

**A Frustrated Teenager in Post-World War II America:  
Themes of Conformism and Non-Conformism  
in J. D. Salinger's Novel *The Catcher in the Rye*  
and Peter Weir's Film *Dead Poets Society***

Pavla Šimčíková

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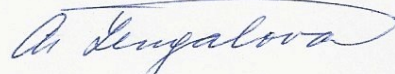
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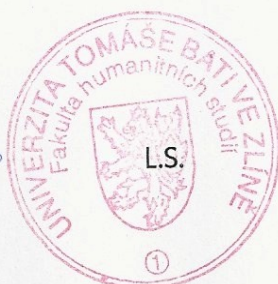
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doc. Ing. Anežka Lengalová, Ph.D.

*děkanka*



PhDr. Katarína Nemčoková, Ph.D.

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Cílem této bakalářské práce je dokázat, že J. D. Salinger i Peter Weir prezentují konformní poválečnou americkou společnost jako prostředí, ve kterém se teenageři, zvláště chlapci z vyšších společenských tříd, cítí frustrovaní, a tudíž se jejich mladí hlavní hrdinové Holden Caulfield, Neil Perry a Todd Anderson stávají nekonformními. Jelikož oba autoři chápou nonkonformismus jako sociální selhání, nedávají svým protagonistům jinou alternativu než přijmout konformní role, a tak zůstat frustrovanými teenagery. Aby byla hypotéza prokázána, práce nejen dokumentuje poválečnou Ameriku, kde jsou obě díla zasazena, a její sociální situaci, ale obsahuje také analýzy obou děl soustředící se na témata konformismu, nonkonformismu a frustrace teenagerů.

Klíčová slova: sociální situace v poválečné Americe, *Kdo chytá v žitě*, *Společnost mrtvých básníků*, konformismus, nonkonformismus, frustrovaný teenager

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to prove that both J. D. Salinger and Peter Weir portray the conformist post-war American society as an environment that makes teenagers, especially boys from higher social classes, frustrated, and therefore their teenage protagonists Holden Caulfield, Neil Perry and Todd Anderson become non-conformist. As non-conformism equals becoming a social failure for both authors, they give the characters no other alternative than to accept the conformist roles and hence remain the frustrated teenagers. To prove the hypothesis, the thesis documents post-war America, where both works are set, and its social situation and also includes analyses of both works, concerning themes of conformism, non-conformism and teenage frustration.

Keywords: social situation in post-war America, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Dead Poets Society*, conformism, non-conformism, frustrated teenager

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## INTRODUCTION

Holden Caulfield, the main character of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Neil Perry and Todd Anderson, the main characters of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), are all teenage boys from upper-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. As both the book and the film are set in post-World War II America, which at that time witnessed not only enormous prosperity but also separation of teenagers as a distinctive social group, it might be expected that these teenage boy characters would be trouble-free and enjoy the affluence and with that connected convenient life and supply of various products as well as having their own new identity. Nevertheless, as both works present, it is not exactly so.

To be a part of the post-war American society was for teenagers probably not as pleasant as it might seem. Since the Cold War started within a few years after World War II, the United States were at that time preoccupied with fear – fear of the possible atomic war and fear of spreading communism. Given such conditions, the United States did all it could to provide its citizens with a feeling of security, the basis of which lay in promoting and creating stable homes and families. Due to the prosperity that the war brought, the government made the suburban ranch houses affordable and this way fulfilled the long awaited American Dream of many Americans. The suburbs started to flood with these ranch houses, which indeed created stable homes but were all almost the same. And not only the houses but also its residents were incredibly uniform. According to the authorities, family was then all-important and all needed to be done to assure it lasts, and so, even though it made them frustrated afterwards, a vast majority of women accepted the promoted roles of ‘homemakers,’ who took care of children and home, and a vast majority of men became ‘breadwinners,’ who were family providers with prosperous jobs. For teenage boys, this ‘breadwinner’ role was something inevitable, something they needed to accept one day and be prepared for it, no matter what sacrifices they must have made and how frustrating it might have been. Both selected works, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Dead Poets Society*, portray the situation of American teenage boys in the post-war period and show that due to the conformism and necessity of accepting the ‘breadwinner’ role their life indeed must have been far from trouble-free.

In its first chapter, this bachelor’s thesis documents the post-war conformist period in the United States that both analysed works are set in, in other words, it points out what the major reasons for the post-war conformism in the American society were and also what forms this conformism took. In the two remaining chapters, analyses of both selected

works, concerning themes of conformism, non-conformism and teenage frustration, are included. The thesis argues that both authors, J. D. Salinger and Peter Weir, portray the conformist post-war American society as an environment that makes teenagers, especially boys from higher social classes, frustrated, and therefore their teenage protagonists become non-conformist. As non-conformism equals becoming a social failure for both authors, they give the characters no other alternative than to accept the conformist roles and hence remain the frustrated teenagers. The thesis thus also argues that both Salinger's and Weir's portrayal of the post-war American society is negative.

## 1 SOCIAL SITUATION IN POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA

“Once conform, once do what other people do because they do it, and a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness; dull, callous, and indifferent.”<sup>1</sup>

– Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*

Being an adult in the post-war American society, one seemed not to have any other choice than to conform. If one was a man, then the main and only goal he needed to strive for was to find a prosperous white-collar job to provide for the family. If one was a woman, she was expected to become nothing else than a multitasking housewife who took care of children and at the same time of the house. Since both of these roles often required far more than they were able to offer, many adults, even though they did not want to admit it, felt frustrated. As the weight of gender roles did not lie on their shoulders yet, teenagers, unlike their parents, could be genuinely satisfied. They had just separated from the rest of the society and the post-war prosperity supplied them with comfort and new products they could enjoy without any worries about corporate work or home and children. Yet, as they knew the roles were to come one day, many teenagers must have felt frustrated, too.

Although Holden Caulfield, the main character of J. D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Neil Perry and Todd Anderson, main characters of Peter Weir’s film *Dead Poets Society*, are all fictional, their stories represent vivid accounts of what it might have been like to be a teenager in the affluent but rigid and sham post-war American society and how young people may have truly felt. Before analysing their situation, however, it is necessary to understand what happened before and during the post-war period and how exactly these events influenced the American society of that time.

### 1.1 Towards Post-War Conformism

The post-war American society was extremely conformist. Although it might seem that the only reason for being so was the start of the Cold War and with it associated fear of communism and its spreading called the Red Scare that caused the need for security found in unity and togetherness, the post-war conformism did not stem from one single event. It

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (Tavistock: Moorside Press, 2013), accessed January 18, 2016, [https://books.google.cz/books?id=B6FNCAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=B6FNCAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

developed because of a whole amount of both interconnected and independent events, and its roots lie not only in the post-war period itself but also in the previous ones – they reach out back to World War II and the 1930s Great Depression.

### 1.1.1 World War II, Cold War and the Scare

The post-war era was heavily influenced by the participation of the United States in World War II. As it is discussed further below, it pulled the country out of the Great Depression, restarted its economy and brought the post-war prosperity. This rather positive side of the war, however, was not the only one. To make Japan surrender and end the conflict, the United States decided to use atomic bombs, an act because of which the country was perceived as extremely powerful, possibly the most powerful one. Not for long, however. Since the Soviet Union did not want to drop behind, it came up with its own nuclear weapons in 1949. Due to these deadly inventions and their application in warfare, the world then entered a new age – the atomic age.<sup>2</sup> The threat of atomic war was thus constantly hanging in the air and because of that Americans were afraid.

The source of anxiety, nevertheless, did not include just the possible atomic conflict. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union was an ally to the United States in the war, now both countries took separate paths and the Cold War began. During the post-war period, the United States feared the communist ideology more than ever before. And no wonder – it had successfully begun to spread all over Eastern Europe and China.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as people affected by war are generally in need of mutual aid and share a sense of togetherness, there was a possibility that seeds of the ideology might fall on fertile ground in Western Europe as well. Such a scenario would then not only mean that the Soviet Union would gain even more power than it already possessed but also that the United States might, due to the communist ideology, lose some of the European markets. This loss would then weaken its strength and influence and shake the foundations of capitalism, the most powerful weapon against the Soviet Union that the United States operated with at that time since the Soviet Union already owned an atomic bomb, too. Due to this, Americans were afraid even more.

As a result of all these events and the scare connected with them, the post-war United States were “pre-occupied with matters of secrecy and security.”<sup>4</sup> This influenced not only

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<sup>2</sup> See Sarah Graham, *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Continuum, 2010), 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

its domestic but also its foreign policies, which the country did not practise much in the past. Throughout its history, the United States were rather an isolationist country, caring predominantly about its own issues, but then, after the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 and the participation in World War II, this approach changed and the country's foreign policies began to expand.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the main post-war foreign policy was the policy of containment. It meant that in order to secure the country the United States tried as much as it could to stop communism abroad from spreading.<sup>6</sup> On March 12, 1947, President Harry S. Truman stood before Congress and delivered a speech from which the Truman Doctrine arose. It backed up the containment policy with the promise of “political, military and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces.”<sup>7</sup> What also backed up the containment policy was the Marshall Plan, officially known as the European Recovery Program (ERP), which was crafted in the same year and gave Europe nearly 13 billion dollars that should not only rebuild the ruined economies but also work as a shield against the influence of the Soviet Union and communism.<sup>8</sup> To protect the country even more, the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency were established after the war.<sup>9</sup>

To provide external security, however, was considered insufficient, and so the United States focused also on the internal security, introducing many domestic policies. One of them dealt with “identifying anyone who might betray the nation”<sup>10</sup> – the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was established to find and punish communists not only within the government but also within union-organized workforces and Hollywood. The HUAC's work was later supported by Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was obsessed with sentencing people because of being communists without any further

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<sup>5</sup> See Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>6</sup> See “Milestones: 1945–1952, Kennan and Containment, 1947,” United States Department of State, accessed January 18, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.

<sup>7</sup> “Milestones: 1945–1952, The Truman Doctrine, 1947,” United States Department of State, accessed January 18, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

<sup>8</sup> See “History of the Marshall Plan,” George C. Marshall Foundation, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/history-marshall-plan>.

<sup>9</sup> See Warren Susman and Edward Griffin, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America,” quoted in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Graham, *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, 8.

evidence. As a consequence, a new word ‘McCarthyism’ was coined and became to be used as “a synonym for persecution and government-sponsored repression.”<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1.2 Post-War Prosperity – Weapon against Both Communism and Anxiety

Other domestic policies that the government introduced were then connected with the post-war economic boom and the desire to create a state where abundance and welfare of all, together with satisfied families, would rule and thus beat the communist ideology and reduce the ever-present scare and anxiety Americans felt at that time.

Thanks to the 1930s Great Depression, the United States economy struggled before World War II. The country’s participation in the conflict and with it associated need of factories for manufacturing all kinds of weapons, however, changed this fact, making the post-war economy flourish and the United States enormously affluent. To retain this prosperity, the government immediately took the whole situation under its control.

In 1946, the government came up with the Full Employment Act, which laid on its shoulders the responsibility to maintain economic stability and keep the unemployment rate low. To ensure that the right decisions concerning economic policies were done and to run the economy smoothly, the Council of Economic Advisers was established and so were relationships between the government and major American corporations.<sup>12</sup> Both politicians and businessmen praised these modern corporations, gave proofs that capitalism was superior to communism and, last but not least, tried to secure and unite the nation even more by emphasizing and supporting home and family life.<sup>13</sup> Forms of the government’s support to families were various – from providing benefits and increasing mortgage insurance commitments to lowering payments on loans. During the Great Depression, many middle-class Americans dreamt about having better homes and stable family lives, but the subsequent war gave them none of that. Just the opposite. It took manpower, money and resources, which left Americans frustrated and made them hang on the American Dream more than ever before.<sup>14</sup> In the decade of the fifties, the government made this

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<sup>11</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> See Susman and Griffin, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America,” 20.

<sup>13</sup> See May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> See Clifford E. Clark Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities,” quoted in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 172-183.

formerly impossible dream finally accessible, and so many people accepted to play by the government's rules.

In the post-war period, almost all Americans experienced domestic revivals and married earlier, the divorce rate decreased and a baby boom occurred. A majority of American families, especially the middle-class ones, moved to the suburbs, where they bought ranch-style houses and lived their American Dreams of abundance and security.<sup>15</sup> This way of life not only brought people the desired fulfilment and provided them with an escape in the harsh, uncertain times as the post-war period undoubtedly was but also created the most powerful weapon against communism the country then possessed.

A proof of the statement that the abundant suburban home was the most powerful weapon against communism might be the 'kitchen debate.' In 1959, when the Cold War reached its peak, Vice President Richard Nixon visited the Soviet Union to have a discussion with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. At a time like this, it might be expected that these two talked about missiles, bombs or even forms of government, but the main topic ended up to be the modern home and appliances, hence the term 'kitchen debate.' For Nixon, American superiority did not lie in nuclear weapons, which rather than country's strengths showed its weaknesses, but in the above-mentioned abundant suburban home that represented "the essence of American freedom."<sup>16</sup>

Suburbia indeed served as a protective shield against communism and lessened the fears the period brought, but on the other hand it also was the embodiment and the main symbol of the post-war conformism.

## 1.2 Suburbia and the Uniform Society

Conditions in the post-war United States enabled that the much-desired suburban life was now available not only to the wealthy but also to ordinary middle-class people. Therefore, the group that experienced the post-war economic growth and consumer paradise the most was the American middle class.<sup>17</sup> Influenced by the conformist forces of the government and corporations worshipping the idea of togetherness and the collective whole, a majority

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<sup>15</sup> See May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 10-12.

<sup>17</sup> See Susman and Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," 21.

of middle-class Americans started to “blindly [follow] the herd instinct”<sup>18</sup> and moved to the suburbs to ranch houses, which were unarguably convenient but incredibly identical.<sup>19</sup>

Some people, most often intellectuals and critics, found this rise of conformity disturbing and saw Americans as “a classless, undifferentiated folk”<sup>20</sup> who with open arms accepted the myth of the American Way of Life that was mass-marketed to them by media and advertisements.<sup>21</sup> Despite that, most people did not seem to care about the negative aspects and happily continued to ‘enjoy’ their American Dreams. They continued to live in the same ranch houses that expressed comfort and convenience and were associated with the easy-going lifestyle typical for the West Coast, especially California. They continued to consume the same products, watch the same TV shows and read the same magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* or *Good Housekeeping* that promoted not only the homes but also what it represented – happiness from raising children, decorating and improving the home and spending time together in families.<sup>22</sup> They shared common interests, experience and worldview and were convinced that the source of creativity was found in the community rather than the individual and that “belongingness”<sup>23</sup> was something one needed to strive for. They believed the American Way of Life truly existed.<sup>24</sup>

It did not take long, however, until many understood there indeed were negative aspects beneath the glittering surface. The whole perfect dream began to be slowly destroyed from the inside as the above-described conformity did not fulfil the too high expectations and put enormous pressure on both men and women and, last but not least, also on most teenagers.

### 1.3 The Frustrated Family

During the difficult post-war period, Americans listened to experts profoundly. These experts, who made uncertain things certain and gave advice, were concerned with the nation’s disintegration, and so they promoted not only the importance of the nuclear family

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<sup>18</sup> Clark, “Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities,” 183.

<sup>19</sup> See Ibid., 183-184.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society,” quoted in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 41.

<sup>21</sup> See Ibid., 38-42.

<sup>22</sup> See Clark, “Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities,” 171-184.

<sup>23</sup> Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society,” 44.

<sup>24</sup> See Ibid., 44-51.



but also the distinction of family roles. Fathers were supposed to be ‘breadwinners,’ mothers ‘homemakers,’ and together they would create the perfect stable home.<sup>25</sup>

This concept originated already in the 1930s. During the 1930s Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal program, which meant that the government would now hugely interfere into people’s lives. Federal policies gave support to unemployed male ‘breadwinners,’ and thus there was no reason for women to seek jobs to back up their husbands anymore. They were dismissed from federal jobs, and in a short time state and local governments followed the same trend. Married women were even excluded from certain professions – from teaching, for instance – and even though the government reached its helping hand to families in need, to women it turned its back. They thus preferred marrying promising providers to ill-paid, inferior jobs, stayed at home and took care of children. Yet, such distinctive gender roles were not clear until the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>26</sup>

Because of the ideology imposed on them by the power elite and because of their own feelings that this was the right way of living, most Americans in the post-war period agreed with the experts that bachelors would be “psychologically damaged and immature”<sup>27</sup> and single women “doomed to an unfulfilled and miserable existence”<sup>28</sup> if not married. Therefore, people accepted marriage as fulfilment and purpose, which resulted in the significantly increased marriage rate, and got committed to the concept of distinctive gender roles of ‘breadwinners’ and ‘homemakers.’ Nevertheless, not all of them found what they were looking for – since the family life sometimes required far more than it was able to offer, many experienced disappointment and misery. Both men and women had to sacrifice their independence, personal freedom, life goals and achievements. Yet, the stable home provided more security than anything else at that time and one was not keen on risking “emotional and economic bankruptcy, along with social ostracism.”<sup>29</sup>

### 1.3.1 Male ‘Breadwinners’

The main task for the fathers was to financially secure the family. As the weight of this task was entirely on their shoulders, they had to have a job that would be able to cover all

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<sup>25</sup> See May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> See *Ibid.*, 31-40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-29.

family expenses. For that reason, a majority of men worked in white-collar positions in large, prosperous organizations. Even though being a successful man was much praised and generally supported – by Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), for instance – the reality of everyday life was entirely different. Men were “caught in a mass, impersonal white-collar world,”<sup>30</sup> from which they because of the ‘breadwinner’ role could not draw back, and became nothing more than “other-directed organization men”<sup>31</sup> that felt oppressed by the corporate powers and alienated. These negative sides were commented on by, for example, David Riesman in his *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) or William Whyte in his *The Organization Man* (1956).<sup>32</sup>

As far as home and men’s perception of it is concerned, although both Riesman and Whyte saw the affluent suburbs as “extensions of the corporate world,”<sup>33</sup> for men at that time homes served as an escape from the tedious and organized work lives. Since their source of depression and frustration lay chiefly out there in large corporations, men, unlike women, generally perceived home and family life rather as liberation than a burden.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.3.2 Female ‘Homemakers’

Women in the post-war years were supposed to be neither working outside home – their job opportunities were limited and their wages minimal – nor worried about men’s issues like business or politics. They were expected to be typical consumers and attractive housewives.<sup>35</sup> As taking care of homes and children was considered a career for a majority of women, they had to “fulfill a wide range of occupational roles”<sup>36</sup> – from educators and nurses to cooks and housekeepers. As a result of these high expectations of what she should be capable of, the post-war woman may be called the “superwoman.”<sup>37</sup> Not only did women have to master all these quite exhausting activities, on the top of that, they also had to give up much to be these ‘superwomen.’ Unlike men, they made difficult choices of giving up careers in medicine, science or arts and many activities they enjoyed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> See Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 11-12; May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> See Ibid., 165.

<sup>35</sup> See Ibid., 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Ibid., 180.

Because of home and marriage and all the responsibilities they represented and because of their usually unfulfilled dreams and wants, a big amount of women in the post-war period felt depressed and frustrated. To abandon their marriage, however, appeared unthinkable – it was the best way how to get status and respect and how to be secured in the period filled with scare. Hence many women did what they believed was necessary and stayed in marriages despite all hardship.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3.3 Teenagers, Growing Up and Phoniness

Even though “adolescence had been recognized as a specific social category in the US since at least the 1900s,”<sup>40</sup> the word ‘teenager’ appeared and started to be widely used and accepted no sooner than in the 1950s. It was a result of the post-war prosperity that gave adolescents spending power and thus a possibility to separate themselves as a distinctive social group that cared about almost nothing else than their lifestyle. “Clothes, records, cinema, eating out and magazines were all important aspects of teenage culture,”<sup>41</sup> and with this own culture teenagers “expressed their separateness from [conformist] adults.”<sup>42</sup> No matter how hard they tried, however, to grow up was inevitable and one day they had no other choice than to be just like their parents.

In the post-war United States, to mature meant, as it was already pointed out, to become conformist. To become the responsible husband, who worked in a white-collar position in a large corporation and provided for the family, or the wife multitasker, who brought up children and took care of the home. Although both men and women often felt alienated, depressed and frustrated in these tiring gender roles, the general image of fulfilment prevailed, and rather than admitting they were dissatisfied, most adult Americans kept everything under wraps. The world of adults was thus seen as one where authenticity to one’s self was inevitably lost and where pretence and dishonesty played the main role – as Holden Caulfield would put it, it was a world of phonies.<sup>43</sup>

To grow up and gain this kind of maturity – or in other words, to accept the exhausting conformist roles and enter the phony world – was the ultimate and necessary goal for

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<sup>39</sup> See May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> See Abigail Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 23-26, accessed December 7, 2015, [https://books.google.cz/books?id=bF5KrOnMIRQC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.cz/books?id=bF5KrOnMIRQC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

a person in the post-war period. To once again secure the nation, this concept was widely encouraged and other life goals were presented as “little dreams.”<sup>44</sup> It was generally accepted that people should forget about their ‘small problems’ – such as what they liked and what fulfilled them – and rather focus on the bigger issues, especially on corporate work and family.<sup>45</sup>

Despite all the advantages the post-war prosperity meant for them, teenagers’ lives at that time must have been far from enjoyable and trouble-free. Given such a social situation, teenagers were forced to grow up into people like their own parents, from whom they tried to separate themselves so much as they did not want to end up like conformist, dissatisfied creatures full of pretence.<sup>46</sup> It might not be surprising then that some teenagers began to rebel. As a result of that, they became to be seen as the ones who “did not attend school, committed crime, had sex outside of marriage, drank under-age and were generally adrift from home and family values”<sup>47</sup> and thus threatened the American shield against communism. This perception helped to develop even stricter upbringing and preparation for teenagers’ future roles – boys were sent to preparatory schools, so that they were taught discipline and got to universities in order to find a well-paid occupation afterwards, and girls were brought up to become perfect mothers and housewives, discouraged from obtaining higher education and professional careers.<sup>48</sup>

Although many considered teenagers to be ‘rebels without a cause’ as they lived in the abundant suburbs and had almost every product they wished for, taking into account what situation they found themselves in, there might be a cause for rebellion after all. Despite the fact they may have wanted to stay authentic to themselves, enjoy themselves and pick a career or life they truly desired, the uniform society and strict parental guidance forced teenagers to do otherwise, which must have made them feel frustrated and alone and thus open to rebellion against what triggered these feelings in the first place. Both authors, J. D. Salinger and Peter Weir, explore through the fictional characters of Holden, Neil and Todd what the pressure imposed on teenagers in the post-war period might have done to them

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<sup>44</sup> Irene Taviss Thomson, “Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s vs. the 1980s,” *Sociological Forum* 7, no. 3 (September 1992): 503, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684662>.

<sup>45</sup> See *Ibid.*, 502-508.

<sup>46</sup> See Denis Jonnes, “Trauma, Mourning and Self-(Re)fashioning in *The Catcher in the Rye*,” quoted in Sarah Graham, *J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 103-104.

<sup>47</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> See *Ibid.*, 10-14.

and how they at that time probably felt. From the analysis in the chapters below it is apparent that frustration indeed prevails, giving the readers a negative portrayal of the post-war American society and its influence on teenagers.

## 2 *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE: ANALYSIS*

The previous chapter provided the historical context of both further analysed works – it outlined major events that caused the post-war conformity in the American society, described what form the conformity took and, most importantly, how it affected both men and women's and also teenagers' lives. And so, having discussed all of that, in this and the following chapter the attention can finally be turned to Holden's as well as Neil and Todd's stories.

The analysis of both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Dead Poets Society* is divided into three parts, each dealing with a different theme. The first part explores the theme of conformism, in other words, how post-war America, where plots of both works are set, and its social situation is reflected in the novel as well as in the film. The second part discusses the theme of non-conformism. It is focused on the teenage characters of Holden Caulfield, Neil Perry and Todd Anderson and their non-conformist behaviour, their rebellion, which can be taken as a reaction to the unbearably strict parental guidance and the environment of prestigious preparatory schools they attend. Based on their comments and actions, the third part then uncovers how teenagers in the post-war American society might have truly felt. Because of the conformist forces imposed on them and the impossibility of leaving the society and doing what they truly desire, feelings that prevail are depression, loneliness and, above all, frustration. To make the analysis complete and comprehensible, there is an explanation of the themes as well as a brief summary of the plot and characters provided at its beginning.

### 2.1 Themes of Conformism and Non-Conformism

To explain what themes of conformism and non-conformism mean, let us stick with one of the analysed works – with *Dead Poets Society*. In the film, there is a scene when Mr. Keating, an idealistic and quite rebellious English Literature teacher and also one of the protagonists, takes his class to the school courtyard and asks three boys, Gerard Pitts, Richard Cameron and Knox Overstreet, to walk around. At the beginning, each boy walks at his own pace and with his own particular style, but then the rest of the crowd begins to clap and all three boys start to walk uniformly. After telling them to stop, Mr. Keating not only explains the purpose of the action but also defines what conformity is:

Now, I didn't bring them up here to ridicule them. I brought them up here to illustrate the point of conformity: the difficulty in maintaining your own beliefs in the face of others. Now, those of you – I see the look in your eyes like, "I would've walked differently." Well, ask yourselves why you were clapping.<sup>49</sup>

The same scene then also explains the theme of non-conformism. As opposed to conformism, non-conformism is not so clearly defined in the scene, yet Mr. Keating, using Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," gives the viewer an idea what it means by continuing his speech:

Now, we all have a great need for acceptance. But you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own, even though others may think them odd or unpopular, even though the herd may go, "That's baaaaad." Robert Frost said, "Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."<sup>50</sup>

By saying so, Mr. Keating wants the boys not to be just a part of a crowd that accepts everything that is served to it but to choose their own way, to think and do things based on their beliefs. He wants them to take "the [road] less travelled by,"<sup>51</sup> in other words, not to be conformist but non-conformist. To show what he means, he tells the boys to walk anyhow they desire – at any pace, with any style and direction. Mr. Keating then inquires one of the boys, Charles 'Nuwanda' Dalton, who continues to lean against a column, if he is going to join the group. Dalton answers that he is "exercising the right not to walk,"<sup>52</sup> whereupon Mr. Keating thanks him for illustrating the whole point even further.

## 2.2 *The Catcher in the Rye in a Nutshell*

Even though J. D. Salinger claimed himself to be "a dash man not a miler,"<sup>53</sup> to be more comfortable with writing short stories than novels, in 1951, after ten years of writing, his *The Catcher in the Rye* was published. At that time, he probably had no idea that the book would become one of the best known and most popular post-war American novels, but it later truly did.<sup>54</sup> Although it still may be considered controversial because of the "anti-social behaviour of its protagonist,"<sup>55</sup> the book not only gives today's readers a glimpse into sham post-war America but can also work as a companion that makes one sure they are not the only ones confused during the difficult years of adolescence.

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<sup>49</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir (Touchstone Pictures, 1989), DVD (Magic Box, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Graham, *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> See *Ibid.*, 1-6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is set in 1949, and it tells a story about "this madman stuff"<sup>56</sup> that happened to Holden Caulfield, the 16-years-old main character with a unique first-person voice, "around last Christmas."<sup>57</sup> Holden has just been expelled from the prestigious preparatory school for boys in Agerstown, Pennsylvania, called Pencey Prep, which is apparently not the only school he has got kicked out of. As his parents, who are "nice and all"<sup>58</sup> but also "touchy as hell,"<sup>59</sup> would be furious at him for being expelled from another school, he decides to spend two days in New York instead of going home. Before he gets to the city, Holden manages to visit his history teacher Mr. Spencer, have a weird conversation about books and his new red hunting hat with Robert Ackley, an annoying guy who rooms right next to him, and picks a fight with his roommate, "sexy bastard"<sup>60</sup> Stradlater because of his date with Jane Gallagher, a girl Holden seems to like profoundly but Stradlater treats her only as an object of physical desire. Yelling "Sleep tight, ya morons!"<sup>61</sup> Holden leaves the school and then takes a train to New York.

In the city, Holden visits many places as well as meets many people. Firstly, he checks in at the Edmont Hotel and goes down to its Lavender Room, from where he then takes a cab to the nightclub called Ernie's. Back in the hotel, he agrees to being sent a prostitute. Without having sex, Holden gives her the money, but later on a pimp called Maurice beats him for not paying enough. After leaving the hotel, he has breakfast with two nuns, takes Sally Hayes, his pretty but shallow old friend, to the Sunday matinee and skating, and then he meets with Carl Luce, who attended Whooton, one of the schools that Holden left. Having almost frozen in Central Park, he reaches home where he chats with his smart younger sister Phoebe, who he adores. To avoid his parents, he goes to his former teacher's apartment, but after noticing Mr. Antolini patting his head, Holden leaves and spends the night on a bench at Grand Central Station. Meanwhile, he considers the possibility of leaving New York and living somewhere in a cabin near the woods. The same day, he meets Phoebe again, and together they visit the zoo and go to the carrousel. After talking to her, he abandons his plan to leave New York and returns home.

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<sup>56</sup> J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991), 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



In the last chapter, Holden admits that he is now in therapy because of being sick – yet, he does not specify in what way – and from there he retrospectively narrates his story. He also reveals that he is supposed to get back to school in September, but he adds he does not know if he can make it. At the very end of the novel, he claims he is sorry for telling the story since he now misses everybody he has mentioned.

In the book, Holden just wanders around New York, meets people and talks about quite weird topics like the ducks and where they go in winter when the lagoon is frozen or how the Museum of Natural History is great because “everything always stayed right where it was.”<sup>62</sup> He constantly comments on his past, his brother D.B., sister Phoebe and dead brother Allie, calls people phonies, drinks alcohol, smokes cigarettes and thinks about sex. Nevertheless, when one reads between the lines and gives this “angry, melancholy and alienated”<sup>63</sup> teenager a chance and understanding, then they can gain a picture of how being a teenager in post-war America must have not only looked but also felt like.

### 2.3 Conformism

Even though conformism was earlier defined, with the help of Mr. Keating, as “the difficulty in maintaining your own beliefs in the face of others,”<sup>64</sup> in case of *The Catcher in the Rye* analysis its sense needs to be broadened. The novel, of course, portrays how Americans in the post-war period blindly followed both generally shared beliefs and the concept of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘homemaker’ gender roles and thus the society was incredibly uniform, but there is also something else. Something else that is tightly connected with conformism – one might say it can be a result of it – and that is phoniness, inauthenticity and corruption of the adult world. Being so prominent in the novel, this sub-theme is therefore also included in this part of the analysis. In the first instance, however, let us take a closer look at how conformism in the main sense is presented in the novel.

As far as generally shared beliefs of the post-war period that most Americans blindly followed are concerned, they are portrayed, for instance, through the characters of Holden’s teachers – Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini. Before Holden leaves Pencey Prep, he has a conversation with Mr. Spencer about himself being expelled. When Mr. Spencer asks Holden what Dr. Thurmer, the headmaster of the school, said to him concerning his

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<sup>62</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 121.

<sup>63</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

situation, Holden answers that Dr. Thurmer talked about “life being a game and all.”<sup>65</sup> Holden apparently does not share this belief as he for himself comments it with “game, my ass,”<sup>66</sup> but Mr. Spencer is more than serious about this issue and agrees with Mr. Thurmer, saying “Life *is* a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules.”<sup>67</sup> In chapter 24, Holden is engaged in a conversation with the second teacher, Mr. Antolini, and once again their topic is Holden being expelled from Pencey. When Mr. Antolini inquires what the problem was, Holden states that he “flunked Oral Expression”<sup>68</sup> because he could not stand it when other students yelled “Digression!”<sup>69</sup> every time someone did not stick to the topic of their speech. He then continues making his point, saying “I guess I don’t like it when somebody sticks to the point *all* the time”<sup>70</sup> and “I mean you can’t hardly ever simplify and unify something just because somebody *wants* you to.”<sup>71</sup> Mr. Antolini is apparently concerned with this Holden’s rebellious attitude and, as Sarah Graham argues, he “suggests that digression may not be the best strategy for success,”<sup>72</sup> meaning that Holden should obey in order not to be a social failure. As it is visible on both characters, Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini, Salinger shows that to achieve stability and security in such insecure times as the post-war period was, there was a general belief in the society given by the authorities that one should “[play] according to the rules.”<sup>73</sup> These rules at that time meant to be conformist, to identify oneself with one’s gender role and become a part of the crowd without any digressions. Salinger, with the character of Holden and his above-mentioned actions and comments, openly criticises this.

What Salinger also criticises in connection with the shared belief of “[playing] according to the rules”<sup>74</sup> is how Americans in the post-war period followed the concept of distinctive gender roles. His portrayal of these roles includes not only their description but also how probably all characters of the novel, except for Holden, stick with them. Both the male ‘breadwinner’ and the female ‘homemaker’ roles are, for instance, portrayed in Holden and Sally’s conversation in chapter 17. When Holden persuades Sally to leave New

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<sup>65</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>72</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

York with him, drive to Massachusetts and Vermont and live in a cabin there, she refuses his offer and claims “We’ll have oodles of time to do those things – all those things. I mean after you go to college and all, and if we should get married and all. There’ll be oodles of marvelous places to go.”<sup>75</sup> whereupon Holden contradicts her, saying that there would not be any places to go then because it would be “entirely different,”<sup>76</sup> by which he means, among other things, this:

And I’d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels.<sup>77</sup>

In their dialogue, Sally shows dedication to her future ‘homemaker’ role – she states that *not her* but *Holden* is to go to college, by which she suggests she does not need higher education as she knows she will not need to find a job but get married and stay at home with children. The fact that girls in the post-war period had no other choice but to marry is then, for example, also visible when earlier in the chapter Holden waits for Sally at the Biltmore and at the same time watches all the girls around and wonders “what the hell would *happen* to all of them.”<sup>78</sup> He concludes with the statement that “most of them would probably marry dopey guys,”<sup>79</sup> which illustrates the point that marriage at that time indeed was the biggest goal for women, no matter if it was satisfying or not.

Unlike Sally, Holden does not share the dedication for fulfilling his gender role, yet he supplies the reader with its description – a provider for the family who has a job in an office and earns a lot of money. An example of a dedicated male ‘breadwinner’ might be found in the character of Holden’s father, who is, as the reader finds out, for instance, in chapter 15 and 22, a corporation lawyer. Even though there is not much written about any of Holden’s parents, from the little provided the ‘breadwinner’ role is apparent – Holden states that as a lawyer “[his] father’s is quite wealthy”<sup>80</sup> and therefore “he’s always investing money in shows on Broadway.”<sup>81</sup> Another proof that the family is well provided thanks to the father is the fact that Holden can afford to attend all these prestigious

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<sup>75</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 133.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

preparatory schools and that “everything [he] had was bourgeois as hell,”<sup>82</sup> e.g. his leather Mark Cross suitcases or even his fountain pen.

As the ‘breadwinner’ role was highly promoted in the post-war period, Salinger presents that boys, especially ones with upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds, were encouraged or even forced to be prepared for it as best as they could. He shows that the basis of this preparation was great education for their studies at universities and for their occupations and that this education was gained nowhere else than at the prestigious preparatory schools, where, as Holden points out, “all you [did was] study so that you [could] learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day.”<sup>83</sup>

Although Holden probably attended even more schools than that, there are only three of them named in *The Catcher in the Rye* – the Whooton School, Elkton Hills and Pencey Prep – the most frequently mentioned and described one being Pencey. Holden provides the reader with its advertisement – “Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men.”<sup>84</sup> – from which it is apparent how schools at that time must have promoted the concept of the ‘breadwinner’ role and importance of maturity and shaped boys into future leaders, lawyers, scientists or doctors. And they, or at least Pencey, were evidently excellent at that since Holden claims “It has a very good academic rating, Pencey. It really does.”<sup>85</sup> No matter how prestigious the schools might have been and how many “splendid, clear-thinking young men”<sup>86</sup> they might have molded, the novel shows how everything under the shining surface was just a sham – their students, for example, Ackley or Stradlater, were far from being the adorable boys presented in the advertising posters – which is the reason why Holden, someone who values authenticity, always quits them. As quitting school in the post-war period was perceived as basically giving up the ‘breadwinner’ role and going against the rules, it was unthinkable for a teenager to do so, that is why Holden states that his parents will be “pretty irritated”<sup>87</sup> about him being expelled from Pencey and Phoebe claims that “daddy’s gonna kill [him]”<sup>88</sup> for that.

As it was mentioned before, most Americans in the post-war era tended to be conformist and stuck with the concept of distinctive gender roles. Even though they

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<sup>82</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 108.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

thought it would supply them with fulfilment, the actual outcome was opposite. Even so, most people kept worshipping the conformist ideas, kept everything under wraps and pretended to be satisfied. Some, on the other hand, went against the society principles and ideals, for example, concerning sex issues, yet still acted as orderly citizens. This is when Holden's phonies, inauthentic and corrupted people who are full of pretence, come into the play. These phonies can be taken as both a criticism and a portrayal of the real face of the post-war American society and the adult world of that time.

Since Holden repeatedly describes them as "full of phonies,"<sup>89</sup> the main source of phoniness for him is inarguably schools. Although they are much praised by the novel's characters, according to Holden, they are, such as the American society of that time, 'rotten' underneath as he claims almost nothing from what was presented about them was true. This might be noticed in his comments on Pencey Prep and its advertisement:

Pencey Prep is this school that's in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads, anyway. They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere *near* the place. And underneath the guy on the horse's picture, it always says: "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." Strictly for the birds. They don't do any damn more *molding* at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably *came* to Pencey that way.<sup>90</sup>

The phoniness then can be found not just in schools as such, but also in by whom they are as institutions created – authorities such as headmasters and teachers, and students. Examples of phony school authorities in *The Catcher in the Rye* might be Mr. Thurmer, headmaster of Pencey Prep, Mr. Haas, headmaster of Elkton Hills, or Mr. Spencer.

Mr. Thurmer's phoniness is described on a funny matter. He had decided that every Saturday night boy students were to get a steak, which would be, under normal circumstances, pleasant, but the stakes were "little hard, dry jobs that you could hardly even cut."<sup>91</sup> Mr. Thurmer did not want the boys to have a proper meal, but he wanted it to sound fancy when boys' mothers came on Sunday and asked about what was for dinner the other night. Mr. Haas is phony because when he greeted students' parents on Sundays he was always "charming as hell"<sup>92</sup> except when some of them were "little old funny-

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<sup>89</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 167.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

looking,”<sup>93</sup> then he would “just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he’d go talk, for maybe half an *hour*, with somebody else’s parents.”<sup>94</sup> His phoniness, inauthenticity, thus lies in concealing his true opinions about the older parents by faking the pleasant greeting. Mr. Spencer is described by Holden as “really pretty nice,”<sup>95</sup> but when Mr. Thurmer came to the history class, Mr. Spencer lost his authenticity and he would “practically kill himself chuckling and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam prince or something.”<sup>96</sup> Mr. Spencer’s phoniness thus lies in dissembling just because of the authority of Mr. Thurmer.

As far as students of the prestigious schools are concerned, just as the authorities they are also portrayed as phony. One of the examples might be Holden’s roommate Ward Stradlater. Holden says he “fixed himself up to look good”<sup>97</sup> and “*was* pretty handsome,”<sup>98</sup> but otherwise his razor was “always rusty as hell and full of lather and hairs and crap,”<sup>99</sup> which shows that Stradlater’s tidiness was not natural but only faked in front of other people. Also other Pencey students are portrayed as phony because, despite the fact they come from wealthy families and are supposed to be the awesome, well-behaved young men as they attend such a prestigious school, Holden says they stole his “camel’s-hair coat right out of [his] room,”<sup>100</sup> which proves otherwise. Not only Pencey students but also other students, especially ones from the well-known Ivy League universities, seem to be full of pretence – they look sophisticated and neat in their “gray flannel suits”<sup>101</sup> and “checkered vests,”<sup>102</sup> but all they do is “criticizing shows and books and women in those tired, snobby voices.”<sup>103</sup>

Phonies in *The Catcher in the Rye* are, however, found not only among people at prestigious preparatory schools for boys but also outside of them. According to Holden’s comments, the whole adult world is basically full of them. From the many examples listed in the novel, Ernie, “a big fat colored guy that plays the piano,”<sup>104</sup> might be named. Even

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<sup>93</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 80.

though he is “a terrific piano player,”<sup>105</sup> he is a boastful snob and would not talk to you “unless you’re a big shot or a celebrity.”<sup>106</sup> Despite this fact, when he gives a bow after his performance, he *tries* to do so humbly, which Holden naturally considers phony. Another example might be Holden’s old friend Sally Hayes, about whom he thought “she was quite intelligent, in [his] stupidity”<sup>107</sup> but who over the years, maybe as she gained maturity, turned out to be a phony too as she, for example, dissembles and eagerly engages herself in a conversation with the Ivy League boy she meets at the Sunday matinee although “they probably met each other just *once*, at some phony party.”<sup>108</sup> Her phoniness might be then seen in the fake familiar way she treats someone she apparently hardly knows.

Another area where phoniness and corruption is present is characters’ approach to sex. As Sarah Graham argues, in the post-war period “the monogamous, heterosexual model”<sup>109</sup> was considered ideal. Not much information about sexual practices was provided – that is probably why Holden repeatedly states he does not understand sex – and generally sexual restraint was promoted. Yet, when Alfred Kinsey interviewed men and women in America at that time about the issue and then published his works about human sexual behaviour, it turned out that the norm “did not correlate with many people’s experiences.”<sup>110</sup> The novel shows so, too. An example might be Stradlater, who is by Holden considered “a very sexy bastard,”<sup>111</sup> regularly engaging himself in sexual activities as “most guys at Pencey just *talked* about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time (...) but old Stradlater really did it,”<sup>112</sup> then Carl Luce, who “knew quite a bit about sex, especially perverts and all”<sup>113</sup> and “lost his virginity when he was only fourteen,”<sup>114</sup> or Mr. Antolini, who is married to Mrs. Antolini but by patting Holden or telling him “good night, handsome”<sup>115</sup> it is suggested he is most likely gay.

Surprisingly, even Holden might be included on the list of phonies. Although he does not address himself directly, it is quite visible from his actions – he basically chronically lies about himself and pretends to be someone else. Throughout the novel, he makes up

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<sup>105</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 84.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>109</sup> Graham, *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

different identities for himself, for instance, when he meets Mrs. Morrow on the train to New York, he calls himself Rudolf Schmidt, or when he introduces himself to the prostitute, he does so as Jim Steele. Apart from that, he, for example, calls himself “a moderate smoker”<sup>116</sup> even though he has a cigarette in his hand almost constantly, or he claims that although he is going to buy a magazine in a store, he is “liable to say [he is] going to the opera.”<sup>117</sup> This might be a portrayal of Holden being somewhere in between innocent childhood and phony adulthood – he is described as having both children’s and adults’ qualities – or there can also be another explanation for his pretence. In chapter 12, Holden states that he is “always saying ‘Glad to’ve met you’ to somebody [he is] not at *all* glad [he] met”<sup>118</sup> and then adds that “if you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though.”<sup>119</sup> This might implicate that if one wanted to survive in such a sham society as the post-war American one was, it was most probably crucial to be a phony, too.

## 2.4 Non-Conformism

To withstand the pressure the post-war American society placed on teenagers, concerning the preparation and inevitability of gaining maturity and becoming conformist adults, must have been incredibly difficult. Some teenagers probably coped with it, some, Holden included, did not and reacted to the situation with rebellion, with breaking the generally accepted norms and rules in order to follow their own beliefs and stay authentic to themselves. No matter how great this idea of non-conformism might sound, as he says he is “supposed to go to [school] next fall,”<sup>120</sup> in the end it is implied that Holden learns a lesson that the post-war American society is a harsh place to be and without following the rules one simply is not able to survive. Even so, it is only something that the reader can assume since Holden adds:

A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I’m going apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don’t. I *think* I am, but how do I know? I swear it’s a stupid question.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 182.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*



This part of the analysis, however, explores what precedes this learned lesson, and that is Holden's rebellion. In the novel, there is a symbol for Holden's rebellion – his red hunting hat. Not only is wearing such a hat for normal occasions as Holden does quite rebellious itself, it also distinguishes him from the crowd. Above that, when he shares a conversation with Ackley about the hat, Holden claims it is “a people shooting hat”<sup>122</sup> and that he “[shoots] people in this hat.”<sup>123</sup> In this sense, the hat can also stand for his disgust for people, especially the phony ones, and his disdain of their values. The statement that the hunting hat can be a symbol of Holden's rebellion can be further justified by the fact that he wears it when he does one daring and rebellious thing – leaves Pencey Prep:

When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. (...) I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, “*Sleep tight, ya morons!*”<sup>124</sup>

As it was mentioned before, probably the most prominent rebellious behaviour of Holden's is his dropping out from schools. Since he claims that Pencey “is about the fourth school [he's] gone to,”<sup>125</sup> the reader can only assume how many schools altogether Holden got expelled from, yet from the information about the three named a good picture of why he actually drops out from schools can be created. Holden definitely does not do so because he would not be intelligent enough – he even says that he “didn't have too much difficulty at Elkton Hills”<sup>126</sup> – he does so as a matter of choice. Of course, he could work harder and pass the subjects, but the crucial thing is that he does not want to since he does not share the values both the schools and society promote and considers them phony.

There are many examples of Holden expressing his contempt for the traditional values. According to Sarah Graham, some can be found already in the first chapter. She claims that Holden's distance from the school's values is apparent, for instance, from the fact that he watches the football match from the hill, from afar. Another example of him not agreeing with the values is the fact that he calls the cannon that he is standing by and is from the Revolutionary War, which might stand for traditional values because it is “a source of pride for many Americans,”<sup>127</sup> as ‘crazy.’ At the same time, the note about the

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<sup>122</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 22.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>127</sup> Graham, *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, 34.

Revolutionary War, which arose from questioning the British rule by the American colonies, may also stand for Holden's rejection of authorities. Graham also argues that by saying "you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win"<sup>128</sup> Holden expresses that "he does not share the school's ethos of loyalty."<sup>129</sup> As it was already mentioned, in his conversation with Mr. Spencer, Holden also refuses the traditional "life is a game that one plays according to the rules"<sup>130</sup> norm by commenting "game, my ass,"<sup>131</sup> and, in his conversation with Mr. Antolini, he expresses the non-conformist approach by stating "I guess I don't like it when somebody sticks to the point all the time"<sup>132</sup> and "I mean you can't hardly ever simplify and unify something just because somebody *wants* you to."<sup>133</sup> Also the whole adult world and him in the position of a 'breadwinner,' for example a lawyer, is not what he strives for since he claims that as a lawyer "all you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot"<sup>134</sup> and that "doesn't appeal to [him]."<sup>135</sup> Holden thus flunks all the preparatory schools, and he "wouldn't go to one of those Ivy League colleges, if [he] was dying."<sup>136</sup> The only plan he has in mind is to find an escape, to leave.

Having suffered under the conformist forces, Holden decides he can bear it no longer, and so he plans to take his rebellion even further and abandon the society, all its rules and norms. His plan changes – firstly he speaks about driving up to Massachusetts and Vermont, then about being on a ranch in Colorado – yet the goal to leave remains:

I have about a hundred and eighty bucks in the bank. I can take it out when it opens in the morning, and then I could go down and get this guy's car. No kidding. We'll stay in these cabin camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out. Then, when the dough runs out, I could get a job somewhere and we could live somewhere with a brook and all and, later on, we could get married or something. I could chop all our own wood in the wintertime and all. Honest to God, we could have a terrific time!<sup>137</sup>

Another note about his plans to leave the society can be found in chapter 25 where he claims he would go West "where nobody'd know [him]"<sup>138</sup> and there he would find a job

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<sup>128</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 2.

<sup>129</sup> Graham, *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, 34.

<sup>130</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 8.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 198.

at a filling station. He adds he would pretend “[he] was one of those deaf-mutes”<sup>139</sup> so that people would leave him alone. With the money he would earn, he says “[he’d] build [himself] a little cabin”<sup>140</sup> near the woods, and then he says “[he’d] meet this beautiful girl that [would be] also a deaf-mute and [they’d] get married.”<sup>141</sup> Despite the non-conformist plan of escaping the clutches of society, there is always a portion of conformism present. Although he despises the traditional ideals, every time he states that he would get married. This indicates how uncertain he is about being a ‘full-time’ rebel and how he probably feels he should walk the line, too. In chapter 25, when he sees Phoebe struggling with the suitcase wanting to leave with him, he realises that even he would most likely struggle if he left. And so, when they are about to go to the zoo, he suddenly claims “I’m not going away anywhere. I changed my mind.”<sup>142</sup> meaning that he in the end, despite the potential unhappiness, probably picks the conformist side.

Other examples of Holden’s rebellion are connected with drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and encountering a prostitute, in other words, with doing something that is unthinkable for the above-mentioned splendid young men. Even though he is only 16 years old, he states that he “can drink all night and not even show it”<sup>143</sup> and that once at the Whooton School he even “drank [a pint of Scotch] in the chapel.”<sup>144</sup> Once he got “drunk as a bastard”<sup>145</sup> that he “could hardly see straight,”<sup>146</sup> and throughout the novel he keeps ordering Scotch and soda, his favourite drink, all the time. As far as smoking is concerned, Holden has a cigarette in his hand every time it is possible. Although he says to Mr. Antolini that he is “a moderate smoker,”<sup>147</sup> it is only a lie. He is rather “quite a heavy smoker”<sup>148</sup> as he also claims himself to be, which can be proved, for example, with him confessing that he “must’ve smoked around two packs since [he] left Pencey,”<sup>149</sup> that is in less than a day. Above that, in chapter 9 when he is “feeling pretty horny,”<sup>150</sup> he calls a girl

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<sup>139</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 198.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 63.

“that wasn’t exactly a whore but didn’t mind doing it once in a while,”<sup>151</sup> and in chapter 13 he even agrees to have a prostitute sent to his room. Although he has sex with neither of them, the act of calling the girl or being sent the prostitute itself can be considered rebellious at that time.

## 2.5 Teenage Frustration

As it was previously stated, the post-war American society was a harsh place to be for a teenager. They needed to accept the future gender roles and already in the adolescent years start to prepare for them, which, according to both the historical description and the analysed works, cannot have been easy and to the less adaptive individuals might have even caused emotional problems – Holden ends up in a certain kind of therapy and is most likely psychoanalysed after all. Since Holden throughout the novel most often quotes that he is ‘depressed,’ one might assume that Salinger presents depression as the prevailing feeling teenagers had at that time. Yet, there is something ‘bigger,’ something ever-present in the novel that might be seen as a source or trigger for all other feelings, and that is frustration.

According to Oxford Dictionaries, frustration is defined as “the feeling of being upset or annoyed as a result of being unable to change or achieve something.”<sup>152</sup> In the post-war conformist American society, it indeed must have been incredibly hard for teenagers to change or achieve something or have what they truly desired. Instead of growing up into a conformist adult, Holden would like to stay the innocent, not phony and authentic child forever, but in order to survive in such a society he has to grow up – or at least he most likely plans to do so. And that is a fact he cannot change, which makes him frustrated. Also he would like to have someone who would understand him, ‘catch’ him in case of a fall and assure him that the adult world is not that bad after all, a parental figure one might say. Phony adult people, his parents included, are, however, incapable of fulfilling this, which is a reason for frustration, too.

It might be said that Holden’s frustration is caused by the conformism he must face and become a part of. Of course, he might be non-conformist, escape and leave all the schools and gender roles behind, but since Salinger gives him no other alternative, Holden

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<sup>151</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 63.

<sup>152</sup> “Frustration Definition,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/frustration>.

stays in the society and thus remains the frustrated teenager. This part of the analysis deals with and comments on the aspects of Holden's frustration, in other words, what the things he cannot change, gain or achieve are.

The first thing, incredibly prominent in the novel, is Holden's inability to stay a child (or a teenager) for the rest of his life. The reason for this is that with children he associates good human qualities, more accurately innocence and authenticity, which he incredibly values, whereas with adults he associates bad human qualities, such as immorality and phoniness. The fact that Holden values these childlike qualities is, for instance, visible in chapter 5 when he creates a snowball and starts to throw it. He wants to throw it at a car and then at a hydrant, but he does not do so because they "looked so nice and white."<sup>153</sup> White colour generally stands for purity and innocence in Western societies, and because he values them, he is not keen on ruining them. As it was mentioned, these qualities are associated with children, and that is the main reason why Holden adores children more than anything else. This adoration is then extremely visible throughout the novel. Let us take, for example, how Holden speaks about his brother Allie, who died of leukaemia:

You'd have liked [Allie]. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent. His teachers were always writing letters to my mother, telling her what a pleasure it was having a boy like Allie in their class. And they weren't just shooting the crap. They really meant it. But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody. People with red hair are supposed to get mad very easily, but Allie never did, and he had very red hair.<sup>154</sup>

About his younger sister Phoebe, Holden also speaks kindly – he states that "You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life. She's really smart. I mean she's had all A's ever since she started school."<sup>155</sup> or that when one says something to her, she, unlike the adults, "knows exactly what the hell you're talking about."<sup>156</sup> In a similar, positive way, Holden speaks also about his friend Jane Gallagher, who despite being older still keeps the childlike qualities. He claims that she is "a funny girl"<sup>157</sup> who "knocked [him] out"<sup>158</sup> and that while holding hands with her he was happy, as opposed to the company of other people.

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<sup>153</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 36.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

As innocence, purity and authenticity are so important for him, Holden is more than concerned with their loss and the loss of people who possess them. For instance, when Allie died and Holden lost him forever, he did not only grieve for Allie, but he was so mad and desperate because of that that he “broke all the windows in the garage.”<sup>159</sup> Since he lost Allie, Holden is aware of the fact that he can lose the other innocent people in his life too, and that bothers him. This is, for example, visible in Holden’s reaction to Stradlater’s date with Jane and the fact that together they “sat in the goddam car”<sup>160</sup> of Ed Banky’s, which Holden assumes might mean that Stradlater “[gave] her the time”<sup>161</sup> there. Sex is for Holden, who is a virgin, something associated with adulthood, something that takes one’s purity away, and because Stradlater might have done so to Jane, Holden is furious, picks a fight with him and later comments on the matter this way:

Anyway, that’s what I was thinking about while I sat in that vomity-looking chair in the lobby. Old Jane. Every time I got to the part about her out with Stradlater in that damn Ed Banky’s car, it almost drove me crazy. I knew she wouldn’t let him get to first base with her, but it drove me crazy anyway.<sup>162</sup>

Also, when Holden notices there is ‘Fuck you’ written on the wall in the school that Phoebe attends, he is furious too because he knows that this word might corrupt the children, Phoebe included. He comments on this matter with that it “drove [him] damn near crazy”<sup>163</sup> and that he “kept wanting to kill whoever’d written it.”<sup>164</sup>

In this sense, Holden would like to be the protector of innocence, the catcher in the rye, and the reader finds out so when Phoebe asks him what he would like to do in life. Holden creates the name of his ‘occupation’ based on a poem by Robert Burns which includes a part stating “If a body meet a body coming through the rye,”<sup>165</sup> only he exchanges the word ‘meet’ for ‘catch.’ This little change has, however, a crucial effect on what this ‘occupation’ of the catcher in the rye, which is “the only thing [Holden would] really like to be,”<sup>166</sup> actually stands for. It is described in chapter 22:

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go

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<sup>159</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 39.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them.<sup>167</sup>

According to the metaphorical extract, Holden pictures the children's world as a field of rye, at the end of which is a cliff, which stands for adulthood. What Holden as the catcher does is basically preventing these children from the fall down, from growing up into immoral, phony adults. As the reader, however, finds out, Holden can save neither Phoebe and the other kids nor Jane or himself since growing up and getting exposed to the adult world is something inevitable. This is proved several times in the novel. For example, by pointing out how Holden grows physically – he states that one side of his head is “full of millions of gray hairs”<sup>168</sup> and that he “grew six and a half inches last year.”<sup>169</sup> Another example that he cannot prevent the inevitable is visible in the scene when he spots another ‘Fuck you’ sign. He desires to rub the sign off, but it would not disappear, and so in the end he describes the situation as hopeless and says that “If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* the ‘Fuck you’ signs in the world. It's impossible.”<sup>170</sup> meaning that growing up and exposure to the adult world is inevitable. Even though this impossibility to save himself and other children from the clutches of the corrupted adult world can be seen as a source of frustration for Holden, he seems to come into terms with it as he, while watching Phoebe riding the carousel, claims that there is a possibility that children can ‘fall off,’ meaning reach the adulthood, and one should let them:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them.<sup>171</sup>

Another source of frustration for Holden is the lack of people who would understand him, help him and assure him that the adult world is not so bad after all. Nevertheless, in the phony world of adults, even though he seeks connection, nobody seems to be there for him. Not even his parents. This might be proved by the fact that throughout the whole novel they stand in the background. Not only is there little information provided about them, but also Holden basically does not encounter his father in the course of the novel and, when he meets his mother, he does so from behind a closet door, which suggests there

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<sup>167</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 173.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

is an obstacle between them. That Salinger presents there were obstacles between children and their parents at that time, meaning that parents did not actually know their own children, is apparent in the scene when Holden travels to New York and meets Mrs. Morrow, mother of the Pencey student Ernest Morrow. Since Ernest “was always going down the corridor, after he’d had a shower, snapping his soggy old wet towel at people’s asses,”<sup>172</sup> Holden says he “was doubtless the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey, in the whole crummy history of the school,”<sup>173</sup> yet Mrs. Morrow claims with absolute conviction that her son is sensitive.

Given these circumstances, Holden tries to find the understanding and helping people, who he hopes can probably assure him that adulthood is not so bad after all, somewhere else. He is, however, not particularly successful. He tries to talk to and find support in his friends, for example, in Sally Hayes or Carl Luce, who, nevertheless, do not have the least clue what he is talking about, and Mr. Antolini, who eventually puts him down too as he, instead of helping him, pats him on his head and scares him. After being unsuccessful among the people he knows, he addresses even strangers – cab drivers, a prostitute or nuns – to find what he is looking for, but he fails again, keeps lacking someone who would understand him and, as he cannot change that, the frustration deepens and triggers other inconvenient feelings, apart from depression also feelings of isolation and lonesomeness.

Having been exposed to all these negative feelings, Holden “[gets] sick,”<sup>174</sup> which might be understood as a mental breakdown, and ends in a therapy. Although such a thing must be horrible, it is still a positive scenario as some teenagers may have ended up much worse – for instance, committing suicide. An example might be the novel’s character of James Castle, who, similarly to Holden, could not cope with other boys at school but, unlike Holden, really decides to jump out of the window. That Holden has suicidal thoughts is apparent, but thankfully he never actually takes his life:

I stayed in the bathroom for about an hour, taking a bath and all. Then I got back in bed. It took me quite a while to get to sleep—I wasn’t even tired—but finally I did. What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would’ve done it, too, if I’d been sure somebody’d cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn’t want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 54.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 104.



From the above-provided analysis, it is visible that with *The Catcher in the Rye* J. D. Salinger presents a critical portrayal of the post-war American society. With the teenage character of Holden Caulfield, he criticises the conformism and with that associated play-according-to-the-rules approach that the period brought and how negatively in terms of necessity of accepting the 'breadwinner' role it affected teenagers, especially teenage boys from higher classes of the society, and their lives. What the author also profoundly criticises, concretely with Holden and his phonies, is inauthenticity and dissemblance of people of that time. Salinger presents the conformist post-war American society as an environment that makes teenagers, in this case Holden, frustrated, and from the reasons responsible for this, the author above all stresses the inevitability of entering the corrupted adult world or the lack of people who would understand teenagers. To escape such a harsh situation, Holden becomes a non-conformist, but since Salinger describes non-conformism as becoming a social failure, he gives Holden no other alternative than to accept conformism and thus remain the frustrated teenager.

### 3 *DEAD POETS SOCIETY: ANALYSIS*

Just as the analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the analysis of *Dead Poets Society* is also divided into three parts – the first explores the theme of conformism in the film, the second the theme of non-conformism, and the last teenage frustration. Similarly, there is a brief summary of the plot and characters provided at its beginning.

#### 3.1 *Dead Poets Society in a Nutshell*

Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society*, released in 1989 and honoured with the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay written by Tom Schulman, is set at the fictional Welton Academy in Vermont in 1959. Peter Weir chose this year rather than the earlier ones intentionally as he wanted "to capture American society right at the turning point of a decade of social cohesion and conformity (the 1950s) and a decade of social upheaval and revolution (the 1960s)."<sup>176</sup> As well as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Dead Poets Society* also provides a picture of how growing up in post-war America might have looked like and what teenagers, especially boys with upper-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds, most likely had to face during this period.

Welton Academy, similarly to Pencey Prep, is a prestigious and strict preparatory school, whose main purpose is to prepare its boy students to get to the best universities and become future leaders, doctors or scientists. In other words, its main purpose is to prepare the boys for their future 'breadwinner' roles. Two of these students that the analysis is focused on are Neil Perry (played by Robert Sean Leonard) and Todd Anderson (played by Ethan Hawke). Neil is a son of middle-class parents who made sacrifices to send him to the Welton Academy, and so, throughout the whole film, great pressure is imposed on him in order "to create a good return on his parents' investment."<sup>177</sup> Even though he is passionate about acting more than anything else, he is pushed to become a doctor, which is impossible for him to bear. Todd lives in the shadow of his successful older brother, who also attended the Welton Academy. He is "extremely meek and shy,"<sup>178</sup> yet he has a rich interior life. Because of his personality, he does not participate much for the most of the film, but slowly he undergoes a change and in the end finds his confidence and is the first to stand on his desk to support Mr. Keating.

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<sup>176</sup> G. M. Dewis, *Dir. Peter Weir's Dead Poets Society* (St. Kilda: Insight, 2012), 6-7.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The story begins with the arrival of Mr. Keating, a new, innovative English Literature teacher. Being different from the other teachers at the Welton Academy, Mr. Keating does not demand discipline and excellence, he rather attempts to inspire his students to live based on their beliefs, find beauty in life and make the most of it. To illustrate and explain his ideas and values, he uses poetry that is, according to him, one of the reasons to “stay alive for.”<sup>179</sup> Thus influenced, Neil and Todd as well as the other fellow students – Knox Overstreet, Charles ‘Nuwanda’ Dalton, Steven Meeks, Gerard Pitts and Richard Cameron – create a secret group called the Dead Poets Society. Following the example of Mr. Keating, boys frequently meet outside of the school in a cave in the woods, and there they read poetry and for the first time in their lives enjoy themselves. Their independent thinking together with their non-conformist behaviour, nevertheless, does not have only positive consequences for the boys. After Neil shoots himself because of not being able to pursue his acting career, Mr. Nolan, the headmaster of the school, and boys’ parents take the situation firmly into their hands. Because of his “unorthodox teaching methods”<sup>180</sup> and influence, Mr. Keating is blamed for Neil’s death and immediately fired, and the boys are forced to return to the grey reality of the school desks and conformity. No matter how sad the ending of the film might seem, the last scene, when all the members of the Dead Poets Society stand up on their desks to defend Mr. Keating, gives the viewer hope that despite staying in such uniformity, inside the boys are free-thinkers.

### 3.2 Conformism

Just as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Dead Poets Society* also portrays the conformist post-war American society, in other words, how Americans during this period blindly followed both generally shared beliefs and the concept of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘homemaker’ gender roles. As the whole film is, unlike *The Catcher in the Rye*, set just at school, it does not focus so much on the entire society but mainly on how the beliefs and concepts of gender roles were presented and followed in the preparatory school environment. Also, since there is not so much space as there is in the novel, the sub-theme of phoniness, inauthenticity and corruption of the adult world that is connected with the theme of conformism is, compared to *The Catcher in the Rye*, not prominent.

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<sup>179</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

Right in the opening scene of *Dead Poets Society*, it is visible that Weir tries to show how values and beliefs were indeed important and generally followed at that time. As the film is set mostly at the Welton Academy, the main shared belief presented is the importance of boy students' preparation for their future 'breadwinner' roles, in other words, the importance of discipline and education, with the help of which the role can be achieved and fulfilled. The values are represented not only by the four banners that the boys bring to the hall and on which the four pillars that the school finds all-important – "Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence"<sup>181</sup> – are displayed, but also by lightening the candle, which, as Mr. Nolan says, stands for "the light of knowledge,"<sup>182</sup> and by the speech he delivers during the initial ceremony:

In her first year, Welton Academy graduated five students. Last year we graduated fifty-one and more than seventy-five percent of those went on to the Ivy League! This, this kind of accomplishment is the result of fervent dedication to the principles taught here. This is why you parents have been sending us your sons. This is why we are the best preparatory school in the United States.<sup>183</sup>

That these values must have been highly promoted by the authorities, both parents and teachers, and in connection with that much must have been expected of the boys at that time is visible in the following scene when the headmaster greets the boys' parents. When Mr. Nolan meets Todd, he states "You have some big shoes to fill, young man. Your brother was one of our finest."<sup>184</sup> and, when Neil passes by him, Mr. Nolan claims that "we expect great things from you this year,"<sup>185</sup> whereupon Neil's father adds "well, he won't disappoint us."<sup>186</sup> That striving for what was expected, tradition and discipline must have been crucial at that time and the fact that there apparently was no place for authenticity or free thinking in the post-war American society can be then also seen in the dialog between Mr. Keating and Mr. McAllister, another Welton Academy teacher:

Mr. McAllister: You take a big risk by encouraging them to become artists John. (...)  
Mr. Keating: We're not talking artists, George, we're talking free thinkers.  
Mr. McAllister: Free thinkers at seventeen?  
Mr. Keating: Funny, I never pegged you as a cynic.  
Mr. McAllister: Not a cynic, a realist.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

Another conversation, in which it is portrayed that being authentic and not following the rules was considered unthinkable, is the conversation between Mr. Keating and Mr. Nolan. When Mr. Nolan asks what was going on during Mr. Keating's lesson when the boys were marching and clapping in the courtyard the other day, Mr. Keating replies "That was an exercise to prove a point. Dangers of conformity."<sup>188</sup> Mr. Nolan, slightly irritated, responds that Mr. Keating should not question the curriculum that is set because if he questions it, the boys might do so too, whereupon Mr. Keating tells his opinion that "[he] always thought the idea of education was to learn to think for yourself."<sup>189</sup> Mr. Nolan then expresses that at the boys' ages it is something impossible and that Mr. Keating should stick with the values of tradition and discipline and, above all, prepare the boys for college.

The film presents that due to this pressure imposed on them, many of the teenage boy students turned into what the society of that time wanted and became a part of the crowd, in other words, the splendid, educated young men striving for their future roles, which is in the film represented by a many times showed symbol of a flock of birds. As *The Catcher in the Rye* provides the description of the 'breadwinner' role, so does *Dead Poets Society*. Since this role required being the provider for the family, one needed to strive for a highly paid profession, which is visible, for example, in the scene when Knox and 'Nuwanda' tell Neil to "tell [his father] off"<sup>190</sup> because of not letting Neil contribute to the school annual and forcing him into being a doctor. Neil answers that they are in the same situation and addresses them as "Mr. Future Lawyer and Mr. Future Banker."<sup>191</sup> Also, in the scene when Mr. Keating tells the boys to rip out the page with a text on understanding poetry, the topic of 'breadwinner' roles is mentioned. He states:

I see that look in Mr. Pitt's eye, like nineteenth century literature has nothing to do with going to business school or medical school. (...) Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are all noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.<sup>192</sup>

From his monologue, it is apparent what professions were connected with the role and what was required to obtain them. Although Mr. Keating considers the professions and with them connected 'breadwinner' role important, he points out that only they cannot fully fulfil one's life. In this statement, criticism of the post-war American society and its

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<sup>188</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

beliefs that one should unconditionally strive for the gender roles and forget about other aspects of life can be seen – even though many Americans at that time obtained the roles, general dissatisfaction with their lives prevailed.

### 3.3 Non-Conformism

Just as Holden finds it difficult to withstand the pressure that the post-war American society places on him, so do Neil Perry and Todd Anderson. They too are fed up with the harsh preparation for their future ‘breadwinner’ roles and with the impossibility to shape their lives according to their visions, they too are unable to cope with the situation and, given the right impulse by Mr. Keating, they too react to it with non-conformist behaviour – rebellion and breaking the rules – to stay authentic to themselves. But just as Holden finds out that in order to survive in such a society one must walk the line, so do Neil and Todd. Having understood this fact, Todd is strong enough to continue facing the conformism around, Neil, however, is not. Nevertheless, the portrayal of how teenagers at that time might have felt and what it could have caused to them is a topic of the last part of the analysis. This part deals with what form Neil and Todd’s rebellion and non-conformist behaviour took.

As the expectations both Neil and Todd should meet are incredibly high and the conformist forces imposed on them too strict, it is not surprising that the boys start to rebel, for example, by questioning and even mocking the key values the authorities promote. This is apparent at the beginning of the film when the boys meet in Neil and Todd’s room, rename the four pillars into “Travesty, Horror, Decadence, Excrement”<sup>193</sup> and the school’s name into “Hellton,”<sup>194</sup> and smoke a cigarette even though it is obviously prohibited at school. Although this certainly can be taken as a form of rebellion, the ‘more serious’ one comes after the boys encounter Mr. Keating, who, in a good faith to help the boys to be themselves and seize the day, triggers something that has horrible consequences.

Since Mr. Keating’s first lesson, it is obvious that he will be different to other teachers at the Welton Academy. As G. M. Dewis points out, from the very start it is obvious that he is a romantic, preferring rather emotionality than rationality, as he is whistling *1812 Overture* by Romantic-era composer Tchaikovsky.<sup>195</sup> As the scene continues, Mr. Keating

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<sup>193</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> See Dewis, *Dir. Peter Weir’s Dead Poets Society*, 15.

then takes the boys to the trophy hall, and there the viewer gets other clues that he indeed will be different. Not only does he give the boys a choice to call him Mr. Keating or, “if [they’re] slightly more daring,”<sup>196</sup> O Captain! My Captain!, he also teaches them a lesson about life – both are unusual things for the boys to hear from a teacher. He tells them, with the help of Robert Herrick’s poem “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” that they should seize the day (*carpe diem*) and live their lives extraordinarily as we all are “food for worms”<sup>197</sup> and because “each and every one of us (...) is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die.”<sup>198</sup> The boys are apparently affected by his teaching, as after the lesson, even though he rips it out afterwards, Todd writes ‘seize the day’ to his notebook in capital letters. Another scene, in which it is apparent that Mr. Keating goes against the traditional values and desires the boys to do so, to a certain extent, too, is the one when he teaches them how to understand poetry. According to G. M. Dewis, the textbook *Five Centuries of Verse* and its preface about how to understand poetry by Dr. Pritchard represents the traditional approach that is rational – it includes measuring the greatness of poetry based on a graph – and lacks the passion for poetry.<sup>199</sup> By calling this approach ‘excrement’ and by telling them to rip the page out of the book and adopt a more passionate approach for poetry, Mr. Keating certainly questions the norms of that time and, as they in the end follow his example, the boys start to do so as well. Having quoted Walt Whitman and his poem “O Me! O Life!” Mr. Keating ends the scene with asking the boys “what will [their] verse be,”<sup>200</sup> encouraging them to take action and do something extraordinary about their lives, in a sense to be non-conformist.

A crucial step on the boys’ way to rebellion is finding a yearbook from the year Mr. Keating graduated from the Welton Academy. In the yearbook, they read a note about the Dead Poets Society. Wanting to know what it stands for, the boys inquire Mr. Keating, who gives them the desired explanation:

The Dead Poets were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life. That’s a phrase from Thoreau that we’d invoke at the beginning of every meeting. You see we’d gather at the old Indian cave and take turns reading from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley; the biggies. Even some of our own verse. And in the enchantment of the moment we’d let poetry work its magic.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> See Dewis, *Dir. Peter Weir’s Dead Poets Society*, 17.

<sup>200</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

Having heard this explanation, Knox tries to summarize it and asks if the Dead Poets Society “was [just] a bunch of guys sitting around reading poetry,”<sup>202</sup> whereupon Mr. Keating disagrees and adds:

No, Mr. Overstreet, it wasn't just “guys,” we weren't a Greek organization, we were romantics. We didn't just read poetry, we let it drip from our tongues like honey. Spirits soared, women swooned, and gods were created, gentlemen, not a bad way to spend an evening, eh?<sup>203</sup>

By saying this, Mr. Keating stresses that their gatherings had nothing to do with any kind of a study group dealing with poetry but that they were moments during which they enjoyed the true meaning of living, which cannot be achieved while being in the society. Carrying out such an activity – reading poetry in a cave and thanks to that “sucking the marrow out of life”<sup>204</sup> – is something that definitely stands against the strict conformist norms of the Welton Academy as well as of that time, but, no matter how inappropriate for a student of a prestigious preparatory school this activity might be, it can certainly help one to cope with the situation. And as they know so and are even encouraged by Mr. Keating – just the one sentence of his “not a bad way to spend an evening”<sup>205</sup> can be taken as encouragement, plus he puts his copy of *Five Centuries of Verse* with lines that are to be read at the opening of the meetings into Neil's room – it does not take much time and the first meeting is set and the Dead Poets Society is renewed.

The Dead Poets Society together with the *carpe diem* approach give the boys not only an escape from the harsh reality, they also help them not just to ‘survive’ but to actually ‘live,’ even if it is only for a short period of time. Although they know they are doing something a Welton Academy student should not do, something non-conformist – like sneaking out in the middle of the night into the forest, smoking cigarettes and pipes and drinking alcohol there, observing pictures of naked women or even bringing girls to the cave – they most probably for the first time in their lives are full of energy and happiness from living. This is apparent, for example, when one of the boys, Steven Meeks, reads the very playful and rhythmical Vachel Lindsay's poem “The Congo” and the others start to dance around, or when they have all the other meetings and have fun just chatting and laughing, or later in the film when they play football with Mr. Keating while Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* plays.

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<sup>202</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.



The Dead Poets Society then leads to another non-conformist behaviour – Meeks together with Pitts tune Radio Free America, which is apparently forbidden to listen, Neil auditions for a part in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* even though his father would strictly disapprove, Knox sneaks from the school to see Chris, the girl he likes, and then even enters a party to meet her and gets drunk there, and Charlie ‘Nuwanda,’ who has come to a conclusion that they should not be “just playing around out here”<sup>206</sup> but “mean what [they] say,”<sup>207</sup> meaning to spread and truly live according to the *carpe diem* approach, publishes an article in the school paper in the name of the Dead Poets. This, together with Charlie’s call from God who tells Mr. Nolan that “[they] should have girls at Welton,”<sup>208</sup> is a breaking point when the boys’ little rebellion in order to survive in the severe environment becomes a direct attack on the authorities and their values. This results in ‘Nuwanda’ being punished by beating with a wooden paddle and Mr. Keating’s slight averting from non-conformist values and returning to conformist ones as he claims that “sucking the marrow out of life doesn’t mean choking on the bone”<sup>209</sup> and that “there’s a time for daring and there’s a time for caution,”<sup>210</sup> suggesting that one must indeed walk the line in order to ‘make it’ in the post-war American society, no matter how frustrated it might make them. Just as Holden eventually gives up his non-conformism, most boys from *Dead Poets Society*, Todd included, are also given no other alternative. In order not to be expelled and thus survive in the society, the boys are forced to sign the paper saying that Mr. Keating and his teaching methods were responsible for Neil’s suicide (even though it is debatable if it is truly so) and turn from the non-conformist rebels into the disciplined but frustrated Welton Academy students. If they do not want to conform, such as ‘Nuwanda,’ then they are expelled and become a social failure. And if they are unable to conform as the frustration that conformism brings is unbearable, such as it is for Neil, then it can have even worse consequences – suicide.

Although it might seem that the boys eventually conform, become a part of the crowd and start to blindly follow the values and norms the period required, the last scene says otherwise. Of course, they need to be conformist to survive in the society but only on the outside – they need to be disciplined and excel at school to then have a ‘noble’ profession

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<sup>206</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

– inside they can be free thinkers. This is suggested by the last scene when the boys, encouraged by Todd, stand up on their desks in order to express their opinion that Mr. Keating, who leaves the school, is innocent, whereas the rest of the class is ignorant and stays sitting with their heads bowed down.

### 3.4 Teenage Frustration

Similarly to Holden, both Neil and Todd experience frustration. Even though Neil and Todd do not feel frustrated because they are unable to save all the children from the corrupted adult world, they certainly feel so because they themselves need to enter it and adapt to it and thus cannot achieve what they would like to according to their beliefs, for example, to become an actor instead of one of the requested ‘noble’ professions. Apart from this kind of frustration, they, just as Holden, feel frustrated because there are no parental roles in the post-war adult world, no close people that would understand them, truly know them and support them. An exception might be the few fellow students, who, nevertheless, generally cannot fully substitute one’s parents, and, of course, Mr. Keating, who is, however, forced to leave the Welton Academy in the end, which might be after all taken as a source of frustration, too. And these sources are what this part of the analysis tries to take a closer look at.

As far as the frustration triggered by the inability to achieve what they like is concerned, this is mainly portrayed with the character of Neil. Right from the beginning, more accurately from the scene when Mr. Perry comes to Neil’s room at the first day of school and demands him to drop the school annual even though Neil does not want to, it is apparent that Mr. Perry has his own plan for Neil. His own plan that is created according to the norms of the period and that includes Neil being a doctor. Neil, however, has no such ambitions. After being imposed to Mr. Keating’s influence, he claims that “for the first time in [his] whole life [he knows] know what [he] wanna do,”<sup>211</sup> and that is to be an actor. Although he knows his father would not approve of that, he auditions for a role in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and gets the part of Puck. As he wants to act so much and stay authentic to himself and as it fills him with genuine happiness, he forges a permission letter from his father. Later in the film, however, his father finds out and demands him to quit. Neil acts in the play anyway, which results in his father’s decision to

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<sup>211</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

withdraw Neil from Welton, apparently to get rid of the distraction in form of Mr. Keating and the boys, and enrol him in a military school to pursue studying at Harvard and becoming a doctor as the period required. Being unable to change his fate and achieve what he likes, Neil battles with frustration so fierce that he eventually decides to give up his fight and shoots himself.

The lack of parental roles, people who would understand teenagers and support them, is also portrayed with the character of Neil. As it was pointed out before, Neil knows that a career of a doctor is not something he would like to strive for and, in the course of the film, he finds profound fulfilment in acting, which is apparent not only from his statement that “acting’s everything to [him]”<sup>212</sup> but also from his compelling performance as Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Even so, his father shows no trace of understanding and support, labels Neil’s acting as the “absurd acting business”<sup>213</sup> and sends him to another school without any further consideration how it might emotionally affect his son. The lack of parental roles, which then triggers frustration, is also visible on the character of Todd. In one scene he says it is his birthday and, when Neil inquires what presents he received, Todd shows Neil a desk set and adds that his parents “gave [him] the same thing as last year”<sup>214</sup> and that he “didn’t even like it the first time.”<sup>215</sup> This, together with the pressure to excel at school and become one of the ‘noble’ professions, may show how little boys’ parents cared about who their children were as human beings and what their true desires contained and how the only thing that mattered to them was if their sons fulfilled the future ‘breadwinner’ role as the society required.

Missing such important figures as one’s own parents are in their life, the boys, especially Neil and Todd, tend to deepen the relationships between each other, which is visible in how the above-mentioned scene continues. When Neil notices how much Todd is disappointed because of the present, which for Todd represents the great gap that there is between him and his own parents, he tells Todd that the set has a good aerodynamic shape and urges Todd to throw it off the wall, which then results in Todd’s cheerfulness. Not only the other boys but also Mr. Keating substitute the place of the missing understanding and supporting parents. The proof of this statement can be found in the scene when Neil,

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<sup>212</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

after the argument about acting that he had with his father, comes to Mr. Keating, just as a son to his father, for advice regarding his future. Neil tells him what acting means to him, whereupon Mr. Keating suggests that he should explain how he truly feels about acting to his father. Neil's answer that "[he] can't talk to him this way,"<sup>216</sup> together with the fact that in the end when he is at home with his parents he is really unable to tell his father who he really is, further justifies what a gap there must have been between parents and children at that time. A gap neither Mr. Keating nor the other boys could fully fill.

Because of both the inability to change their situation and become what they like and because of the lack of proper parental figures in their lives, teenagers in the post-war conformist American society are portrayed as suffering from frustration – both Neil and Todd and also Holden experience this feeling. For Holden and Todd, this frustration is fierce but still bearable, for Neil it is not, which then results in suicide.

As it is apparent from the above-provided analysis, not only J. D. Salinger but also Peter Weir presents a critical portrayal of the post-war American society. With the protagonists of Neil Perry and Todd Anderson, Weir questions the conformism and with it associated followed beliefs of that time and shows what such an environment could have done to teenage boys. Both Neil and Todd experience frustration, especially because of the necessity to accept the 'breadwinner' role and the lack of people who would understand them, and, as their situation is unbearable, they become non-conformist. But just as for Salinger non-conformism equals becoming a social failure, so it does for Weir, and he too gives Neil and Todd no other alternative than to accept conformism and thus remain frustrated teenagers or, like in case of Neil, to kill oneself.

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<sup>216</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir.

## CONCLUSION

The post-war American society, where both analysed works *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Dead Poets Society* are set, was conformist, and there were several reasons why it was so. As the world entered the atomic age after World War II and the threat of atomic war floated in the air and as the Cold War started and communism began to spread, the United States were afraid. And thus, because of the ever-present fear, many things were done in order to secure the country. Beside the foreign policies, such as the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan, domestic policies emphasizing and supporting home and family life, something in which one could find an escape in such harsh times, were also carried out. Due to the post-war prosperity that the country's participation in World War II brought, the government made ranch houses in the suburbs extremely affordable, and since for many Americans this was their American Dream, unreachable for a long time because of not only the war but also because of the preceding Great Depression, they welcomed this government's help with open arms and accepted to play by its rules. People experienced domestic arrivals, married earlier and a baby boom occurred. The suburbs were flooded with the above-mentioned ranch houses, which were indeed convenient and represented the post-war affluence but, most importantly, were almost all the same. And so was a vast majority of their residents, who accepted the promoted distinctive gender roles of male 'breadwinners' and female 'homemakers' even though it in most cases made them frustrated. And thus the post-war American conformism was born.

Being set in this environment, both J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* portray the post-war American society, in particular how its conformism affected teenage boy characters from higher classes of the society – Holden Caulfield, Neil Perry and Todd Anderson. The aim of this thesis was to prove that both authors present the post-war American society as an environment that makes teenagers frustrated, and therefore they become non-conformist. As for both Salinger and Weir non-conformism equals becoming a social failure, they give their protagonists no other alternative than to accept the conformism and hence remain the frustrated teenagers. This hypothesis was proved by the conducted literary analysis.

The first part of the analysis dealt with the theme of conformism, that is with how the conformist post-war American society is portrayed in the works. With their authoritative characters, whether teachers or parents, both Salinger and Weir show not only how Americans blindly followed the generally shared beliefs of playing according to the rules

but also how important it was to stick with the concept of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘homemaker’ gender roles. Since all three protagonists are teenage boys, they are expected to become ‘breadwinners,’ family providers with prosperous jobs, and for this they need to be appropriately prepared. The basis of this preparation lies in strict education at prestigious preparatory schools Pencey Prep and the Welton Academy, where the boys not only obtain sufficient knowledge to get to the best universities and then to acquire the highly paid positions but also gain discipline and the ‘right’ values. The conformist role of ‘breadwinner’ is presented as inevitable, as something teenage boys are obliged to accept and fulfil no matter what. Being exposed to this pressure, with no possibility of doing what they would like to according to their beliefs and with a certainty they cannot change their fates, teenage protagonists of both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Dead Poets Society* become frustrated. Therefore, they question and criticise the conformist values and become non-conformist, in other words, they start to rebel.

The second part of the analysis explored the theme of the above-mentioned non-conformist behaviour of the main teenage characters. Their rebellion, which is in direct opposition of what a splendid, educated young man striving for his future role should do and which can be taken as a reaction to the conformism they are exposed to, is visible in both works. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, for instance, leaves every possible preparatory school that he attends since he questions and despises the values they promote, he plans to leave the society and live in a cabin by the woods, then smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol and even agrees to being sent a prostitute. In *Dead Poets Society*, both Neil and Todd too question the values the school promotes and go against them by, for instance, being members of the Dead Poets Society, a group of boys who meet in a cave where they read poetry, smoke and generally have a good time. Even though such actions help the protagonists to overcome the unpleasant situation, both Salinger and Weir see non-conformism as becoming a social failure, and so all Holden, Neil and Todd are given no other alternative than to leave the rebellion behind, accept the conformism and remain the frustrated teenagers. At least Holden and Todd do so – with the character of Neil, Weir points out that for some teenagers the frustration might have been so fierce that the only escape could have been suicide.

The last, third part of the analysis dealt with the theme of teenage frustration. This feeling is in both works generally triggered by conformism that the protagonists are exposed to, but both Salinger and Weir analyse this matter further and give particular reasons responsible for frustration. Salinger presents the inevitability of entering the

corrupted adult world or the lack of people who would understand teenagers as the main sources of this feeling, Weir then the necessity to accept the 'breadwinner' role and also the lack of understanding people.

Having presented the results of the analysis, it can be also concluded that they support the second aim of this thesis, and that was to prove that both Salinger's and Weir's portrayal of the post-war American society is negative.

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