

Myths of Innocence: The Child in *Lolita* and Three Texts  
by J.D. Salinger

by

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*For my dad, who loved Salinger*

## Introduction

If there is one theme that dominates the scholarly conversation surrounding the work of J.D. Salinger, it is the representation of childhood innocence and its corollary, adult guilt, phoniness, or corruption. Leslie Fiedler in a 1962 essay adapted from sections of his seminal work *Love and Death in the American Novel* and entitled “The Eye of Innocence,” places Salinger within a group of authors whose writing belongs in the Cult of the Child, a cult in which there is an extreme “nostalgia for innocence” and a belief in innocence’s redemptive qualities (Fiedler 242). Warren French, in his 1976 edition of his 1963 *J.D. Salinger*, which studies the author’s oeuvre, understands all of Salinger’s work as a struggle between the “phony” and the “nice,” by which he means the “phony adult world” and the “carefree innocence of childhood” (French 120). Ihab Hassan, in his highly influential work *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (1961), devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of Salinger, seeing his central conflict as “the encounter between a vision of innocence and the reality of guilt” (Hassan 260). Thus, the strength of Salinger’s works seems to rely on the confrontations that come out of this conflict between the innocence of the child and the lack of innocence of the adult and the adult world.

The three texts I examine in this analysis, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (published in 1948 in *The New Yorker* and anthologized in *Nine Stories* in 1953), and “Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters” (published in 1955 in *The New Yorker* and anthologized with “Seymour: An Introduction” in 1963), have all been used to corroborate this characterization of Salinger’s work. *The*

*Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's only novel and most popular work, tells the story of the days following Holden Caulfield's expulsion from boarding school, in which he wanders around New York City, meeting strangers and old friends, and generally passing judgment on every aspect of the world around him except for his little sister Phoebe, his dead little brother Allie, and the ducks in Central Park. Sanford Pinsker classifies the entirety of *Catcher* as a case of "innocence under pressure," and many scholars second this interpretation in various ways (Pinsker). According to Alan Nadel, Holden struggles against "the fall from innocence;" to another critic, Paul Levine, Holden (like Seymour) is "too full of love, with no worthy object on which to bestow it" (Nadel 368; Levine 94). Holden is either innocent or a hopeful savior of innocence in a wide range of interpretations, fighting against an adult world that will inevitably win. Seymour Glass is the protagonist of both "Perfect Day" and "Raise High," and behaves similarly to Holden in many ways. "Perfect Day" tells the story of the last day of Seymour's life. Seymour spends the day on the beach with a young girl, Sybil, avoiding his wife in the hotel room, before returning to his hotel room and killing himself. Many read his suicide as "prompted by his inability to go back to innocence" or, like Fiedler, suggest the story asks to be read as Seymour being "awakened by the innocence of a child to enough awareness of the lost world he inhabits to kill himself" (Mazzaro 84; Fiedler 235). In "Raise High," Buddy Glass, the narrator and Seymour's brother, describes Seymour's wedding day (Seymour does not make an appearance), and includes some reproduced entries from Seymour's diary, in which he details his love for the young child Charlotte. Buddy finds out that Muriel, the woman Seymour is marrying, looks a lot like Charlotte. Thus, "Raise

High” is also interpreted as proof of Seymour’s attempts to “go back to the innocence of his childhood” (Mazzaro 84).

All together, the general interpretation of Salinger’s work has become that it feeds into a “cult of innocence” or a “cult of the Child,” and reinscribes and utilizes the “myths of sentimentality” (Levine 95; Fiedler 235, 244). It is hard to interpret this any other way: some conception of or interpretation of the child and childhood innocence (and its opposite) is central to understanding the impact of Salinger’s work. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the word “innocence” is not used once in the text of *The Catcher in the Rye*, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” or “Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters.”

This is because Salinger’s work utilizes the traditional conception of childhood innocence, solidified in Romanticism and in the Victorian period, to represent the child. The word “innocence” does not need to be used, because scholars, critics, and readers alike, either consciously or unconsciously, recognize and interpret the signs and tropes of this traditional conception in the text, because of how ingrained this kind of representation of childhood innocence is.

Etymologically, innocence originally meant simply to not inflict harm. The word is derived from the Latin “*innocere*,” “*in*” meaning “not” and “*nocere*” meaning “to harm” (Faulkner 7). However, the word has evolved far beyond this original definition to include a plethora of meanings and connotations. Over time, innocence became associated not just with a lack of harm, but also with a lack of knowledge. This pervades the legal sense of the word as well—there is a difference between causing harm knowingly or unknowingly (with *intent* or without intent). Innocence,

in this sense, becomes not knowing any better, not understanding the consequences of your actions. In the Christian moral sense, innocence means to be free of sin, or free of knowledge. In the story of Adam and Eve, the knowledge of good and evil that they gain from biting the apple is what causes them to be expelled from Eden. Once they bite the apple, they also recognize themselves as nude—they suddenly have knowledge of their sexuality and the sense that they should be more prudently covered. Innocence, then, is very connected to a lack of sexuality, a lack of sexual knowledge. “To know” someone in the Biblical sense means to experience another person sexually, and this is an experience that an innocent person cannot have had. Innocence is sexual purity, and not just purity of action but also purity of thought, knowledge, or intention about sex. Innocence is no longer simply the opposite of harmful. Knowledge and experience of any kind, but especially sexual, become the opposite of innocence. In other words, knowledge and experience become guilt or corruption.

Beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and solidified in the nineteenth and twentieth, these qualities are applied to the child and articulated in new and multiple ways. The concept of childhood innocence appears, gains traction, and eventually becomes ingrained. The century this trend began is up for debate. The seminal work by Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962), posited that the “discovery of childhood,” at least childhood as the innocent and important stage of life we now consider it, occurred in the seventeenth century, but many scholars since have disagreed with his arguments (Ariès 46). What scholars do agree on is a general trajectory of the growth of the concept of childhood



innocence—starting with Locke, emphasized by Rousseau, and cemented by Romanticism and the Victorian age. John Locke’s contribution to the development of the concept of the child is his idea in his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding” that at birth every human is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. This separates the child from the Christian notion of original sin, and from knowledge and experience (without yet relying on innocence) (Bailey 195). In Locke’s conception, humans are born without any kind of knowledge, and it is only through experience that knowledge is formed. This heightens the role of the parent and education, because it becomes important to teach the child the right kind of things and allow them the right kind of experiences. It is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, most notably in *Émile, or On Education*, who expands the idea of the blank slate and forms a conception of the child as specifically equated with “innocence” (Bailey 195). This “innocence” is also explicitly non-sexual in Rousseau and should be kept from the corrupting influence of sexual knowledge and experience for as long as possible (Rose 8). Rousseau makes innocence precarious; therefore, more adults and institutions are needed to prolong this innocence and protect it, demanding greater involvement in the life of the child (Wolff). For Rousseau, adults need to be involved in the child’s life, but he creates a sharp distinction between the child and the adult, and thinks the child should be kept from adult life (aka sexual life) for as long as possible (Wolff 90, 82). If Locke moves the child away from original sin, it is Rousseau who endows the child with “original innocence” (Thiel 132). This original innocence is vulnerable to the forces of the world, and also entails an understanding of and closeness with nature that was seized upon and expanded in Romanticism. The child, in Romanticism, is more natural than

the adult, “both natural and supernatural,” in tune with nature and also somehow non-human (angel, beast, or other) in the relationship to nature and to the adult (McGillis 102). The Romantic child is pictured as “beautiful, natural, and pure” (McGillis 105). In Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” he declares: “And not in utter nakedness,/ But trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home:/ Heaven lies about us in our infancy,” emphasizing the child as angel (and pointedly mentioning nudity in order to distance the child from it). William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* also highlights the separation between children and adults along the innocence/experience binary. Paintings like Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *The Age of Innocence* codify the Romantic representation of the child—distant, natural, ethereal, and pure-white.

This Romantic view of childhood extends into the “cult of childhood” in the Victorian period (Wood 116). There are two ways of representing the child in this period, as angelically innocent, superior to adults, or somehow “primitive” or savage, needing education and guidance (Wood 116). The second category also stems from the Romantic connection to nature, but is viewed as the deviance from the “ideal” of the perfectly innocent child, showing how ingrained that ideal is (Flegel 45; Wood 128). Either way, the Victorian child, situated in nature, has to be “unsullied by culture, full of joy, and free of calculation” (Wood 128). Though rocked by Freud’s studies on child sexuality in the early twentieth century, this concept of childhood innocence, as vulnerable, pure and non-sexual, without culture, without experience, without intention, and without knowledge, remained strong throughout the twentieth

century, and it is this concept of childhood innocence that is at work in Salinger's texts and their interpretations.

This creation of childhood innocence and its necessary qualities works in tandem with the creation of adult corruption. If lack of knowledge of or experience with sex and the world are equated with innocence and the child, then knowledge of and experience with sex and the world are equated with guilt and the adult. Notably, around the same time John Locke frees the child from original sin, John Milton, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, saddles the adult (specifically the female adult) with it. Milton's conception of knowledge as corruption in this epic further illustrates the prominence of the idea in seventeenth-century England. "[A]ll [is] lost" once Eve eats the apple: the acquisition of knowledge ruins Paradise (Milton 9.784). Adults are able to reinstate an idea of their own innocence with the idea of the innocence of the child. But, in order to conceptualize the child this way, the adult is conceptualized and represented as the child's opposite. Because of this, "the difference of the child from the adult has become a dominant theme in contemporary mythology" (Warner). The adult world becomes the "reality of guilt" that justifies the need for the "vision of innocence" (Hassan 260). The adult world is characterized by "sex, senescence...death," crushing materialism, social, cultural and economic concerns (J. Bryan 102). If the child is "unsullied by culture," the adult is seeped in it (Wood 128). The child is non-sexual, so the adult is completely sexual (even in their potential for sex); the child is natural, so the adult is unnatural, phony, and deceitful. These premises create a powerful binary, one that is very clearly at work in the texts I examine: good child/bad adult or innocent child/corrupt adult. It is in part by actively

maintaining the distinction between adults and children that a conception of innocence is able to exist at all, an existence through opposition, each side of the binary constituting the other.

This history very clearly *constructs* an idea of innocence, but it becomes so ingrained over the course of time as to almost be considered an *a priori* understanding of the child. It is a construct, a myth, and a creation that took hold and solidified through repeated representation and culture. During the Age of Innocence, the Romantic and Victorian periods, this constructed distinction—moral, physical, biological, intellectual—between the child and the adult was given a value and became completely ingrained. Adult corruption, the “phoniness of the adult world,” “adult callousness” or however else it can be put is as constructed as childhood innocence (Fiedler 234; French 87; J. Bryan 102). It is the adult who “defines the child” by marking the child as different from himself, but who also defines himself in the process (McGillis 103).

Interpretations of Salinger’s works group Salinger with this historical legacy that establishes the myths of innocence. Part of this project is finding out what purpose this conception of innocence serves within Salinger’s works. The scholarship maintains that these strict divisions between child and adult are almost religiously adhered to in Salinger’s works, with very few characters demonstrating the nuanced capacity to defy or straddle the corrupt adult/innocent child binary. His work seems to rigorously uphold the traditional Romantic/Victorian conception of innocence, despite the fact that he never uses the word.

Another book, published in the United States in 1958, situates itself in direct opposition to these traditional myths of innocence through irony and parody. This book is *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov, which tells the story of a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, in love with a twelve-year-old girl, Lolita. *Lolita* was originally barred from being published in the United States, so it was published first in France in 1955. When it was finally published in the United States in 1958, it, like *Catcher*, was extremely popular, becoming the first book since *Gone With the Wind* to sell 100,000 copies in the first three weeks (Satanovsky). All four works—*Catcher*, “Raise High,” “Perfect Day,” and *Lolita*—were written in the same decade and involve the representation of childhood innocence, but, if mentioned in the same scholarly breath as Salinger’s texts, *Lolita* is normally viewed in direct contrast. Fiedler, for instance, starkly opposes the two when he declares that *Lolita* “represent[s] a resolve to reassess the innocence of the child,” while Salinger is the “last reputable exploiter of the sentimental myths of childhood” (Fiedler 245, 235).

*Lolita* is directly concerned with childhood innocence, as evidenced by the fact that Nabokov uses the word “innocence” six times and “innocent” twenty-five times, almost all of them in connection with children specifically. Whereas Salinger avoids the word, Nabokov uses it liberally. Scholarship on *Lolita* is also directly concerned with innocence, especially the loss of it. Lolita is either understood as having lost her innocence at Humbert Humbert’s hands or as having never had it to begin with, prompting the idea of the sexual girl—the Lolita—that sank into popular culture after the book’s publication (Savage). Nabokov’s parody works through his use of Humbert Humbert: while Humbert subscribes to and seeks a child who fits into

the Romantic/Victorian conception of innocence and all its tropes, the text undermines him in numerous ways to show the construction of innocence, the centrality of Humbert himself, and the motives behind his reliance on innocence. Thus, the text attacks the myths of innocence by undercutting its narrator's dependence on them.

I use *Lolita* as a lens through which to consider Salinger's works, and argue that analyzing *Lolita* sheds light on the ways that Salinger's texts can also be used to provide a critique of the traditional conception of innocence, despite their general acceptance as doing the opposite. The critique is present, if slightly ambivalent, and there are strong similarities between *Lolita* and the texts by Salinger in the way the narrators are undermined through contradictions that illustrate their unreliability. In the first chapter, I attempt to show how innocence is sexualized in all four narratives, specifically through a focus on the girl-child's body, despite the fact that the narrators claim to uphold the traditional conception of innocence. I believe the texts undermine their narrators. In all four texts, the girl-child is an object of desire, while the adult woman is an object of disdain so, in the second chapter, I consider the representation of innocence and the girl-child alongside the representation of experience and the adult woman. I argue that the male protagonists and the texts attempt to construct this innocence/experience binary through contrasting the girls and women in terms of sexuality and social fluency, but that inconsistencies in this construction reveal the sexual desire that drives it. The arguments in the first and second chapters contribute to my understanding of Humbert, Holden, and Seymour's power in the texts because of their ability to represent, narrate, and thereby construct meaning. In the third

chapter, I address the question of power directly, and unpack how the narrators distort the power dynamic in order to represent the child as powerful. Yet again, I argue that the texts call attention to this distortion, highlighting the ultimate power of Humbert Humbert, Holden, and Seymour. The ways in which *Lolita* undermines Humbert enhance my understanding of the ways in which *Catcher*, “Perfect Day,” and “Raise High,” do the same with Holden and Seymour. In the end, Salinger’s works are more like *Lolita* than they may at first appear.

## I. Innocence and Desire

In the traditional conception of innocence solidified in Romantic and Victorian representation, part of the child's innocence is her vulnerability. Innocence is precarious, fleeting, doomed to fall, and this precariousness immediately implies the imminent destruction of innocence that must occur at one point or another. Because innocence is most strongly defined by its sexual purity, that destruction often, though not always, comes from encounters with sex. Because one value (innocence) is "defined mainly as the opposite of something else" (experience), "perceiving one value always entails thinking of [the other] value" (Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, 37). Thus, to think of innocence is necessarily to think of not-innocence; it is to fantasize sex. Whether the child is aware of its encounter with sex or not is another matter—the child, in being established as innocent, has already been made into a sexualized *object*. "[M]en are excited by the idea of defiling the pure and deflowering the virgin," so "focusing on children's presumed innocence only reinforces men's desire for them as sexual objects" (Kitzinger 80). "Ironically, a conspicuous effect of purging the child of sexuality [is] that their sexual significance [is] intensified" (Faulkner 83). Innocence, instead of creating a moratorium on childhood sexuality, creates a multiplicity of discourses surrounding the issue (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 29). This duality of innocence has existed from the very beginning of its entry into discourse. Innocence, though it should not experience any desire, is desirable in itself (Wolff 87). Larry Wolff, in "Childhood and The Enlightenment: The Complications of Innocence," notes that Rousseau, widely accepted as the founder of the traditional conception of innocence, was "well aware"



of an adult “readiness to violate natural innocence...because he had himself contemplated such an intervention” when, in his youth, he almost purchased a young girl to serve as his concubine (Wolff 86). Because innocence is constructed as something ephemeral and precarious, something to be protected, it becomes “possible to imagine the violation of that innocence” (Wolff 88). “The adorable Child [is] also a desirable child” (Higonnet, “Picturing Childhood,” 303). In “demand[ing] protection,” innocence was constructed also to invite its own violation (Bailey 203).

Of course, the child cannot actively invite its own violation because he or she is always represented as unknowing, without intent and without understanding. In the texts I examine, the power to represent, to construct, and to violate innocence is in the hands of the male characters—Humbert, Seymour, and Holden—who author the child. All three men rely on the Romantic view of innocence as vulnerable and express the desire to protect that kind of innocence. I argue that, instead, all three men use this vulnerability (and the child’s status as object) to sexualize or defile the child. Desire for the child drives this destruction, and innocence drives the desire. In this way, the child is made desirable “not despite [the Romantic] conception of innocence, but because of it” (Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence* 132). *Lolita*, through parody and the unreliability of Humbert Humbert, shows this link between innocence and sexualization clearly, thus providing a cogent critique of traditional innocence. Similarly, Salinger’s texts undermine Holden and Seymour’s vision of innocence by demonstrating the ways in which they sexualize and defile innocence. Salinger’s texts are without the playful irony and parody of *Lolita*, but they can still be used to critique the myths of innocence once their contradictions become clear.

Though Salinger and Nabokov utilize entirely different tones and styles in their writing, it is worth taking a moment to note the basic similarities between *Lolita*, *Catcher*, “Perfect Day,” and “Raise High.” The stories are all tied together by the fact that Humbert, Holden, and Seymour all have a history of psychoanalysis. Humbert Humbert has multiple stints in the sanatorium for various reasons including “[a] dreadful breakdown,” “melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression,” and “periods of depression” (Nabokov 29, 30-31, 270). What to Humbert is “melancholia” and “depression” becomes feeling “sad as hell” and thoughts of suicide in Holden Caulfield’s terminology (*Catcher* 125, 136). Holden has written all of *Catcher* from inside a mental institution; Humbert has written all of *Lolita* from inside a prison. Seymour too has been in and out of analysis his whole life, and Muriel’s mother in “Perfect Day” alludes to the fact that Seymour displays mentally unstable behavior and has spent time in the Army mental hospital—she worries that “Seymour may *completely* lose control of himself” (“Raise High” 58; “Perfect Day” 9). All three men are pointedly outside of, or deviant from, society. From this standpoint, all three men also turn to art of some kind or another. Seymour is a “poet, for God’s sake,” according to Buddy (“Raise High” 60). Humbert Humbert turns to “articulate art” to treat his “misery,” crafting his depiction of Lolita and reproducing Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” in his description of his first child love, Annabel (Nabokov 266). In *Lolita*, Poe’s “kingdom by the sea” becomes a “princedom by the sea,” and the angels that envy become the “seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs” that envy (Nabokov 7). He recreates the Romantic poem in the text and makes a parody of it—the young Humbert’s love for

the child Annabel, instead of causing him to lie by her tomb, inspires a lifetime of pedophilic desires. Holden also recreates a poem from the same era—Robert Burns’ “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye”—in his title, *Catcher in the Rye*. Holden misquotes the poem, however, substituting “catch” for the original “meet.” Holden hides the sexual overtones of the poem with his substitution, but his mistake is mentioned in the text—the sexual aspects of his fantasy to be the catcher in the rye are there, lurking, more veiled than in Nabokov’s prose. “Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters” is a line from a poem by Sappho, so Seymour is also situated within a poetic history. All four narratives combine mental instability and artistry in the characters of Humbert, Seymour, and Holden. The stories are also tied together by an extreme focus on prepubescent girls. In *Lolita*, Humbert’s sexual desire is openly stated; in Salinger’s texts it is latent and repressed, but there are clues that point to its existence. Analyzing the relationship between male characters and girl-children across all four texts elucidates further similarities between the works that reinforce the idea that they can all be used to critique the traditional myths of innocence.

*Lolita* is the story told by Humbert Humbert, the narrator and a man on trial for the murder of another man, of his pedophilic love for young girls—one young girl in particular, Lolita. Humbert Humbert moves from Europe to America after receiving an inheritance from a family member’s death, and settles in with Lolita and her mother, Charlotte Haze. He immediately falls in love with Lolita, and plots to seduce her. However, after Lolita goes to camp, Charlotte admits she is in love with Humbert. They marry, but then Charlotte finds out about his love for her daughter when she stumbles upon his diary. Charlotte, planning to tell someone, runs into the

street, is hit by a car, and dies. Humbert then claims to be Lolita's father, picks her up from camp, and they begin a long road trip around America, staying in motels every night. Humbert first rapes Lolita, then they continue to have sex throughout this section of the novel. Humbert eventually gets a job and they settle down momentarily, but he again becomes paranoid about Lolita's activities and they begin another road trip. After becoming ill, Lolita is kidnapped from the hospital by a man Humbert later finds out is named Clare Quilty. Humbert tracks Quilty down and kills him, and it is for this murder that he is convicted. We learn Humbert has written *Lolita* while awaiting trial, but has died before its publication.

Through all of this, the reader is situated squarely within Humbert Humbert's point of view, within the special artistic vision Humbert claims for himself in *Lolita*. Humbert Humbert attempts to present himself as the artist figure in part in order to present his portrayal of girl-children as aesthetic appreciation, but the text undermines him, revealing that any of his representations of the child is always driven by and infused with his sexual desire for the girl-child. He claims that being an "artist and a madman" gives him the ability to see nymphets (Nabokov 14). He recreates Poe's artistry in his own creation of Annabel. He repeatedly calls himself an artist and proclaims that "sex is but the ancilla of art," insisting that his sexual desire is only secondary to his role as artist, but his pedophilia and other aspects of the narrative make it clear that sex is the driving force behind any of his art (Nabokov 244). This undermines Humbert's portrayal of himself. His vision as first-person author/narrator is always compromised and de-authorized by the text itself. The status he tries to claim for himself (artist with special vision) is completely overridden by the various

identities the text attributes to him (from the first page of the Foreword): mentally unstable, condemned criminal, and pedophile (Nabokov 3). Through this confluence of conflicting positions, Nabokov creates distance between the reader and Humbert. Because of his criminality, the reader pathologizes and judges his vision negatively rather than sympathizes with it, though Humbert continually tries to garner sympathy. His pedophilia always compromises his artistry, making it so that the “vision of innocence” he tries to present is always undercut by the “reality of [his] guilt” (Hassan 260). Humbert is “[g]uilty of killing Quilty,” and guilty of “depriv[ing] [Lolita] of her childhood” (Nabokov 28, 266). His guilt manifests in the novel through the character of Quilty, whom he tries to paint as the “bad monster” of the tale (Appel 229). Quilty is Humbert’s “Double” in every way, from his physical resemblance to his “appreciation of little girls, literature, puns, and purple smoking jackets” (Appel 225; Brand 20). This guilty alter ego divests Humbert Humbert of his innocence and believability as a narrator. The rhyme of “Quilty” and “guilty” also plays on Humbert’s guilt. Even Quilty’s first name, “Clare,” plays on the French *clair*—the guilt is clear. Through emphasis on his guilt, his criminality, his pedophilia, and his self-proclaimed “insanity,” the text reveals Humbert Humbert to be unreliable, and his artistry to be always secondary to his sexual desire (Nabokov 30). This puts the reader in a ready position to critique Humbert Humbert’s portrayal of the child.

Parody implies imitation; in *Lolita*, Humbert imitates and uses Romantic/Victorian tropes of childhood innocence to depict the child, but his open admission of his sexual preference for girls satirically undercuts this imitation and

creates the parody. *Lolita's* critique of this conception of innocence works in part by illustrating how easy it is to use the Romantic elements to sexualize the child.

Humbert Humbert clearly subscribes to the traditional conception of innocence. He insists on his desire to “protect the purity” of Lolita, claims he has the “utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability,” and promises that “under no circumstances would he [] interfere[] with the innocence of a child” (Nabokov 58, 17). Yet it is clear that it is precisely this “purity” and “vulnerability,” major tenets of the Romantic conception, which attract him to children in the first place. For instance, when Humbert Humbert first sees Lolita, he sees a “sudden burst of greenery...and then...a blue sea-wave swell[s] under [his] heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees,” Lolita turns to look at him (Nabokov 35). The references he makes to nature, the “burst of greenery” and the “blue sea-wave,” parody the Romantic connection of the child to nature. Here, the relationship to nature is clearly connected to Humbert’s titillation. Her “half-naked, kneeling” body is the focus, and the image comes to Humbert through nature. He goes on to describe her “frail, honey-hued shoulders,” “silky supple bare back,” “puerile hips,” and “polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest [that hides] from [his] aging ape eyes...the juvenile breasts” (Nabokov 35). The vulnerability implied by “frail,” “bare,” and “juvenile,” is the source of Humbert’s attraction and the “pleasure in looking” he experiences (Mulvey 19). Purity, vulnerability, and a connection to nature are made explicitly sexual in *Lolita*, thus critiquing these myths of innocence.

*Lolita* also parodies the Romantic depiction of the child as supernatural in Humbert's creation of the nymphet and his other descriptions of children. Nymphets are "not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)," possessing "fey grace" (Nabokov 14). Humbert claims one has to be "an artist and a madman" to spot nymphets, thereby highlighting the special vision he attempts to endow himself with (Nabokov 14). Humbert creates the concept of the nymphet in order to justify his attraction to certain girls; so, once again, the Romantic construction of the child is used to sexualize. Indeed, Humbert admits that the "attraction immaturity has for [him]" is partially "the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty" and partially in the fact that it is "never-to-be-had" (Nabokov 248). Its attraction comes from the fact that it is unattainable. It is the very precariousness, vulnerability, and supernatural quality embedded in the traditional conception of innocence that Humbert uses to justify his sexual attraction to it. Creating through parody and irony the conditions for the reader to see this, *Lolita* attacks the myths of innocence that Humbert Humbert upholds.

Humbert Humbert relies on this traditional idea of innocence, yet the text makes it clear that, rather than admire it, Humbert sexualizes, defiles, and destroys innocence. Even Humbert Humbert admits this, when he says he "deprived [Lolita] of her childhood" (Nabokov 266). Humbert Humbert "[breaks] [her] life," and, in fact, Lolita "die[s] in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl...in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest" (Nabokov 262, 4). Humbert destroys Lolita's life and, though he has had the power to create her through his narrative, her power to create never arises, as symbolized through her death. Lolita is always the object to

Humbert's subject. Just as Humbert realizes he "simply [does] not know a thing about [his] darling's mind," the reader must always "view her from the outside" (Nabokov 267; Megerle 344). If in the beginning Lolita is not conscious of Humbert's manipulation, it becomes clear that she recognizes the gravity of her situation by the end. This recognition/knowledge acquisition indicates the destruction of the childhood innocence Humbert claims is so precious to him.

*Lolita*, in undermining the special vision Humbert claims for himself and in clearly highlighting Humbert's sexual attraction to the child, reveals the way that Humbert is able to sexualize the child through the traditional conception of innocence, thereby critiquing that conception. Humbert Humbert portrays the child as natural, pure, and vulnerable, but openly sexualizes those qualities. In Salinger's texts, Holden and Seymour also ostensibly use this ephemerality of innocence to justify their various pursuits to protect innocence. I argue that here as well, the narratives show how this precariousness is in fact used to sexualize, destroy, possess, and defile the girl-child. Because Salinger's texts do not create the same critical distance between reader and character that *Lolita* does, these violations are harder to see. I hope to show that the similarities are striking, and to prove that both authors provide us with narratives that can be used to undercut the very idea of innocence their characters subscribe to.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is narrated/authored by Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year old boy. The novel starts with his expulsion from prep school. Holden says goodbye to Pencey Prep after trying to fight his roommate for going on a date with a girl he likes, Jane Gallagher. Holden then travels to New York City, books a hotel



room in order to avoid seeing his parents, and spends the next few days wandering around the city, talking to strangers and meeting old friends. In that time, he often fantasizes about calling Jane, but never does, and goes on a date with a girl named Sally Hayes. Later, he decides he wants to see his sister Phoebe, so he sneaks into his family's apartment to talk to her. Phoebe is upset at him for getting expelled, and Holden tells her the only thing he wants to be in his life is the catcher in the rye. In the climax of the story, Holden decides to move out West, but when he tells Phoebe she implores him not to, and he eventually decides to stay in New York. In the last chapter, Holden reveals he has had a breakdown shortly after the events of the story, and has written his tale from a mental institution.

Like Humbert, Holden is the narrator of the story. Unlike Humbert, Holden's status as mentally unstable and deviant from society has been used in scholarship to endow him with more "special insight" and an "artistic sensibility" (Shaw 97). Holden's disturbance places him outside of society, but because Holden deems that society "phony" anyway, this does not seem like such a bad thing. Instead, the traditional reading of *Catcher* makes Holden out to be a "sensitive soul[]" who is misunderstood by a "hypocritical, uncaring society" (Shaw 97). Holden, like Humbert, is an artist through his authority as first-person narrator and his story-writing skills (*Catcher* 237, 49). He authors his narrative and the characters inside it, and it is important to never lose sight of this in examining his use of the child. Unlike Humbert, Holden does not call attention to his artistic authority very much, making it easier to forget it exists. Like Humbert also, Holden presents himself as able to appreciate things others cannot, like the fact that Jane Gallagher keeps all her kings in

the back row when she plays checkers (*Catcher* 57). Holden also thinks “[p]eople never notice anything” (*Catcher* 13). Statements like these are Holden’s attempts to privilege his own vision over the vision of others.

It is easy to accept Holden’s artistic vision at face value, but the text provides information that subtly undercuts his vision. Before slipping into considering Holden’s vision objective, it is important to remember that Holden, despite being an abysmal student, is an “ace composition writer,” able to artfully spin a story however he needs to (*Catcher* 237). Though Holden declares almost everyone and everything a “phony,” he also admits that he is probably the “most terrific liar you ever saw in your life” (*Catcher* 22). With comments like this, Holden undercuts his own reliability; the text makes him into an unreliable narrator. The title *The Catcher in the Rye* also highlights Holden’s unreliability. The phrase comes from a Robert Burns poem, but Holden misquotes the line—in the poem it is “If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye,” but he substitutes “catch” for “meet” (*Catcher* 224). His desire to become the catcher in the rye and catch kids “if they start to go over the cliff” is foundational to the scholarship that considers Holden a would-be protector of innocence, but “meet” is far more sexual, and Holden’s slip suggests a repression of the sexual aspect (*Catcher* 224). The poem by Burns is written around the same time as Poe’s “Annabel Lee” that Humbert parodies in *Lolita*, so the title of *Catcher* also supplies a reference to the Romantic era. Through the title, then, Salinger does two things. He emphasizes Holden’s place within a poetic narrative history, reminding the reader of Holden’s artistic vision. Through the mistake in the title, he emphasizes Holden’s ability to misunderstand and misrepresent the sexual nature of representing

innocence. Holden's name also suggests that he is "beholden" to something, obligated to uphold a certain point of view. This undermines Holden's representation because it further illustrates the bias in it—he is always representing with a specific motive in mind. Through these details, Salinger creates conditions for the reader to understand Holden's biases and thereby undermine Holden's vision of innocence.

Holden, like Humbert, also subscribes to a traditional view of innocence as non-sexual and vulnerable. In his fantasy of becoming the catcher in the rye, Holden demonstrates his goal of protecting this vulnerable innocence. He imagines "[t]housands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing at the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff" (*Catcher* 224). His conception of the loss of innocence as a "fall" echoes the Romantic conception. His image of the children running around in a field, a "natural" space, is also highly romantic (*Catcher* 224). The children are at home in the field, and Holden imagines himself as the only adult able to coexist there.

Holden, on first reading, seems to uphold this Romantic conception of innocence in his relationship with Jane Gallagher. When he finds out she is going on a date with the sexed-up, "unscrupulous" Stradlater, Holden gets "so nervous [he] nearly [goes] crazy" (*Catcher* 52, 45). He ends up punching Stradlater after their date and cannot bring himself to speak to Jane again throughout the novel, presumably indicating that Jane Gallagher is ruined by this encounter and has lost her innocence (Pinsker 45). However, it is clear through Holden's depictions of Jane that it is he who sexualizes her, not Stradlater, and that, like Humbert Humbert and Lolita,

Holden finds Jane's vulnerability seductive. This undermines the traditional reading of Holden and Jane and provides a new one: Holden is "nervous" because he is jealous of Stradlater and wishes it had been he who was able to take Jane's virginity. His concern for her innocence is undermined and revealed to be attraction to her innocence (the innocence he constructs as vulnerable and pure). When he first describes Jane's appearance, he writes:

I wouldn't describe her as strictly beautiful. She knocked me out, though. She was sort of muckle-mouthed. I mean when she was talking and she got excited about something, her mouth sort of went in about fifty directions, her lips and all. That killed me. And she never really closed it all the way, her mouth. It was always just a little bit open, especially when she got in her golf stance, or when she was reading a book. (*Catcher* 100)

This description is highly sexual, especially in Holden's focus on Jane's mouth. Jane is unconscious of the behavior that sends her mouth in "about fifty directions" and leaves it always open, and her ignorance of the behavior is part of what "kill[s]" Holden. She is without intention, but the open mouth is inviting and seductive. Holden's attraction is not hidden: she "knock[s] [him] out." Holden has clearly spent time watching Jane, but it seems Jane never looks back at him, indicating her status as object of the gaze in the narrative. Holden presents this sexualized image of Jane for the reader as well as himself, so the reader can experience the seduction in Jane's innocence. Holden's fixation with Jane's mouth continues in the one time they "[get] close to necking" (*Catcher* 101). In this instance, Jane's tears prompt Holden's

physical, sexual advance. Jane starts to cry, and “the next thing [Holden] [knows], [he] [is] kissing her all over—*anywhere*—her eyes, her *nose*, her forehead, her eyebrows and all, her *ears*—her whole face except her mouth and all. She sort of [won’t] let [him] get to her mouth” (*Catcher* 102). This moment evinces the attraction the precariousness of innocence holds for Holden. When Jane is most vulnerable, he is most ready to sexualize her. Jane prevents him from taking exactly what he wants, her mouth, but Holden still voraciously takes what he can get in this moment—kissing her *anywhere* he can. Holden blames Stradlater for possibly defiling Jane’s innocence, but Holden has already defiled it or, at the very least contemplated defiling it and made an attempt at defiling it. Holden’s insistence on Jane’s innocence and vulnerability works in tandem with the way he sexualizes her. This shows that innocence *is itself* sexualized in *Catcher*, even if it is not sexual. The vulnerability of innocence is sexually attractive to Holden, just as it was to Humbert. Though Holden’s critique of Stradlater illustrates a desire to protect Jane’s innocence from sex, his action towards Jane and depiction of her illustrates a desire to defile that innocence. In this way, *Catcher* undercuts Holden’s professed relationship to innocence.

Holden also presents a sexualized image of Phoebe, his younger sister, which further undermines his vision of innocence. For instance, Holden emphasizes her undeveloped body, which immediately invites imagination of her developed one, like Humbert Humbert’s emphasis on Lolita’s “juvenile breasts.” Holden describes Phoebe: “She’s quite skinny...nice skinny. Roller-skate skinny. I watched her once from the window when she was crossing over Fifth Avenue to go into the park, and

that's what she is, roller-skate skinny" (*Catcher* 88). The repetition of "skinny" calls attention to Phoebe's body. Holden watches Phoebe, like Jane, without her knowledge; she is ignorant of the attention she invites. Phoebe going "into the park" romantically situates her in nature, and suggests her unattainability. James Bryan, in "The Psychological Structure of *The Catcher in the Rye*," calls Phoebe Holden's "emblem of unattainable childhood beauty," and describes their interaction in the later chapters of the book as a "mock romance" (J. Bryan 103, 112). He makes several convincing arguments that highlight the sexual overtones of their interaction in the bedroom. The bedroom itself, for one, is sexual, but there are also several instances in which Holden calls attention to his discomfort with the possible sexual interpretations of their interaction. His statements illustrate both his fear that the reader will consider the relationship sexual and the fact that he has already conceptualized it as such. For instance, he notes that Phoebe sleeps with "her mouth way open" (*Catcher* 207). "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" (*Catcher* 207). Holden notes Phoebe's open mouth just as he notes Jane's, and calling attention to their open mouths automatically invites images of kissing. This depiction sexualizes Phoebe, and Holden's nervous repetition of phrases suggests his discomfort with this fact. He is also uncomfortable with how affectionate Phoebe is (*Catcher* 209). She throws her arms around his neck and he responds by "sort of [giving] her a kiss" (*Catcher* 209). He is beginning to read sexuality into their relationship. In overly emphasizing how non-sexual their relationship is, he calls attention to its potential to be sexual, thereby sexualizing Phoebe and revealing himself as sexual. At times, he

displays an ability and tendency to violate Phoebe's innocence, like when he, "just for the hell of it," "[gives] her a pinch on the behind" (*Catcher* 217). "It was sticking way out in the breeze, the way she was laying on her side. She has hardly any behind" (*Catcher* 217). His visualization of Phoebe as undeveloped and in a vulnerable physical position is coupled with his sexual act—just as when he kisses Jane while she cries. Phoebe's innocent, unknowing vulnerability sparks the attempt to defile (or rather, this is the way her vulnerability is constructed). Whether Holden desires Phoebe sexually or not, he clearly desires innocence, and his sexual behavior with Phoebe may be a response to the fact that he no longer feels desire for Jane's innocence. His insistence on her physical vulnerability serves to sexualize her, thus, as in *Lolita*, the tenets of Romantic innocence are revealed as serving a sexual purpose in *Catcher*.

Holden's fantasy of being the "catcher in the rye" suggests his desire to save kids from vulnerable positions. In fact, in his relationship with Jane and Phoebe, when they are in vulnerable positions, he makes physical moves to take advantage of that vulnerability. *Catcher*, then, shows him to be far from the catcher in the rye. The vision he tries to legitimize is undercut. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters," the two texts that concern Seymour Glass, the same dynamics appear. Seymour's vision—like Humbert's and Holden's, as mentally unstable and as artist—is emphasized by the characters, but undercut by the text, as is his representation of his relationship to innocence.

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" does not utilize a first-person narrator, but free, indirect discourse still situates the reader squarely in Seymour's point of view.

The short story starts with a phone conversation between Muriel Fedder, Seymour's wife, and her mother in a hotel room. The conversation is mostly about Seymour—Muriel's mother is worried about his mental health and subsequently Muriel's safety, and Muriel calms her down. The second part of the story takes place on the beach of the resort, where a young girl, Sybil Carpenter, runs up to see Seymour, and they have a conversation. Seymour eventually takes her out on the water and tells her a story about the fictional bananafish. Delighted at Sybil's response to the story, Seymour kisses her foot, causing an indignant Sybil to run away. Seymour then leaves the beach, returns to his hotel room, and kills himself. Buddy, Seymour's brother, is the narrator of "Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters," which tells the story of Seymour's wedding day (retroactively, Buddy is writing the story after Seymour's suicide). Seymour does not show up, and Buddy spends the day trapped in a car with several other wedding guests. They go to Seymour and Buddy's shared apartment in New York City, where Buddy reads Seymour's diary entries and reproduces them in the text of "Raise High." Buddy learns of the resemblance between Muriel, Seymour's fiancée, and Charlotte, Seymour's childhood love. He defends Seymour to the other wedding guests before they all leave the apartment.

Seymour's vision is presented as that of the artist. Buddy in "Raise High" means to characterize Seymour as having a special vision and as a "poet, for God's sake. And I mean a *poet*" ("Raise High" 60). He opens "Raise High" with a Taoist tale about a man who can find the "superlative horse—one that raises no dust and leaves no tracks" because he is so "intent on inward qualities" that he "loses sight of the external" ("Raise High" 4, 5). Buddy compares Seymour to the man in the story,



saying Seymour was the only person whose senses were attuned enough in this way to “send out and look for horses” (“Raise High” 5). Seymour, then, does not see like most people—his vision is special and superior. His name, of course, also suggests his ability to “see more” (“Perfect Day” 14). The only one of Seymour’s poems that Buddy shares is a haiku about a little girl on a plane, so Seymour’s artistry, like Humbert and Holden’s, is presumably used to represent innocence (“Seymour” 134). Also like Humbert and Holden, Seymour is presented as mentally unstable, primarily by Muriel and her mother in “Perfect Day,” but also by the other car passengers in “Raise High.” The “superlative horse” is described as “evanescent and fleeting, elusive as thin air,” which calls to mind the descriptions of childhood innocence as something ephemeral, unattainable, and vulnerable (“Raise High” 4). Supposedly, then, Seymour’s special vision can spot this innocence and appreciate it for its essence, not for any of its external trappings. This is remarkably similar to Humbert’s description of his ability to see nymphets (Nabokov 14). Buddy attempts to position Seymour as someone able to innocently appreciate innocence, but “Perfect Day” and “Raise High,” I argue, undercut this presentation.

Furthermore, as in *Catcher*, there are signs in the narratives that also impair Seymour’s reliability as artist and seer. For one, his mental instability already calls his reliability into question. In addition, his last name, “Glass,” threatens his ability to “see more.” If he is only seeing more glass, he has an imperfect vision or an obscured one; his vision has not yet matured to see *through* glass—he simply sees more glass or “through a glass darkly.” His name simultaneously praises and undercuts his vision. The title of the story, “Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters,” comes directly

from a Sappho poem about a wedding day in which the bridegroom is “[s]uperior as the singer of Lesbos.../to poets of other lands.” Like *Catcher*, the title of this story raises Seymour up and places him within a poetic tradition. It also emphasizes his artistry, and his ability to construct a narrative to his liking. As the wedding guests will construct the wedding location in Sappho’s poem, Seymour will construct his own narrative for his own subjective purposes.

In “Perfect Day” and “Raise High,” like *Catcher* and *Lolita*, the undeveloped nature of the body of the child is focused on in a way that simultaneously highlights the vulnerability of that body and sexualizes it. It is carefully noted that Sybil would not be needing “one piece” of her “canary-yellow two-piece bathing suit” for another “nine or ten years” (“Perfect Day” 15). Seymour emphasizes that Charlotte, his childhood love, wears “a yellow cotton dress” that he “love[s] because it [is] too long for her” (“Raise High” 75). These images do not just warn of the maturation to come or celebrate the present state of childhood innocence; they invite contemplation of the child’s body as undeveloped and as developed. Mentioning Sybil’s future puberty conjures up an image of her future breasts; mentioning Charlotte’s smallness creates an image of her future growth. The image of the child is simultaneously innocent and sexualized because innocence is a sexual commodity in itself (Savage 80). This also undercuts Seymour’s supposed ability to see past the external to the internal qualities.

In both “Raise High,” and “Perfect Day,” the child is taken advantage of when in her most vulnerable position. In “Raise High,” this occurs when Charlotte “[sits] down in the middle of [Seymour’s] driveway,” and Seymour “[throws] a stone at her” because she “look[s] so beautiful” (“Raise High” 89). Charlotte’s external appearance

and the explicit vulnerability of her position prompt Seymour's destructive, defiling move that results in her needing nine stitches ("Raise High" 89). Seymour does not appreciate her innocence; he destroys it. In "Perfect Day," Seymour takes Sybil out into the ocean on a float, tells her the story of the bananafish, and then gets so excited that he kisses her foot ("Perfect Day" 24). It is worth noting that the imagery in the bananafish story—fish who "swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas"—is also highly sexual, indicating Seymour's desire to turn Sybil's vulnerable situation into a sexual one ("Perfect Day" 23). Sybil's belief in Seymour's story harkens back to the Romantic child who "represents imagination and innocence," but Seymour's response, to kiss her foot, uses this Romantic conception to justify his action—her innocence is so attractive that his sexual desire for her comes out (McGillis 112).

With both Sybil and Charlotte, Seymour's action is incomprehensible unless it is accepted as an attraction to, and a desire to violate the innocence and vulnerability of the child. It is when Sybil and Charlotte are most vulnerable that Seymour finally seizes his opportunity. Like Humbert, Seymour pretends throughout "Perfect Day" that he has protected Sybil's innocence by keeping her ignorant of the "mock romance" he plays out with constant physical contact (constantly holding her hands and ankles), sexual nicknames ("baby" and "my love"), and double-layered text about jealousy of his relationship with another girl ("you know how these things happen, Sybil") ("Perfect Day" 16, 24, 18). In fact, he has sexualized her for himself and the reader. In Seymour's final act, kissing Sybil's foot, Sybil becomes conscious of his manipulation—she yells "Hey!" and runs away from Seymour once they get back to

shore (“Perfect Day” 24-5). With this, Seymour cannot pretend he has protected her innocence: her understanding and demonstrated knowledge of the sexual intention in his act is proof he defiles it. His guilt leads him to suicide. Rather than appreciate or protect the innocence of the child, “Perfect Day” and “Raise High” show how Seymour sexualizes, damages, and violates the innocence of the child; I argue that this dissonance between narrative and narrator provides a critique of the myths of innocence, rather than simply upholding those myths.

Seymour, Holden, and Humbert make Lolita, Sybil, Charlotte, Jane, and Phoebe objects in the narratives, created and sexualized by and for the male protagonists. The narratives call attention to this sexualization by undermining the vision of the protagonists and highlighting that the vulnerability of the child consistently sparks the characters to take advantage of the child physically. The innocent child is constructed as object of desire and sexual object, and is without agency in her own representation. Traditional interpretations of Seymour and Holden often do not acknowledge the sexual aspects in their relationships with and depictions of the girl-child. One critic reads Seymour as a combination of “sensitivity, intelligence, and enlightenment,” and believes his sense that “the world [is] almost unbearably beautiful” “explains his action, at the age of twelve, in severely gashing the face of Charlotte, a friend on the quiz show” (Baskett 57, 55). For Holden, similar frameworks are often used to interpret his actions—he is “too full of love” or “too moral for the world” (Levine 94; Pinsker 12). Readers often accept, sympathize with, or rationalize Holden and Seymour’s actions, unlike Humbert Humbert’s, which the text overtly calls them to judge and pathologize. However, in the text of *Catcher*,

“Perfect Day,” and “Raise High,” there is ample reason to judge Holden and Seymour, and to recognize that many of their actions, like Humbert Humbert’s, can be understood as the result of sexual desire for innocence. Seymour’s stone throw and foot kiss and Holden’s bottom pinch and necking attempts are closer to Humbert Humbert’s sexual attraction than they may seem.

In addition to being sexual objects, the narratives also highlight the child’s lack of individuality and subjectivity at the hands of Humbert, Holden, and Seymour in another way. Lolita, Sybil, Muriel, and Phoebe are all reproductions of some prior image of unattainable innocence the three men hold on to. They are not just images in themselves; they are images of images, attempts at recreating some idea of unattainable goodness. It is yet another way innocence is used to objectify the child. In these layers of representations and reproductions of innocence, Holden, Seymour, and Humbert get further away from the actual child, though they profess that she is the one they want to get closest to.

In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert actively expresses his desire to “incarnat[e]” his childhood love Annabel “in another” (Nabokov 13). Humbert Humbert and Annabel are around the same age when they meet one summer, and she is the first girl with whom he attempts to consummate his love (similar to Holden and Jane). Right when Humbert Humbert is “on [his] knees, and on the point of possessing [his] darling,” they are interrupted, and “four months later [Annabel] die[s] of typhus in Corfu” (Nabokov 11). The “shock of Annabel’s death consolidate[s] the frustration of that nightmare summer,” “haunt[ing] him ever since” until he finds Lolita (Nabokov 11, 13). Because Annabel dies while still “innocent,” Humbert is able to solidify a

concept of eternal innocence that he continues to seek. The eternal innocence of the dead child is a Romantic trope in itself: “the pure child’s death was often celebrated as it preserved the child’s innocence,” inspiring adults to posit the possibility for the infinite preservation of that innocence (Wood 116-7). When Humbert lays eyes on Lolita he exclaims, “It was the same child,” and goes on to describe his delight at the similarity in their physical features (Nabokov 35). Lolita is the reincarnation of his sexualized image of innocence, but, barring her dying young like Annabel, she is destined to disappoint. And she does. Humbert eventually regrets that Lolita is “something quite different from innocent Annabel” (Nabokov 117).

Humbert sets up an ideal that can never be attained in order to justify his continual pursuit of the perfect child, the perfect nymphet. Even Annabel is a reproduction—a reproduction of Edgar Allan Poe’s Annabel Lee. Innocence is an ideal that can never be achieved, but setting up the ideal justifies the pursuit. Innocence is set up to be unattainable in order to foster a whole series of attempts and failures that result in the continual destruction and defilement of innocence. If it can be destroyed, it was not the perfect, eternal innocence that the ideal represented. The ideal is protection for Humbert. The pretense of the need to constantly strive for innocence facilitates his pursuit of his pedophilic desires. Lolita is never an individual, she is merely “[Humbert’s] own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between [him] and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (Nabokov 57). The ideal Lolita is an unconscious, fully passive, mindless Lolita—with a body.

In *Catcher*, Holden's ideal of innocence is Allie, his younger brother who dies of leukemia when Holden is only thirteen (*Catcher* 49, 50). Allie, like Annabel, dies too young from a chronic illness. Also like Annabel, Allie, in death, is able to become an ideal of eternal innocence that justifies Holden's further pursuit of perfect innocence. Though Holden does not sexualize Allie as Humbert sexualizes Annabel, the idea of eternal innocence that Allie helps him to create, coupled with his burgeoning sexual desire, forms his attraction to the innocence of Jane and Phoebe. Part of the reason Holden is so attracted to Phoebe is because her hair is a "little bit like Allie's was," and she is about the same age as Allie was when he died (*Catcher* 88). She calls to mind Allie's innocence, but has the sexualized vulnerability that only a living innocent child can have. Phoebe, however, can never live up to Allie because she is alive and will inevitably grow. Her role as Benedict Arnold in the school play suggests her betrayal of Holden's constructed ideal for her (*Catcher* 210). Innocence is precarious and necessarily fleeting, but Holden's vision of Allie allows him to posit an innocence that does not have to fade, creating an impossible standard for others to match. The ideal can never be met, which both validates the continued pursuit of the ideal and takes away the already miniscule individuality of the child.

Seymour Glass effectively does the exact same thing as Humbert Humbert across "Raise High" and "Perfect Day." Sybil, Charlotte, and Muriel are fully objectified through the process. Mrs. Silsburn, one of the wedding guests with whom Buddy rides in the car for the majority of the narrative, sees a picture of Charlotte and exclaims: "This child could *double* for Muriel at that age. But to a T" ("Raise High" 83). Buddy "[can't] quite take this information whole, let alone consider its many

possible ramifications” (“Raise High” 83). Seymour has married Muriel in attempts to reproduce Charlotte’s image. Buddy is sick at the information because it means the Seymour he has tried to rehabilitate throughout the story is not marrying for love but acting from a desire to repossess the innocence he destroyed. In “Perfect Day,” it is clear that Muriel has not lived up to Charlotte’s image, just as Lolita did not live up to Annabel’s. Furthermore, there are various indicators that Seymour is attempting a second re-creation of Charlotte—through Sybil. Sybil’s yellow bathing suit is too big for her, just like Charlotte’s yellow dress. Seymour kisses Sybil’s feet, calling to mind the fact that he loved when Charlotte stomped on his feet (“Raise High” 81). Once sullied by Seymour, Sybil has also failed to live up to the image of Charlotte. But, even Charlotte did not live up to the image of Charlotte—she grew up. There is no perfect innocence in reality, only a constructed image of it in the mind, but having a “perfection complex” like Seymour does justifies the constant cycle of searching for, finding, and sexualizing innocence (“Raise High” 74).

Holden, Humbert, and Seymour attempt to recreate an impossible vision of ideal innocence through creating the images of other children. The children must remain completely unknowing in this endeavor, for they embody and are the targets of the desires of the men, not individuals in their own right. They are authored to compete with a vision of innocence, yet doomed to fail in that competition. The Romantic ideal of eternal innocence is undercut by showing the futility of this pursuit in all four texts. Innocence itself is only an image, and a sexualized one at that. In its status as sexualized object, it is completely passive—it never gazes, it is only gazed



at. So, it is constantly visualized, re-produced, re-created, and re-represented, because it can never object to its treatment as such.

The males, then, are entirely central to this question of innocence, as creators and interpreters of innocence. They use innocence to represent a sexualized vision of the child—sexualized, but not possessing sexuality. Furthermore, that child is an extrapolation from other images, other icons of innocence that the male characters bring to bear on their respective narratives. Sexualization of the child is an attempt to act out sexual desires on a passive, unaware object, for “[s]etting up the child as innocent” means it does not possess sexuality for the male sexuality to respond to—only a blank slate that the male sexuality can impose itself on (Rose 4). The child is “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions...by imposing them on the silent image of [the child] still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 15). The child carries the definition of innocence the man creates, and all the images, experiences, and conceptions that are tied up in that. In order for the male fantasy to work, that image has to be silent and passive—never creating or representing its own meaning. The child as vulnerable, unknowing, and sexualized image of innocence becomes the ideal object for the male to possess.

## II. Innocence and Experience

In Humbert, Seymour, and Holden's representations of innocence, their desire for the child shines through. Rather than merely appreciate, admire, or protect the innocent child, the three men defile and sexualize innocence. This sexualization is less obvious in Salinger's texts, but it is there nonetheless. On the other hand, in *Lolita* and in Salinger's texts, adult women are overtly sexualized and critiqued on the basis of their experience—sexual and otherwise. Just as the male narrators construct innocence, they construct experience, and the two sides of this binary support each other. Demeaning the adult woman justifies desire for the child. Humbert, Holden, and Seymour's goal is to present the woman as diametrically opposed to the child. However, as with their construction of innocence, there are contradictions in the text—namely similarities between the women and girls and similarities between the women and the men—that belie their unreliability in the construction of this binary, thereby undermining the binary itself. Through this undermining, the narratives also reveal the sexual preference for the child that undergirds their portrayals of adult women. Essentially, women are portrayed this way because they are not as desirable as the girl. *Lolita* addresses these issues relatively clearly. Humbert Humbert's contradictions are obvious and somewhat ridiculous, which makes it easier to begin tearing down his conception of innocence/experience in the novel. On the other hand, Salinger's texts, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," "Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters," and *The Catcher in the Rye*, work harder to keep the male construction of innocence/experience hidden. Nonetheless, an analysis of Salinger's texts reveals the same construction of innocence at work, and helps to debunk the "myths of

sentimentality” infused into Salinger’s work and many of its interpretations (Fiedler 244).

With this in mind, the two categories through which I consider the portrayal of women and girls in the four works are categories crucial to the conception of innocence/experience (or knowledge; I use the terms interchangeably) itself: sexuality and social fluency. Both sexuality and social fluency are broad terms whose presence or absence determines knowledge or innocence, respectively. To be a sexual being, to think about, know about, or engage in any form of sexual relation, is a traditionally adult behavior and indicates knowledge or experience, which, in these works, is a negative trait. This comes from the traditional Romantic/Victorian conception of childhood innocence as explicitly non-sexual, and the adult as a possible sexual influence on the child. Young girl children, in order to be innocent, should be “sexually as pure as any milky maiden” (Fiedler 223, 226). They do not know about sex, are not curious about sex, and do not engage in sex.

Social fluency, my own term, also pertains to knowledge and experience. As with sexuality, lacking social fluency suggests innocence. Social fluency in its most general sense indicates an understanding of the way the world works, and a corresponding ability to navigate that world according to its own terms. Socially fluent behavior is everything from having learned good manners to knowing how to make a reservation at a restaurant. Economic fluency is included in social fluency, as having money and spending it indicates participation in and a command of a worldly system. Social fluency is any kind of cooperation with the world and all its conventions. It is an understanding of, ability to use, or intention to use, the unspoken

or spoken codes or norms that govern most interactions. The child who lacks social fluency is, in the Romantic/Victorian conception, a child “unsullied by culture,” whereas the adult is seeped in that culture (Wood 128). Not understanding or knowing the world adds to the Romantic sense of the child’s vulnerability in the world and to the sense of naturalness surrounding the child. In these works, social fluency is seen as something unnatural because it comes from a system of values imposed from without rather than from within; this unnaturalness is often tied to deceit (or, in Holden Caulfield’s case, “phoniness”), especially when it applies to adult women. Because these categories determine the existence of innocence or experience in these works, pointing out contradictions in their usage and application shows how the text undermines the categories of innocence and experience in general.

*Lolita* offers a critique of the traditional reliance on a conception of innocence in a way Salinger’s works do not. As discussed in the previous chapter, the irony of Humbert’s dual status as pedophile and innocence-worshipper primes the reader to undermine any of his descriptions of the child. Because he makes clear his dislike for adult women based on their developed bodies, the reader is also ready to undermine his depictions of adult women. Humbert Humbert takes their opposition to a ridiculous extreme: he thinks that women and girls are so irreparably different that they might as well be “two sexes...both [of which] would be termed female by the anatomist” (Nabokov 16). The way Humbert frames the adult women is important because it creates the circumstances for the way he frames the girl children, and vice

versa. Because they are made to represent two sides of a binary, they form each other—establishing women as bad establishes girls as good.

Humbert Humbert constructs Valeria and Charlotte in a way that highlights their sexuality and social fluency, respectively. He constructs a highly negative image of both of them, but the narrative undercuts this negativity and reveals it as merely distaste for the woman that stems from the sexual preference for the child. His criticism of his European first wife Valeria, a small but important character in *Lolita*, is based largely on her sexuality, or, rather, on the sexuality he attributes to her. Framed another way, his criticisms of Valeria are entirely based on *his own* sexual preferences. First, Humbert criticizes her for her body because “instead of a pale little gutter girl, Humbert Humbert had on his hands a large, puffy, short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*” (Nabokov 23). Furthermore, he does not like that she is not a virgin when they marry—her sexual experience is unattractive (Nabokov 22). His condemnation of her body is based on the fact that he desires a child’s body. Whereas Humbert criticizes Valeria mostly for her sexuality, he criticizes Charlotte for her excessive social fluency. He refers to her as generally “cold,” saying that her “polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul”; she is “completely devoid of humor” (Nabokov 52, 33). In Humbert’s opinion, Charlotte is hardly her own person, since her opinions, thoughts, and desires are entirely formed by outside, societal sources. She has an “overflow” of “poise” that makes her completely “unnatural” (compared to Humbert’s first vision of Lolita situated in nature (Nabokov 35)) (Nabokov 34). She expresses herself through the language of “soap operas,

psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes” (Nabokov 74). There seems to be no “natural” or individual spirit to Charlotte because her knowledge of and concern for every worldly affair from book club to religion constitutes her, in Humbert’s depiction. She is simply “genteel,” a “woman of principle,” “matter-of-fact,” and “contrived” (Nabokov 69, 70).

However, the text makes it clear that these negative illustrations of Valeria and Charlotte stem more from Humbert’s pedophilia and desire to control the adult woman than from the actual qualities he discusses. For instance, when Valeria leaves him for another man, Humbert is not upset at her adultery nor does he further condemn her for her sexuality. Instead, Humbert is angry because “matters of legal and illegal conjunction” should be for “[him] alone to decide” (Nabokov 24). Valeria’s autonomous, rebellious choice has upset him because it undermines Humbert’s authority; it de-authorizes him. This is especially true in light of the fact that Humbert’s only desire for Valeria was for her to “impersonate” a “stock character,” the doting wife (Nabokov 24). She is simply a “figure” that he has no “particular fondness for” (Nabokov 24). Words like “figure” and “stock character” indicate Humbert’s desire to control Valeria and stifle any individuality or power she may have as a character. Instead, Valeria defies his artistic vision and power over her. Once Valeria has veered from her stock character, Humbert rhetorically disposes of her, but the text again undermines him. He relays that Valeria dies in childbirth shortly after participating in an experiment in which humans subsist on a “diet of bananas and dates in a constant position on all fours” (Nabokov 27). Humbert shares that her death is his “little revenge,” and that, surprisingly, the results

of this study “appear not to have been published yet” (Nabokov 27). Nabokov highlights his unreliability here and Humbert himself highlights his plan for “revenge,” and the combination of the two undermines his construction, delegitimizing his depiction of Valeria. Reducing Valeria to animal status, forcing her to eat bananas (a phallic symbol), is too transparent an attempt at revenge—Humbert only wants to diminish her to regain control over his narrative and her construction, but *Lolita* has already exposed him.

His motives for painting Charlotte negatively are also transparent: she represents a barrier to his authorial power because she represents a barrier between him and the object of his sexual desire, the subject of his story, Lolita. He refers to Lolita as “hot little Haze” and to Charlotte as “big cold Haze,” but one should be careful to note that these nicknames (“hot” and “cold” especially) refer not to something Humbert has intuited about the inner character of the women but to the way *he* feels about them (Nabokov 52). Just as Valeria is meant to be a “figure,” Charlotte is meant to remain a “Haze” for the reader, so the focus stays on Humbert and Lolita. However, she is also a “Haze” for Humbert, in that her presence obscures his main goal, preventing him from seeing, knowing, and sexually interacting with Lolita. Right after Charlotte gains the knowledge to destroy Humbert, she is run over by a car and dies. Her knowledge kills her. Like Valeria, Charlotte is expelled from the narrative the moment her knowledge or experience threatens Humbert’s sexual desire and authorial control. Humbert confesses to a “lighthearted dream of controlling her,” so when he cannot control her, he disposes of her in the narrative (Nabokov 77). His marriages to Valeria and Charlotte are meant to serve as a front for

his “degrading and dangerous desires” for girl-children (Nabokov 21). So, when the two women deviate from this prescribed role into a more autonomous one, they become a threat to Humbert’s sexual desires.

Humbert Humbert condemns Valeria and Charlotte on the grounds of sexuality and social fluency, but this condemnation is revealed as simply based on Humbert’s sexual preferences. Humbert Humbert disdains experience and knowledge not because of some deeper understanding of a universal truth, but because of his sexual attraction to innocence. Humbert maintains that he is “an exceptionally handsome male” who can “obtain at the snap of [his] fingers any adult female [he] [chooses],” but he does not desire the adult female; he desires the innocent girl (Nabokov 22). In this way, Nabokov parodies experience, revealing it as a thin veil for the exercise of sexual desire for the child. Experience then, like innocence, is thoroughly critiqued in Nabokov’s novel.

In addition to that, there are contradictions in the way Humbert Humbert establishes innocence or experience that further undermine this binary. For, though Humbert relies on an “unravished...stereotypical notion of [the] ‘normal child,’” to define innocence, he still labels Annabel and Lolita as “innocent” even when they do not fit that description (Nabokov 116). He creates the “nymphet” seemingly to separate the notion of innocence from the child, in order to alleviate his guilt over the violation of innocence he incurs (Nabokov 17). However, his fluctuation between labeling Annabel and Lolita as “innocent” and “nymphet,” when, by his definitions, the two cannot coexist, reveals his manipulation of terms and definitions, and the unreliability of his portrayal of innocence/experience.



Lolita is both sexual and socially fluent, and Annabel is sexual, yet Humbert still considers both of them innocent. Sometimes he calls them nymphets, but even his tendency to alternate between the two suggests his difficulty in keeping his own constructed binary straight, thus undermining the binary itself. Lolita is remarkably savvy for her age, and attached to similar societal institutions as Charlotte. When Humbert meets her, Lolita has already been heavily influenced by “modern co-education, juvenile mores, [and] the campfire racket” (Nabokov 125). She is, like Charlotte, “disgustingly conventional,” and eventually develops “conventional mannerisms” (Nabokov 137, 175). Her “list of beloved things” is comically “obvious”: “[s]weet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth” (Nabokov 137). She is sarcastic and “cynical,” suggesting a disparaging knowledge of the world far beyond the traditional conception of innocence (Nabokov 105). Just like Charlotte, she is completely formed by society and learns poise and grace over time, but her social fluency does not garner the same condemnation as her mother’s (Nabokov 138, 219). Since the traditional presentation of the Romantic child is one “unsullied by culture,” Nabokov parodies this with a child who is completely sullied.

Also through the character of Lolita, Nabokov tackles the myth of the most consummate representative of innocence: the sexually pure little girl. Presenting a young, sexual girl convincingly parodies “the myths of sentimentality” that Salinger seems to ascribe to because it upends the traditional conception of innocence (Fiedler 244). Lolita herself declares to Humbert that he is “not even her first lover” (Nabokov 127). She first learned “various manipulations” from a girl school friend, before going

to camp and daily taking turns with a friend “copulat[ing] behind a bush” with the “indefatigable Charlie” (Nabokov 127, 129). Moreover, Lolita reveals she is not alone in these sexual pursuits at school. She explains:

Well, the Miranda twins had shared the same bed for years, and Donald Scott, who was the dumbest boy in the school, had done it with Hazel Smith in his uncle’s garage, and Kenneth Knight—who was the brightest—used to exhibit himself wherever and whenever he had a chance... (Nabokov 128).

Nabokov prevents the reader from believing that Lolita is the exception, a lone hypersexual twelve-year-old; he has her reveal that she is far from being the only one. The kids around her are sexual, exhibitionist, and perhaps incestuous and, she emphasizes, this behavior occurs regardless of intelligence. Every kid, from the “dumbest boy” to the “brightest,” engages in the same kinds of behavior, undermining the fundamental fabric of childhood innocence that even a pedophile like Humbert Humbert clings to.

However, even after setting up his definitions of “innocent” and “nymphet,” Humbert Humbert still contradicts himself in ways that confess his manipulation of the concepts, undermining the integrity of the concepts themselves. He does this especially with Lolita and Annabel. For instance, he fluctuates between calling Annabel “the initial fateful elf in [his] life” and attributing to her an innocence that Lolita cannot live up to (Nabokov 15, 117). Furthermore, Annabel is allowed to be innocent even though she was ready to have sex (and did “hold in her awkward fist the scepter of [his] passion”) with the young Humbert Humbert (Nabokov 12).

Annabel is his greatest exemplar of innocence *and* nymphet, even though the two should be irreconcilable. Lolita receives a similar conflicting treatment. Humbert, when he first meets her, is committed to “protect[ing] the purity of that twelve-year-old child” (Nabokov 58). Yet, even before he learns of her sexual escapades he refers to her as a “nymphet.” Even after he learns of her previous experience and has sex with her himself, Humbert considers her innocent and nymphaean all at the same time (Nabokov 130). He goes so far as calling her an “immortal daemon disguised as a female child,” yet fervently believes in her “innocent fluorescence” (Nabokov 130, 191). Nabokov alerts us to Humbert’s inability to keep his definitions straight, revealing the fact that he uses them differently at different times based solely on what is useful to him.

Humbert Humbert, though he is sexual and socially fluent, does not condemn himself according to his own binary. This contradiction further reveals the true motive behind the creation of the binary—sexual desire. His prejudice against women comes from a lack of sexual desire for the woman. His condemnation of their knowledge and experience is only a façade. He highlights his own sexuality and sex appeal, but condemns it in adult women. He is socially fluent—economically stable, able to reserve hotel rooms and rent cars, a self-proclaimed charmer and able to cultivate deceit—yet he criticizes this behavior in adult women. He chastises Charlotte for using soap operas, psychoanalysis, and cheap novelettes for her expression, but admits in the same sentence that he draws on them “for [his] characters” (Nabokov 74). He utilizes social fluency in his role as author just as much

as Charlotte utilizes it for her expression. Through admissions like these, the text undermines his binary by showing his ability to exclude himself from it.

*Lolita* undermines the innocence/experience binary that Humbert Humbert dutifully constructs to separate girls and women according to the categories of sexuality and social fluency. In the next section, I turn to Salinger's texts, and argue that in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Seymour and Holden also construct this innocence/experience binary in similar ways, and that the texts undermine them in similar ways. In this way, it becomes clear that Holden and Seymour, in their relationship to innocence and experience, are not so different from Humbert Humbert. Through contradictions in the treatment of women and girls and the unreliability of Seymour and Holden, Salinger's texts reveal the same preference for the child and need for control that drives Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, offering a similar critique of the myths of innocence.

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," it is in relation to Seymour that the portrayal of the other characters can be understood. The two main female characters—Seymour's wife, Muriel, and a little girl on the beach, Sybil—are, through narrative structure, setting, and their relationship to Seymour, very clearly contrasted in "Perfect Day." Accordingly, Leslie Fiedler contends convincingly that Salinger seems to want this story read as "the child as the embodiment of all that is clean and life-giving as opposed to the vulgar, destructive (i.e. fully sexual) wife" (Fiedler 241). This is the reigning understanding of the story, but the text allows for another reading, one that shows Seymour's unreliability and sexual desire in

constructing this opposition, thereby undermining his descriptions of Muriel and Sybil as such.

Like Charlotte and Valeria in *Lolita*, Muriel is defined and condemned in “Perfect Day” through details about her sexuality and her social fluency. For one, the tableau of her that opens the story oozes sexuality. She is in a hotel room in a “white silk dressing gown, which [is] all that she [is] wearing” (“Perfect Day” 4). Moreover, the narrator notes, she looks like a girl whose phone “ha[s] been ringing continually ever since she [] reached puberty” (“Perfect Day 4”). The sexuality inherent in the reference to puberty, her almost-nudity, and the hotel room setting immediately establish Muriel as a mature woman who is, first and foremost, sexual. In the time it takes to wait for the phone, she reads an article in a “women’s pocket-size magazine, called ‘Sex is Fun—or Hell’” (“Perfect Day” 3). The two adjectives are slightly misplaced antonyms that make one thing clear: Heaven is not an option for the adult woman because of her engagement in sex. Muriel is diminished in a moral sense by her choice in reading, her attire, and the setting because they all suggest her *experience*. Experience with sex, with men, even her ability to read a juicy article all position her far from the traditional conception of innocence and contribute to the predominant reading of her that Fiedler suggests is encouraged—as “vulgar, destructive (i.e. fully sexual) wife” (Fiedler 241).

Muriel’s experience is further called upon to defame her in terms of social fluency. She is completely consumed with her appearance, it seems, as she has spent the two and a half hours she has had to wait for the phone to ring “wash[ing] her comb and brush,” [taking] the spot out of [her] skirt,” “mov[ing] the button on her

Saks blouse,” “tweez[ing] out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole,” and “putting lacquer on [her] nails” (“Perfect Day” 3). Her concern for her appearance suggests Muriel’s “phony” social fluency. She is beautiful, but the work that goes into maintaining this beauty is made ridiculous in Salinger, far away from the naturalness that characterizes innocence in the Romantic/Victorian conception. In this instance, Muriel’s efforts at physical upkeep amount to a kind of deceit, a very intentional deceit that here means simply to adhere to anything unnatural, to change yourself or edit yourself based on externally imposed social standards. Conforming to traditional beauty and working towards traditional conceptions of beauty are a form of social fluency. Muriel understands what she is doing and does it with intention. On the phone with her mother, Muriel reveals her social fluency further when she talks about people she has met at the hotel bar, the woman who is “all hips” yet wears a dress that is too tight for her, and the latest fashions at the beach (“Perfect Day” 10, 11, 12). The conversation shows her social fluency through highlighting her competition with other women and her concern for societal class (“Perfect Day” 12). All the surface details combine to form a picture of Muriel as highly sexual and socially fluent, and therefore worthy of criticism in Salinger’s world. They categorize her as simply “adult,” but that designation becomes a negative one in Salinger’s text.

Upon deeper analysis, however, the text suggests that Muriel’s position in the narrative is determined by Seymour’s lack of attraction to her, which inspires his determination to reduce her character to sexuality and social fluency. Because this knowledge and experience makes Muriel a negative character, it ostensibly justifies Seymour’s preference for Sybil. This reading undermines the portrait of her that the

text initially creates. Furthermore, there are two distinct dynamics at play in Muriel's depiction. On the one hand, she is not sexually desirable to Seymour; on the other hand, she is sexualized and made sexually desirable for the reader. In this way, Salinger's text illustrates the dual nature of the portrayal of experience—woman disdained for sexuality, and woman on display for it and defined by it. Muriel's wearing only a bathrobe is often interpreted as revealing her sexuality, but it reveals the sexuality the reader readily applies to Muriel just as much. Watching, as it were, Muriel get ready alone in her hotel room as if no one were watching her is the titillating voyeuristic fantasy that Salinger provides for the reader. Her sexuality is negative within the narrative, but still sexualized for the reader. The reader can, so to speak, have his cake and eat it too—condemn Muriel and ogle her. This illustrates the seduction in the myth of experience, but there are other aspects of the text that call for inquiry and criticism of the myth of experience. Seymour and the reader trap Muriel in her role, and the text reveals this entrapment. On the one hand, the hotel room suggests sexuality; on the other, it suggests confinement. Muriel has to read up on sex because she lives in a world that has told her that she will either participate in and enjoy sex (Fun) or participate in and hate sex (Hell), because participating in sex and being a sexual subject is not an option. Her phone has been ringing off the hook with phone calls *from* men—there is no indication of her interest—and yet that fact seems to place her in the category of sexual woman. Muriel is less sexual than *sexualized* by the narrative. In the realm of social fluency there is the same male construction and confinement at work. Muriel can only use her beauty to get by, so she works to keep her beauty up to male standards—and still, she is not desired within the world of the

text. Seymour significantly avoids her for the first two parts of the narrative, and his looking at her is directly followed by his suicide (“Perfect Day” 26). Muriel tells her mother that Seymour calls her “Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948,” a nickname that highlights the sexuality and social fluency Seymour attributes to her in its references to pageantry, sexual promiscuity, and lack of commitment to any deeper spirituality (“Perfect Day” 7). Muriel’s knowledge and experience is twisted into a brand of evil in Seymour’s narrative, and the text suggests that this distortion should be recognized as stemming from Seymour’s own sexual desire for innocence and the child.

Compared to the hotel room Muriel is confined to, the beach where Seymour meets Sybil is a natural (read: innocent) paradise. This sets the tone for the opposition between them that Seymour tries to create in “Perfect Day.” It is the first strong suggestion the narrative makes that Sybil is far more natural than Muriel (similarly to *Lolita* and *Charlotte*), subscribing to a traditionally Romantic trope of innocence. However, though there are of course differences between Sybil and Muriel, there are certain similarities on the basis of sexuality and social fluency that should be used to undermine the opposition of innocence and experience/knowledge that Seymour presents. Sybil’s behavior, for the most part, is far from the measured, composed social fluency that Muriel exhibits. She is impatient; she sinks her foot into sand castles and kicks sand into Seymour’s face without consideration (“Perfect Day” 20, 15, 16). Furthermore, she is portrayed as not knowledgeable, which emphasizes her innocence. She has not yet learned simple grammatical structure and pronunciation, telling Seymour proudly that her “daddy’s coming tomorrow on a nairiplane” (“Perfect Day” 16). Rather than referring to her swimsuit as “yellow,” she calls it “a



*yellow*” (“Perfect Day” 17). She delights Seymour when she believes in his fantastical story of the bananafish, loudly declaring she sees a fish with six bananas in its mouth, displaying the joyful imagination that characterizes Romantic/Victorian innocence (“Perfect Day” 24). On the whole, it is fair to say that Sybil seems not to be fettered by the same social concerns that Muriel is. Sybil is also, in contrast to Muriel, portrayed as completely sexless, though I have shown how this emphasis on her sexlessness actually serves to sexualize her in the narrative, especially the reference to her prepubescent body. Sybil may not have the knowledge to conceptualize her bikini as sexual, but in pointing out her lack of breasts (and the fact that she will inevitably not always lack them), she has been conceptualized as sexual by the narrator, the author, and the reader. Thus, she is conceptualized by the reader as sexual just as Muriel is; but, unlike Muriel, she is not accused of displaying her own sexuality. In her innocence, she is free of intention.

Accepting this cursory glance at Sybil’s behavior does not adequately recognize the distinct similarities between her and Muriel, or the indications that Sybil is not strictly innocent in the traditional sense. Sybil’s bikini, for instance, is just as, if not more, revealing and scandalous than Muriel’s robe. Sybil displays jealousy and contempt for another girl when she tells Seymour to “push [Sharon Lipschutz] off” the piano bench the next time she sits with him (“Perfect Day” 19). This matches Muriel’s judgment of the woman who is “all hips.” The clearest and most important indication of Sybil’s knowledge/experience in matters of sexuality is the moment when Seymour kisses her foot (“Perfect Day” 24). She shouts an indignant “Hey!” makes him push her back to shore, and then “[runs] without regret

in the direction of the hotel” (“Perfect Day” 25). This scene is important because it indicates that Sybil has some sense of what is proper or improper sexual behavior, and that means she has knowledge of or experience of the morality behind sexuality. This undermines the innocence Seymour claims for Sybil in the narrative, and demonstrates the sexual desire for the child that grounds his dismissal of Muriel.

The narrative plays out in three distinct parts, and this narrative structure, at first, seems to uphold the opposition that Seymour creates between Muriel and Sybil. In the first part, Seymour is absent. However, he and his mental health are the main topics of conversation in Muriel’s phone call with her mother. In the second, Seymour plays with Sybil on the beach and seems relatively happy. In the third and shortest, Seymour berates a woman in the hotel elevator, returns to his room, looks at Muriel, and commits suicide. Though Seymour is not present in the first part of the story, his relationship to Muriel and her mother is made very clear. Muriel’s mother thinks Muriel should be afraid of Seymour, and though Muriel defends him, she does not fully deny her reasoning (“Perfect Day” 14). Seymour is positioned in opposition to the two of them, but rather than this putting him in a negative light, it is a positive thing that these two sexualized, socially fluent women do not relate to him. In the middle scene, Seymour seems perfectly content with Sybil. Once he kisses her foot and she runs away, his entire demeanor changes. He yells at a random woman in the hotel elevator for looking at his feet. The connection of the feet suggests his guilt over violating Sybil—he childishly funnels his guilt into his accusation that the woman violates him. It also indicates his desire: though he would gladly kiss the foot of a girl-child, he is repulsed by even the possibility that his feet garner attention from an

adult woman. In "Raise High," Seymour loves that Charlotte stomps his feet, which further illustrates the contrast between the kind of bodily connection he desires from the girl-child and the fact that he wants absolutely no physical connection with the adult woman ("Raise High" 81). In "Perfect Day," he goes on to call the woman a "God-damned sneak," attributing to her a deceit and intentionality that characterizes the socially fluent adult woman ("Perfect Day" 25). However, the woman denies that she was looking at his feet, and Seymour's mental instability and unreliability suggests the woman is being truthful ("Perfect Day" 25). Therefore, his accusation comes more from distaste for the adult woman than from actual deceit or intention on the part of the woman. This third part is a rapid turnaround from the serene Seymour of the beach. When Sybil leaves Seymour, it seems as though a mask has been lifted. The shift in Salinger's word choice is obvious: Seymour begins to swear; he "cock[s] the piece" of his gun and "look[s] at Muriel" before he shoots himself ("Perfect Day" 26). The sentences are shorter and choppier, even, lending themselves to the sudden violence of the scene. The fact that Seymour's happy experience with Sybil is bookended with unsavory interactions with adult women heavily insinuates that adult women are involved in his decision to kill himself and in his unhappiness. Muriel and the adult woman in the elevator are opposed to the female child, and it is the female child who benefits the adult male.

The structure and shock value of the plot do everything they can to enforce a reading that privileges childhood innocence and denounces adult female experience, but upon further examination, the same unreliability of Humbert Humbert is visible in Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," lending support to the fact that the

innocence/experience binary stems from Seymour's sexual desire for the child, not from an inherent value in the behavior of the child or the behavior of the adult. Seymour attacks Muriel for her sexuality, yet, his marriage and his physical contact with Sybil make it clear he has at least some knowledge of and experience with the sexual. The language of his suicide such as "cocked the piece" is also highly sexual, as are the phallic and sexual innuendos in his story of the bananafish ("Perfect Day" 26, 23). Though he seems disgusted with his wife's social fluency, we learn that he is wealthy and a veteran, indicating that he has his fair share of involvement with societal institutions and success within them. If Seymour were to loathe experience as much as he does, he would have to hate himself, for there is no way he can consider himself innocent. Like Humbert, he pointedly excuses himself from the binary he creates, but the text undermines him to show where he would fall. Seymour, despite his own sexuality and social fluency, condemns Muriel for her sexuality and social fluency; thus, the binary is revealed as driven by desire rather than by an adherence to an objective value in innocence over experience.

The same binary is at work in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and in this text it is also undermined. Through narrative structure and Holden's descriptions, Holden creates a clear opposition between adult women—namely Sally and Jane—and girl-children—namely Phoebe. Sally Hayes, the girl Holden goes on a date with, is portrayed as very socially fluent; Jane Gallagher is portrayed as sexual. Phoebe is portrayed as neither. However, there are contradictions in the portrayal of all three girls that suggest the unreliability of the binary and of Holden as narrator and labeler.

Holden paints Sally as the “queen of the phonies” because of her socially fluent behavior, but the text suggests in several ways that we should not trust Holden’s portrayal (*Catcher* 152). Sally is phony in Holden’s mind because she overuses words like “grand,” predictably enjoys a popular entertainer that Holden thinks is phony, and gets caught up in a conversation with a “phony Andover bastard” at intermission (*Catcher* 138, 152, 166). She clearly has experience with social situations like the one she and Holden are in, and knowledge of how to navigate the situation gracefully. “She always *knew* somebody, any place you took her”—Sally is integrated into the social scene, making her phony in Holden’s eyes (*Catcher* 165). In Holden’s conception, phonies intentionally display their knowledge for other people. For instance, at the show’s intermission Holden looks at the crowd and comments: “You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were” (*Catcher* 164). Holden vilifies Sally for her social ability that comes through experience and knowledge. Like Muriel, however, Sally is merely acting from within the role she is confined to by Holden, who constructs the situations in which Sally demonstrates her social fluency. For instance, it is Holden who buys the tickets for the popular performance. He acts “seductive as hell” in the car with Sally so that she “[doesn’t] have any alternative” but to neck with him (*Catcher* 163). He claims he does not really like her, but he sexualizes her anyway, indicating the sexual and social role Sally is forced to play (*Catcher* 174). He admits that she has no alternative, yet condemns her for it anyway. When Holden impulsively asks Sally to leave New York with him, she says no, and Holden snaps. He tells her she “give[s] [him] a royal pain

in the ass,” and, when she starts to cry, he starts to laugh (*Catcher* 173-4). In this moment, Holden’s façade crumbles, and it is clear that he vilifies Sally because she will not always obey him or acquiesce to all of his desires, like leaving town with him. This is akin to Humbert’s denunciation of Valeria when she sleeps with another man: he does not care for her much anyway, but her insubordination is too much to take. Sally cannot win. She is berated for being “phony,” and for being honest in saying she does not want to leave New York. This reveals Holden’s prejudice against her, thus making his condemnation of her social fluency unreliable.

While Holden condemns Sally for her social fluency, he condemns Jane Gallagher for her sexuality. Jane Gallagher is a complex figure in *Catcher* because there are effectively two versions of her: the Jane who goes out with Stradlater, potentially has sex, resulting in her loss of innocence and lack of physical presence in the narrative, and the Jane that Holden reminisces about, the innocent Jane, who holds his hand and “sort of [won’t] let [him] get to her mouth” when he kisses her (*Catcher* 102). The first Jane exemplifies Holden’s condemnation of experience—even the mere potential for sexual behavior results in Jane’s loss of innocence in his eyes. The second Jane exemplifies his glorification of innocence. I argue there are contradictions in the text that undercut both of these depictions of Jane. In the previous chapter, through analyzing the sexualization of Jane’s innocent depiction, I showed that *Catcher* calls for a reading of Holden’s anger at her “lost innocence” as anger over the fact that he is not the one to take it. He is jealous of Stradlater, not grieving over Jane’s moral corruption. The fact that Holden does not want to call or think of Jane after this incident also indicates that he is no longer attracted to her. He

is no longer attracted because she is no longer innocent, illustrating Holden's sexual desire for innocence. This undermines Holden's depiction of experience because it reveals his ability to use experience/knowledge to veil his own subjective desires and preferences. In terms of innocence, the text undermines the depiction because it is sexualized and because Jane herself understands sexuality. She avoids Holden's kiss and cries after seeing her lecherous stepfather because she has knowledge and/or experience of the sexual realm (*Catcher* 102). It is akin to Sybil indignantly running away from Seymour's kiss or Annabel engaging with Humbert Humbert. Thus, Jane, according to Holden's definition, should not be considered innocent in her relationship with him. According to the text, she should also not be vilified for her possible experience in her relationship with Stradlater. The two treatments of Jane stem from Holden's desire for her innocence and lack of desire for her experience. The suggestion the text makes to this effect undermines the entire binary upon which Holden constructs the two versions of Jane Gallagher.

Phoebe, like Sybil for Seymour, is Holden's "paragon of innocence" (Nadel 362). On the surface, like Sybil, Phoebe exhibits the lack of sexuality and social fluency that supposedly defines Salinger's children but, with a closer look, she shows some similarities to the older women that create another contradiction in Holden's application of innocence and experience. Though Phoebe displays gaps in proper behavior, she shows a growing maturity through social fluency in many other ways. It is clear that Phoebe is gaining a modicum of awareness of social propriety. She "can be quite snotty," since she now understands Holden's irony and can fire it back at him (*Catcher* 217). She chastises Holden to stop swearing so much, and is better about

saving money than he is (*Catcher* 218, 233). All of this demonstrates her social and economic fluency, but Phoebe is not condemned for it like Sally (who is criticized for chastising Holden for speaking too loudly (*Catcher* 169)). Phoebe also displays at least some knowledge of the sexual realm when she protests that she does not want a boy in her class to like her (*Catcher* 213). Her sense that there is something inappropriate about his behavior is enough to suggest that she knows something of romantic relations. This is similar to Sybil's running away from Seymour's kiss. These demonstrations of Phoebe's growing social fluency and knowledge of sexuality do nothing to discount her in the narrative like they do Sally and Jane. Humbert simply prefers his relationship to his sister because of his attraction to innocence. One hint to this effect is clear in the passage where Holden relates his opinion of the movie *Hamlet* with Sir Laurence Olivier. "The best part in the whole picture was when...old Ophelia was sort of horsing around with her brother, taking his dagger out of the holster, and teasing him and all" (*Catcher* 152-3). Holden gets a "big bang out of" this scene because it portrays a playful *and* flirtatious relationship between brother and sister (*Catcher* 153). The reference to Ophelia "taking his dagger out of his holster" is sexual imagery that reveals Holden's sexual attraction to the scene. The phallic and sexual implications of the phrase are clear, as is Holden's excitement about and affinity for the scene. Signs like these indicate his sexual preference for the child, perhaps for his sister. Thus, his portrayal of Phoebe is not based on his appreciation of her goodness, just as his portrayals of socially fluent, sexual women are not based on an inherent understanding of the evil of experience. Like Humbert, Holden's preference for the child and prejudice against the woman undergirds the



application of his standards, and in calling attention to this, the narrative undermines those standards.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's preference for children is clearly displayed through the narrative structure. Whereas almost everything remotely adult is deemed phony, and every interaction with adults sends Holden into a depression or a nervous breakdown, children like Phoebe and a few child strangers he meets provide him with his happiest encounters in the novel. Rather than accept this, the structure can be analyzed to reveal another meaning, however. As we have seen, Holden admits to being a "terrific liar," and can be an unreliable narrator (*Catcher* 22). Accordingly, like Humbert and Seymour, Holden, though he is clearly sexual and socially fluent, does not condemn himself by the same standards he uses to condemn adult women. In highlighting this discrepancy, the narrative points to the inconsistencies in the binary as a whole and undermines it. Holden is very clearly socially fluent in a variety of ways. For one, he is wealthy, and proves his financial security by carelessly throwing his money around throughout the narrative. Having money is a power, and an adult one at that. Unlike Phoebe who meticulously secures and counts her "Christmas dough" or the boy in D.B.'s story who covets the goldfish he buys for himself, Holden understands that he has no need to carefully save his money (*Catcher* 232, 4). He books a fancy hotel room for himself, takes Sally to a Broadway show, buys drinks for random girls, and blows ten dollars on a prostitute all in one night. While the children in *The Catcher in the Rye* treasure their allowances, Holden, on the tip of adulthood, has grown to recognize the societal cachet in having and spending money. Holden is socially adroit enough to navigate

New York on his own, maintain relationships with professors and old friends, strike up conversations with new people, and run into acquaintances everywhere he goes. He is just as socially fluent as Sally, if not more, yet he never calls himself “phony.”

In the sexual realm, Holden consistently alternates between desire for/fixation on sex and condemnation of the sexual activity of others such as Stradlater or Jane or the populous at large. Yet, he admits that, in his mind, he is “probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw” (*Catcher* 81). Holden is sexual and socially fluent, and this contradiction in his own behavior and the way he treats others’ behavior undermines the categories of innocence/experience that Holden constructs in his narrative. Once his unreliability is clear, the reader should question his authority to judge and construct others. His construction comes from his own desire and preferences rather than an implicit understanding of moral right and wrong.

In the innocent child/experienced adult binary that Humbert, Seymour, and Holden subscribe to, none of them designate a place for themselves, because their knowledge and experience would automatically place them on what they deem to be the wrong side of the equation. In *Lolita*, the narrative summarily undermines the binary Humbert upholds, thus providing a readily visible critique of the traditional mythic conception of innocence vs. experience. In my reading, Salinger’s texts do the same undermining work, but it is harder to uncover because the texts also play on the strength of the binary to structure and create tension within the narrative. The binary disguises the force that is really at work: prejudice against the adult woman that comes from a sexual preference for the girl. Despite calling attention to the presence of this prejudice, the narratives do not fully validate the female characters or allow

them their own voices. Jane and Sally remain silent. Charlotte is not a likeable character; Valeria is often a forgotten one. Muriel and her mother do not get to speak for themselves, even though the narrative validates their discussion of Seymour's mental instability. Questioning the way the child is treated in these works has led me to the treatment of the women that seems to both inspire and come from a reliance on the child, but this larger issue is left unresolved. There is perhaps not even a clear condemnation of the attitude towards the woman in these works. It seems that the narrators' desire for innocence justifies the treatment of the women and the girl, which suggests that Salinger's sentimental style comes close to making pedophilic desire palatable. However, there are contradictions in the text that highlight this constructed binary, calling attention to the sexual desire that drives it. In this way, there is a critique on the innocence/experience binary. It becomes clear that the binary, like innocence itself, serves only to justify and validate the preferences and desires of the male narrators. The texts facilitate this recognition, thereby dismantling further the myths of innocence the narrators utilize to their advantage.

### III. Innocence and Power

“Where there is desire, the power relation is already present,” and the relationships between girl children and male adults in the discussed works are, on the most fundamental level, relationships between the powerless and the powerful (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 81). As narrators and as adults, the men hold the authorial and physical power in their hands, while the girls become the unknowing, vulnerable objects of desire. However, a reversal takes place in all four narratives: Humbert, Seymour, and Holden all present the child as *powerful* and themselves as powerless. It is a very specific type of power they endow the child with, one that fits in with the Romantic/Victorian conception of innocence and does not amount to any *real* power over the man. However, the narratives reveal this inverted representation and rectify it, with consistent reminders of the more concrete power the men hold over the child. For, in endowing innocence with power, the men make an attempt to exonerate themselves from any responsibility for their actions. It is an attempt to blame the child for the temptation its innocence represents. If the child is powerful, the male characters can pretend they do not have control over the situation, and then they cannot be held guilty for sexual desire for and sexual advances on the child. The narratives prevent this latter reading from being valid, however, by calling attention to the inequality in the power structure between the two. It is *Lolita* that makes this manipulated power relation the most obvious, but the same power dynamics are at work in Salinger’s texts—narrators who distort power, and narratives that overthrow this distortion. By displaying this manipulation, the narratives again undermine their narrators and the traditional myths of innocence their narrators rely on.

If knowledge is power, then childhood innocence should be inherently powerless, but, perhaps surprisingly, this is not the case in the traditional Romantic/Victorian conception of innocence. Romantic innocence does have power, though power of a very particular type. The innocent child has a “sentimental power” that comes along with its “visual charm” (Wolff 95). The image of the child is highly evocative and provocative, and seems to spark passion and emotion in the adult. The Romantic innocent child, connected to nature, has a knowledge of and connection to the world that adults do not share (or feel they have lost) (Wood 128). Though the child is unknowing, this particular type of Romantic knowledge of nature comes from the child’s innocence and endows her with a specific kind of sentimental power. The “natural and supernatural” aspects of the child give it “power,” in a sense (McGillis 102). This power is mystical and otherworldly, magical, even. Thus, the Romantic/Victorian conception allows for the child to exert a kind of power over the adult.

All three narrators attribute these Romantic/Victorian innocent “powers,” as well as other kinds of power, to the children in the text. However, these powers should not be confused with actual physical and intellectual power. In *Lolita* and Salinger’s texts, the male characters present the child as powerful in order to justify their actions with the child and to free themselves from guilt and blame. The powers they endow the child with do not amount to actual power. The Romantic “sentimental power” to melt the heart of the adult, to coerce the adult—it only creates the illusion that the child has actual power over the adult. The supernatural and the natural powers also foster this illusion. “Innocence,” then, can be manipulated to serve the

needs of the powerful, because it creates the conditions to believe that there is an equal balance of power or even that the child has more power than the adult.

Ultimately, this means that innocence, just as it is used by the male characters as a mask to cover their desire for the child, is also a mask used to cover their absolute power over the child. Because all four texts provide ways to recognize this, all four texts undermine the myth of the power of innocence.

Once again, *Lolita* makes this manipulated power relation the most clear. In *Lolita*, the power Humbert gives to Lolita is the “perilous magic of the nymphet,” which suggests that Humbert is somehow in danger rather than Lolita (Nabokov 126). His creation of the category of nymphet attempts to exonerate him for his crimes: he cannot help himself, he claims, because he is compelled by some otherworldly magic to act the way he does. This is Humbert’s attempt to recreate the sentimental power of innocence utilized in traditional Romantic narratives. Nabokov’s parody is clear, and that parody reveals Humbert’s nymphet as a flimsy illusion to hide his own power over Lolita and intense sexual desire for her.

In addition, Humbert Humbert attributes power to Lolita by framing her as the seductress who initiates their first sexual contact (Nabokov 124). This is “Humbert’s ultimate power twist—the twist of what he actually does and of how he narrates his actions in his attempt to convince himself and us that Lolita is in control, that he succumbs to her, and that what he does here is on some level acceptable” (Patnoe 94). He frames this accusation against Lolita within a passionate appeal to his intended audience (the future jury at his murder trial): “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to

Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (Nabokov 124). Humbert Humbert attempts to completely upend the traditional narrative of aggressive pedophile/defenseless child, but his claim is unreliable. He proclaims himself prudent and patient sexually, meek even, in comparison to the seductress Lolita. Nabokov has already given the reader the tools to convict Humbert’s action rather than sympathize with it. It is precisely Humbert’s established status as pedophile, murderer, and defendant at his own trial that Nabokov uses to reveal Humbert’s gesture as a plot to convince the reader that he is something other than guilty and in control. Humbert repeats his attempt to falsely empower Lolita by emphasizing Lolita’s power to escape, which validates this as a relationship of power in the Foucaultian sense—Humbert’s power only becomes power if Lolita has the possibility to resist (Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 789). Humbert also highlights Lolita’s ability to “hurt” him verbally, like when a “strident ‘what d’you think you are doing?’ [is] all [Humbert] [gets] for [his] pains” (Nabokov 155). Magic power, power to leave, power to yell—these are hardly powers compared to Humbert’s power over Lolita. Humbert Humbert means to paint her as holding his heart in her hands, able to squeeze too hard and kill him whenever she pleases, but Nabokov reveals in many ways Humbert’s ultimate power. If he is powerless, he is blameless, and it is important to remember this man is awaiting trial. He can attempt to redeem his actions by saying that the child had power over them, and that he was caught up in that power and unable to avoid it. In reality, Humbert “gets power by appearing to give up power, exerts his will by appearing to relinquish his will” (Patnoe 96).

Nabokov, through Humbert's narration, places consistent reminders of Humbert's ultimate power over Lolita. For one, Humbert always has the power of the author over Lolita, a power that clearly trumps all others in the narrative. Humbert also always has sheer physical power over Lolita. This most obviously comes through in their sexual relationship. Humbert tries to convince the reader otherwise when he claims Lolita seduces him and that it was Lolita that directed their first sexual intercourse ("‘Okay,’ said Lolita, ‘here is where we start’" (Nabokov 125)), but he reveals Lolita's physical inexperience when he notes that "she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid's life and mine" ("life" quite possibly meaning Humbert's penis (Patnoe 91)) (Nabokov 125). He tries to justify his rape through Lolita's previous sexual experience, but passages like these reveal Lolita is far from a fully sexual adult capable of making this decision. Lolita is not physically able to stop or to control Humbert in this act, which happens time and again throughout the novel. The reader should not become desensitized to it. Humbert also expresses his physical power in other ways. For instance, when "Lo look[s] up with a semi-smile of surprise and without a word [Humbert] deliver[s] a tremendous backhand cut that [catches] her smack on her hot hard little cheekbone" (Nabokov 213). This is a bright sign to the reader: Humbert Humbert has an adult male body, and the physical power that comes with that is always enough to subjugate the child. His ability to enact violence on her body indicates his absolute power over her body, and it is important to remember this power exists constantly, even in moments where he is choosing not to exhibit it. In his act of violence he also further sexualizes her ("hot hard little cheekbone")—there is sexual stimulation and pleasure in the image of



the child about-to-be-defiled. The pleasure comes from the defilement and the sense of power that comes with the ability to harm. Part of the attraction to innocence is the attraction to the power Humbert is able to hold over innocence. Lolita's magic nymphet power does nothing for her in the face of Humbert's true power. Humbert's attempts to paint himself as powerless in Lo's hands are at the limit of Nabokov's dark, ironic humor, seeing as it is Humbert Humbert who abducts her, drives her around the country for years, pretends to be her father (further suggesting power over Lolita in a legal and moral sense), hits her, calls her his "slave-child" and penetrates her sexually through all of that (Nabokov 176). The reader *should* darkly laugh at Humbert's attempted illusions, *should* be incredulous enough to question him, and distant enough from him through Nabokov's ironic tone to be willing to overturn all of Humbert's claims, but also to recognize that Humbert's claims reflect some reality in the ability to manipulate innocence in order to justify exercising power over the child.

"Power" is more visible in *Lolita* because power is made explicit in the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita. In Salinger's works, power is harder to divine, which is why looking at *Lolita* first is helpful. Ultimately, the same power relations and manipulations are there, but the presentation of the "sentimental power" of the child is more convincing at first. Humbert tries to utilize this sentimental power, but the parody and irony of *Lolita* thwarts him. Salinger's works, on the other hand, employ the sentimental power of the child far more effectively. The sentimental power becomes even more mystical and otherworldly in Salinger's hands because it is presented as mysterious and inexplicable. Salinger's adult

characters often experience a “profound emotional response” to the child that seems to bolster this mysterious power of innocence (Wolff 85). For instance, Holden cries uncontrollably when Phoebe generously gives him some of her allowance; Seymour claims to be forever marked by Charlotte’s yellow dress (*Catcher* 233; “Raise High” 75). These moments are left relatively unexplained, unlabeled and, therefore, are rendered all the more powerful. Salinger taps in to the emotional response the adult supposedly has to innocence in order to create sympathy between reader and characters. If Salinger is not probed further, but is simply accepted as a sentimental writer, then he seems to simply play into the “myths of sentimentality” surrounding the child (Fiedler 244). But, I argue that, upon pushing harder and probing further into the power dynamics at work, Salinger’s prose reveals a commentary similar to Nabokov’s and relationships that function like those in *Lolita*. Salinger’s sentimentality showcases the seduction of the myths of innocence and provides ways to critique those myths.

In “Raise High,” “Perfect Day,” and *Catcher*, Holden and Seymour try to construct the child as powerful by using the same kinds of innocent powers Humbert attributes to Lolita. In “Raise High,” Seymour and Buddy meet Charlotte when she is “dropping marbles on [them] from the twelfth story” (“Raise High” 82). Her elevated, even heavenly, position immediately suggests power. So does her marble throwing. The scene is one in which Charlotte, without knowledge, puts Seymour and Buddy in danger. The initial implication is clear: Buddy constructs her innocence as so powerful that it has the potential to hurt Buddy and Seymour. Buddy also mentions that Charlotte stomps on Seymour’s foot whenever she is “delighted” at the

“broadcasting table,” which seems to further indicate her power over Seymour (“Raise High” 81). Here, her power is physical and sentimental—the physical act gives her power over Seymour, and the gesture also suggests that she is “full of joy, and free of calculation,” subtly playing into the Romantic/Victorian definition of innocence (Wood 128). Charlotte is depicted in one instant as running away from Seymour, suggesting her power to escape, and Seymour claims she has left a mark on him (“Raise High” 75). These are Seymour’s attempts to create the illusion that Charlotte has power. But the mark Seymour has is not real, nor is her power.

A few key incidents are enough to reveal that it is Buddy and Seymour who possess the actual power. Through these incidents, Salinger undermines their representation. First and foremost, in their power as authors. The mark Seymour imagines he has is from the time when Charlotte “[runs] away from [Seymour],” so he “grab[s] her dress to stop her, to keep her near [him]” (“Raise High” 75). He claims to “still have a lemon-yellow mark on the palm of [his] hand” from the dress (“Raise High” 75). He wants power over her body, wants to keep it with him. Furthermore, it is clear he *has* power over Charlotte’s body, or takes it at the very least, in his act of grabbing. He needs no permission to claim Charlotte’s body for his own because his power over her is complete. In another crucial moment, Seymour throws a rock at Charlotte. Buddy explains this story to the deaf-mute in a moment of frenzied candor. The passage is worth reproducing in full:

“What happened was, she sat down in the middle of our driveway one morning to pet Boo Boo’s cat, and Seymour threw a stone at her. He was twelve. That’s all there was to it. He threw it at her because she

looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo's cat. Everybody knew that, for God's sake—me, Charlotte, Boo Boo, Waker, Walt, the whole family." I stared at the pewter ashtray on the coffee table. "Charlotte never said a word to him about it. Not a word." I looked up at my guest, rather expecting him to dispute me, to call me a liar. I am a liar, of course. Charlotte never did understand why Seymour threw that stone at her. ("Raise High" 89)

Salinger uses these two events to undercut Buddy as a narrator and Seymour as someone who is at the whim of the power of innocence. The mark she inflicts on him is illustrative of her power: it is nonexistent. The reverse is true as well. The comparative mark he leaves on her (that leaves her with nine facial stitches ("Raise High" 80)) displays his enormous power. Buddy too, makes a pathetic attempt to exonerate Seymour for his inexcusable action. His inability to keep eye contact and his frantic tone undermine his effort, however, as does his admission that he is a "liar, of course." With this, Salinger undercuts Buddy's narration and alerts the reader to his manipulation of the story. Buddy is a liar, so the reader should not trust his halfhearted attempts to shift the blame to Charlotte by saying it was "*because* she looked so beautiful" that Seymour suddenly had to commit this action. It is akin to Humbert saying Lolita seduced him. Through Buddy's repetition of "middle of the driveway," Salinger pushes the reader to see the precariousness of Charlotte's position, rather than attempt to sympathize with Seymour's. As discussed in the second chapter, it is Charlotte's vulnerability that inspires Seymour's desire to destroy. By proclaiming that "the whole family" understood Seymour's action, Buddy

rhetorically implores the reader and his audience to sympathize and understand, but even he cannot sustain the lie. He admits (not to his audience, but to the reader) that Charlotte “never did understand why Seymour threw that stone at her,” and perhaps none of the family members did, since it is unclear which parts Buddy lies about. Regardless, Charlotte is positioned against the others, powerless and silenced. Charlotte is contained and controlled. Buddy’s audience within the story, the deaf-mute, does not and cannot question him. This choice of audience further indicates Buddy’s shame over the story. Charlotte is silenced within Buddy’s tale, and within “Raise High” at large. Outside “Raise High,” however, the reader can see the story clearly if it is read closely enough. Buddy’s lies and shame expose Seymour’s power and Charlotte’s powerlessness. Buddy and Seymour attempt to use a sentimental definition of innocence to invert the power relation, but Salinger makes that manipulation clear—it presents an attack on the traditional use of innocence.

Salinger also undercuts Seymour Glass’s portrayal of Sybil’s power in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Like Charlotte, Sybil is originally represented in a physical position of power: she stands over Seymour as he lies on his back on the beach (“Perfect Day” 16). He seems vulnerable to her. Sybil can “yank[] her hand away” from Seymour, chastise him, correct him, and run away from him in the end (“Perfect Day” 20, 19, 17, 25). A “Sybil,” of course, is a type of female prophet, so even in her name Seymour suggests Sybil’s Romantic, supernatural power. Furthermore, Seymour’s suicide after his interaction with Sybil seems to reflect a powerful emotional response to Sybil. Salinger highlights these “powers,” but also provides copious examples of Seymour’s power over Sybil that outweigh them. Just

as he grabs Charlotte's dress without permission, Seymour repeatedly grabs Sybil's ankles and hands without asking ("Perfect Day" 16, 18). In the fateful moment when he kisses her foot, Seymour is taking what he wants from Sybil without warning and without permission—he is exerting total power over her. Sybil's power to retreat from his grasp is a reactive power, not an active one. Sybil's position on a raft directed by Seymour drifting out to sea, far away from anyone else, like Charlotte's position in the middle of the driveway, is Salinger's visual signifier of her vulnerability, her utter lack of power over the situation ("Perfect Day" 22). Seymour has power over her body, her life, and her representation. For that matter, he also has unquestioned authority over his own body, as evidenced by his suicide. Rather than read Seymour as a tortured, defenseless soul, a lover of innocence in the face of a dark, destructive adult world, I believe Salinger's details call for a reading of Seymour as fully in control, aware of and capable of exerting his power. His love of innocence is partially a love of the power he has over innocence, his desire for innocence also a desire to exert power over it.

Holden also represents himself as subject to the power of innocence and, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger once again provides the means to undermine this. Holden speaks consistently of how little kids "kill [him]," suggesting their power, and the only thing that seems to cure Holden's dramatic mood swings is a young boy's song, a little girl's politesse, or the company of his sister Phoebe (*Catcher* 89, 150, 155, 209). Accordingly, Holden confers a certain amount of power on Phoebe. Phoebe copes better with the death of Allie, for instance, endowing her with an emotional intelligence and power that Holden does not have (*Catcher* 222). Phoebe,

despite being “such a little kid,” interrupts Holden and pushes him to make sure he knows when she has something to say (*Catcher* 89). She seems to have power over his decision-making, and, for his mental health, the “restorative” and “redemptive capacity” that also characterizes the Romantic/Victorian conception of innocent power (McGillis 103; Pinsent 213). In other words, Holden represents her as possessing the same kind of illusory, sentimental power that Seymour utilizes in his representations of Sybil and Charlotte.

Holden always has the power, however, in his role as author, and in other ways. In the climax of the novel, Phoebe will not drop her protest against Holden’s leaving New York and moving west. Holden tells her to “shut up” because he thinks he is going to “pass out cold,” then he repeats the command, and, finally he yells it, saying that he is “all set to hit her” (*Catcher* 267). He repeats, “I thought I was going to smack her for a second. I really did” (*Catcher* 267). Phoebe begins to cry, and Holden continues to jab at her. “That made her cry even harder. I was glad. All of a sudden I wanted her to cry till her eyes practically dropped out. I almost hated her” (*Catcher* 268). In this instance Salinger provides a window into the power Holden has held all along—the power to physically and emotionally dominate Phoebe. Phoebe denying Holden’s authority sparks his need to reassert dominance—and his awareness of Phoebe’s growing vulnerability only makes him want to push harder. Holden desires to exert power over innocence. In the novel’s resolution, Holden watches Phoebe ride on the carousel. There is a gold ring in the middle that all the kids on the carousel try to grab, and Holden gets nervous at first watching Phoebe do this, because he is afraid that she will fall. Then, Holden has an epiphany that “if

[kids] want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it” (*Catcher* 273).

Salinger forces the reader to recognize Holden’s power in this statement. This statement confirms the reliance on innocence Holden has, the desire to intervene, and his presumed power in his ability to intervene. Salinger’s message is a direct one, for Salinger: Holden needs to relinquish his concept that a child’s fall is a bad thing. In other words, he has to relinquish his conception of innocence and the innocence/experience binary, and the power that conception allows him to exert over the child. This is Salinger’s clearest attack on Holden’s idea of innocence. In some way, this is Salinger speaking through Holden, having Holden undermine his own vision.

In every way, the male characters use innocence to try to obscure their absolute power. They construct innocence as desirable, and present a sexualized image of it that divests the child of all subjecthood, turning them into a mere object. They construct a system of value (innocence/experience) that they do not judge themselves by, revealing their power over the other characters and their power to cloak their desire for the child. Finally, they present innocence as powerful—the ultimate twist that attempts to mask their very real power. All of this is done most clearly by Humbert Humbert, so *Lolita* provides a useful complement to Salinger’s works. Nabokov and Salinger undermine the illusions their protagonists attempt to create through jarring contradictions in the text. Sentimentality and the myths of innocence actually serve to empower male characters by objectifying, harming, and oppressing the child. Rather than present us with four narratives of men who love and protect innocence, Nabokov and Salinger present us with four narratives of men who



*say* they will do that, but actually create a construction of innocence that allows them to do the opposite. Because of this, all four works illustrate resounding attacks on the myths of innocence.

## Conclusion

If the men in these narratives state a mission to protect innocence, their actions do not match up to their rhetoric. The child is not protected in these works, not aided in any way by the male characters' stated ideas on innocence. The child is not only unprotected by the male protagonists, but also by the larger societies presented in the narratives. The cops that Humbert is so afraid of never so much as question him as he drives Lolita around the American countryside for two years. Even though there are plenty of other adults who could intervene in the situation—educators, family friends—no one does. The only man who bothers to intervene is another pedophile, Quilty. Lolita dies in the “remotest Northwest,” unprotected by society and then pushed to its margins (Nabokov 4). Society does not even avenge Lolita's destruction: when Humbert is finally caught and charged, it is for his murder of an adult man, not for his repeated rape of a young girl. Sybil is left alone by her family and corrupted by a strange man, Seymour Glass, never to be heard from again. Charlotte suffers a permanent facial paralysis and nine stitches in her face and is defended by no one. No one knows what happens to the Central Park ducks in winter.

The traditional reading of Salinger's texts and his protagonists as protectors of childhood innocence, “strugg[ling] to transcend sex entirely” is seductive (J.E. Bryan 229). However, the narratives also offer an entirely different reading, one in which Holden and Seymour prey on the child's vulnerability, sexualize the child, construct adult women and children based on their sexual desires, and exert unchallenged power over the child, just as Humbert Humbert does in *Lolita*. Salinger's work should not be discarded as entirely sentimental or adherent to the myths of innocence because, just as *Lolita* does, the narrative invites criticism and inspection of those

myths. For instance, Salinger invites this exploration by embedding Seymour's definition of sentimentality into the text of "Raise High." Seymour chastises Muriel for her sentimentality, telling her "we are being sentimental when we give to a thing more tenderness than God gives to it" ("Raise High" 67). When too much tenderness is given to the innocent child or to Holden and Seymour, the reader should remark it, question it, and probe further. Just as Seymour questions Muriel's affinity for the kitten, the reader should question Seymour's affinity for the girl-child. There is potential for Salinger's characters to be sentimental without his entire narrative to be so, and the dynamic and conflict between the two is where the commentary arises.

Underneath the sentiment Salinger's characters utilize, Salinger's texts hold a critique of the traditional conception of childhood innocence. While the male characters insist on their appreciation of the child's innocence, the texts reveal their sexual desire for innocence and their desire to invade its vulnerability. While the male characters degrade adult women for their sexuality and social fluency, the texts display Humbert, Holden, and Seymour's sexuality and social fluency, thereby displaying the sexual desire for innocence that undergirds their depictions of adult women. Finally, while the male characters emphasize the power the innocent child has over them, the texts emphasize the superior power the males have over the child. Salinger's texts play with the same critiques that *Lolita* does, but without utilizing the same irony and parody. The narratives undermine the sentimentality of the characters, and the dynamic between the two illustrates both the seduction of the myths of innocence and the need to critique them.

The sentimental reading of Salinger is that his protagonists admire and appreciate (without sexual desire) the innocence of the child, but, in all four texts, there is a noticeable disconnect between the characters' investment in the rhetoric of innocence and their actual investment in the children. It is not a stretch to contest that this similarity in Nabokov and Salinger's message might stem from their own postwar political moment in which there was an "acceptance...that the federal government would have a broader role in promoting the health, education, and welfare of the national child community" (Holt 163). More policies concerning the child mean more ways to keep track of, discipline, and control the child in the name of its protection.

In this realm, it has to be recognized that innocence "performs a social function" (Faulkner 6). There is a "cultural and social investment in innocence," but not every child gets to be innocent (Warner). "[T]he ideal of a protected and free childhood [is], in practice, granted only to a tiny, affluent, white and western fraction of all children" (Higonnet, "Picturing Childhood," 298). These texts show that even those children are not protected by innocence, but made into "objects of desire" by it, "invisible except as projections of adult fantasies" (Giroux 46, 31).

There are more questions to be asked and answered about the political manipulation of innocence in the postwar era versus today, who it serves, and how power and desire work through it. What is clear is that the narratives all reflect and offer commentary on a concept that played/plays a part in their/our greater social reality. Their call for the reader to reexamine how innocence is deployed within the text can be amplified to a call to reexamine how innocence is deployed in society—and a reminder to always consider how its constructed, malleable parameters serve

the interests of someone other than the child. This negative commentary begs the question of how to move forward: because if relying on innocence is not used to protect or empower children, what can be?

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