dystopia, and she is faced with the responsibility to act as an individual amidst impediments and opposing forces implemented by the presiding structure. Much like Holden, she has to face a break and a transition. The ethics of the novel reside in the realm of dystopian standards. She is responsible for these standards as

opposed to a character in a setting outside of Panem. The extreme world in which Katniss lives victimizes her. Holden also is a victim of dystopia, although his experience differs from Katniss's. Things in District Twelve do not veil the dystopia, whereas the setting of *The Catcher in the Rye* tends to attempt to mask or justify its corruption and shallowness. People in the Capital experience the sham utopia, but the people in the districts do not experience the same illusion. The Game itself perpetuates the dystopia and attempts to scare people away from action. The goal is for the people of the districts to accept complacency and a closed system.

Analysis of Katniss proves her actions to be ethical even if her intentions do not meet the same standard, as seen in her initial attempts to placate and conform to the dystopia to prevent a war. Even her alignment with the rebellion is based on other interests than dismantling the dystopia. Katniss's ethical desires are complicated by her limited scope of vision and by the inescapability of the power plays using her. The responsibilities to evaluate ethics of self and others, to assess the dystopian world, and to evaluate capacity for agency emphasize Katniss's initial compliance to the Capital, not because of her belief in the system, but because her fear of retribution on people of immediate concern to her. This never fully changes. She continues to hate the capital and she eventually hates the "new Capital," District Thirteen. She seeks for individuality, choice, and influence in her immediate surroundings. However, her sense of others lacks the same ethicality. This is largely because of the unethical nature of his dystopia. The governing power controls people through ignorance and isolation. An ethical responsibility towards others becomes difficult, erring toward impossible, because there is no tangible philosophical awareness of a greater whole of people. This is why the concept of leading an idea as opposed to a visible group is foreign to Katniss. She instead processes it through a more self-based paradigm.

The government permits, but limits, the capacity for agency within the districts. The people are still victims rather than agents. The possibility of change only comes after complete annihilation. It is then partly surrendered to the new regime. Towards the end of the novel, Katniss has almost complete autonomy because her attack against the newly implemented governing structure. She is disconnected and left to herself, but the others are ushered into a new order. By the end, after transitioning from having very limited abilities to act to having an abundance of action-based influence, she surrenders ethical influence for disconnected autonomy.

The way Katniss sees herself and others is so ingrained in the dystopia that she has to disconnect herself or lose herself in what is going on. She is able to act regardless of the dystopia and ethically uses the opportunity to enable the action of others. However, in the end, Katniss is still not free of the dystopia despite the victory over the capital. Using the questions of ethics in dystopia in *The Catcher in the Rye*, what would seem to be an emancipating ending of the series proves to be a placatory broken existence where Katniss and her cohorts are discarded and forever terrorized by the effects of dystopia. She brings down the system but is not free from it—regardless of the “happily ever after” with Peeta.

Each of these dystopian novels emphasizes messages that invite awareness and ethical actions from their audiences. Each novel presents ideas on ethical behavior and awareness: the separating influence and scarring nature of violence, the transcendence of familial relationships and “goodness,” the awareness of influential forces, and the importance of humanity and individual thought. Each novel shows projections and gives warnings and then follows characters that have to navigate through the forecasted dystopias. The ability of characters to attack the ideological surroundings and to act according to conscience establishes the capacity for ethics

within a dystopia while encouraging preventative measures and analysis in life beyond the literary world. The actions of and responsibilities to ethics in each of these novels are altered because of their dystopian settings. The circumstances in the novels that question the ethics of self and society reflect reality and the human condition. It encourages analysis of constructions and ethical responsibilities by making an extreme, dystopian setting to emphasize the problems, needs, and obligations. Moreover, each of the protagonists is steered toward attacking the ideological structures of the dystopia. They go through a similar process as Holden. The parameters, problems, and confines of the different dystopias influence the outcome of the attacks. The results reinforce the novels' themes and invitations to analyze and act upon those themes.

The prevalence of the dystopian genre testifies to the need to look for the ethics-based process characters experience and that color their journey. *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a case study for the necessary steps of confronting social constructions as well as providing an area of focus for such questioning. The emphasis of agency, change, and basic ideals provides a standard by which to measure ethics. The extremes used in dystopian fiction emphasize the ethics and the problems that created the dystopia. Literary case studies provide clear projections of the future and advise basic actions against dystopia as well as acting to prevent the presented dystopian scenarios. Ethical analysis of dystopian fiction ensures the contextualization of characters' actions and the communication of base fears and actions represented by the text.

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