The American Nightmares of Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood

Master’s Thesis

Bc. Přemysl Slunský

Supervisor: Mgr. Jiří Šalamoun, Ph.D.

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the Works cited section.

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the notion of the American dream in the 1950s and the impact it may have on the mental health of Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood – the protagonists of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*, respectively.

The primary aim is to find the links between the said characters’ depression (and subsequent mental breakdown) and the social pressures of the era, in which both of the novels are set, while also determining additional root causes of their mental health problems. This is achieved by defining the era’s distinctive features, diagnosing the characters’ possible illnesses in more detail, analyzing their family background and indicating all the traumatic events they experience throughout (or prior to) the plot of their respective novel.

The thesis is concluded by assessing the relationship between all the potential causes of the characters’ depression while also determining the principal one.

Key words: American Dream, Women, 1950s, postwar era, depression, psychosocial factors, suicide, mental health, conformity, gender roles, psychological diagnosis, peer pressure, J.D. Salinger, Sylvia Plath
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Introduction

Yes, I know my enemies – they’re the teachers who taught me to fight me.
Compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance,
Hypocrisy, brutality, the elite,
All of which are American dreams!

– Rage Against the Machine, \textit{Know Your Enemy}

The American Dream; one could hardly find a simple phrase so powerful, so influential, and so highly controversial to even remotely match this driving force of the American nation. Despite the actual term not becoming popularized until the early twentieth century, the notion of it has existed for as long as America itself, and had its indisputable role in shaping the nation throughout the centuries. But just as there are two sides to every coin, so has the American Dream been a subject of more than a few negative connotations.

As the title suggests, one of the themes of this thesis is the nightmare side of the Dream, since it focuses on the lives of the characters, who would, in all likelihood, choose words more akin to those of the introductory song excerpt, if asked what the Dream meant to them. All the adverse nouns that the song uses to define the American Dream, as well as the sharp criticism aimed at various authorities, are integral themes of both \textit{The Catcher in the Rye} and \textit{The Bell Jar}. And in many ways do the lyrics parallel the attitudes of the novels’ respective protagonists: Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood.

The fact that there are roughly forty years between the novels’ plots and the song only shows that the Nightmare counterpart to the Dream has always been present, even if often represented only by minority groups (though not particularly small ones, by any means). Still, the postwar era in the United States had its own specifics, – from the Cold War paranoia to very clear-cut and heavily advertised gender roles – which will be discussed in this thesis and serve as the main reference point in regards to the socio-cultural background.

Another major theme of this work is the depression and subsequent mental breakdowns of the two characters. The main focus is to analyze the characters’
psychological conditions in as much detail as possible while considering all the information on their background that the novels provide.

The primary aim of the thesis is to determine the exact relationship between the characters’ mental health problems and the social pressures of the postwar era they live in. The hypothesis on this subject is as follows: The socio-political situation of the postwar era is the direct cause of the characters’ depression.

The secondary aim is to validate the seriousness of Holden Caulfield’s condition, which is often disregarded by the critics and considered a mere teenage angst; even more so when compared to the condition of Esther Greenwood. Eik, for instance, states that “[Esther’s] problems were of course much more serious that Holden’s […]” (2). And while that may seem to be the case at first sight, the hypothesis for this thesis is that Holden’s condition, in terms of its seriousness, is either on par with that of Esther’s, or even a more serious one.

The thesis is divided into two notional parts. The first part is focused on providing a sufficient amount of socio-cultural context on the postwar era, in which the novels are set, while the second part deals with a detailed psychological diagnosis of the characters, supported by the fourth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as well as other sources.

The findings of this study then disprove the primary hypothesis – they establish the characters’ childhood trauma as the root cause of their mental illness, the after-effect of which is their above-average sensitivity to the socio-political pressures.

The second hypothesis, however, is proven as Holden’s diagnosis clearly shows a significantly larger number of serious symptoms compared to that of Esther’s; even despite Holden’s story being told over a much shorter time span.

Aside from all of the above, the purpose of this thesis is to also raise the awareness regarding the seriousness of depression, and the consequences of overlooking many of its symptoms, which may, in some cases, lead to tragedies.
1. The American Dream

1.1. Origins and definitions

In the course of history, the term “American Dream” has become an inseparable part of America’s folklore. It is often mentioned in connection with the country’s supposed greatness, unparalleled freedom and unlimited opportunities for everyone who is willing to work hard enough. But what exactly is the American Dream and where did it come from? Whether a beacon of hope for those who are struggling in the poorest of conditions, a motivational story for parents to tell their children, or simply a myth to keep everyone’s spirits on high levels even in times of trouble, there is no one single interpretation of the term. And much like its actual meaning, its origin can also be observed from several different perspectives.

The term itself was popularized quite recently, in the early 1930s and defined by James Truslow Adams, the son of a rather unsuccessful Wall Street broker who thus grew up in a relatively modest environment. However, he would later become successful in his father’s field, earning enough money to devote himself fully to writing. As he was becoming more and more famous in this field, he decided to write a general history of the United States that would focus on what he considered to be the most important aspect – the theme he would call the American Dream (Cullen, 3-4).

*The American Dream* was originally supposed to be the name of Adams’ most famous book but his publisher did not seem to be in favor of that idea (Cullen 4). This only proves that the term was not very popular among people at the time. Perhaps the Great Depression was at least partially to blame. As many people were literally struggling to survive, there was, without much doubt, a certain amount of skepticism about the traditional American ideals and values. Instead of pursuing happiness, the majority of people chose to pursue social securities promised by Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal. This solution, however, did not appeal to Adams in the slightest. Cullen states that he was “feeling they represented a betrayal of American traditions of autonomy and a case of government collusion in the creation of a soulless, materialistic consumer society” (4).

From this alone, it is quite clear that Adams’ version of the American Dream was not that of mere materialism as many Americans seem to interpret it nowadays but it
was rooted much deeper in its obvious model – the Declaration of Independence. In *The Epic of America*, Adams states:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (214-215)

Adams seemingly fully realizes the skepticism of the common American folk during the harsh times of the Great Depression but urges them not to give up on the ideals that had once shaped the nation. To some extent, he succeeded and his book became a great success that would be widely quoted in the decades to come. However, by the time he died in 1948, he was far from satisfied with the state his country was in (Cullen 4).

Despite Adams being the one who coined the term, the concept of the American Dream had most likely existed far earlier, possibly dating back to the very foundations of the American nation. And it is no wonder that the vast uncharted continent held such a great promise for a number of people dissatisfied with their own countries for one reason or another. This new land was their hope as everything seemed possible. There were no laws and regulations, no political oppression and other things of the sort. Whoever decided to board the boat to the New World was undoubtedly full of all kinds of dreams. And even though it was difficult at first and many did not survive, the dream lived on and America would continue to draw more and more people in. However, if there was one point in the history of the American nation that could truly be considered the core of the American dream, it would surely be the 1776’s Declaration of Independence, carrying some of the most powerful, history-changing words to date.

Officially stating that “all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and
Pursuit of Happiness” (US 1776), Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and others embedded the roots of this national myth – promising things that would not always be delivered – that would survive for centuries to come. Even though this passage comprises only a small opening portion of the Declaration – while the rest deals mostly with the initial Anglo-American struggles and complains about the King of Great Britain and his tyranny of the thirteen states – it is this very part that is solidly embedded in all aspects of contemporary American lives as the invariable foundation of the American Dream. Those three items: Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness, relatively vague as they are, truly seem to be an irreplaceable part of every American’s subconscious, and as such, they are often used and abused by various individuals as a means of achieving their own aims. Cullen argues that this so-called generality of the passage – stating that “the self-satisfied business executive, the desperately poor urban athlete, the angry activist for gay rights will nevertheless embrace it instinctively even as they differ on just what it means” – is often used in advertising and promoting the strong consumerism in the American society (39).

The main problem with the passage in modern day America is, according to Cullen, that it can be explained and understood in different ways. The original meaning of the word “life”, for instance, can be easily undermined when things like abortion or genetic engineering are considered (39). Liberty can also be easily seen as highly controversial, especially with America’s long history of slavery and racial segregation. And the Pursuit of Happiness, despite seemingly being the most ambiguous of the three, is very often connected to nothing but material wealth. As Cullen states: “[…] we Americans often act as if we believe there really isn’t anything money can’t buy” (39).

If there is a society in which the vast majority believes that happiness equals material wealth, how does it affect the remaining individuals who might dare to think otherwise? What could the Dream possible mean for those, whose idea of happiness does not lie in climbing the social ranks? Then there are people who are born into families who have already achieved their material dream, those who have nowhere to climb, so to speak. Such people are often frustrated as they perceive the Dream as something vain and greedy. Something that inevitably lacks the non-material portion of the word “happiness”. The very portion that large businesses and advertising companies do not find lucrative enough to mention.
But to avoid a misconception here – a certain degree of aspiration towards material goals has always been an irreplaceable part of the Dream. The main problem and the source of many people’s disillusionments lies rather in the fact that these material goals have become the only goals, brought upon by modern-day market capitalism and its vicious advertising. While that may have made the American Dream more attractive to some individuals, for others it may very well be the reason why it has lost its spark. In simple terms, the ideal version of the Dream would consist of both material and the non-material (the latter being different for each individual) factors. According to Noonan, the original meaning of the American Dream has become clouded over the years by the ever-growing focus on the former. She stresses that “a big house could be the product of the dream, if that’s what you wanted, but the house itself was not the dream.” Things such as wisdom or respect can work just as well if that is what the person so wishes.

And yet, these are things that only very few Americans would use to define the Dream. Noonan believes that “[t]he American Dream was never fully realized” and it might be better to see it “as a continuing project requiring constant repair and expansion, with an eye to removing barriers and roadblocks for all.” Similar words were also written at the beginning of the 20th century by Walter Lippmann, an American writer and reporter, who states: “Our business is not to lay aside the dream, but to make it plausible. We have to aim at visions of the possible by subjecting fancy to criticism” (172).

The American Dream and its accessibility has been indeed changing for the better over the centuries. In not so distant past, it was far from accessible for everyone. A great number of individuals were excluded from ever pursuing it for reasons such as race or gender, despite these reasons being in direct contrast with the words of both the Declaration and Adams’ original definition. Nevertheless, quite a few Americans were denied their right for happiness by the society. Hochschild described the situation as following: “The emotional potency of the American Dream has made the people who were able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. […] Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait” (26). So in terms of accessibility, the American Dream can indeed be considered a living, constantly developing, organism. When it comes to its main focus, however, it remains somewhat stagnant.
As the American Dream is defined by none other than the Americans themselves, Noonan sees its satisfactory future evolution mainly in responsible parenting. According to her, the Dream needs adults “who can launch kids sturdily into Dream-land”. Apparently, the kids who are raised in a functional, loving environment will stand better chances at pursuing the Dream. On the other hand, for the children who were not blessed with such homes, the very notion of the Dream alone could serve as a source of hope and motivation – a substitute of sorts. For that reason, Noonan is bothered by the skepticism that has taken root in contemporary America as regards to the Dream due to the above-mentioned phenomena (particularly the excessive stress on the material aspect), and as a result, children and young people have nothing to aspire to. In other words: “Now we have stressed kids operating within a nihilistic popular culture that can harm them. So these kids have nothing—not the example of a functioning family and not the comfort of a culture into which they can safely escape.”

Now the question remains: When exactly did the Dream and its notion begin to decline and what exactly caused its downfall? From all of the above, several important turning points are to be observed; from the very beginning – that is before the actual coinage of the term – to the apparent skepticism of the recent years. First, there was the so-called “Puritan Dream” which started with the Plymouth colony settlers. This lay the foundations to the American Dream as defined by J.T. Adams centuries later – the longing to escape the old undesirable conditions and start over differently. It is probably safe to assume that this was the Dream in its purest form, although even at this stage, the desire to accumulate wealth was, in a way, already there. Cullen argues that any kind of migration is to some extent connected with the desire to improve your living conditions, including the Puritans:

The American Dream was never meant to be a zero-sum solution: the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with. Even the Puritans, whose dream in its purest formulation was about as selfless as any in American history, and who were as skeptical of human will as any people in the Western world of the last five hundred years, nevertheless acted from this premise. (158)

What made the Puritans different from the modern-day immigrants with nothing to lose, however, was that most of them had to leave a considerable amount of
possessions behind. And they would deliberately choose to do so in order to pursue the Dream. That act alone shows their dedication to the cause and the deep meaning that the notion once had beside the plain materialism (even if that also played its part). In any case, it would be nigh impossible to find a purer version of the Dream than that of the Puritans so one may choose to view it as the cornerstone.

Then, in 1776, came the Declaration of Independence – the birth of the real America as well as another major landmark for the American Dream; a few words that defined the nation and have been continuously quoted for centuries. But in those same words, one may observe the first instances of the shallowness and hypocrisy that may have been the first cracks in many people’s ideals – the cold fact that the Dream, once again, was not meant for everyone. Quite a few people – the African Americans, women, and others who were inexplicably denied the unalienable rights – then made their goal to fix this major contradiction and as mentioned above, they have succeeded to a great degree, even though it took an immeasurable amount of time.

But long before these injustices could be remedied, there was the Great Depression, which marked yet another wave of skepticism. As such, it meant a major blow to the American Dream, as many Americans grew distrustful of the conservative values and decided to seek refuge in the social system offered by Roosevelt’s government (which Adams himself saw as a major threat to the term he coined). Even with the depression gone and America thriving again in the years following the Second World War, the Dream had undoubtedly suffered greatly along with the people who experienced the fragility of their system first hand.

Nevertheless, things quickly started improving after the war and the notion of the Dream was starting to resurrect itself despite the relatively tense atmosphere between the United States and the Soviet Union, which, however, had no negative effects on the US economy. On the contrary, the economy was continuously growing for more than another decade (Jorgensen, 23-41). And with it, once again, grew people’s desire to pursue happiness. Pierce describes the situation as follows: “Life in America, consequently, was arguably better than it had ever been. The middle class had swelled, unemployment rates were some of the lowest in history, and the ‘American Dream’ was for many families a reality.”

This era of economic abundance is when both of the novels take place, with roughly four years separating one another – Esther’s story begins “the summer they
electrocuted the Rosenbergs”, that is 1953, Holden’s can be pinpointed to either 1949 (the main storyline) or 1950 (the actual year of his narration), using the date of his brother Allie’s death; an era, in which entering the world of adulthood and pursuing the Dream ought to be far easier than ever before. Not only the general economic conditions seem favorable enough but even the more personal circumstances of both protagonists are rather generous (at least at first sight).

Holden comes from a complete family with a stable financial background – the exact same kind of family that Noonan promotes as an ideal starting point. And while Esther’s situation is slightly worse – she loses a father at a very young age and is thus raised by a single mother – she manages to get a scholarship to college, win several prizes and eventually becomes an epitome of upward mobility at a very early age.

And yet, neither of the characters shows the slightest signs of happiness. On the contrary, it almost seems as if all the possible interpretations of the Dream mentioned thus far, are more of an obstacle for them; a source of anger and confusion, which in both cases eventually lead to mental breakdown. The possible causes of this phenomenon will be discussed in further chapters.
1.2. America’s postwar Dream

The end of World War II marked a whole new era for the American society. One filled with new opportunities, hopes, and dreams, as well as new issues and threats. On the one hand, there was a significant economic growth creating brand new opportunities for the people – particularly the middle class, such as new housing projects or new possibilities in banking (such as the use of credit, which allowed people to acquire almost anything without the need to save up). Capitalism was at its strongest and consumerism determined nearly every aspect of people’s lives. On the other hand, however, there was the invisible threat posed by the Cold War, creating a constant tension in what at first sight may have appeared to be a trouble-free prosperous paradise. And the Cold War was not, by far, the only problem America was facing at that time.

When all the major events of the decade are taken into consideration, one may notice a great number of contradictions. J. Ronald Oakley described it as “an age of great optimism along with the gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowery rhetoric about equality along with the practice of rampant racism and sexism” (qtd. in Halliwell 4). That is what makes the era special – for many people, it brought the notion of the American Dream closer than ever before. Things that seemed unattainable or even unimaginable at one point, not so long before, were suddenly becoming a reality. While this was certainly true for a great number of people, the opportunities were far from equally accessible. For many others, the fruits of this prosperous era still remained out of reach for reasons hardly compatible with the ideals America claimed to live by.

Despite the war’s end and the economic boom, most Americans were rather reluctant to see a bright future ahead of them. Their still vivid memories of the depression as well as the prewar foreign policies left them with little optimism at first. There was no guarantee that another depression would not strike – after all, the situation after World War I also seemed positive at first. This situation, however, was but a temporary one and it did not take long for the people’s pride to eventually resurface, which was nicely illustrated by rising birthrates and the popularity of mortgages and credit usage. In other words, after a short period of insecurities, Americans started to believe in themselves once again and concluded that the
favorable economic climate would last permanently. As the confidence in their own situation grew, so did their willingness to assist other nations to achieve a similar level of prosperity and freedom (Bedford et al. 540).

According to many critics, however, the sudden prosperity and comfort could have had strong negative effects on the very foundations of the American values. Bailey summarizes the criticism by stating that: “America's very success was destroying the values that had made success possible” and that it could lead to undermining the principles needed for achieving such high levels of prosperity (262). In other words, the economic conditions made many people’s lives much less of a struggle, which inevitably meant certain changes in their perceptions. Life suddenly seemed easier and people did not need to work quite as hard as they were used to since America’s very beginning. It is thus understandable that such situation caused certain unease about both the current generation as well as the one to come. Being born into too much comfort without the need to work hard for it, was somewhat against America’s founding ideals.

The American Dream could not remain unaffected by all of these conditions, either. Bailey proposes two diametrically opposite ways the Dream could have been interpreted at the time, posing a question:

Did the American dream mean success through individual competition in a wide-open free marketplace? Or was the dream only of the abundance the American marketplace had made possible – the suburban American dream of two cars in every garage and a refrigerator-freezer in every kitchen? (262)

The original Dream was not only about material wealth itself – that was merely the final product. It also stressed the process itself; the struggle of becoming self-made, which inevitably leads to gaining so much more than just the tangible objects. It helped to shape the individual and help him grow along with his possessions. The new Dream, on the other hand, was something else entirely.

According to Bailey, it “seemed to look to the private as the sphere of fulfillment, of self-definition and self-realization” (262). People were no longer seeking any unnecessary risks. Instead, they would focus on building a steady household, which would be able to provide a feeling of security and comfort. Public and work life was
thus sidelined, which was something new, and according to some, quite worrisome. The critics of this new way of life feared that “the rejection of the public, of work and of risk would soon destroy America's prosperity and security.” Most of these rather obstinate views were aimed at the American youth, whose behavior was considered something far from satisfactory by the adults. The kind of critique often differed, though: while some were alarmed by the rise of juvenile delinquency, others denounced the excessive conformity (Bailey 262).

Paradoxically, it was the latter group that was often seen as dangerously troublesome for the American future. During the years of abundance, it became easy for the people to turn a blind eye to the unpleasant realities of the era and see only the utopia presented to them by the growing influence of the mass media – particularly the television, which became an integral part of nearly every household in the 1950s. The TV commercials presented America of that time as a paradise, in which happy families lived in nice houses, drove pretty cars and had no shortage of anything. While not entirely unrealistic by any means (and truly achieved by many), this Suburban Dream was not something everyone could aspire to, either. Poverty still existed at large, as did racism – these two aspects alone had many aspirants excluded from the prospect of a better life. Not to mention the position of women, whose lives were firmly pre-determined regardless of their individual wishes.

The mass moving to the suburbs was important for several reasons. It created a family-friendly environment within a commutable distance from the cities that even young couples could afford – this resulted in young Americans marrying and settling down earlier in life, which subsequently meant a significantly higher birth rate (people born in this era are thus often referred to as “Baby Boomers”). There was a downside to this, however. As a large number of, generally rather wealthy, Americans left the cities to build their Suburban Dream, the cities became home to rural people from the south and well as various immigrants, both of whom were rather poor. This brought more poverty to the cities as well as a general decline of public services (King et al. 647-648).

And yet it was in the government’s best interest to present the era in the best possible light. With the Cold War in the air and the threat of communism, America needed to present its own system as something superior and nearly flawless. As May states: “The divisions in American society along racial, class and gender lines threatened to weaken the society at home and damage its prestige in the world” (xvii-
Despite the growing dangers of the atomic age, the Cold War was not fought with actual weapons but rather with rhetorical efforts of both parties to present their system as the one that would allow everybody (or as many people as possible) to live the good life, while, at the same time, convincing them of how evil their opponent’s system was. For that reason, it was of the utmost importance to the government officials that the majority of people were satisfied with their conditions and those who were not, needed to believe in a swift improvement. Otherwise, according to May, “dissatisfied workers might be drawn to left-wing political agitation, leading to socialism or even communism” (xviii). That, of course, was America’s worst nightmare and the one thing that could not be allowed to happen by any means.

The notion of the idyllic life in the suburbs was thus one of the “weapons” of America to counter its greatest enemy. The sudden obsession with early family life (which many of the TV advertisements turned into a period trend, of sorts) in a nice detached house with a two-car garage could be considered sort of a political endeavor, the purpose of which was to display capitalism at its best. And while this situation truly meant a significant improvement for many working-class families who suddenly started reaching middle-class standards of living, the social problems that remained were only growing larger.

There was racism, which not only did remain in America in those times, but it became worse. And the suburban idyll as a way to counter communism was at least partially to blame. May claims that the ideas “blurred class lines while sharpening racial divisions” (xviii). And that was hardly surprising considering the sudden social transformation. While immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds were allowed to enjoy everything America had to offer – leaving behind the status of outsiders and blending in with others, as long as their skin was white – blacks were not allowed to enjoy nearly any of the benefits of the era, even if they could afford them (May xix). In other words, this suburban paradise was a white paradise only. Any white person was welcome to join in, while for the African Americans it was off limits. Bedford et al. even go as far as to claim that the postwar era turned “racial inequality from a regional peculiarity to an obvious national disgrace” (555).

Racism, however, despite its seriousness, is not an issue tackled in either of the novels and is thus irrelevant for the purposes of this study. On the other hand, all the other major problems that some groups of people suffered from during this era are, in one way or another, reflected in the novels. These include poverty, the cold war
mentality resulting in the likes of Senator McCarthy rising to power, and the role of women.

While poverty is relatively sidelined in the novels, as both of its protagonists have no shortage of anything material, its existence is nonetheless acknowledged by both Salinger and Plath in one way or another. Holden, in particular, is often bothered by the financial inequality he encounters on multiple occasions throughout the novel and tends to sympathize with poor people much more than with the rich ones. Esther, being brought up by a single mother, had her own experience with a certain financial shortage, which, however, never became too extreme to cause any serious suffering.

From this perspective, both of the protagonists represent the lucky majority of the era of abundance, and their suffering thus clearly has different roots. That leaves us with the Cold War mentality (further discussed in 1.3) and the portrayal of women (discussed in 2.1), both of which are prospects so dominant that neither of the protagonists can really avoid their influence.
1.3. America’s postwar Nightmare

It is nigh impossible to talk about the 1950s without at least fleetingly mentioning the shadow conflict, which, in one way or another, affected everyone and everything; not to mention its huge influence on people’s political attitudes and value orientation – aspects undoubtedly connected to their perception of the American Dream.

The tension between the United States and the Soviet Union existed long before the post-war years. Americans were wary of the Russians since the Bolsheviks’ rise to power in 1917 and their suspicions never quite diminished despite the two countries’ cooperation during World War II. Thus the increased tension after the war, from which the two countries “emerged as rival superpowers”, was hardly surprising (King et al. 611). Things only escalated further with President Truman’s 1947 reaction to the Communist occupancy of Greece and Turkey stating:

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes. (McCullough 547)

These words were connected to Truman’s request of $400 million, which were to be used to aid the two nations in order to overcome the threat of communism. Despite some criticism concerning the UN, the aid bill was passed by the Congress and Truman’s request, which became known as the Truman Doctrine, was fulfilled (King et al. 612-613). This marked the beginning of an era, in which America assumed the role of a supporter. The goal was to forestall the spread of communism in the world, which America saw as the biggest threat to the capitalist world and as Russia’s ultimate goal.

Soon after, all of Western Europe received American financial aid, courtesy of the so-called Marshall Plan (or European Recovery Program) to help them recover from the desolate post-war conditions. Despite the Secretary of State George Marshall’s speech at Harvard University in June 1947, where the plan was officially presented, Russia did not take kindly to the proposal – they considered it “an American plot to
take over Europe” and prevented the Soviet-bloc countries from participating (King et al. 613-614).

This tense situation gave rise to what became known as McCarthyism, or the McCarthy era – a term based on its leading figure, Wisconsin Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy. A name often associated with an anti-communist obsession and paranoia, which literally bloomed all over the 1950s America, turning many people’s lives into living hell and once again unconsciously undermining what has always been said to be America’s founding principle – freedom.

Of course, America has always been the major counterpart of communism and anti-communist incentives were nothing shockingly new for its citizens. As Fried puts it, “anti-communism flourished long before the Senator from Wisconsin adopted the issue in 1950” (vii). Nevertheless, it was he who turned the mild disfavor into something far more destructive – for Americans themselves more than anyone else. Once a country with an unparalleled freedom of expression, America under McCarthy’s influence became more of a something resembling a totalitarian state.

The Communist Party of the United States was hardly significant enough to spawn any major disturbances. Throughout its short existence since its founding in 1919, it never achieved any particular success in terms of neither the number of its members nor the voters. “From an electoral standpoint” it was considered “effectively irrelevant” and “no member of the Communist Party was ever elected to Congress” (Stone 1390). It certainly seemed harmless enough. Even the fact that it had not even existed until so late in the US history further proved its irrelevance. For a long time, communism as such was nearly non-existent in America – an abstract concept presented as evil and utterly incompatible with American values; an abstract fear.

Perhaps it was the Great Depression that brought about the slight, yet significant, change to this seemingly impenetrable mentality. Faced with growing unemployment rates, hunger, and even homelessness, many people began to seriously question the capitalistic ideals for the first time in America’s history. Stone believes that the reason behind more people suddenly leaning towards Communism was “not to serve the Soviet Union, but because Communism seemed a viable hope in the struggle for justice at home and against fascism abroad” (1390). The Depression mercilessly demonstrated how imperfect capitalism was and how horrifying the consequences of
its failure could be. From this perspective, it seems only natural that many people began their search for a safer alternative.

This is where Roosevelt’s New Deal, once again, seems to be a patent culprit as it was, in a way, the first time that America ever chose to accept some principles that, to some extent, resembled those of communism. After all, as Stone stresses, “New Deal liberalism and Communism shared some of the same ideals” (1391). Surely those ideals would have been unthinkable in the American context, had it not been for the Depression, which brought about a situation miserable enough to alter even the seemingly unalterable American mindset. With this in mind, the fear of communism after the WW2 was not entirely unwarranted – not only did the favorable economic conditions somewhat resemble the roaring twenties (which understandably led many to fear that history would repeat itself) but having already experienced one depression, people were now aware of its effects on their psyche. Not to mention Russia was now a larger, more fearful power than ever before; a force to be reckoned with. And so, with the cold war silently raging, America could not risk her people being fond of the enemy’s ideals in the slightest.

Soon, the situation inevitably escalated in a severe paranoia, helping the likes of McCarthy quickly rise to power. Anything resembling communism, however remotely, was bound to raise vibrations and cause trouble to everyone involved. Stone mentions “hundreds of clubs, associations, committees, and alliances [that] sprang into being to fight for economic, social, political, racial, and international justice” as an example of activist groups whose goals were often similar to those of communists, despite the fact that “[m]ost members of these groups were not Communists, or even Communist ‘sympathizers’” (1391).

But that was still before the real Red Scare, which only really began with the fall of China to the communists and the Soviet Union detonating its first atomic bomb. With America thrown into turmoil, it became obsessed with finding something to blame it on. And according to the Republicans, the most obvious culprits were the communist sympathizers as apparently “[o]nly perfidy […] could have caused such disasters” (Stone 1393). There was a widespread conviction that “the greatest threat to the national security was the betrayal of America by Americans” (Stone 1393). And that is where the red nightmare really began.

Both of the novels take place during the years that Fried calls “the climax of anti-communism in American life” (144). It was a time when the right-wing politicians
held most of the power, whereas the Liberals were not in a position to fight back effectively. Anti-communism was supported by the vast majority of Americans, often even by the critics of McCarthy, and as such, there was little use in attempting to fight against it. Elmer Davis described the times as “bitter days – full of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness” (qtd. in Fried 144).

In any case, those were not good times for any left-leaning liberals to openly express themselves as they were in the minority and it was best for them to keep a low profile. Feelings of increasing frustration and loneliness would thus not be surprising in case of many such individuals – our protagonists included.
2. The postwar gender differences

2.1. The Dream of domesticity

After the end of World War II, when men started returning from the front, women’s lives were about to change. After the rise of the suburban dream and reasons discussed in the previous chapters, the notion of what it meant to be an ideal woman also shifted dramatically in order to fit the overall picture of a harmonious American society and its signature way of living. With a sufficient number of men available once again, women were no longer required to work. Instead, they had another important role to fill – the perfect housewives.

As peculiar as it may sound a few decades later, becoming a perfect housewife was indeed the main aspiration of the vast majority of young women in the fifties. And one could hardly blame them for it as the influences were strong and plentiful. The TV, as well as other sorts of advertising, would depict women as mere childbearers and caretakers whose only role in life was to raise several children and ensure a safe, clean and comfortable haven for their husbands, who in return, would provide for them financially. But the influence of the mass media was just the tip of the iceberg. Many schools supported the notion just as much, which meant that young girls were being raised with their future roles already pre-determined.

In her paper, Lamb mentions a 1954 *Home Economics High School Text Book*, which serves as a good example of this phenomenon, as it apparently helps its readers “to discover how to be an ideal housewife, the woman for whom the maintenance of the house and the well-being of the family were fundamental priorities” (1). Textbooks full of advice on how to be an ideal wife were far from rare in those times and the demand was high. Being a housewife was not something to be frowned upon, however. Most women took pride in such aspiration, at least at the beginning. The family-based way of living was the example that the vast majority of people chose to follow, convinced it was the best way towards happiness. In a 1955 study, for instance, it was presented that only a very tiny portion of Americans believed in achieving happiness without marriage (Coontz 25). Based on this, one may assume that marriage in itself was an inseparable part of the American Dream.

One may go as far as to claim that marriage, to women, was no different than a regular career was for men. Even though the sense of progression in the former was questionable, to say the least. Nevertheless, the significance of marriage (and
childbearing as its inevitable aspect) cannot be underestimated. Lamb describes it as follows:

Marriage was an incredibly powerful institution during these years; people didn’t ask themselves if they were going to get married, but when and to whom? Young women didn’t have a doubt about having babies, but simply about how many babies they would give birth to. (10)

It is rather peculiar how easily such a situation, undoubtedly very convenient for the government’s purposes, developed. Even though there were doubtlessly many other, smaller aspects that contributed to the cause – the economic situation, affordable housing, the spread of credit payment, etc. – the government’s conspicuous efforts to convert the society into this family-based model can hardly be denied. As a result, a new trend, of sorts, emerged. The role of television has already been mentioned several times throughout the previous chapters but there were other kinds of media nourishing this trend before the TV became widespread enough to truly serve its purpose – magazines.

In her study, Catt explores the significance of magazines as “a consistent source for the latest trends, news, and general information an American needed to know (5). The articles in these magazines, of course, adapted to the era and discussed the most popular issues at the time – which in this case was the suburban life first and foremost. Nevertheless, as Catt mentions, the articles themselves were not the only source (possibly not even the main one) of the influence. Instead, she ascribes much greater influential value to the advertisements in these magazines, stating that “it was the advertisement on the sides and spread carefully between articles that really illustrated how men and women should act and appear in the 1950's“(5).

With these facts considered, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the purpose of advertising in this era was far wider than selling simple products – they were selling an entire way of life using the very same strategies. Indeed, when one explores the usual mercantile methods, the purpose of which is to sell a physical product, they are not that notably different from how America was selling what we may call the housewife culture. The goal was to establish an environment, in which a large number of people long for the same thing. This thing then becomes a state of normality. And normality is something that the vast majority of people naturally seek
as rejecting it would threaten their place in the society. This can be generally achieved by several methods commonly used in regular advertising.

According to Iljin and Jokubauskas, the most important aspects determining the perception of advertising are the psychological ones. They claim that “the largest amount of information is perceived by seeing” as “visual presentation of advertising is the simplest way of pertaining information” since it requires less energy than other kinds of perception (qtd. in Susniene et al. 51). This perfectly corresponds with the way the family-based life was presented in America. The visual representation of what the suburban dream was all about was everywhere and one could not help but notice it – subconsciously at the very least. The family life promotion also fitted many other descriptions of what psychologists consider to be an effective advertising. These include e.g. “a large, attractive and full-colour photo or text design” (Susniene et al. 51), which is generally, once again, in accordance with America’s advertising and goals at the time.

From all of the above mentioned, it is clear that the conditions for American women of the era were rather peculiar. It seemed idyllic at first glance and perhaps in many cases, it was, at first. But when observed from another perspective, one immediately begins to see the other side of the coin. In a way, this idyllic household was nothing but a prison to these women. In many cases a fancy one, perhaps, but a prison nonetheless. And it was not only the household itself but rather the entire society desperately clinging to this idea of domesticity out of which there was no escape as nearly every institution of any kind was an integral part of it. O’Neill comments on the issue while referring to Betty Friedan’s famous work _The Feminine Mystique_, stating that “Friedan was right to see the postwar period as a time when all institutions seemingly conspired to make autonomy for women difficult” (308).

This clearly corresponds with what has been already written – this conspiracy of all major institutions creating the no-escape situation. O’Neill extends his outlook on the issue, borrowing some of the rather extreme expressions used as chapter titles in Friedan’s book, while commenting that “the facts were in her favor” (309). He observes:

> The media acclaimed family ‘togetherness,’ promulgating a ‘happy housewife syndrome.’
> ‘Sex-directed educators’ indoctrinated female students, even in women’s colleges, to be only wives and mothers. Advertisers using the ‘sexual sell’ ensured that women would
devote their best efforts to housework and shopping. Everything worked to keep women in homes that were ‘comfortable concentration camps,’ where they suffered from ‘progressive dehumanization.’ (308-9)

Needless to say, the description above makes for a rather harsh portrait of the era. One that doubtlessly stirred some controversy among those (though not exclusively those) who, to this day, consider the era to be one of America’s greatest. Still, if one decides to go as far as to refer to something as close to taboo as concentration camps, there is no doubt about their seriousness regarding the subject. There is simply no joking in such matter and joking Friedan was not.

Her work achieved a cult following over the years, becoming one of the most iconic works on the subject. Fetters calls it “a seminal, revolutionary piece of literature.” Interestingly enough, however, its success (and apparent relatability of such a large number of women) did not happen immediately upon its release (despite being released in the early sixties, directly following the “incriminated” decade). According to Fetters’ analyses of some of the book’s early reviews, the most commonly emphasized issue seems to be that Friedan does not consider the indisputable fact that the wishes of many women were in accordance with the period trend. In other words, it was not enforced on them by any means.

One such example is a review by Jessie Bernard, which stresses (using statistics) that the number of high school-educated women interested in the domestic arts was by far larger than the number of those who were not. Bernard fully acknowledges Friedan’s perspective but at the same time, she perceives it as rather one-sided. According to her, it is just as important to note that “women are different, that some are at ease with domesticity, just as some are not” (382). In other words, the trend of domesticity could be compared to just about any other trend – among the vast majority of those who happily embrace it for it fits their purposes, there are always those for whom it simply does not work. The latter group then suffers from feelings of discontent, which are difficult to deal with since it would mean confronting the majority with very slim chances of success. Such a situation can easily lead to a sense of loneliness and alienation, which may consequently cause further psychological issues.
That would explain why the entire decade was a peaceful one, without any major social disturbances. Only by the end of the fifties did women come out of their shells and let themselves be heard. Consequently, most of the sources dealing with the issue of women’s place in the society are told in retrospective – only after this “idyllic” decade was already over. The alternative explanation for this occurrence could be a possibility that the feelings of discontent described in the previous paragraph were but budding ones at the time. It may have taken some time for the unhappy women to cohere with all the aspects of their new lives and to determine where, in this paradisic land of abundance, their troubles originated from. And one could hardly blame them for their confusion since, according to everyone around them, “it was the best of times for women just the same” as “they were able to realize their social and biological destinies under ideal circumstances” (O’Neill 309).

On the positive note, all of this had its indisputable benefits, of course. O’Neill stresses the significant decrease of divorces, the near lack of illegal drugs in relation to the low crime rates as well as the illegitimate birth rate being “a fraction of what it is today”. For these and other aspects, he considers the society of that time “more conservative than now” but “also healthier” (310).
2.2. Purity and its loss

“When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.” –Esther Greenwood (Plath 77)

As in most coming-of-age novels, the loss of virginity in *The Bell Jar*, as well as *The Catcher in the Rye*, has its significant role. What makes it even more significant in the case of these two novels is the time period in which they take place and the opposite genders of the respective protagonists.

The first part of this sub-chapter is focused on the period standards regarding sexuality, including virginity loss, premarital sex and the differences in perceptions of these among different genders. The second part focuses more closely on Holden and Esther themselves, their sexual (in)experience and its consequences on their psyche and behavior throughout the novels.

According to Carpenter, young Americans “have traditionally assigned different meanings to virginity and experienced virginity loss in divergent ways based on their gender” (345). This was especially true in the post-war period, throughout which the gender differences were more distinct than ever before (and after – in the 1960s). As already mentioned, American society of that time was based on the nuclear family model, which strictly defined the roles of each gender. This model in itself already bore a strong influence on how sexuality was perceived. O’Keefe stresses that “[t]he preservation of the nuclear family […] was highly dependent on women in their traditional roles as wives and mothers” (56). Fitting these roles included, among other things, certain preconceived sexual behavior. Those, however, often tended to contradict one another.

On the one hand, “tradition and stability” were presented as the ultimate ideals to live by, but then there was the other side of the coin – the constant attempt “to be glamorous and modern by keeping up with Hollywood trends”, which in many ways were the polar opposites of the former as it often promoted a far wilder lifestyle and premarital sex. Such major contradictions then “proved to be confusing and stressful for young women and girls” (O’Keefe 56). And understandably so, as those were two completely different lifestyles that required different life choices (with those of the sexual spectrum among them). Ultimately, the society wanted young girls to be two different things at the same time, or rather to appear as one, but to really be the other. O’Keefe describes the situation as follows:
Popular culture and media outlets of the 1950s and early 1960s raised young women to be sexually charged and hyperaware of their public appearances, but ultimately women were told to channel their sexuality into marriage and procreation. (56)

Such circumstances were bound to make young girls’ lives difficult, insecure and unsure about who they were and what they wanted from life (as if that were not difficult enough in itself in the maturing phase of one’s life).

But the popular culture seemed to thrive on their misery and the constant struggle of becoming a walking contradiction, as even the period pop music often proved (Douglas 87). This issue is clearly reflected on Esther’s character as she constantly struggles with indecision regarding her future place in the society, describing it with her famous fig-tree analogy – she wants a little bit of everything, which, in a way, is exactly what the period trend promoted, in spite of its obvious impossibility.

In the case of teenage boys, the situation was quite different as male purity was not something the media (or anyone else, for that matter) paid too much attention to. Men were supposed to be the breadwinners, first and foremost; the ones who, as Holt puts it, “brought home the bacon” (1). But despite not being pressured by the media and the ‘outside world’ as much as their female counterparts, it is safe to assume that the subject of the first sexual intercourse is not something to be ignored in any person’s maturing phase. However, remaining pure until marriage was generally not something for men to worry about as either scenario would make little difference in the society’s eyes.

Carpenter describes the difference in perception of virginity loss between men and women as follows:

Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, young women typically perceived their virginity as precious and strove to maintain it until they were married or at least engaged. In contrast, young men customarily saw their virginity as neutral or even stigmatizing, and often sought to lose it outside the context of a committed romantic relationship. (345)
Despite the significant difference in public opinion on this issue, the actual engagement in premarital sex was not male-driven as extremely as it may seem. According to Finer’s research on premarital sex, “the likelihood of having sex at all did not differ significantly by gender”, and even though “males were slightly more likely to have had premarital sex at virtually every age” the difference was surprisingly not that vast (76). On the other hand, – based on the same research – the percentage of all people (both male and female) who had had premarital sex in the 1950s and early 1960s, was notably lower in comparison with the decades that followed (Finer 76).

From that, we may conclude that the purity issue was indeed rather important in one way or the other throughout the given period, for which the media and popular culture were at least partially to blame. However, other interpretations of these facts are also possible. Finer himself, for instance, suggests that “[t]he increase seen beginning with the 1964–73 cohort may be partly due to increased availability of effective contraception (in particular, the pill), which made it less likely that sex would lead to pregnancy […]” (77-78). A plausible theory, without a doubt, which certainly had its impact on the stated numbers. But the socio-cultural factors discussed above cannot be ignored, either.

In any case, the 1950s was a time when all these things – purity and its loss, premarital sex, domesticity vs. the Hollywood-like glamor, etc. – were constantly observed, contemplated and judged, perhaps far more intensely than in any of the decades that would follow. And that was something the young generations of that time could have hardly remained unaffected by – including, of course, the literary subjects of this study – Holden, and Esther.

The gender differences in perception of virginity are clearly represented in both novels, perfectly corresponding with Carpenter’s theory. Particularly in The Bell Jar, Esther puts a huge emphasis on the issue while also confirming that it was a subject widely discussed by the general public. She says:

Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. (Plath 77)
With this statement, Esther expresses how tremendously important the subject of purity was to her (and very likely to most girls her age) and how it overshadowed all the other social divisions. This, however, may better be perceived as an exclusively female outlook since the male representatives – Holden, whose views on the society’s divisions are more of a material kind, and even Buddy Willard – do not seem to care nearly as much.

This unbalance, caused largely by the male hypocrisy regarding the subject, angers Esther and she refuses to stay pure for a man who would not be pure himself (like Buddy) and concludes: “Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn’t pure either” (Plath 77).

_The Catcher in the Rye_, on the other hand, proves the other half of Carpenter’s theory, as Holden either does not address the issue at all (for the most part) or, when he does, he tries to lose his virginity, even if the process often makes him uncomfortable. As Holden’s male peers are often said to be quite experienced in this field, Holden feels the pressure to be the same way, but he is often full of contradictions when the moment comes. While at one point, he claims to be “the biggest sex maniac you ever saw” (Salinger 70), he also shows a great amount of consideration for girls, saying:

The thing is, 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. Most guys don’t. […] The trouble is, I get to feeling sorry for them. (Salinger 103)

Even later, when he attempts to have sex with a prostitute, he is unable to, due to more or less the same reasons (Salinger 107). Overall, from Holden’s comments on the subject, it soon becomes clear that he does not feel that much of an urge to lose his virginity for his own personal reasons, but rather due to the peer pressure he is constantly exposed to.
3. The characters’ diagnoses

3.1. DSM outline introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide psychological profiles of Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood, respectively; detailing their mental state and determining all of their possible psychological disorders. Each presented disorder will be supported with at least one quote from the book, in order to make the given information as plausible as possible.

In order to present a lucid and concise overview of the possible disorders, the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) will be used as a reference.

DSM-IV utilizes a multiaxial system, which “involves an assessment on several axes, each of which refers to a different domain of information […]” (American Psychiatric Association 25). There are five axes in total. However, for the purposes of this thesis, only axes I-IV will be referred to. Here is a brief summary of what each axis focuses on¹:

Axis I - Clinical Disorders, Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention; e.g. mood disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sleep disorders, adjustment disorders

Axis II - Personality Disorders, Mental Retardation; e.g. Antisocial personality disorder, Narcissistic personality disorder, Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, dependent personality disorder

Axis III - General Medical Conditions; e.g. decreases of the digestive system, Congenital anomalies, symptoms, signs, and Ill-Defined conditions

Axis IV - Psychosocial and Environmental Problems; e.g. problems with the primary support group, problems related to the social environment, educational problems

(American Psychiatric Association 25)

¹ For the full description of the multiaxial classification, refer to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), p. 25-31
3.2. Holden Caulfield

Axis I

Throughout the novel, Holden experiences frequent mood swings, often talking about being depressed. These may not seem that serious at first and could easily be mistaken for a rather innocuous emotional phase that most teenagers experience at some point. However, as the novel progresses, these depressive moods become more frequent and more serious as Holden starts mentioning suicide or even seriously contemplating it at some point. Strangely, it is often the most unexpected things that make him feel that way, such as hearing people laugh: “New York’s terrible when somebody laughs on the street very late at night. You can hear it for miles. It makes you feel so lonesome and depressed” (Salinger 91). Such situations are nothing rare and one may even observe a steady ‘progress’ in their seriousness. In the quote above, for instance, Holden’s lonesomeness and depression can be interpreted as something relatively mild; something everyone might say every once in a while when they are in a bad mood.

As the story progresses, however, Holden’s negative feelings somewhat intensify. In the hotel scene in Chapter 13, he says: “I was feeling sort of lousy. Depressed and all. I almost wished I was dead” (Salinger 101). Here, he mentions death for the first time, which is already in itself more serious than all of his ‘depression talk’ prior to this scene. And it gets worse still. At the end of the following chapter when he says: “What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window” (Salinger 116-117). This scene is disturbing not only because Holden now seriously contemplates suicide but also because he mentions jumping out of the window – the very same suicide method that James Castle – one of Holden’s former classmates whose death Holden witnessed with all of its gory details – chose for himself (the impact of this event will be further discussed in Axis IV).

At one point, Holden even breaks down completely and starts crying for virtually no reason, as in Chapter 20: “When I finally got down off the radiator and went out to the hat-check room, I was crying and all. I don’t know why, but I was. I guess it was because I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome” (Salinger 169). That is yet another proof of the seriousness of his condition and its continuous decline.

Holden also seems to have trouble sleeping. While he often mentions not being tired, it is important to note that he mostly mentions it in close connection to his
depression. Prior to both of the lines quoted in the previous paragraph, he says: “I wasn’t sleepy or anything” (Salinger 101) and “It took me a while to get to sleep – I wasn’t even tired – but I finally did” (Salinger 116), respectively. Although it may be the depression causing the insomnia, it could also be the other way around – the lack of sleep may be one of the contributors to the depressive condition. This, however, is merely a speculation as Holden never directly admits that he is suffering from insomnia and thus the reader is only told the above-mentioned hints.

A similar situation can be observed regarding Holden’s appetite. Holden himself admits that he does not eat as much as he should and is very skinny as a result.

I’m a very light eater. I really am. That’s why I’m so damn skinny. I was supposed to be on this diet where you eat a lot of starches and crap, to gain weight and all, but I didn’t ever do it. When I’m out somewhere, I generally just eat a Swiss cheese sandwich and a malted milk. (Salinger 120)

This may very well suggest an eating disorder of some sort; one that has been going on for an extended period of time as Holden’s gauntness must be easily noticeable, which is why he is supposed to follow the special diet. As with the sleeping disorder, this, too, is very likely to be connected to his depression.

Holden also shows a lack of interest in both educational and non-educational activities. He has already been expelled from three high schools prior to Pencey, from which he is about to be expelled as well. And while low motivation was arguably not the only factor in this (Holden’s expulsions have, without a doubt, also been caused by his social adjustment issues, which will be further discussed in Axis IV), it is more than clear that his motivation to study is very low; or rather he straight out refuses to study things that are of no interest to him just for the sake of education. This is clearly demonstrated in the scene with Mr. Spencer in Chapter 2, in which Spencer scolds Holden for his history exam paper, on which (after writing very little on the topic of the Egyptians) Holden left a note for Spencer that said:

Dear Mr. Spencer […]. That is all I know about the Egyptians. I can’t seem to get very interested in them although your lectures are very interesting. It is all right with me if you flunk me though as I am flunking everything else except English anyway. Respectfully yours, HOLDEN CAULFIELD. (Salinger 15)
In this note, Holden openly admits his complete indifference not only regarding the subject but the school in general. Strangely, though, he mentions that in spite of his disinterest, he found Spencer’s lectures “very interesting”, as if not to hurt Spencer’s feelings or to not discourage him as a teacher. Which is a rather peculiar thing to do for someone who just openly admitted that he could not care less about getting ‘flunked’ in nearly every subject. Similarly, Holden shows no interest in the football game that everyone else seems really excited about. Holden drily states that “[i]t was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn’t win” (Salinger 4), which of course did not apply to Holden, whose interest in the game was quite possibly even lower than his interest in everything else school-related.

However, while Holden does not care about certain things, he (often unnaturally) obsesses over others. For instance, there is Holden’s ex-girlfriend, Sally Hayes, whose picture Holden still keeps at a visible place in his room (when he is still at Pencey), and is very annoyed by his roommate constantly looking at it and then putting it elsewhere.

He was looking at this picture of this girl I used to go around with in New York, Sally Hayes. He must’ve picked up that goddamn picture and looked at it at least five thousand times since I got it. He always put it back in the wrong place, too, when he was finished. (Salinger 24)

Things get even stranger later on in the novel when Holden decides to meet up with Sally and suddenly, for reasons he himself cannot understand, starts fantasizing about marrying her and running away with her:

The funny part is, I felt like marrying her the minute I saw her. I’m crazy. I didn’t even like her much, and yet all of a sudden I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her. I swear to God I’m crazy. I admit it. (Salinger 138)

The most peculiar thing here is that Holden admits not liking Sally that much, and yet he suddenly starts obsessing over her as if she was the most important person in the world for him. From their subsequent conversation and Holden’s comments, however, it is obvious that the former (that he does not really like her) is more likely.
Holden does not really like Sally and his strange obsession thus likely originates from something else; perhaps his constant feelings of loneliness. Holden needs someone with whom he could share his fanciful plans, which mostly involve escaping from the capitalist machinery; from the notion that most people, including Sally, call the American Dream, while for Holden, it is clearly a nightmare he does not wish to confront.

In Chapter 17, Sally represents the logic that Holden tries so hard to overlook. When he starts, very enthusiastically, describing his escape plan, Sally often counters his wild ideas with one of her earthbound remarks, which makes Holden furious (Salinger 146-147). When she urges him not to scream at her, he assures the reader (rather than Sally) that “[it is] crap, because [he] wasn’t even screaming at her” (Salinger 147) but it is clear from the entire conversation that he is indeed quite hysterical and one may even doubt that he is a reliable narrator at this point.

From the conversation with Sally, it also becomes clear that Holden is obsessed with the idea of escaping before he becomes a full-fledged adult. The notion of adulthood terrifies him and he fears that if he does not manage to escape now, he never will. He asserts that things will be different and all of his plans will no longer be possible to execute:

I said no, there wouldn’t be marvelous places to go to after I went to college and all. Open your ears. It’d be entirely different. We’d have to go downstairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We’d have to phone up everybody and tell ‘em good-by and send ‘em postcards from hotels and all. And I’d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels. […] It wouldn’t be the same at all. You don’t see what I mean at all. (Salinger 147-148)

What Holden is trying so hard to explain here (while already realizing that he will never get through to Sally despite his best efforts) is that once a person enters this ‘adult world’, there is no coming back. And that while he or she gains all those seemingly great things, it will also take away something far more important; perhaps the child-like naivety and the faith that things could work differently. It is also
interesting to note that he sees college, of all things, as the catalyst of all the negative things to come; a gateway, of sorts, to the ‘American Nightmare’. Possibly out of fear of being turned into the exact kind of person he despises so much.

Sally, however, is not the only girl in the novel whom Holden obsesses over. There is also Jane Gallagher who is very special to him in a variety of ways. It is rather difficult to determine what the exact relationship between Holden and Jane is, as Jane herself never appears in the story, and as such, the reader is dependent only on Holden’s descriptions and reactions towards other people who dare to mention her. Undoubtedly the most expressive scene in this regard is the one in Chapter 6 when Holden finds out about his roommate Stradlater dating Jane.

An interesting thing to note here is that before Jane is brought into the picture, Holden actually seems relatively fond of Stradlater. Earlier in Chapter 3, he even defends him in the argument with Ackley, saying: “Stradlater’s all right. He’s not too bad. […] You don’t know him, that’s the trouble”. He then highlights Stradlater’s generous side, which is something he perceives as quite rare among the rich (Salinger 29). But the moment Stradlater raises the subject of Jane, Holden quickly starts becoming hostile, which eventually culminates in an outburst of anger, subsequently causing a physical fight with Stradlater.

The moment Stradlater first mentions Jane as his new date (though he calls her Jean instead, which immediately emphasizes his utter indifference towards her as a person), Holden starts getting very excited, instantly remembering how he first met her and various details about her, which Stradlater does not show the least bit of interest in. In this scene, one can witness how much Jane means to Holden, how deeply he admires her and the amount of attention he paid to everything she did back when they were still seeing each other. Unlike Sally, to whom Holden would cling probably only out of desperation, his interest in Jane seems to be truly genuine, although it is not quite clear whether he has ever been interested in her romantically, or just merely as a person. But aside from his little sister Phoebe, Jane is quite possibly the only female character whom Holden idolizes to such an extent.

There are ultimately two ways one can look at the anger outburst scene. One is that Holden’s behavior can simply be ascribed to jealousy – he has been in love with Jane and cannot deal with the fact that she is now dating Stradlater. Simple enough. However, if that really were the case, the scene, in its entirety, would not quite make sense. First of all, Holden does not get mad immediately after learning that Stradlater
is about to go out with Jane. He actually seems excited about it at first and it is apparent that he wishes to talk about her with Stradlater. There are no signs of hostility in his behavior at this point. Thus, it must be something else that sets him off later in the conversation – possibly Stradlater’s utter lack of interest. It is easy to notice that the more Holden talks about Jane, the more he realizes how little interested Stradlater really is in her until he comes to the conclusion that he only wants her for the one thing.

‘She had a very lousy childhood. I’m not kidding.’ That didn’t interest Stradlater, though.

Only very sexy stuff interested him. (Salinger 37)

So rather than jealousy, the reason for Holden’s actions might as well be a genuine concern for Jane’s well-being. Holden has this seeming urge to protect Jane, in a similar way he wishes to protect children, which might have something to do with her “lousy childhood”. The information Holden provides on the subject is rather vague. We are only told that Jane’s parents are divorced and her step-father is an alcoholic and “run[s] around the goddamn house, naked. With Jane around and all” (Salinger 37). Whatever that may imply, it is certainly nothing positive and it may be one of the reasons why Holden is so protective of her.

At the same time, however, as much as he adores her, he also avoids meeting her for some reason, despite the obvious longing to do so; making up vague excuses such as: “You have to be in the mood for those things” (Salinger 37-38). This circumstance consequently forges a state of misery for Holden, as he is constantly stuck between the strong longing to meet Jane and the inner block that prevents him from doing so. That results in strong nervousness and anxiety, as well as obsessive thoughts about her and Stradlater. They start quite mildly:

I pulled the peak of my hunting hat to the front all of a sudden, for a change. I was getting sort of nervous, all of a sudden. I’m quite a nervous guy. (Salinger 39)

Then they intensify as Stradlater finally heads out to meet Jane:

I sat there for about a half hour after he left. I mean I just sat in my chair, not doing anything. I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all.
It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy bastard Stradlater was. (Salinger 39)

By the time he returns, Holden’s nervousness reaches insane heights that do not only affect his mental state but his physical health as well (this is where Axis I and III intersect one another).

I was so damn worried, that’s why. When I really worry about something, I don’t just fool around. I even have to go to the bathroom when I worry about something. Only, I don’t go. I’m too worried to go. I don’t want to interrupt my worrying to go. (Salinger 45)

Prior to this statement, Holden also admits having memory issues; not being able to remember what exactly he had been doing before Stradlater arrived. Considering his vivid descriptions of just everything else in the novel, this, too, may very well be ascribed to his obsessive worrying.

Later in the novel, in Chapter 11, Holden starts thinking about Jane again; tormented by the constant notion of Jane and Stradlater spending time together in the car. Here it becomes even more apparent how important it is to Holden, whether the two were intimate with each other or not. He keeps telling himself that Jane would never be intimate with someone like Stradlater: “[…] I was pretty damn sure old Stradlater hadn’t given her the time – I know old Jane like a book – I still couldn’t get her off my brain. I knew her like a book. I really did” (Salinger 85). He then remembers, among other things, a scene when Jane started crying for reasons she did not disclose, and even though she denied it, Holden suspects it had something to do with her step-father (Salinger 88). This, besides the fact that he is clearly attracted to her both physically and mentally, may be the reason for his nervousness regarding her and Stradlater.

Aside from people, Holden also tends to obsess over various things that would seem insignificant to most. For instance, he keeps wondering about where the ducks from Central Park South go for the winter. This question bothers him on multiple occasions throughout the novel and keeps asking random people about it in all seriousness; e.g. a taxi driver in Chapter 9: “You know those ducks in that lagoon right near Central Park South? That little lake? By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over? Do you happen to know,
by any chance?” (Salinger 67). Holden is bothered by the fact that the ducks do not stay at the same place all the time and the thought of them disappearing to a place unknown to him makes him feel anxious. There are also other hints suggesting that Holden dislikes changes in general. When visiting the museum in Chapter 16, he says: “The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. […] Nobody’d be different” (Salinger 135).

All these changes that Holden is so afraid of include a certain major one – growing up. This is what Holden perhaps fears the most. And it is not just about himself growing up, but about other people as well; the innocent children becoming teenagers/adults – the ‘phonies’ he so loathes. When talking about the museum, Holden also stresses the fact that while all the things in the museum remain the same, the visitor is the one who inevitably changes with time (Salinger 135). When he adds his little sister Phoebe into this equation, it saddens him as, in a way, he does not wish to see her grow up and change, either:

I thought how [Phoebe]’d see the same stuff I used to see, and how she’d be different every time she saw it. It didn’t exactly depress me to think about it, but it didn’t make me feel gay as hell, either. Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. (Salinger 136)

This essentially brings us back to Holden’s ‘escape plan’ with Sally, and the reason why he wants to execute it as quickly as possible – before he goes to college; before everything irreversibly changes.

Finally, there is one more major aspect of Holden’s mental health belonging to this branch – his ‘mental images’ or ‘movies’ he invents in certain situations, presumably as a way of coping with stress and anxiety.

There are two of these in the novel, which Holden describes very vividly; both being somewhat reminiscent of action movie scenes (which is ironic, considering how Holden despises movies in general). The first one comes right after he gets cheated out of money and subsequently beaten by Maurice in Chapter 14:

About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts. Old Maurice had plugged me. Now I was on the way to the bathroom to get a good shot of bourbon or something to steady my nerves and really go into action. […] As soon as old
Maurice opened the doors, he’d see me with the automatic in my hand and he’d start screaming at me, in this very high-pitched, yellow-belly voice, to leave him alone. But I’d plug him anyway. Six shots right through his fat hairy belly. (Salinger 116)

This imaginary scene follows right after Holden’s fierce encounter with Maurice, which did not end in Holden’s favor. It is thus evident that Holden uses this fictional scenario to deal with his defeat and the feelings of despair. These are particularly strong throughout the whole scene as Holden even admits crying at one point (Salinger 115).

Another such scene appears later on in the novel, in Chapter 20, and similarly to the first one, it includes Holden being shot by an imaginary bullet. In this scene, Holden admits being extremely drunk, saying “I could hardly see straight” (Salinger 166). The imaginary scene itself, despite the common ‘bullet’ theme, is a bit different from the first, somewhat lacking in the action department:

I started that stupid business with the bullet in my guts again. I was the only guy at the bar with a bullet in their guts. I kept putting my hand under my jacket, on my stomach and all, to keep the blood from dripping all over the place. I didn’t want anybody to know I was even wounded. I was concealing the fact that I was a wounded sonuvabitch. (Salinger 166)

This projection is not a direct aftermath of the preceding event (at least not in the same way the first one was). Nothing particularly shocking happens to Holden prior to this imaginary scene, which might be the reason why there is no real action and no other people involved this time.

There is, in fact, a visible logical pattern between the two imaginary scenes and the real situations, which act as their catalysts. In the first scenario, Holden is raging as a result of his encounter with Maurice – this anger is clearly projected in the fictional scene he consequently creates. The bullet in the guts may represent Maurice wronging Holden (beating him, stealing his money), while the ‘action’ part (Maurice begging Holden to leave him alone and Holden shooting him in spite of his pleas) represents Holden’s coping with the situation; an imaginary revenge he was too weak to execute in the real world. In the second scenario, the bullet is more likely to
represent Holden’s ‘emotional baggage’; his issues with interpersonal relationships and the loneliness they inevitably cause. These issues are something he does not want others to see; he is trying to conceal the fact that he is bleeding (emotionally) as well as the bullet (the main source of all of his problems) that caused it.

These vivid fantasies that Holden is experiencing are likely to be a form of a condition called maladaptive daydreaming.\(^2\) The fact that they are clearly related to stressful events (or depressive states of mind) only empathizes their role as a coping mechanism. While it cannot be classified as a personality disorder, since, as Kandola states, “[p]eople experiencing maladaptive daydreaming are aware that their daydreams are not reality”, which is clearly true for Holden, it is nonetheless a condition that does suggest psychological issues of some sort. In his article, Kandola quotes Professor Eli Somer, who defined the phenomenon, saying: “He [the Professor] believed that maladaptive daydreaming could develop as a result of trauma or abuse, and act as a coping strategy to escape reality”. This seems very likely to be Holden’s case as he has had his share of traumatic experiences (as will be discussed further in the thesis).

**Axis II**

Another one of Holden’s major issues, which prevails throughout the entire novel, is his perception of other people. He frequently expresses his contempt and distrust towards most of the supporting characters as well as people in general, while the ones he genuinely likes and trusts are few and far between. There seems to be some sort of paranoia, which makes Holden discard certain groups of people (the vast majority, in fact) and label them ‘phonies’. One of such examples is his explanation for leaving his previous school: “One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That’s all. They were coming in the goddam window” (Salinger 17).

Holden is very skeptical about educational institutions, saying: “You can’t trust anybody in a goddam school” (Salinger 221). He considers them elitist and pretentious, and gives an example of the Elkton Hills principal, who would only fawn over the high-class parents while acting coldly towards the lower-class one.

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\(^2\) Maladaptive daydreaming is not formally recognized as a psychiatric disorder by the DSM, so the choice of placement in this part of the chapter is mainly for the sake of better clarity. At the same time, however, it does share some symptoms with dissociative disorder, which belongs to Axis I.
(Salinger 17). Holden despises such behavior despite himself being from a high-class family.

But it is not only the people in the school environment that he is mistrustful of (although he perhaps mentions those most frequently). At one point, he contemplates joining a monastery (which is, in a way, yet another attempt to escape the society) but soon after he concludes: “I’m not gonna join one anyway. The kind of luck I have, I’d probably join one with all the wrong kind of monks in it. All stupid bastards. Or just bastards” (Salinger 57). Judging from his attitude throughout the rest of the novel, it can be said that this ‘division’, in Holden’s point of view, really applies to the society as a whole – aside from those few people he likes, there are only ‘stupid bastards’ and ‘just bastards’.

There are several more examples of Holden showing contempt for other people (that is people as a group, rather than individuals), such as:

People never believe in you. (42)

People always clap for the wrong things. (94)

I was surrounded by jerks. I’m not kidding. (95)

People are always ruining things for you. (98)

There are so many of these in the novel that one may easily get the impression that they are completely random; that Holden is in this ‘phase’ when he hates everybody for no particular reason. However, upon closer inspection, there is a certain pattern to be found. In order to uncover it, it might be best to examine the people he likes and see what qualities they possess as opposed to those he hates.

From the more general point of view, Holden is clearly fond of children. His sister Phoebe is in a league of her own as she is undoubtedly Holden’s favorite living relative as well as his favorite person in general. But it is not just her. To Holden, children symbolize innocence and sincerity, the very qualities that the vast majority of adults seem to lack. Perhaps his view of adults and children can be best summarized by the following quote:

You take adults, they look lousy when they’re asleep and they have their mouths way open, but kids don’t. Kids look all right. They can even have spit all over the pillow and they still look all right. (Salinger 176)
To Holden, children are all right, regardless of what they look like or what they do. He appreciates their genuineness, the fact that they always are exactly what they seem to be. He attributes all the positive qualities to them and idolizes them about as much as he detests most adults: “God, I love it when a kid’s nice and polite when you tighten their skate for them or something. Most kids are. They really are” (Salinger 133).

Holden’s sympathy with children is also where the novel’s title comes from: *The Catcher in the Rye* – the children’s protector; someone who keeps them away from danger:

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 look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. (Salinger 191)

Protecting children is the only thing that Holden is interested in doing. He has no interest in getting a well-regarded job, building a career, earning lots of money; he has no interest in the American Dream as the society perceives it. For him, the Dream is to save children from losing their innocence and becoming the wealth-obsessed hypocrites that most of their adult counterparts are.

The reader may witness how furious Holden gets over a vulgar sign on the school wall – despite him being angry throughout most of the novel, the way he rages over the sign is incomparably more intense:

It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them […]. I kept wanting to kill whoever’d written it. […] I kept picturing myself catching him at it, and how I’d smash his head on the stone steps till he was good and goddamn dead and bloody. (Salinger 221)
Holden is aware of the fact that the more bad things children learn about the world, the faster they grow up. And he cannot stand someone shortening their childhood by exposing them to nasty things, such as the said writing and the meaning behind it.

With that being said, Holden does not loathe every single adult he meets. And even though he is generally far more critical towards them for the sole reason of them being adults, there are a few he likes (to some extent at least). There is Mr. Spencer who Holden thinks is a good teacher; his brother D.B., even though he is quite mad at him for “being a prostitute” in Hollywood (Salinger 4); even Stradlater seems to be okay in Holden’s eyes before the business with Jane. And then there is Mr. Antolini, about whom Holden says: “He was about the best teacher I ever had, Mr. Antolini” (Salinger 192), although the events surrounding Antolini are far more complex and will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter.

There is a certain attribute shared amongst all of these people – their attitude towards wealth. Mr. Spencer is said not to have much money and Holden admires his excitement about buying seemingly insignificant things, such as a blanket (Salinger 9). D.B., aside from being a family, once earned Holden’s admiration for being a writer – Holden has fond memories of the beginnings of D.B.’s career, back when he did not have much money, and we may observe the conspicuous change of attitude Holden adopts when D.B. becomes rich through the movie business in Hollywood (Salinger 3-4). And Stradlater’s situation is particularly notable – while he is said to be very rich, Holden admires him for his willingness to share (Salinger 29). That shows that Holden does not hate rich people because they are rich but rather because of their attitude, which is hardly ever similar to that of Stradlater’s.

Aside from all of his social issues, another one of Holden’s problems belonging to Axis II are his obsessive-compulsive actions, which he admits on multiple occasions:

I sat down on the [washbowl] right next to [Stradlater] and started turning the cold water on and off – this nervous habit I have. (31)

Then I sort of started lighting matches. I do that quite a lot when I’m in a certain mood. I sort of let them burn down till I can’t hold them any more, then I drop them in the ashtray. It’s a nervous habit. (144)
Another peculiarity Holden mentions is his issue with watching plays. First, he mentions that he hates actors because their acting never seems real enough (Salinger 130). Then he explains: “The trouble with me is, I always have to read [the play] by myself. If an actor acts it out, I hardly listen. I keep worrying about whether he’s going to do something phony every minute” (Salinger 131). This line shows how strong Holden’s paranoia and obsessive worrying regarding other people’s actions really is. At times, it may even seem that by his constant critique of others, Holden suggests his own superiority, and indeed some of his lines do sound rather narcissistic. On the other hand, whenever he talks about the people he admires – his family in particular – he suddenly feels inferior, saying: “I’m the only dumb one in the family” (Salinger 75). In other words, he seems to be living between the two extremes – people he thinks are superior to him, and ‘the phonies’, which is yet another reason for his constant feelings of loneliness.

Another aspect of Holden’s obsessive behavior is his lying. On some occasions, he makes things up for no particular reason; with nothing to gain from his lies. In Chapter 8, he meets the mother of one of his classmates and he creates this rather complex, completely untruthful, scenario. He even uses an alias for himself. He then admits that his lying is something he can hardly control, saying: “[…] I started reading this timetable I had in my pocket. Just to stop lying. Once I get started, I can go on for hours if I feel like it. No kidding. Hours” (Salinger 65). At one point, he even goes as far as to lie about having a tumor (Salinger 65). This may be diagnosed as a factitious disease (belonging to axis I), which Savino and Fordtran define as “intentional production (or feigning) of disease in oneself to relieve emotional distress by assuming the role of a sick person” (195). That would mean that Holden’s lying is yet another one of his coping mechanisms. Savino and Fordtran also add that “[a]lthough the self-induction of disease is a conscious act, the underlying motivation is usually unconscious” (195).

Generally, it could be said that all the paradoxes in Holden’s attitude are the biggest reason for his misery, and it also makes it difficult to precisely categorize his mental issues. For instance, his prevailing contempt for all the ‘phonies’ may classify him as someone with an antisocial disorder, which, however, can be immediately falsified by his almost obsessive empathy for certain people (often complete strangers); e. g. the prostitute (Salinger 107) or the nuns (Salinger 126). According to Bressert, the antisocial personality disorder includes the following symptoms: failure
to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, impulsivity, irritability and aggressiveness, reckless disregard, consistent irresponsibility, and lack of remorse. Here we can see that with the exception of the lack of remorse (since he does express remorse for some of his actions, e.g. the lying), all of the other symptoms listed above apply to Holden. However, in the same article, Bressert also states that “[i]ndividuals with antisocial personality disorder frequently lack empathy and tend to be callous, cynical, and contemptuous of the feelings, rights, and sufferings of others”, which, for the most part, is not Holden’s case.

This brings us back to the hypothesis that Holden’s attitude towards other people diametrically differs based on their socio-economic status, or, in the case of rich people, on the way they handle their wealth (e.g. their willingness to share).

Axis III

Aside from all of the above mentioned, Holden often shows signs of various physical/medical conditions. Firstly, there is his premature hair graying, which he mentions early on in the novel: “It’s really ironical, because I’m six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head – the right side – is full of millions of gray hairs. I’ve had them ever since I was a kid” (Salinger 11-12). There are various misconceptions about PHR, perhaps the most common one being that it is connected with long-term stress or some kind of trauma. But as much as it would help to support our hypothesis here, the fact is that there is hardly ever a connection between these factors. As Sashin states: “Contrary to popular belief, stress has not been shown to cause gray hair. Scientists don’t know exactly why some people go gray early, but genes play a large role.” A research carried out by Chakrabarty et al. confirms this, stating:

Although the primary cause of PHG is considered to be genetic, autoimmune disorders such as vitiligo, pernicious anemia, autoimmune thyroid disorders, and Werner's syndrome are also shown to be causative. (6)

Based on this information, it is safe to assume that there is no direct connection between Holden’s prematurely gray hair and his mental issues. However, according to some studies, “environmental factors (such as ultraviolet light and climate), smoking, drugs, deficiencies of trace elements, and nutritional deficiencies also play
a role in PHG” (Chakrabarty 6). This seems more akin to Holden’s case as he is indeed a heavy smoker and (as already discussed) has some nutritional problems as well.

Aside from his eating issues and possible insomnia, Holden experiences various other, increasingly serious medical conditions towards the end of the book. It starts quite mildly: “I had a headache and I felt lousy. I even had sort of a stomach-ache, if you want to know the truth” (Salinger 203). But following the scene with Mr. Antolini, his condition gradually worsens. He has trouble swallowing food, blaming it on his depression: “The thing is, if you get very depressed about something, it’s hard as hell to swallow” (Salinger 216). Afterward, he experiences a strong anxiety attack as he suddenly starts worrying that he might disappear:

Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddamn curb, I had this feeling that I’d never get to the other side of the street. I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again. (Salinger 217)

Later he feels queasy for a while: “While I was walking up the stairs, […] all of a sudden I thought I was going to puke again. Only, I didn’t. I sat down for a second, and then I felt better” (Salinger 221). And his stomach troubles eventually culminate with him losing consciousness:

I sort of had diarrhea, if you want to know the truth. I didn’t mind the diarrhea part too much, but something else happened. When I was coming out of the can, right before I got to the door, I sort of passed out. (Salinger 225)

The consequences of the shock that Holden experienced at Mr. Antolini’s show the connection between his physical and mental conditions. The fact that he is relatively unconcerned about his health issues (aside from the anxiety attack, which seemed to have surprised him) make it highly probable that he has been experiencing similar conditions for an extended period of time. Despite that, he considers himself “pretty healthy” (Salinger 7).
Axis IV

As already mentioned, Holden has problems adapting in the school environment as well as getting along with his classmates. He struggles with being part of a team, which is illustrated, for instance, on the fencing team conflict – Holden was supposed to be the manager of the team but failed completely to carry out his duties, which the team did not exactly appreciate (Salinger 5). Holden, on the other hand, does not seem to mind too much and even says: “It was pretty funny, in a way” (Salinger 6).

Generally, he seems to get into conflict with nearly everyone he meets, even if they seem to get along at first (Stradlater, Sally, etc.).

The main focus of this axis, however, are the problems with the primary support group, which includes the relationships within the family as well as family tragedies, which comprise a large portion of Holden’s character and will be thus discussed in separately in the following chapter.
3.3. Esther Greenwood

Axis I

Similarly to Holden, Esther expresses her feelings of depression and lack of interest in most activities quite frequently throughout the novel. From the very beginning, she is aware of how lucky she is; that she is an object of envy for most girls her age. But in spite of that, she is unable to feel any excitement about her fortune – “I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty […]” (Plath 2).

Esther’s lack of interest is a bit different than that of Holden’s, however. While Holden is literally uninterested in anything, Esther, on the other hand, claims to be interested in everything (Plath 29), which results in her being overwhelmed and unable to stick to something from start to finish – “[…] I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired” (Plath 27). Unlike Holden, Esther is said to be an exceptional student who tries very hard to achieve the best possible grades – her academic motivation is incomparably higher than Holden’s and she does not express any contempt towards educational institutions.

When socializing with her peers (which is something she does quite often at first, as opposed to Holden), it is apparent that she is not comfortable and the presence of other people does not help ease her loneliness (or even reinforces it) – “I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine-panelling. I felt like a hole in the ground” (Plath 15).

Generally, Esther struggles with the feelings of loneliness and mild depression, but throughout the first half of the novel, she never, even remotely, mentions death (unlike Holden). Her emotions are a mixture of loneliness, confusion, and anger but they are never strong enough to reveal any suicidal tendencies. In fact, there are hints that Esther clings to life and has no desire to die. She even mentions her fear of death when saying: “Whenever I’m sad I’m going to die, […], I slump down just so far and then I say: ‘I’ll go take a hot bath.’ Despite being a bit disillusioned about her stay in New York with all the fanciness it includes, she still has her hopes, dreams, and ambitions – perhaps too many of each, as she herself admits – but in this regard, her situation is much more buoyant than Holden’s.
Another similarity to Holden is Esther’s creation of imaginary scenarios as a way of coping with the real ones, which leave her unsatisfied. The example of this are her imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard. She says:

I spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard. […] These conversations I had in my mind usually repeated the beginnings of conversations I’d really had with Buddy, only they finished with me answering him back quite sharply, instead of just sitting around and saying ‘I guess so’. (Plath 53)

Esther’s scenarios do not involve any violence like those of Holden. Instead, they show her suppressed desire to be more expressive – to avoid being the exact stereotype of a woman of her time who agrees with everything the man says.

Again, like Holden, Esther often lies to other people, using an alias and fabricating a fake history of her life. She justifies it to the reader by saying: “After (lying) I felt safer. I didn’t want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston” (Plath 11). This reveals Esther’s insecurity and perhaps even shame regarding her origins. But she lies for other reasons, too. When Betsy asks her about the reason for not going to the fur show, Esther claims that she really wanted to go but was not allowed to because of her boss Jay Cee. But then again she confesses to the reader: “That wasn’t quite true about wanting to go to the show, but I tried to convince myself now that it was true, so I could be really wounded about what Jay Cee had done” (Plath 27). In this situation, Esther does not only lie to others but, in a way, even to herself, just so that she could wallow in her grievance.

As Esther’s state gradually worsens, so does the seriousness of her lies. It eventually comes to the point when her reliability could be seriously doubted. In the second half of the novel, Esther often complains about various medical problems, which right at first glance seem peculiar, to say the least. She mentions insomnia, claiming: “I hadn’t slept for seven nights” (Plath 122); inability to swallow (eat) or even read and write (Plath 125). These claims, however, are later challenged by the doctor, whose reaction to Esther’s complains strongly implies that they were mendacious to begin with.

‘I can’t sleep…’
They interrupted me. ‘But the nurse says you slept last night.’ I looked round the crescent of fresh, strange faces.

‘I can’t read.’ I raised my voice. ‘I can’t eat.’ It occurred to me I’d been eating ravenously ever since I came to. (Plath 171)

This scene reveals that Esther has been either feigning or, at the very least, exaggerating her symptoms. Her inclination towards self-victimization is already made evident in the scene with Betsy, in which she openly admits it. Here the situation is even more far-reaching since the doctors are involved. Unlike Holden, who only shows scant signs of the factitious disorder when lying to a stranger about having a tumor, Esther’s symptoms are much more significant and undeniable. It is not quite clear, however, whether her fabrications are entirely conscious or not.

Esther also has her own ‘escape plan’ – going to Chicago in order to avoid the constant judgment of others regarding her life choices. She says:

I thought if I ever did get to Chicago, I might change my name to Elly Higginbottom for good. Then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women’s college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the A.M.A. and earn pots of money. In Chicago, people would take me for what I was. (Plath 127)

Just as Holden is trying to escape ‘the perfect life’ in the capitalist society he despises, so does Esther; both of them perfectly aware of the fact that what they are trying to throw away is a thoroughly comfortable, financially secured, life. And yet they both detest it, each for their own reasons. To Holden it represents the superficiality, inequity, and untrustworthiness – the very traits he ascribes to most rich people; to Esther, it is a role that is being forced upon her against her will and the constant judgment of her life decisions.
Axis II

Even though Esther seems to feel rather uncomfortable around people from the start, it never really resembles anything as severe as a social phobia or paranoia. However, this begins to change with her moving back to her mother’s suburban house for the summer. At this point, she also learns about her failure regarding the writing course that she was so excited to take – up until then, she hardly knew what a failure was, so this outcome comes as a major shock to her:

All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap. (Plath 110)

This is the point where Esther’s condition starts worsening rapidly. The failure causes her to lose a great amount of self-confidence along with her hopes for a better future. What makes the situation even worse is the fact that she is ‘locked’ in the suburbs for the summer – this comes at the worst possible time and only adds to her misery as being around familiar people makes it even harder to deal with her failure – “As the houses grew more familiar, I slunk still lower. I felt it was very important not to be recognized” (Plath 110).

It immediately becomes clear that Esther hates the suburbs, calling it “a large but escape-proof cage” (Plath 110) and criticizing the dismal lack of privacy – […] [A]nybody passing along the sidewalk could glance up at the second storey windows and see just what was going on” (Plath 111). Soon after her arrival, she starts to become more and more paranoid about the locals’ gossip. This becomes even more obvious later when she is in the hospital, feeling overly suspicious of other people’s possible connections to those that might know her – “[…] they would gossip about me among themselves. I wanted to be where nobody I knew could ever come” (Plath 171). From then on, her bitterness only increases to the point when she does not want to see anyone, describing her situation as follows:

I hated these visits, because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be, and I knew they went away utterly confounded. I thought if they left me alone I might have some peace. (Plath 195)
But despite showing contempt towards most people at this stage, there are some towards whom Esther expresses a bit more fondness – this attitude is, yet again, similar to that of Holden. For Esther, however, the criterion is not people’s wealth (or the lack thereof) but something else entirely – about the only person to whom Esther shows any respect is Doctor Nolan – a female doctor. Even at the point when she refuses to see anyone else, the presence of Doctor Nolan does not bother her – quite the contrary, she welcomes it. She says: “I thought if Doctor Nolan smoked, she might stay longer. This was the first time she had come to talk with me. When she left I would simply lapse into the old blankness” (Plath 181). With her former boss Jay Cee and her benefactor Philomena Guinea also taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that the people Esther is fond of are generally women who do not fit into the period standard – strong, independent, with respectable, well-paid jobs.

Axis III

Despite mentioning various medical symptoms – insomnia, eating/swallowing problems, disrupted focus – all of these, as already mentioned, are likely to be merely Esther’s own fabrication. And even if they were real at some point, the doctor’s ensuing statement establishes that all of those symptoms are no longer present – and Esther, in a way, comes to admit it herself.

Axis IV

This is where most of the two characters’ major problems intertwine, although some differences can be observed nonetheless.

The biggest difference is their attitude towards school – Esther’s scholastic score has always been well above average, with no particular discords with the academic authorities ever being mentioned. In other words, she is the exact opposite of Holden in this regard. Educational, as well as occupational, problems do not considerably concern her. Even if she sometimes mentions rebellious tendencies to the reader, she – very much unlike Holden – never acts on them throughout most of the novel. This only changes towards the end – in the hospital – when she intentionally makes things difficult for the staff (Plath 176), her mother (Plath 195), and generally just about anyone with the exception of Doctor Nolan.
Both Esther and Holden have problems with the social environment. While in Holden’s case it is mostly about the political situation working hugely in favor of the rich, in case of Esther it mostly concerns the society’s expectations of her as a woman, which do not correspond with what she wants herself.

However, the main problems, in terms of seriousness, that both characters have to deal with to a large extent, are problems with the primary support group. Both have experienced the death of a family member prior to the novels’ events and in both novels, it is made clear that neither of the characters has managed to come to terms with their loss. Both of these areas will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.
4. In depths of depression

4.1. Causes linked to socio-cultural environment

The aim of this sub-chapter is to find all conclusive links between the characters’ diagnoses in Chapter 3 and the peculiarities of the given era and its perception of the American dream discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, many of which have already been briefly outlined.

In Holden’s case, these links may seem a bit more subtle – he is a white male, growing up in an upper-class family, clearly intelligent (despite claiming otherwise) – he seems to be in an ideal position as none of the era’s injustices and shortcomings seemingly apply to him. And yet, that is obviously not the case as it is exactly all these privileges that make him miserable.

Holden cannot simply accept the society being divided into the haves and the have-nots, despite belonging to the former, privileged category. It aggravates him to the point that he starts detesting the rich, and in a way, even himself, for his own privilege binds him to other privileged people while he constantly shows far more fondness for the poor ones – this is evident from the suitcases scene, in which Holden laments about always having to be around people like Stradlater for that very reason.

Holden’s attitude in this regard is doubtlessly rather bizarre, especially in the American context, in which wealth is the main source of pride – even today, let alone in the postwar period, when all of America’s national traits were highly exaggerated for reasons discussed in Chapter 1. In the political climate of the 1950s – the era of McCarthy when opinions of a lot more innocent nature were considered borderline communist – Holden’s attitude would not only be seen as peculiar, but rather as downright criminal.

Needless to say that such conditions tremendously contribute to his gradually deepening despair and loneliness, as his views can hardly be shared with anyone.

Esther’s problems with the social environment, on the other hand, are far more explicit and comprise two major areas: the treatment of women and life in the suburbs, both of which she clearly detests.

Throughout the novel, Esther constantly expresses her longing for independence and freedom; the type of life incompatible with society’s idea of what an ideal woman should be like. She is proud of her creativity and wishes to utilize it in her
future profession (despite having no idea what that profession might be). Her mother, however, is not very supportive of this vague intent and constantly encourages Esther to learn shorthand instead because then “[s]he would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter” (Plath 72). Esther nonetheless candidly admits that she “hate[s] the idea of serving men in any way” and would rather “dictate [her] own thrilling letters (Plath 72).

This situation is in compliance with Beattie’s take on the subject of gender discrimination in the academic setting, saying:

It appears that parents tend to have “lower expectations” for girls when it comes to school. As a result of that lowered expectations, parents tend to not push their daughters toward a high-profile job, instead of attempting to make their daughter conform to the stereotype of society, like become a teacher or a nurse.

And it is indeed evident that Esther’s mother’s expectations are quite low, considering the amount of Esther’s academic success and her own ambitions. In his article, Beattie also adds that “the more intelligent a girl is, the more likely she is to become depressed” since her intelligence is always being suppressed by the society, including her very own family. This may as well be one of the reasons for Esther’s troubled relationship with her mother (which will be explored in more detail in the following sub-chapter).

It is also interesting to note how Esther’s loathing of the traditional woman’s role gradually increases. She does not condemn it straight away – when using her fig-tree analogy, she still sees it as a possibility (even if it is just one of many), saying: “[o]ne fig was a husband and a happy home and children […]” (Plath 73). However, as the novel progresses, she becomes more and more disillusioned with this scenario (and men) to the point when she no longer even considers it. She concludes that no man will ever be good enough and that “infinite security” is about the last thing she yearns for (Plath 79). She also begins to worry that being married and having children would mean losing all creativity; that it would resemble being “brainwashed” and “about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (Plath 81). She often refers to Buddy Willard’s mother who, despite being an intelligent, college-educated, woman, only “cook[s], clean[s] and wash[es] […] from morning till night“ (Plath 80). That notion only makes Esther abhor the idea of marriage all the more.
The way Esther feels about the position of men and women in the postwar society is also expressed in the dancing scene with Marco, which Esther – not knowing how to dance – describes as follows:

Marco’s leg slid forward against mine and my leg slid back and I seemed to be riveted to him, limb for limb, moving as he moved, without any will or knowledge of my own, and after a while I thought, ‘It doesn’t take two to dance, it only takes one,’ and I let myself blow and bend like a tree in the wind. (Plath 103)

To Esther, the idea of marriage (along with the overall conformity to the social standards) is a lot like dancing – there is no need for the woman to know how to dance; to earn money, to make her own decisions, to live. It is the man who leads her every step of the way. The woman may be there physically, but the entire process only takes one – the man. She moves as the man moves, ‘without any will or knowledge of her own’.

Esther’s disgust then culminates when she moves back to the suburbs, among all the similar-looking houses and people who know everything about one another – the very image of the postwar American dream and Esther’s Nightmare. This is where – while watching one of the neighbors, a Catholic mother of six – she admits that children make her sick (Plath 113).

On the whole, Esther finds herself trapped in her misery as she refuses to conform to the social standards, while at the same time not being decisive enough to choose an alternative.
4.2. Causes linked to personal history

According to Beattie, the family situation is among the most influential aspects when it comes to depression; understandably so, as it comprises some of the earliest influences in a person’s life. The core of family relationships is the relationship with one’s parents who – at least in the early years – play the central role in one’s life. Despite many of the stereotypes regarding the American society, research has shown that the significance of this relationship prevails throughout adulthood as both of the parents continue to play the role of major supporters - both financial and emotional (Marks et al. 1612). Marks et al. also stress the importance of “reciprocity in the relationship—especially in emotional and instrumental support” in the case of young adults (1612).

Children form attachments to their parents from a very early age and according to some theorists, gender has a large significance in this area. From their viewpoint, children are typically more likely to identify with the parent of the same gender while consequently creating “somewhat more distance from the opposite-gender parent”. In addition, mother-daughter relationships tend to intensify with age (Marks et al. 1613). Now whether all of this somehow corresponds with the novels’ protagonists shall be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Holden only mentions his parents on a few occasions and never directly meets them during the events of the novel. It is quite evident that he is not particularly close to either of them (which is in direct contrast with the relationship he has with his siblings who clearly mean a world to him), but he does not dislike them, either. He does show concern on multiple occasions as well as awareness of the fact that he causes them a lot of trouble with his constant academic expulsions.

At one point, he starts worrying about getting pneumonia and dying (despite talking about suicide all the time) and the reason it bothers him is that he worries about his parents – may it be in a very peculiar way, since he explains it as follows:

I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father. Especially my mother, because she still isn’t over my brother Allie yet. I kept picturing her not knowing what to do with all my suits and athletic equipment and all. (Salinger 171)

Holden’s way of thinking in this matter shows his perception of his parents’ feelings towards him. He does not even seem to think that his mother would truly
mourn for him as she is preoccupied with mourning for her other son, Allie, and yet he still wants to avoid making her life more difficult.

Whenever Holden mentions his position in the family, there are signs of him feeling inferior (which does not seem to be the case outside of his family circle). He always praises his siblings (with a slight exception of D.B.’s Hollywood “prostitution”), while saying he is “the only dumb one in the family” (Salinger 75). Whether his parents’ behavior – direct or indirect – is what causes these feeling remains unuttered. However, it is far more likely that it is merely Holden’s own conjecture, caused by his deep appreciation of Allie and Phoebe, which makes him think that his parents love him less than they love their other children.

Holden’s mother is also said to have her own share of mental issues, most likely caused by her son’s death. Holden mentions her insomnia, saying “[s]he’s nervous as hell. Half the time she’s up all night smoking cigarettes” (Salinger 175). As for Holden’s father, the reader only learns that he is a corporation lawyer who earns large sums of money (Salinger 119). And even though Holden never explicitly says it, his father seems to be the exact kind of person that Holden himself does not want to become. One may thus assume that their relationship is not particularly great.

It is clear from the start that the alpha and omega of Holden’s family relationships are his siblings – particularly his sister Phoebe and his late brother Allie. Allie’s death thus comes as presumably the worst tragedy in Holden’s life, and is a recurring theme in the novel.

Holden expresses huge admiration whenever he is talking about Allie, saying: “He was terrifically intelligent. […] But it wasn’t just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody” (Salinger 43).

Following this description, it is strongly hinted that Holden’s psychological issues began as an aftermath of Allie’s death as he chronicles his emotional outburst at the age of thirteen:

I slept in the garage the night [Allie] died, and broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn’t do it. (Salinger 44)
He also notes that he was supposed to be psychoanalyzed as a result of that scene, which probably did not happen in the end for reasons not mentioned in the text.

The topic of Allie then arises on a few more occasions, further underlining his importance in Holden’s life. Perhaps the most important situation, which shows that Holden has still not accepted Allie’s death, is when he admits talking to Allie (“sort of out loud”) so as to deal with being depressed. In this imaginary scenario, Holden always revisits the same scene from their childhood, telling Allie to “get his bike and meet [him] in front of Bobby Fallon’s house,” which he deeply regrets not doing in reality that time (Salinger 110).

When Phoebe later accuses Holden of not liking anything, he is only able to counter that argument by saying that he likes Allie (in present tense) and her. When Phoebe tells him that Allie is dead and so that does not really count, Holden gets angry, saying: “Just because somebody’s dead, you don’t just stop liking them, for God’s sake – especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that’re alive and all” (Salinger 189).

It is obvious that Holden idolizes Allie in a way that none of the living people he encounters (perhaps except Phoebe) could possibly compete with, which is why he refuses to really accept the fact that he is dead. It may also be exactly because he is dead that Holden idolizes him so much and antagonizes everybody else. This would be partially in accordance with Freud’s theory on the subject, which says that people often tend to “assume a special attitude towards the dead” while “overlooking whatever wrongs [they] may have done” (43). That could explain Holden’s – perhaps a bit excessive – praise for Allie throughout the novel.

Aside from Allie’s death, there have been two more traumatic events in Holden’s life – both of them briefly mentioned in the previous chapter; witnessing the suicide of his classmate James Castle, and Holden’s hinted molestation at some point prior to the novel’s events.

James Castle commits suicide by jumping out of his dorm’s window as a result of extensive bullying. Holden mentions this scene rather briefly and admits that he did not really know him very well, and yet it is evident that the experience has deeply scarred him and no doubt contributed to his contempt towards the school authorities. Holden was the first to approach Castle’s dead body, witnessing all the gory details – “He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody would
even go near him” (Salinger 188). Experiencing such a tragedy so directly and at such a young age would inevitably leave its mark on one’s psyche.

The molestation issue is mentioned rather subtly and may be easy to overlook. Holden indicates it at the very end of Chapter 24 following the peculiar scene with his former teacher Mr. Antolini. At first, Holden has nothing but praise for Mr. Antolini (which is very rare in his case), and decides to spend a night at his place. Once he falls asleep, however, something rather disturbing happens:

I woke up all of a sudden. I don’t know what time it was or anything, but I woke up. I felt something on my head, some guy’s hand. Boy, it really scared hell out of me. What it was, it was Mr. Antolini’s hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. (Salinger 211)

Holden then becomes hysterical, leaving Antolini’s apartment immediately, extremely nervous, sweating. But more importantly, he claims to have experienced a similar kind of behavior (or worse) before – and at school grounds, no less (Salinger 212). Apparently, it has happened to him multiple times in some form. He says: “That kind of stuff’s happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can’t stand it” (Salinger 213).

Holden never further specifies what kind of ‘stuff’ it was, exactly, but he makes it clear that he has been molested in one way or the other, and on multiple occasions, at that. There is also the fact that these perverts are linked to schools (may it be teachers or some other members of the staff), which would explain Holden’s aversion to it, let alone many of his other issues.

Hornor’s study shows that children who have experienced this sort of abuse are far more prone to depression, suicidal tendencies and a number of other psychiatric disorders. Additionally, in case of suicide, boys are said to be at even greater risk than girls (360). With Holden’s consternation following the Antolini scene taken into consideration, including all of his sudden stomach issues and subsequent loss of consciousness, some experience with abuse in the past is a definite possibility.
Esther’s family situation is in some ways similar to Holden’s, even though she was raised by a single mother so her childhood was presumably not as luxurious as Holden’s, she did not seem to suffer from any particular financial stringency, either – early in the novel, she says:

It’s not that we hadn’t enough to eat at home, it’s just that my grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat-loafs and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, ‘I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,’ which always made me feel I was somehow eating pennies instead of Sunday roast. (Plath 24)

On a similar note, she also states that she never ate in “a proper restaurant” prior to her New York adventures (Plath 22). The way she reminisces about those times, however, does not appear to have any negative connotation. On the contrary, while feeling awkward and perhaps a bit insecure among the New York’s upper crust, these memories seem to help her cope with her current situation. This is clearly demonstrated at the beginning of Chapter Three, in which the present – perceived rather negatively by Esther – is constantly being intersected by her memories; particularly those of her grandparents, who apparently played a major role in her upbringing (although they are not mentioned again after that). In this part, she also – although very briefly – mentions her brother despite his importance to her is never really stressed in any way throughout the novel. Another important thing to note here is the fact that Esther does not mention her mother even once in connection with these “happier” memories.

When talking about the family situation, one must also consider the time period, in which the novels take place. As presented in the previous chapter, the 1950s was a time when women were the ones fully devoted to raising children – that alone would logically give them a certain edge in terms of the parent-child relationship, with the men, as breadwinners, being a bit sidelined in this regard. This – combined with the above mentioned gender theory as well as the continuously intensifying mother-daughter relationship described by Marks et al. – leads to a logical assumption that Esther’s relationship with her mother should be among the most powerful and stable ones in Esther’s life but the exact opposite is true (for reasons unknown to the reader).
Throughout the course of the novel, Esther’s attitude towards her mother develops from minor annoyance to pure hatred without any particular reason ever being directly stated, neither unequivocally determinable by the reader. Although Esther does not clearly express the negative feelings towards her mother until later parts of the novel, one can clearly sense her subtle hostility in their interactions from the very beginning – and they only intensify later on. In the early parts of the novel, Esther hardly mentions her mother at all and when she does, it is usually nothing particularly positive. There is clearly no adoration in her descriptions, no awe, no particular respect.

There is a significant contrast between Esther’s perception of her mother and that of her boss – Jay Cee, for whom Esther seems to have a great deal of admiration. “I liked her a lot,” she says despite her friend Doreen’s nasty remarks. “She wasn’t one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter” (Plath 5). Esther brings up her unconcealed fondness for her boss again several times afterward, and at some point she even goes as far as to say: “I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do” (Plath 36).

In order to make any kind of sense of this rather harsh statement as well as Esther’s overall attitude, it might be helpful to compare and contrast Jay Cee and Esther’s mother in terms of their character and way of life. Despite the fact that very little information is given on these two, it is still rather easy to notice the simple fact that they are diametrically different. Jay Cee is a smart, independent woman; decisive and strong-willed. She is often described as somewhat ugly by both Esther and her friend Doreen, although in Esther’s point of view, her looks are of no real importance – “She looked terrible but wise” (Plath 36). While Doreen often mocks others for their looks without seemingly paying attention to anything else, Esther focuses on the abilities and intelligence first and foremost (at least in case of women – her attitude towards the opposite sex is slightly different as will be discussed further on).

Once again, the period standards must be taken into consideration here – it was the time when women – even college educated ones – were usually not found in high career positions. In other words, Jay Cee does not really fit the period archetype of an average woman.
From a certain perspective, Esther’s mother does not either as she was the one supporting the family. Unlike Jay Cee, however, she did not do so of her own volition but rather due to the unfortunate circumstance of losing her husband.

My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn’t trust life insurance salesmen. (Plath 36)

The word *secretly* here may suggest various possibilities. The most plausible one, perhaps, is that all of which Esther expresses in the excerpt above is nothing but her own subjective conclusion derived from a mixture of her vague childhood memories. On the other hand, mentioning the life insurance salesmen indicates that there might be some truth to it and that Esther’s mother may have indeed mentioned something along those lines. If that were the case, Esther’s attitude could be strongly influenced by her mother’s (perhaps repeated) self-victimizing, which Esther is likely to despise, considering her overall strongly feminist outlook.

She refrains from commenting on this issue any further, leaving the reader wonder whether she agrees with the statement (to some extent, at least) or not. Only as the story progresses, it becomes relatively clear that Esther does not blame her father for anything. In other words, her mother’s criticism of her father (whether she criticized him openly or “secretly”) was likely to further undermine Esther’s scorn for her mother and thus be yet another element that contributed towards their damaged relationship.

Another thing about Esther’s mother is her sheer practicality when it comes to her daughter’s future – “‘Even the apostles were tent-makers,’ she’d say. ‘They had to live, just the way we do.’” (Plath 36). This, of course, is characteristic for most parents to some extent but for someone like Esther, who is much more inclined towards an artistic path, such attitude can be perceived as a nuisance and may be one of the reasons she sees her mother as unsupportive and unhelpful with her important life decisions.

Overall, Esther’s mother could easily be considered the most passive character in the entire novel, in terms of both her actions and expressed (or rather suppressed) emotions. From the limited amount of information provided to the reader, she is presented as a sad woman, a victim of her fate that she no longer tries to change. All
the reader is told about her past is that she has been a single mother of two children since Esther’s nine years of age (her brother being even younger). That itself makes for a difficult family situation, although she probably received some assistance from her (or possibly her husband’s) parents (as Esther mentions her grandparents as an integral part of her childhood).

From Esther’s point of view (which is, of course, highly subjective), the childhood spent with her mother was not a happy one. While she never goes as far as to describe it as a polar opposite to happiness, she also clearly states that she was “only purely happy until (she) was nine years old” (Plath 71) while highlighting a particular memory of one of the final moments spent with her father as her happiest one – “… I felt happier than I had been since I was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with my father the summer before he died” (Plath 70). It remains unclear whether the memories with her grandparents quoted in one of the previous paragraphs happens before or after the “fatal” age, but nevertheless, her father evidently played a crucial role in her life and the loss thus struck her hard and without a doubt affected her future development.

This event, despite not getting that much focus in the novel, could very well be the catalyst of many of Esther’s future troubles. On the conscious level, Esther may not even be aware of the connection. Until her mental breakdown, she seems to be at peace with what happened, even though she misses her father deeply. The only time she draws a vague connection between her past and her present is when she remembers what apparently was her last happy moment (quoted in the previous paragraph). With that being said, she never openly blames her present miseries on her father’s death, neither does she imply it, however slightly, throughout the whole novel. Whatever anger or sadness arises within her regarding this issue, she usually deals with it by projecting those feelings onto her mother. Esther’s mother thus acts as a sort of scapegoat throughout the story – whether rightfully or not is hard to determine as the reader is only given Esther’s subjective, rather biased, point of view.

The only time she gets really emotional about her father’s death is in the second half of the novel – following her first two suicide attempts (hanging and drowning); the ones that nobody knew about. It is probably safe to assume (though not directly stated in the novel) that these events somehow trigger Esther’s sudden yearning to visit her father’s grave. In this short scene, the reader learns a few more important bits, some of which might help add more pieces to the puzzle of the family’s
complex relationships and Esther’s growing loathing towards her mother, in particular.

The scene begins with Esther’s realization that neither she nor any of the other surviving family members have ever visited her father’s grave. She explains it as follows:

My mother hadn’t let us come to his funeral because we were only children then, and he had died in hospital, so the graveyard and even his death, had always seemed unreal to me. (Plath 159)

Esther does not state whether she sees her mother’s decision as a wrong one or not, and so this statement was probably not meant to sound reproachful towards her mother. She is merely stating the facts here, uncovering quite an important piece of information about her father’s death. In a way, she admits that (mostly due to her absence at his funeral as well as his final days) she has never really accepted the situation. His death was something incomprehensible, something too abstract for her nine-year-old self to conceive. And this abstraction has somehow persevered in her all the way into adulthood.

Not long after, however, her militant approach towards her mother resurfaces, adding yet another possible reason for the grudge she seems to bear:

I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave. I had always been my father’s favourite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with. (Plath 159)

One question this excerpt may provoke is: What caused this sudden yearning? Esther herself does not provide any specifics on the subject, neither does the reader know what exact time period the “lately” in the statement refers to. Perhaps it can be assumed that this sudden “great yearning” is somehow connected to Esther’s gradually worsening psychological condition. With her growing depression resulting in the recent suicide attempts, she is quite likely to feel the need to “tie up the loose ends”, one of which may very well be visiting her father’s grave; perhaps as an act of finally accepting his death.
Another important thing is Esther mentioning being her father’s favorite. That is, again, in direct contrast with the same-gender theory. Not only does Esther strongly prefer her father to her mother but according to her statement, her father also preferred Esther to her younger brother (assuming Esther’s judgment can be trusted and treated as a fact). Their mutually strong relationship was thus bound to reinforce the sense of loss Esther has been feeling since his death.

And finally, possibly the most striking part of this excerpt: Esther (this time very openly and rather bitterly) blaming her mother for never properly mourning for her husband’s death. Although – as this scene is quite close to the point when Esther’s contempt for her mother is at its peak – one possible explanation is that Esther might be exaggerating when it comes to all of her mother’s negative traits. As was previously mentioned, her negative emotions do have a tendency to gradually intensify as the novel (as well as her psychological decline) progresses. However, assuming Esther’s words are to be trusted, her mother’s lack of emotion regarding her husband’s death along with her complaints about him leaving no money behind, are likely to be Esther’s main reasons behind her attitude. She describes her mother’s reaction to her father’s death as follows:

She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived, he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn’t have stood for that, he would rather have died than had that happen. (Plath 161)

Although well meant, in all likelihood, the nine-year-old Esther could have easily mistaken it for a lack of concern from her mother’s side. The fact that she still remembers her mother’s words so vividly suggests they were important to her in some way. It could also be yet another aspect that made her father’s death seem so unreal and why she has been struggling to accept it for so many years.

The scene ends with Esther crying hysterically for her father for the first time in her life – “I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain” (Plath 161). This is an important turning point in the novel, the moment of acceptance, which, however, also means Esther’s full submission to her depression and her suicidal tendencies, which she is now determined to see through to the end – her final, most thorough, suicide attempt follows directly after the graveyard scene, which leads her straight to the mental institution.
4.3. The causality of the roots of depression

When combining all the findings from the preceding sub-chapters, several important facts become evident. It is true, on the one hand, that a certain part of the characters’ suffering does come from their social environment – particularly from the socio-cultural climate exclusive for the postwar period.

Holden struggles with his leftist perspective, which, in a sense, makes him an anti-American. His personal dream is utterly incompatible with the American dream of that era (or any era, really) that all the people around him share, which logically makes him feel lonely and those feelings of loneliness lead to depression. Similarly, Esther dreads the idea of becoming a housewife living in the suburbs, even if it means marrying a very promising, wealthy man, who would provide her with all the luxury she could ask for – again, the American dream for many women of that time.

However, with the seriousness of their psychological problems, the above-mentioned causes may appear rather trivial, which shifts the attention to their personal history. This is where the characters share a very similar kind of traumatic experience – the death of their family member. Both Holden and Esther show clear signs of inability to accept this and move on with their lives. Esther literally says that she has not been happy since the day her father died, and Holden – judging by the fact that the only happy memories he mentions always include Allie – seems to be thinking along the same lines. Not to mention that Holden also has to deal with the history of abuse and the suicide of his classmate, which make things that much worse for him.

In other words, the characters’ personal history is in itself traumatic enough to cause a wide range of mental problems but that is not to say that the cultural aspect has no influence on their eventual breakdowns.

According to the theory of a psychiatrist Aaron Beck, there is a definite link between the two. He observes:

In the course of his development, the depression prone person may become sensitized by certain unfavorable types of life situations such as the loss of a parent or chronic rejection by peers. Other unfavorable conditions of a more insidious nature may similarly produce vulnerability to depression. These traumatic experiences predispose the individual to
overreact to analogous situations later in life. He has a tendency to make extreme, absolute judgments when such situations occur. (7)

In context, this means that the primary cause – the death of a family member in both cases, and additionally the abuse and suicide witnessing in case of Holden – made both characters more vulnerable to all the other stressful or traumatic situations that would come later in their lives. It seems highly probable that neither of the characters would have ended up in a mental hospital had it not been for their loss in early age.
Conclusion

Before drawing a final conclusion, let us first summarize the main points of this study, so that everything can be put in a proper context.

The first two chapters have outlined what life in the postwar America was like and what the specifics of the American dream were at that time as opposed to its more general notion. From what has been discussed, it is not much of an overstatement to claim that the American dream of the 1950s was a dream of the radical right-wing politicians and their numerous followers. These people, with the help of the newly spread media (such as television), created an ostensible utopia, the main goal of which was to demonstrate the superiority of life in free-market capitalism, in order to gain a certain edge over the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

This, however, gave rise to a certain pressure, which forced everyone to aspire for certain things and to live in a certain, pre-determined way. As this way of living is not in accordance with either of the two protagonists’ own wishes and aspirations, each of them criticizing different aspects of the era, they quickly start sinking into despair.

A closer diagnosis of Holden and Esther revealed that they both suffer from a number of psychological issues in various areas. They share many of the symptoms as well as similarities in their personal history. Also, they both end up in a psychiatric hospital of some kind, which they both leave at the end of their novels, neither of them seemingly convinced of any major improvements.

Money does not seem to be an important factor for either of them – in fact, they both dream of escaping its influence (e. g. Holden ponders becoming a monk or pretending to be a deaf-mute; Esther, similarly, thinks of becoming a nun). In addition, they are both afraid of becoming the exact representation of their gender – Holden of becoming the rich ‘elevator’ kind of man stuck in the rat race, and Esther of being a housewife with no creativity and will of her own.

Among all of their present issues, they both share a similar tragic event in their past (prior to the novels’ events) – Holden loses his brother at the age of thirteen, and Esther loses her father at the age of nine. The reverberations of this event are always present – however subtly – on the backdrop of both novels, as both protagonists have never properly dealt with them.
In addition, Holden has experienced the suicide of his classmate as well as some kind of (further unspecified) abuse – whether that was before or after the death of his brother also remains unsaid.

This finally brings us to the initial hypothesis stated in the Introduction, according to which was the characters’ depression a direct effect of the socio-political climate, in which they both live. That, based on all the information gathered throughout this study, clearly appears to be false.

A theory based on this thesis’ findings is as follows:

The root cause of the characters’ psychological struggles witnessed throughout their respective novels is the tragic event from their childhood – the loss of a family member. The trauma evoked by this event then causes them to overreact to all negative events in their lives, and it strengthens the negative impact that these contemporary events have on their psyche. The social environment – despite often being presented as the main source of the characters’ misery – is thus not directly responsible for their mental breakdowns. It merely acts as ‘the final straw’ that accentuates the damage dealt years prior to the novels’ events to the point when they can no longer withstand it.

As for the second hypothesis regarding the seriousness of Holden Caulfield’s condition – based on the analysis conducted in Chapter 3, we may firmly claim that Holden’s state is – in terms of its seriousness – at the very least on par with that of Esther’s. Furthermore, his problems clearly exceed those of Esther’s in terms of both their number and their seriousness. While many of their issues are similar, Holden additionally suffers from compulsive behavior, utter lack of motivation and is generally far more disconnected from reality. There are also various medical conditions such as serious stomach problems, low appetite, and even loss of consciousness. Esther, on the other hand, does not seem to suffer from any medical conditions as those she does mention are subsequently refuted by the doctors.

However, these claims can only be made under the assumption that Holden is a reliable narrator. He does admit lying uncontrollably to people around him but whether these people include the reader remains unknown. He may very well be lying or exaggerating as much (or even far more) than Esther does, but since he is not under anyone’s surveillance, the reader is left with no choice but to take his words as the truth – even if it is his own personalized version of the truth.
Works cited

Primary sources:


Secondary sources:


