an approach which recognized the radical reconfiguring of inter-familial and, more specifically, inter-generational relations which occurred in early Cold War fiction, drama and poetry. Gilles Deleuze and Paul Guattari, writing in the 1970s, would use the term “anti-Oedipal” to describe strategies they believed necessary to subvert the oppressive force of a still-extant patriarchal nuclear family. Dina Reissler deployed the term “de-Oedipalization” in her account of postwar representation of family but, in asserting that this process could be attributed to the growing power of women and the rise of the feminist movement, she nevertheless acknowledged continued male dominance within the family and the larger society. In discussing film, television and popular fiction from the fifties onward, she would contend feminists had no choice but to recognize the persistence of roles and relations associated with the Freudian “family romance” if they were to realize the emancipatory potential of the women’s movement. See her “Introduction: Plotting the Family” in Family Plots. The De-Oedipalization of Popular Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1-20.

2. Tennessee Williams’s early drama would seem, on the one level, to reproduce constraints built into the postwar sex-gender-family system. At the generative core Williams’s early postwar drama are issues of courtship, marriage and preservation of family cohesion. Laura Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie, Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire, Brick and Maggie are implicated in a rigid hetero-normative regime which prescribes roles in accordance with age and gender—thus the notion that social position is bound up with marital status once a subject has achieved a certain age, or, for instance, as in the case of Maggie, once married, the behavior of spouses accord with ideals of reciprocity, “marginality” in such instances the fate awaiting those who fail in either respect.

3. Those who fail or are thwarted in efforts to find themselves a secure position within the postwar sex-gender-family system are generally cast in heroic light in the early dramas. This failure (or, as the case may be, heroic defiance) is equated—whatever the actual age of the figures involved—with juvenility or attitudes normally associated with youth, i.e., an indeterminacy or irresolution with regard to commitments or any broader value orientation. Laura and Tom Wingfield, Blanche Dubois, Wayne Chance in Sweet Bird of Youth, or Brick in Cat, have achieved their legal majority in terms of birth age, but each is linked with the adolescent or the not-yet adult, in the sense that however deeply inscribed within the system or zealously they pursue mates, they have not yet assumed a position as conjugal partner or parent within a couple or family unit—or, as in the case of Blanche Dubois, a widow, or Brick, the seemingly impotent husband, have achieved but then relinquished that position.

5 Generation on Trial
Arthur Miller’s Theater of Judgment

In a series of essays published early in his career—"Tragedy and the Common Man," "The Nature of Tragedy," "The Shadow of the Gods"—Arthur Miller documents how as a dramatist he attempted to come to grips with the immediate postwar years—a time in which one could read, as Miller phrased it, "the black outlines of a fate that was not human." Reflecting back on the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the outbreak of the Cold War and the start of the nuclear arms race, Miller conjured up the history of his time as a series of "sheer, senseless events" (Theater Essays 180), a descent into a "chaos" (Theater Essays 179) in the face of which one could feel nothing but "helplessness" and "terror" (Theater Essays 179). Invoking images of a civilization in the grip of cataclysmic crisis, Miller would subsequently write of "an alienation unimaginable in its depth and scope having overwhelmed a generation of youth because of the war," and how "with the existence of the Bomb and the deepening hatred between East and West, there seemed nothing left to look forward to but the next beat of one's heart." If Miller was perhaps the first American writer of the immediate postwar period to write explicitly of the "alienation" of the young and to dramatize the experience of American youth in his work, he viewed the challenges confronting those coming of age in the postwar years as daunting, the war itself a consequence of a more fundamental breakdown which had fundamentally altered the relation of individual to society. Like other progressives of the period, Miller attributed his grim forebodings to something which had gone fundamentally askew in advanced industrial societies. Miller’s contemporary, John Clellon Holmes has spoken of “the burden of my generation in those first postwar years [as] this vast maelstrom of death; the concentration camps that proved too real; the genocide, these corpses in the mind . . . that feeling that something had gotten dreadfully, dangerously out of hand in our world” (215). In Miller’s attempts to explain the rise of fascism and the war which followed, he would condemn “Western society” for having left “so many of its people spiritually alienated, so empty that they long for a superior will to direct their lives” (Timebends 259). But if Miller could claim the concentration camps were simply “the logical conclusion of
writing the law" (Collected Plays I 281). Succumbing to the temptation of the young women leveling the charges, Danforth fails to maintain even a facade of legitimacy.

But The Crucible is only the most conspicuous instance of Miller's preoccupation with justice and his dramatizations of failed judicial systems. If the twentieth century had witnessed, in Miller's account, a descent into a barbaric, subhuman world where, as the German Major in Incident at Vichy observes, "There are no persons any more" (Collected Plays II 280), this points up the degree to which, not only in The Crucible, but in virtually each of Miller's postwar dramas, the possibility of justice has been fatally compromised. This may be the result of a fundamental misconception of justice, as in the case of Danforth, or because, as in A View From the Bridge, "the letter of the law" is exploited for personal ends. In Incident at Vichy, in which suspects are identified and interrogated on the basis of Nazi "Racial Laws," the legal code itself mocks at the very concept of justice. It may result from a situation where those holding judicial office simply abdicate in their responsibilities. Quentin, Miller's lawyer protagonist in After the Fall, speaks of "looking up one day ... and the bench was empty ... No judge in sight" (Collected Plays II 129)—an abdication correlated to the delegitimation of authority in whatever form and the collapse of civilized life into a brutal system of mass-inflicted death as symbolized in images of the death camps against which the action unfolds.

Whether courts can uphold fundamental principles of justice is the central issue on which Miller's first major success, All My Sons, hinges. It is a work in which Miller sought to put into practice his growing conviction the dramatist must intervene—the dramatic work becoming, as he phrases it, a "species of jurisprudence" (Theater Essays 194)—if respect for the principle of justice was to be restored. The significance of Greek tragedy—which embodied for Miller an ideal to which all serious drama should aspire—lay precisely in the way "The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of laws" (Theater Essays 6). Miller notes of his feelings following the Second World War that the "Greek tragedies—which I [had come] to love in the way a man at the bottom of a pit loves a ladder—sought to transform the vendetta and blood feud into the institutions of Law and justice" (Timebends 94). Describing how "the tragic hero was supposed to join the scheme of things by sacrifice," he asserts this can occur only once the hero "break[s] one of the profoundest laws, as Oedipus breaks a taboo, and therefore proves the existence of the taboo" (Roudané 91). In a view which echoes Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre VidalNaquet's now-classic reading of Greek tragedy, Miller has stated, "The great Greek plays taught the western mind the law. They taught the western mind how to settle tribal conflicts without murdering each other" (Roudané 374). Vernant and Vidal-Naquet had argued that "the true material of tragedy is the social thought peculiar to the city-state, in particular the legal thought that was then in the process of being evolved. The tragic writer's
use of a technical legal vocabulary underlies the affinities between the most favored tragic themes and certain cases that fell within the competence of the courts.” Vernet and Vidal-Naquet themselves would go on to assert: “Tragedy confronts heroic values (as found in myth) and ancient religious representation with the new modes of thought that characterize the advent of law within the city-state” (25–26). Miller, himself, viewed the law in its origins as rooted in a fundamental respect for and trust in others, in a commitment to the community which ultimately secures the place of the individual within it: “The preoccupation of the Greek drama with ultimate law was therefore an expression of a basic assumption of the people, who could not yet conceive that any could long prosper unless his polis prospered. The individual was at one with his society ...” (Theater Essays 32).

But what, in any more specific terms, would it mean for drama as a literary form to function as a "species of jurisprudence" in which "some part of it must take the advocate's role, something else must act in defense, and the entirety must engage the Law" (Collected Plays I 24–25)? In his essay "The Family in Modern Drama" (1956), Miller underscored the complexities of the task he had assigned himself. Observing that "it is like a rule of society that, as its time of troubles arrives, its citizens revert to a kind of privacy of life that excludes society, as though man at such times would like to banish society from his mind" (Theater Essays 82), Miller acknowledged the temptation to retreat into a private realm as an almost reflexive response to the horrors of war, the threat of nuclear cataclysm and the alienation of the postwar era. But it was also for this reason that he dismissed American drama of the time as "suffocatingly private" (Timebends 178), drama itself symptom of escape into a world of purely private concerns. He spoke scornfully of dramatists “confined to writing an Oedipus without the presence, an Oedipus whose catastrophe is private and unrelated to the survival of his people, an Oedipus who cannot tear out his eyes because there will be no standard by which he can judge himself” (Theater Essays 194, emphasis added). In contrast, Miller conceived of creating a drama which would overcome “the deep split between the private life of man and his social life” (Theater Essays 81).

But despite Miller's misgivings about the contemporary American theater, his own drama attests to the powerful claims of family, ties of kinship and the sense of security afforded by marriage and domestic life. Indeed, in Miller's view it was the immediacy and intimacy of the family—the proximity of family members to each other—which constituted the basis of “realism,” a mode, he asserted, which was “suited to express a primarily familial relation” (Theater Essays 69). In terms that echo Freud, Miller notes that “concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares before the time we were conscious of ourselves as selves” and he would add “what we feel is always more ‘real’ to us than what we know, and we feel the family relation while we can only know the social one. Thus the former is the very apotheosis of the real and has an inevitability and a foundation indisputably actual” (Theater Essays 81). In this sense, Miller came to envision the dramatist's task in terms of a double imperative: on the one side, to recognize claims exerted by "family" as "the very apotheosis of the real"; on the other, to preserve "an awareness as no generation was before that the larger units, the city, the nation, the world, that help make us and destroy us, are never far beyond our most intimate sense of life" (Theater Essays 173). If the restrictiveness of vision—the "banishing of society"—associated with the privacy and intimacy of the familial is symptomatic of a society in crisis, Miller's own early work in the wake of the Second World War and the outbreak of the Cold War reflected, on the one hand, the impulse to recreate and retreat into the security promised by marriage and family—into those relationships which Miller himself would characterize as the "apotheosis of the real"—and his drama would delve ever more deeply into the question and meaning of family: above all the role of the father in relation to the child. Given Miller's deep skepticism about authority in its established, institutional forms—courts, government, business—he nonetheless intimates that the familial relationship, grounded in the respect and depth of feeling one family member feels for the other, is, ideally, impervious to events in the public sphere and thus constitutes a realm from which any effort to reestablish the foundations of justice—trust, understanding of the other, empathy, commitment to those beyond oneself—had necessarily to begin.

Whereas Miller has situated his preoccupation with family and justice, in particular with the place of the father, in a specifically Jewish tradition and his conviction that "Jews have from their beginnings declared that god above all means justice before any other value ... we are the people of the book, the Bible, and the Bible means justice or it means nothing," he also invokes the figure of Job to suggest the scale of violence confronting human-kind: "Job, after all, is not complaining merely that he has lost everything; he is not some bourgeois caught in an economic depression. His bewilderment derives from a horrendous vision of a world without justice, which means a world collapsed into chaos and brute force. And if he is called up to have faith in god anyway, it is a god who in some mysterious manner does indeed still stand for justice, however inscrutable his design may be" (“Why Israel" 27, my emphasis). Viewed against this backdrop, Miller's figuration of the father in his drama is at odds in crucial respects with the Pentateuch and Mosaic ideals of the paternal as giver-of-the-law, as provider, protector and arbiter, of the father, in Miller's words, as “master of the earth”—ensuring that “civilization will be carried on” (Collected Plays I 190)—a figure whose status ultimately derives from the authority he wields within the family and the respect he is accorded by his children. Miller's father figures—Joe Keller, Willy Loman, Eddy Carbone, John Proctor, Quentin—are to be sure, in Miller's phrase, “deputies of the social,” representatives of larger social units (commerce, society, nation), but they are all profoundly compromised figures. Victims of their own ambitions and desires, of economic forces and ideological systems whose workings they never fully grasp, they point to
another, radically altered configuring of the family. As Miller's fathers seek to affirm their positions qua pater familias—uncompromising in the insistence with which they affirm their identities as "fathers" within the ever more restricted confines of the family—their actions have the effect of subverting their already fragile authority and undermining both the ideal of justice and the families they preside over.

But just as fathers are marked, in the solicitude they show, as both "excessively" paternal towards their children and unwitting victims, they confront an older or already adult son (or, as in A View From The Bridge, a surrogate daughter figure) who may initially love, respect or identify with the father—a figure in whom the claims of family are, at least initially, made unequivocally manifest—but who, in returning to or occupying a liminal space beyond the family, observes, assesses and, ultimately, passes judgment. Possessed of a degree of experience and a budding awareness of the wider world, Miller's adolescent or already adult child has yet to find his or her place in society and thus does not speak from a position of full adult responsibility, but precisely for this reason occupies a vantage point from which, in Miller's view, he or she can weigh the evidence and judge dispassionately. Using terms like those of Erikson, Eisenstadt, Feuer and other theorists of youth and the family in the postwar years, Miller was to note that "the viewpoint of the adolescent...is revolutionary"—one that "insists upon justice" (Theater Essays 193). In assigning the son (or daughter surrogate) the crucial task of indicting and judging those in positions of authority who fail in their responsibility to their families and to the larger society, Miller would seem to suggest, in a view similar to that of Palazzolo, that this occurs in terms of what I would call a "judicializing" of the family unit, a process whereby family roles are refitted as legal roles—those of "prosecutor," "defendant," "witness," "judge," "jury," "executioner"—the action itself mimicking that of a court proceeding.

If All My Sons exemplifies the powerful forces at work in the re-domesticating of American society in the early Cold War years, it also provided a template—a judicial-like structuring of the action—which became, in key respects, the basis for the configurations of character and plotting in the sequence of dramas Miller wrote from the late forties into the early sixties. The action takes place within and in immediate proximity to a single well-to-do family, but in its portrayal of the father and his younger son in their relation to nation, society, to the law and legal system and, ultimately to the concept of justice itself, the work underscores what Miller meant when he spoke of drama as "a species of jurisprudence." Acknowledging the traumatic effect of the war, the play's opening scenes juxtapose images of domestic stability and order—a comfortable suburban home, the reassuring companionship and conversation of neighbors—with the personal suffering, sense of loss and social upheaval associated with the war and its devastating violence. In the figures of the younger son, Chris Keller, the recently returned veteran eager to settle down, find a bride and get on with his life, and his father Joe Keller, the father the son has always looked up to, a self-made man who has risen to become a successful businessman whose firm has made an essential contribution to the war effort, the drama seems to stress the virtues of hard work and the ideals of a settled domestic life. The sole obstacle in the way of the son's desires is the mother, Linda Keller, who refuses to acknowledge the death of the older son Larry, a pilot reported missing earlier in the war. She has convinced herself he is still alive and refuses to countenance the younger son's affection for Ann Deever, Larry's fiancée—feelings the young woman, seeking to put her loss and the war behind her, seems ready to reciprocate. In the figure of the missing son and the mother's act of denial, the war lives on and continues to shape the lives of the Keller family.

Initially structured around a courtship plot—a young couple thwarted by a traumatized mother who cannot cope with wartime loss—the drama re-inscribes the mother's grief within a larger pattern of deception and denial centered on the father's arrest and trial during the war after his shop had dispatched faulty cylinder heads resulting in the deaths of American pilots. As Keller was not present on the day the parts were shipped—he had called in "sick"—Keller had the lower court's guilty verdict overturned on appeal and was released. Keller's partner, Steve Deever—Ann's father—also arrested and convicted of criminal negligence, remains in prison. In the eyes of the son, Keller has shown courage in standing up to his accusers, and the father himself is proud of his accomplishments. But his somewhat ambiguous account of the arrest and subsequent release leaves room for doubt about what has actually transpired. Whereas acknowledging to the son he was "guilty as hell," he unabashedly claims, "Except I wasn't, and there was a court paper in my pocket to prove I wasn't...Fourteen months later I had one of the best shops in the state, a respected man again" (Collected Plays 160).

If the drama initially endorses the central claims of family and the promise of generational continuity—the father serving as role model with whom the younger son identifies; the mother insisting, in her denial of the older son's death and efforts to exclude the older brother's fiancée, on the continued integrity of the family—the drama takes an abrupt turn in the second act when George Deever, Ann's brother and yet another one of Miller's many lawyer figures, arrives at the Keller home bearing new "testimony." Having visited the father in prison, he has again heard out his father's account of events, this time, however, convinced there has been a miscarriage of justice. Seeking to prevent his sister's marriage because, in his words, Joe Keller has "destroyed your family" (Collected Plays 100), George in effect reopens the case against Keller. In his attempt to convince Chris and Ann that incriminating evidence had been suppressed, George is at first simply rebuffed. Reiterating the court's judgment, Ann dismisses her brother's version as a rehash—"Dad told that whole thing in court"—and then underscores, in the guise of "character witness," her father's apparent failings.
Keller makes a persuasive case, and George is momentarily stymied. Indeed, on the verge of accepting Keller's story, he seems momentarily relieved that his questions have been answered and the case finally put to rest. But as George and the Killers, seemingly reconciled, banter amiably, George casually compliments his adversary on his good health: "Joe, you're amazingly the same." His guard momentarily down, Keller responds, "I ain't got time to be sick."—except, he hastily adds, for "my flu during the war" on the day he was absent from his shop. Equally inattentive, his wife comments that her husband "hasn't been laid up in fifteen years" (Collected Plays I 111). George picks up on the inconsistencies instantly—"She said you've never been sick." Under renewed grilling, Keller loses his grip and the alibi Keller has concocted is revealed to be pure fabrication; indeed almost instantly, as far as George is concerned, the essential point has been made: "What happened that day, Joe?" (Collected Plays I 111). Cornered, the wife admits to George and Chris she has known the truth all along, and that Keller had perjured himself.

As the implications of the mother's admission sink in, Chris—here now in the role of judge and jury—offers the father a final chance to clear his name: "I'm listening, God almighty, I'm listening" (Collected Plays I 115). Seeking to exonerate himself, Keller cites mitigating circumstances, the pressures of business at the height of the war—"a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business"—but then invokes the "genealogical imperative" and his responsibilities to his son as a father: "Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you ... when would I have another chance to make something for you" (Collected Plays I 115). When the mother explains—"There's something bigger than the family to him"—Keller retorts: "Nothin' is bigger—I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head" (Collected Plays I 120).

With the reading of Larry's final letter to Ann, in which the older son announced his intention to commit suicide out of the shame he feels on receiving news of his father's arrest, Keller's loyalty to family—and his conviction that he can and must do whatever it takes for the sake of his sons—is both implicated in the older son's decision to take his life and identified as the motive for his own courtroom denial of guilt. At this point Chris has reached his own verdict and is ready to deliver his father up for a new trial, an action preempted when the father, having accepted the son's judgment and thus acknowledging the son's authority, effectively metes out his own punishment, "executing" himself in the act of suicide with which the drama concludes.

In transforming the family into a tribunal-like structure—or where, as in The Crucible, the husband smitten with an adolescent servant girl finds himself accused both at home and, in reverting to his role as husband and father, by the girl he sends away—Miller created a dynamic which informed the sequence of dramas culminating in After the Fall. In each of his major works, lawyer figures play a critical role, not only in The Crucible, All My
Sons and After the Fall, in which Quentin, Miller’s semi-autobiographical protagonist is identified as a lawyer, but equally in A View from the Bridge and Death of a Salesman. A View from the Bridge dramatizes an incident narrated by the Italian-American lawyer Alfieri, whose specialty is immigration law. Eddy Carbone, a longshoreman, agrees to harbor two Sicilians smuggled into the country—there is no work in war-ravaged Italy and with their earnings in America the men can support poverty-stricken families at home. When the younger, Rodolpho, falls in love with Eddy’s ward and niece and reveals his hopes of marriage, Eddy, consumed by jealousy, consults with the lawyer Alfieri on American immigration law. Acting from purely personal motive—incestuous love for his niece—Eddy reports the two men to the authorities. Whereas acting technically within the law—in accord with what the law demands of him as citizen—Eddy is motivated, as the drama makes clear, by purely personal feelings of jealousy, and his act construed as a crime against two men who have been smuggled into America to find work and send money to their impoverished families in Sicily.

In Death of a Salesman, Bernard, the son of Charley, Willy’s neighbor, and Biff Loman’s boyhood friend, has grown up to become a successful attorney. When the distraught Willy meets him later in the drama, Bernard is on his way to Washington to try a case before the Supreme Court. It is at this point that Bernard, in best legal fashion, first puts to Willy the question of what has happened to Biff, the son who at the age of thirty-four has become a petty thief and itinerant laborer: “I’ve often thought of how strange it was that . . . he’d given up his life. What happened in Boston, Willy? (Collected Plays I 190)—a question culminating in Willy’s confession-like reenactment of the adulterous betrayal which, in Biff’s eyes, is emblematic of Willy’s failure as a husband and father. In its structuring of the interaction between father and son, where Willy first passes judgment on the son and then, subsequently, Biff reverses the charges—“We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house”—and brings an indictment against the father, who insists “I won’t take the rap” (Collected Plays I 215–216), the play again exemplifies how essentially legalistic perceptions of character and event inform Miller’s understanding of both the parent/child relations and dramatic structure.

But if for all of its tribunal-like elements the action of All My Sons unfolds within the confines of a single family, the final verdict (Miller describes Keller being “arraigned” by the son) bespeaks a vision of justice grounded in the son’s experience with peers in a world beyond the family: that of wartime combat where, in the example of his men’s readiness to sacrifice themselves for each other, “a new thing was made . . . a kind of responsibility . . . man for man” (Collected Plays I 85)—an ideal of solidarity which Miller explicitly identifies with youth and, in this instance, the son figure. Miller’s effort to fashion a drama where the son’s vision of young men respecting each other as equals and ready to sacrifice themselves to protect the lives of the others was intended as a reaffirmation of a world ruled according to principles of justice, a world ready to embrace “others,” which Miller, tellingly, described as a “realm when we see beyond parents . . . where the father is after all not the final authority, that area where he is the son too” (Theater Essays 194). But if the recognitions occur in the context of a family, Miller stresses here that the function of the drama in helping us to grasp this principle lies precisely in the intimacy—the glimpse into a private world—into which only the drama offers access. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet had noted, in a comment key to understanding both the legal and meta-legal aspects of drama, that ultimately “tragedy is something quite different from a legal debate. It takes as its subject the man actually living out this debate, forced to make a decisive choice, to orient his activity in a universe of ambiguous values where nothing is ever stable” (26). In enabling an audience to see and share the experience of those who have known vulnerability and loss and who, for that very reason, are best qualified to speak about the need for justice in a world where the claims of every person—even the weakest and most vulnerable—will be recognized, and their persons and rights protected, the drama becomes a vehicle not simply, as Miller would argue, for the restoration of justice and a rehumanized social and political life. In his insistence on vulnerability here, the vulnerability of sons at war and, in that vulnerability, recognizing that they must be prepared to help one another—as the basis for rethinking through the meaning of justice, Miller was in fact to acknowledge implicitly the degree to which the ideal of justice remains, paradoxically, indebted to a certain image of the familial or, more specifically, of those, i.e., the sons, who retain a capability for seeing society—the words and actions of adults—for what they are. Indeed, it is ultimately in terms of what the child represents in terms of the “survival of the race,” that the family—and the recognitions which sustain it—assumes the meaning it does for Miller. Whereas Miller asserted that “a great drama is a great jurisprudence,” he would also state that “all plays we call great are ultimately involved with some aspect of a single problem. Is it this: How may a man make of the outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change . . . if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love . . . the sense of identity and honor which all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?” (Theater Essays 73).

NOTES

3. Miller’s faith in the power of drama to effect change—to point the way back to the just society—leads him to the claim a dramatic work must always be judged in terms of “its ultimate relevancy to the survival of the race” (Theater
6 Trauma, Mourning and Self-(Re)Fashioning in J. D. Salinger's
The Catcher in the Rye
Reinventing Youth in Cold War America

While J. D. Salinger's place in American postwar culture is inextricably intertwined with the act of self-silencing with which in the mid-sixties he terminated his career as publishing author, he would become like a handful of his contemporaries—Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs—an iconic figure, his life identified with his fiction and, in particular, his most famous character, the sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield, protagonist and narrator of The Catcher in the Rye. In the only interview he ever granted, Salinger would claim that his "boyhood was very much the same as that of the boy in the book" (Alexander 3) and Salinger's renunciation of public life and withdrawal to rural Vermont and into silence would seem to have been the fulfillment of desires Holden repeatedly gives expression to in the novel. If Salinger went to extraordinary lengths to ensure his privacy, his silence has, nevertheless, come to be read as a "text" in its own right. Ian Hamilton has used the term "sequel" to suggest that Salinger's silence should be viewed as an expressive act which, for all it did not say, lent a stamp of authenticity to the published work, in particular The Catcher in the Rye (137). Louis Menand has noted that "Holden's unhappiness . . . helped to encourage the sense, encouraged by Salinger's own later manner, that there was no distinction between Salinger and his characters" (86). Given Salinger's early claims about the sources of his fiction and the extent to which The Catcher in the Rye has been read as prefiguring the subsequent life, the authorial self (or what we know of it) has perhaps more than incidental bearing for any account of the novel and the teenage boy at the center of it. But for all the speculation Salinger's act of self-erasure has prompted, none of the explanations put forward have been particularly convincing, and what his silence signifies remains as much of an enigma today as it was fifty years ago when Salinger disappeared from public view.

In contrast to the life, the impact of the novel has posed considerably less of a problem. For many years, critical opinion held the book to be one of the first shots fired across the bows of the fifties Cold War consensus, Holden the prototype of the disaffected postwar teenager "terrified of regimentation" (Seelye 30). More recent assessments, in relocating the novel within the political cross-currents of the Cold War, have in part endorsed a reading
of the novel as an “indispensable manual” for disaffected youth (Hamilton 155). Leeron Medovoi has read the novel as giving voice to the progressivism of the thirties, Holden personifying “the Jeffersonian human-rights focused, democratic America of the West in its struggle against the Hamiltonian, property-rights-oriented, capitalist America of the East” (“Democracy” 279). Whereas Medovoi goes on to suggest this critique, “located in the adolescent boy where it belonged” (268), was merely symbolic, others have read the work as reflecting the political repressiveness of early Cold War America. Alan Nadel has contended Holden’s verbal behavior—inquisitorial, confessional, self-indicting—was more of a piece with the “testimony” by witnesses called before the House Un-American Activities Committee than a call-to-arms to newly dissident youth (71–89). Whereas I would take issue with Medovoi’s reading—there is no evidence to suggest that Salinger as a young man had links with the Left or any deeper interest in progressive causes—I would also question Nadel’s view, given Holden Caulfield’s caustic criticism of the American military. I would, nevertheless, agree with Nadel that there is a “testimonial” dimension of Holden’s first-person narrative that points to an underlying pattern of fear, paranoia and guilt. I would see this as having less to do, however, with some implicit anticommunist bias than with a broader dynamic informing the early Cold War years with memories still-fresh of a war which had unleashed death on an unimaginable scale, had witnessed the dropping of the atomic bomb and, with the outbreak of the Cold War and the start of the nuclear arms race, augured the possibility of a new round of conflict that would dwarf anything that had come before. Given the bouts of grief, anxiety, despair and rage which punctuate Holden’s narrative, the question of who or what is being “indicted” and for what reasons can be more productively viewed, in light of Salinger’s claims about his own youth serving as model for his protagonist, in relation to events directly connected to Salinger’s own life and what I would see as a critical shift of perception on the part of the older, professionally successful writer as he looked back on his high-school years at the Valley Forge Military Academy, his subsequent induction into the US Army and the part he played in the war, both as a writer and combatant. Whereas we know that Salinger was an early supporter of American entry into the war and sought to enlist in mid-1941 before the US was formally at war, his attitudes toward war and his response in the wake of Pearl Harbor—“outrage” and “powerful desire to make a contribution”—were also not untypical of the time (Hamilton 155). Initially turned down for medical reasons, he was called up for duty in April 1942, four months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Assigned to an infantry intelligence unit, he was among those assigned to the first wave of landings at Normandy on D-Day, and would go on to see action in major campaigns in the European theater. We also know that Salinger’s career as writer, which went into high gear after he received his first acceptance from The New Yorker immediately before entering military service, received a boost from the war. He continued to write throughout the war, much of this work directly in support of the war effort. Of the twenty-two stories which he published from 1940 to the end of 1945, half address war-related themes, mostly celebrating wartime heroism, army comradeship and awareness that sacrifice, while tragic, was necessary. In “The Last Day of the Last Furlough,” (1944) the protagonist proclaims his eagerness to defend the country against aggressors: “I believe in this war…. I believe in killing Nazis and Fascists and Japs because there’s no other way I know of” (“The Last Day” 10). For readers familiar with Salinger’s postwar work, the views expressed here—completely at odds with the material and tone of the later fiction—can prove somewhat disconcerting. It was nevertheless these stories which, in tune with wartime sentiment, secured Salinger’s early professional reputation. Editors were eager to publish them, and they suggest that, more than simply in agreement with wartime policies, Salinger felt compelled to propagandize on their behalf. “The Hang of It,” a story about a young clumsy recruit following in the footsteps of his officer father, published in 1941, was selected for inclusion in a War Department anthology of stories distributed to soldiers in the field. Salinger’s claim that he refused republication simply because these stories represented the “gaucheries of youth” (his phrase when bringing suit in 1974 to ban a pirate edition) loses something of its credibility (Paul Alexander 250).

Equally clear, however, is the transformation which occurred once Salinger had been exposed to combat. Even for a combat unit, Salinger’s Fourth Army Division, as Paul Alexander has reported, would be caught up in some of “the most bitterly contested fighting of the Second World War” and suffered “an unusually high number of dead and wounded”—indeed, “sixty casualties a day” were not uncommon, and in encounters like the Battle of Hürtgen Forest—now recognized as the bloodiest and most futile engagement of the war—“casualties reached two hundred a day” (Paul Alexander 101–102). Salinger himself, although never wounded, was hospitalized for psychiatric reasons following VE day. As Alexander observes, the war was an experience which changed Salinger’s “patriotic, almost romantic view of war and the military forever” (100). Salinger’s daughter Margaret, in a memoir largely focused on her father, has stressed that “While the war was often in the foreground of our family life, it was always in the background. It was the point of reference that defined everything else in relation to it…. As long as I’ve known him, my father has never taken being warm and dry and not being shot at for granted…. The constant presence of the war, as something not really over, pervaded the years I lived at home” (44). But it is something more than simply the loss of “romantic” illusions about the war and the cause in the name of which it had been fought. Given what happens to his combat veterans in stories published after the war—the unnamed narrator (who suffers a breakdown) in “For Esme—With Love and Squalor” (1950), Seymour, who commits suicide with a German pistol, in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948)—it can be surmised that Salinger’s battlefield
experience was truly nightmarish, something which could render one terminally unfit for civilian life. The psychic disabilities suffered by Salinger's combatants suggest that the war and the experience of trauma—resulting from what Robert Jay Lifton refers to as a "death encounter" which has become "central to [one's] psychological experience"—remains a key to any reading of Salinger's work (Caruth 128). Indeed, Salinger's career is marked by an epochal divide centered in a personal and collective experience of trauma, which opened up as Americans took stock of the costs of victory and grasped the new strategic realities of the Cold War. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have referred to the Second World War as the "watershed trauma of our times"—not an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially not over, a history whose repercussions are omnipresent" (xiv). In the wake of massive casualties, the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, trauma was to become, as Ronald Granofsky asserts, the defining experience of the second half of the twentieth century: "the shock at the destructive potential in human depravity given free rein by technology inconceivable before 1945" giving rise to what he has called the "trauma novel" (11).

Whereas theorists are in general agreement about the factors precipitating trauma and its immediate effects—"a psychologically distressing event outside the range of usual human experience generating intense fear, terror, and helplessness" (Granofsky 16)—they also stress the complex responses on the part of victims seeking to come to grips with traumatic shock. As Kali Tal notes, the subject is under a compulsion to "tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community" (21). However, theorists have also observed how, under the impact of trauma, perception and memory are suspended: "no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead, a void, a hole is found" (Caruth 6). Anne Whitehead has argued, in a comment of relevance to Salinger and his subsequent lapse into silence, that the traumatic event is often "not fully acknowledged at the time it occurs...and only becomes an event at some later point" (6).

But while suggesting that a spectrum of dysfunctional behaviors may be experienced by trauma victims, theorists have also pointed to strategies by which victims seek to come to grips with its effects. István Deák refers to trauma victims retreating into "idyllic memories of a mythicized past" (38). Granofsky writes of a "fragmentation of the self which yields in turn to a phase of "regression"—which can mark either a first step towards return to "normal" life, or a development which reinforces the trauma victim's feelings of isolation and vulnerability (18). In key respects, Salinger's postwar work fits with this pattern of regression and return. The opening section of "For Esmé" recounts in nostalgic fashion a visit prior to the D-Day landings made by "Sgt. X," the narrator, to a church in a Devon village where he listens to a children's choir and his encounter in a teashop with an English girl he observes in the church. Even as the story goes on to record the harrowing symptoms of combat-induced trauma, the narrative exhibits a strategy adopted as the authorial self sought to come to terms with the war and with its outcome; by the end of the story the narrator is on the road to recovery. The first fully articulated instance in Salinger's writing of an adolescent possessed of redemptive force, Esmé assumes her curative powers partly because of her link to an idyllic episode prior to the narrator's traumatization, partly for the poise she maintains in the face of her own overwhelming loss (her father's wartime death). Significantly, in its switch from third-person "impersonal" to a first-person, more intimate account, the narrative marks the turn to the fictional, "testimonial" form that becomes a hallmark of Salinger's postwar writing.

This retrospective tendency is mirrored more broadly in Salinger's postwar fiction, most notably in The Catcher in the Rye. Having pointed to any number of parallels between the youthful Salinger's life and his protagonist's narrative, biographers have lent credence to the view that Holden is "a character whose curriculum vitae is in almost every detail like the author's own" (Hamilton 12). In terms of setting and Holden's age, experience and social background, the novel evokes what would have been an earlier, simpler, "innocent," pre-trauma phase of life. Enough in the novel—accounts of student antics and the tedium of dormitory life at "Pencey Prep," tales of Manhattan nightlife, Holden's bantering about girls and sex—has the ring of truth and would seem to bolster the autobiographical claim. But there are enough disparities between the life and the work as to suggest other, less transparent intentions at work. There is little about the Caulfield family (with exception of an East Side residence and privileged social status) which resembles Salinger's own: Salinger had no older brother, no deceased younger brother, nor, for that matter, a younger sister—all key figures in Holden's narrative—nor does the record suggest that Salinger ever tried to run away from school. On the contrary, evidence points to Salinger having been a reasonably well-adjusted, above-average student who was selected editor of the class yearbook and participated in sport and club activities. He does not seem to have caused school authorities any difficulties, nor, for that matter, as a young man was he ever hospitalized for psychiatric or other reasons (Hamilton 25–31). It would, I think, be safe to say that Salinger's youth was remarkably un-Holdenish.

But if, in evoking a youthful past, the novel points to denial of the sort symptomatic of trauma, trauma-associated affects repeatedly break through the surface of a text one critic goes so far as to describe, somewhat oddly, as "transparently charming" and "hereof of violence" (Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed" 569, 571). Viewed as an instance of "trauma fiction"—both in its expression of affects specific to trauma and its reticence in naming the sources of such affects—the narrative exhibits the maneuvering by which the authorial self sought to work through his tormented relation to the war: both as traumatized combatant but also in the perhaps more guilt-inducing role of a professional writer who had given enthusiastic backing to the war.
effort. Whereas Salinger himself was able to resume his career with little difficulty—suggesting a degree of psychic resilience—equally clear is the self-censorship exercised with regard to his wartime experience. Unlike, Salinger's contemporaries, Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, James Jones and other writers who drew on their experience of combat to write critically acclaimed novels, Salinger would allude to the war and his military experience only in the most oblique fashion. Whitehead has nonetheless noted that "trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual to be recorded at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which insistently and intrusively returns" (6). Thus, even as Salinger sets about writing a novel on his preferred subject—the lives of "young people"—the text betrays the workings of something other than a writer's recollections of adolescent antics. It is in such terms—a reframing of early life in the wake of the psychically disfiguring events which subsequently transpired—that one can account for Holden's erratic, occasionally baffling behavior. Why does a gregarious, intellectually alert, emotionally receptive young man simultaneously find himself repeatedly in the grip of catatonic despair and suicidal bouts of depression? Always open to others and ready to respond on equal terms, Holden displays a certain affability, but he also ultimately indicts and calls the whole of society to account for some unnamed hurt, a society from which he feels compelled at moments, in his visions of retreat to the New England woods or the far West, to escape at all costs. Referring to "the unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, to take in with no end and no limit," Felman characterizes extreme trauma as "unerasable and untranscendable" (Caruth 35-6). Incapable of forgetting, the victim finds the experience itself incommunicable—an aspect of trauma proposed in Holden's narrative by the absence of explicit reference to the war—and yet everything the posttraumatic subject comes to know and see of the world is viewed through the lens of the trauma-inducing, reality-transforming event.

Thus if Catcher would seem to exemplify the traumatized victim's return to the pre-trauma past, that moment—adolescence and school life—is presented as anything but idyllic. For considerable stretches of the narrative, Holden is in a state of numbness, near-suicidal depression. Read as exemplifying the postwar teenager's "spiritual odyssey," an adolescent's quest for identity or the uncertainties associated with youth in the Cold War era, it also attests to conditions—injury, illness, madness, grief, suicide—which mark it as something more than a Bildungsroman à l'américaine (Steinle 128). Personifying, on the one hand, the affluence, mobility, spontaneity, outspokenness associated with the assertive postwar American "teenager," Holden is for the greater part of the narrative in a liminal state; having run off from Pencey Prep, he is isolated and alone, obsessed with thoughts of death and dying, fraught with fears of illness and paralysis, and periodically given to outbursts of violent rage—the roots of which would seem to lie with his grief over Allie, the much-loved younger brother, dead of leukemia. Indeed, at points, it would appear that Holden is in a state of near-inconsolable mourning, his narrative repeatedly veering into elegiac recollection of the deceased sibling. In the grip of this seemingly insurmountable grief, Holden becomes ever more grimly convinced of his own imminent death—an example of what Dori Laub alludes to when he speaks of the trauma victim fearing "that fate will strike again" (Felmen and Laub 67). Haunted by memories of Allie, alone in his dormitory room, ("so lonesome... I almost wished I was dead"), Holden impulsively bolts, only to find himself in a Manhattan hotel room again alone and succumbing to thoughts of "jumping out the window" (Salinger, Catcher 42, 94). When not contemplating suicide, he is convinced that, like Allie, he is suffering a fatal illness: "a tumor on the brain" (51); "pneumonia" (139); "cancer" that would have him "dead in a couple of months" (176). Assaulted by Maurice the bellhop, he lies doubled-up on the floor certain "I was dying... I was drowning" (93), lines which momentarily betray the experience of combat, just as at a later point, Holden imagines himself with a "bullet in my guts" (135). Wandering about Manhattan, Holden is suddenly struck by fears of instantaneous extinction: a "feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street" (178). Felman speaks of trauma as the feeling that one is "impotent to act" (Caruth 35). Holden here, again, feels himself powerless to affect events: "I thought I'd just go down... and nobody'd ever see me again" (178).

But if trauma theorists have underscored the aspect of regression that would seem to lie behind Salinger's evocation of a pre-trauma phase of life, they also speak of the need "to move on" in an act that Granofsky terms "reunification" (18). Thus if Holden's repeated attempts to contact former classmates and girlfriends may attest to postwar youth's orientation to the peer group, it also suggests the desire to reestablish some more normal social life following his crisis and departure from Pencey Prep. An obsessive user of telephones, incessantly calling to arrange dates and make appointments, Holden experiences a compulsive need to talk. He strikes up conversations with anyone who will listen—mothers of classmates, nuns, taxi drivers, tourists from Iowa, hatcheck girls—and bears a special grudge against those who refuse to respond. Indeed, failure to respond to his overtures is a principal criteria by which he judges others: "That's the way you can always tell a moron. They never want to discuss anything" (39). Priding himself on his own moral standards, Holden nevertheless picks up girls he meets by chance; calls the reportedly promiscuous girlfriend of a friend in hopes of a date; has a young call girl sent to his hotel room (with whom he then only wishes to talk). But virtually every exchange ends in miscommunication and a deepening sense of isolation. As the impossibility of communicating—and of eliciting a response—becomes ever more apparent, there occurs what Henry Krystal, in the case of trauma victims, perceives as a "destruction of basic trust," both in others and oneself (Caruth 80).

In a narrative fashioned around a protagonist in perpetual motion who, in the course of three days, experiences dozens of encounters, there is little sense of real forward movement or psychological development. If anything,
Holden’s succession of thwarted exchanges propels him inexorably towards the final crisis which lands him in the California sanatorium from which he will eventually tell his story. Against the backdrop of rebuffed companionship, it is Holden’s identification with his dead brother that ultimately provides whatever underlying continuity the narrative possesses. The depth of Holden’s attachment to Allie is testimony to his capacity for loyalty and genuine compassion, but it is also the most telling symptom of his own morbidity. Whatever consolations he finds in evocations of the younger brother and efforts to communicate—“I was talking to my brother Allie . . . don’t let me disappear” (178)—they only underscore his own psychic fragility. If the significance of Allie’s death would seem clear enough—it marks the passing of childhood, a life-stage which the sixteen-year-old Holden, despite yearning for the checker-playing innocence of his own childhood, recognizes as irrecoverable—it can also be read as a projection of what within the subject has been “killed off.” As brother-figure, Allie is a double, embodying a death Holden experiences as virtually his own. In a culminating moment, Holden sits alone at night in Central Park, rapt in a vision of himself reunited with the deceased sibling. In despair, he plays out the funeral scenario: “I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father. Especially my mother, because she still isn’t over my brother Allie yet” and goes on to reflect in terms that convey both anger and morbid self-denigration on how his remains will be disposed of: “I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river” (139–40). Refusal to have his death commemo-rated only attests to the state ofunken, blank abjection in which he finds himself. His subsequent return to his parents’ Manhattan apartment is less a homecoming than final leave-taking. In a postmortem vision of himself, he imagines the reaction of his younger sister: “how old Phoebe would feel if I . . . died” (140). Nearing the end of his wanderings, he finds himself at the Natural History Museum, immersed in a tomb in the Egyptian Room, staring what is in effect a mock-funeral. Having contemplated the epitaph on his tombstone, he retreats to the museum bathroom where, for reasons not altogether clear, he falls unconscious. Again stressing the proximity of death, he is certain “I could’ve killed myself” (184).

If the victim, fixated on the trauma-inducing event, persists in feeling exposed in ways which lead to a never-ending search for refuge—ultimately in death itself—the condition also provokes rage, a lashing-out at those perceived as responsible for the injury that has been inflicted. For those “wounded by reality” this can, ultimately, be everyone and everything one encounters. Thus whereas Holden’s aggression towards his roommate (to the point of provoking Stradlater into beating him bloody) bespeaks adolescent jealousy, his subsequent outbursts are directed at an ever-expanding array of targets: the older brother, a writer who has “prostituted” himself to the Hollywood studios; the film studios for their bogus renditions of war; writers like Hemingway who glorified violence; his school’s benefactor, the undertaker Ossenburger who asks “Jesus to send him a few more stiff” (14).

His most pointed comments, however, are reserved for the American military and those responsible for the threat of ever more catastrophic violence. In a narrative remarkably reticent about specifying the causes of Holden’s condition, it is his endorsement of his writer-brother’s comments about the American military—an “Army practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were”—and recognition of the catastrophic implications of the atomic bomb which come closest to accounting for his anger and why it is “you got to hate everybody in the world” (126–8). In a line where one hears the voice not of the teenager on the run, but an authorial self which has suffered the brutalizing effect of combat and a war, which despite the peace, has never really ended, Holden declares: “If there’s another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad” (127). The eager supporter of war has turned deserter. In a comment in which feelings of anger, despair and resigned visions of mass annihilation converge, he swears, “I’m going to sit right the hell on top of [the atomic bomb]” (127).

In the allusions to firing squads, atomic bombs, self-immolation and suicide, we sense not only outwardly directed rage, but a redirection of aggression onto the self. If the novel reflects a world where what Freud referred to as “pathological mourning” has become the norm—a condition in which the depth of the subject’s identification with the deceased object (both Holden with his dead younger brother Allie, and the author with an imagined earlier “self”) inhibits the working through of the subject’s grief—it is here that Holden’s repeatedly provocative behavior begins to point to a deeper-lying counter-dynamic at work within the narrative. Whereas the novel evokes a world radically at odds with what is known about Salinger’s relatively uneventful years at the Valley Forge school, it is precisely the “normalcy” of his early years and adolescence that constitutes the more vexing issue the authorial self seeks to come to grips with. A victim who recognizes himself as a perpetrator, as having contributed to his own victimization, Salinger comes to perceive himself as having acquiesced in a social and political system complicit in the making of a world of unspeakable horror. If the novel describes a guilt-driven death wish, it also ultimately seeks to suggest how the authorial self has suffered through might in fact have been avoided. The novel can, in this sense, be viewed less as a post-trauma effort to recapture “lost time” than as a radical rewriting of early life, prompted by profound disavowal of what the now adult, authorial self had once been and lived through as a young man—a revision of early life which provides a measure of the guilt the older, “adult” authorial self had come to feel about his wartime experience and his initial eagerness to “make a contribution.” The novel can be read both as self-indictment and as representing a means by which Salinger could make reparation—in the form of a message and model to readers—and thus come, in his own way, to terms with his participation in a war he now disavows. In this sense, the novel seeks less to evoke an “innocent” pre-trauma phase of life, than promote attitudes embodied in a character, Holden, who, in condemning war, the American military and
adults have not been there to perform the tasks associated with the parental role—first and foremost, that of providing a supportive, non-threatening environment in which children can grow up without fear. But to fulfill the parental-like role he would ideally see himself playing and to do what was required if civilization was not to end in debacle—genuine concern for children and the well-being in general of others, the open display of affection, the possibility of friendship—require, the novel suggests in Holden's wish to move to Vermont or Colorado, that one distance oneself as much as possible from modern American society.

If Salinger has been chastised for the overtly didactic element in his fiction—Joan Didion chides Salinger and his predilection "for giving instructions for living"—this was, in a sense, precisely his intention (79). It was an impulse which becomes more pronounced in the final sequence of Seymour Glass narratives in which Holden's diatribe against militarism becomes aggressively communicated pacifist doctrine. In *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1955) the horrors of war are such that even the most eloquent statements in its defense can only be condemned. Referring to the nation's best known apologia for the "ultimate sacrifice," the narrator Buddy Glass (yet another of the authorial self's avatars) reenvisions the scene of Lincoln's Gettysburg address: "51,112 men were casualties at Gettysburg, and if someone had to speak at the anniversary of the event, he should simply have come forward and shaken his fist at his audience and then walked off—that is, if the speaker was an absolutely honest man" (46). Salinger's silence is, I would suggest, precisely of the sort his revisionary Lincoln ("honest Abe") has recourse to at Gettysburg—the silence of "an absolutely honest man" in the face of hideous horror and mass suffering. It is in these terms that we might understand the meaning of Salinger's withdrawal to rural Vermont (and thus as an adult and professionally successful writer acting upon his adolescent hero's wish to escape a world with which neither Holden nor Salinger ever came fully to terms) and his self-enforced silence—a silence which spoke of precisely what it could not say.

those in society who seem to be oblivious to the larger issues, gives voice to views which are the antithesis of what the authorial self had held in his own youth.

The Holden figure can be read as a composite of voices and life stages: "adolescent" in terms of language, age, physique, generational status; "adult" in terms of the loss and grief he experiences; "post-adult" in terms of his refusal to accept the cataclysmic impasse to which those in authority have brought the world. However much in sympathy with adolescence, the novel is composed not from the position of "arrested development," but from the vantage point of an adult who, in going back over his own life, relives that earlier moment in terms of his subsequent life course and indicts himself for complacency and not having known better. What he puts in the place of that self is not a lost, adolescent subjectivity—which in Salinger's case was in fact, he would recognize after his wartime experience, an essentially complicitous self—but a reconstructed, rewritten, monitory version of self, which had he had a clearer understanding, would have acted differently.

In this sense, the figuring of adolescence, however much of a message to a younger generation it was intended to be, is equally a message to a broader public on the part of a man who has achieved recognition and professional success and, at this point, effectively initiates a process of renouncing the role he has played in a society into which he has been accepted. In an early critique of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Leslie Fiedler was to make caustic reference to Salinger as a "teenage impersonator" ("Up From Adolescence" 58). The dismissiveness of Fiedler’s comment aside, it gets at a crucial aspect of the ventriloquism that informs the Holden character. Just as it would be wrong to identify the novel as an attempt to recapture a lost, "innocent" past—the point is precisely that this past was not innocent—it would also be wrong to argue that *The Catcher in the Rye* is simply concerned with issues of generational difference. Ultimately, it is much more about what "adolescence" itself has come to signify in terms of political and cultural role in a traumatized (not merely "compromised" or "corrupted") world for which adults continue to bear responsibility. If Holden repeatedly anticipates his own death, and expresses anger at those he sees responsible for the world of violence in which he lives, he also seems, in the face of these intimations of mortality, to commit himself to survival. It is finally with reference to what it takes to preserve and sustain life that Holden, in the image of himself as the "catcher in the rye" ready to protect the lives of unsuspecting children unaware of the prospects the world holds out, adopts in certain crucial ways an adult, parental-like sense of his role and mission. Thus, the anger, discontent and rebelliousness Holden comes to articulate are not so much a matter of resisting, rejecting or avoiding adulthood or of wishing—oedipal-fashion—to displace the parent (and, indeed, for all the criticism he voices of various adults and their "phony" ways, his comments about his parents and the grief the mother continues to experience for Ally suggest sympathy and respect for what his parents have suffered). It has rather to do with the feeling that
Shortly after Humbert Humbert achieve his goal of possessing Lolita, the daughter of his recently deceased wife Charlotte Haze, the young girl—an apparently willing accomplice in the “violation of her childhood and her body” (Pifer 85)—announces she is “a bad, bad girl . . . a juvenile delinquent” (113). Whether intended as coy self-caricature, deliberate provocation or assertive self-identification, Lolita’s use of the term “delinquent” and the seeming delight she takes in her sexual escapade with an older man played into fifties anxieties about American youth—whether potentially deviant and thus challenging postwar norms regulating sex and marriage or too easily susceptible to the consumerism and vulgarity of postwar affluence. Sexually precocious, eager to flout parents and teachers, Lolita was perceived by early critics and reviewers to be a distinctly more disturbing figure than Humbert Humbert, the middle-aged man who pursues, possesses and sexually abuses her. Whereas Lolita the novel would meet with widespread acclaim when published in the US in 1957, Lolita the fictional character was routinely—at times, savagely—disparaged. Dorothy Parker described her as “a dreadful little creature, selfish, vulgar, hard, foul-tempered” (9); Lionel Trilling, famously describing Humbert as the “last lover,” had no sympathy for the object of Humbert’s passion, who, Trilling argued, was “not innocent” and had “very few emotions to be violated” (14); Thomas Molnar spoke of Lolita as a “spoiled sub-teenager with a foul mouth, a self-offered target for lechers, movie-magazine editors . . . a corrupt little animal” (12). Despite Nabokov’s claims that his fiction eschewed the topical—“I was never interested in what is called the literature of social comment . . . Politics and economics . . . leave me supremely indifferent” (qtd. Booker 70)—he had created in Lolita a figure whose behavior spoke directly to a major public issue, what Alfred Appel would refer to as “the Teen and Sub-teen Tyranny” of the time (xlviii). As Marie Winn observes, Lolita, “filthy in thought and mind,” displayed distinctly delinquent tendencies, a figure who “seemed to violate” the image of the innocent child, something, she adds, that “America held sacred” (Pifer 84).

If critics would subsequently seek to shift attention from what were perceived as the less savory aspects of Lolita’s behavior to the abuse she suffers at the hands of her middle-aged stepfather, Colleen Kennedy would lament that even feminists were all too often beguiled by the virtuosity of Humbert’s (and Nabokov’s) style. Taking strong exception to the critical approval accorded the novel, Kennedy asserted that any account of the work had necessarily to address the pornographic episodes and sexually explicit language that constitute core elements of the story Humbert (and Nabokov) have to tell. To claim, as author, his male protagonist and a host of admiring critics would do, that “the book is about art, not pedophilia,” that Lolita is “immoralized” in Humbert’s (or Nabokov’s) text, that Humbert’s words create an image “wholly separate from the real,” is to ignore what Kennedy sees as the price of such aestheticization (50–56)—the physical and sexual violence Lolita must suffer to satisfy Humbert’s seemingly insatiable desire. For Kennedy, the aestheticist position, as represented by Humbert and any number of critics (and, arguably, Nabokov himself), becomes something more than indifference to a young girl’s victimization; it presupposes deliberate renunciation of the real and what this means in terms of recognizing the actual pain inflicted on a young girl. Thus Humbert’s subjugation and sexual violation of Lolita constitutes more than a fortuitously happened-upon theme artistically transfigured and given meaning by Humbert, the self-styled artist and writer; it symbolically figures the relationship of the artist to the “real.” In its extreme forms—and Nabokov’s novel is routinely taken as an instance of supremely aestheticized discourse—art “must kill the real” (55). In asserting that “to endorse Lolita is to endorse its contents,” Kennedy called for a “critique of both Nabokov and the institution that would canonize him” (56).

If feminists have, with some significant exceptions, failed to take up Kennedy’s call-to-arms, this was because, as Kennedy herself recognized, the novel’s language—its lyricism, its use of irony, allusion, parody and verbal play of all kinds—was exemplary of what Kennedy, writing in the early nineties, referred to as the “dominant discourse” rooted in theoretical perspectives—deconstruction, postmodernism, French feminism—which regarded textuality and language as provisional, indeterminate, as always subject to rereading, reinterpretation, as always “in play,” and thereby negating the possibility of ascertaining an actual “referent” or some final, definitive meaning. Elizabeth Deeds Ermirth would, for instance, stress “parallels between Nabokov’s verbal experiments and the work of Julia Kris-eva, both of which unsettle traditional notions about language and subjectivity” (qtd. Booker 71). Noting that feminists were “understandably attracted to the power offered by the positions of producer and proper reader” and that, indeed, “some women,” in mastering the language and rhetorical complexity associated with this discourse, achieved “some real power,” she observed that the appeal of such power “prevent[e]d many feminists from attacking the aesthetics that so often justify women’s subordination.” But in her contention that feminist efforts to adopt an aestheticist stance were “implicated in the one that permits Lolita,” Kennedy would suggest that
the aesthetically rigid position was itself an extension of a specifically masculine discourse, something which in its abstraction from the real replicates a male perspective on experience itself (56).

From at least one vantage point, Kennedy’s critique would seem entirely valid. Whatever difficulties Humbert Humbert encounters as refugee from a war-ravaged Europe—his bouts of “insanity” and the two years he spends in psychiatric hospitals—his arrival in the town of Ramsdale and his decision to lodge in the home of Charlotte Haze and her daughter transform him from abject exile into a dominating figure: a man who effortlessly has his way with Charlotte Haze and her daughter Dolores, an “artist” who will conjure the Lolita figure into being, the self-promoting narrator and the protagonist of the tale he sets out to tell. Invoking his knowledge as scholar and his talents as a writer, he will claim he has created “Lolita” out of the gap between “the little given” and “the much promised.” She is, he tells the reader, “my own creation . . . perhaps more real than Lolita: overlapping, enacting her, floating between me and her . . . having no will—indeed, no life of her own” (62). Largely on this basis any number of critics have simply accepted Humbert’s account of himself at face value and what he imagines his real triumph to be. Reiterating general critical disdain for the “actual” Lolita—a “rather common, unawashed little girl whose interests are entirely plebeian”—Paul Stegner commends the “fusing of aesthetically admirable components [that] combine in a forceful and meaningful experience” and lead us to “a compassionate understanding” of Humbert and his experience (114–15). David Rampton praises Humbert for his “marvelously intelligent discourse” and argues that it is his artistry that “makes him attractive and keeps us sympathetic and involved” (115). If Humbert himself goes to some pains to justify himself—as artist, as lover, as man of learning and refined taste—he also does little to conceal the power which as an older male he exploits to realize desires he has no compunctions about confessing to. On the contrary, he revels in the position his “old world” charms bestow upon him, establishing himself as virtual sovereign over subjects incapable of resisting his savoir vivre. “A radiant and robust Turk” in his “self-made seraglio” (60), an “inflated pale spider” who sits “in the middle of a luminous web,” Humbert characterizes himself as a “wily wizard” (49), presiding over a world in which his imagination and his words create the fantasy he will proceed to live out. As he relentlessly skewers Charlotte Haze and middle-class American philistinism—“one of those (bland American) women whose polished words reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality” (37)—his usurpation would seem complete when she prostrates herself before him and proclaims him “her ruler and her god” (91).

The aura of near-magical power which surrounds Humbert as he moves through the world he inhabits would only seem to be confirmed when events conspire in uncanny fashion to do his work for him. The crisis that erupts when Charlotte discovers his diary and the truth about his passion for Lolita is quickly settled when, in her rage, she runs out of the house and is instantly struck and killed by a passing car. With the major obstacle out of the way, Humbert is soon on his way to execute the plan he has concocted and lay claim to Lolita, earlier dispatched by her mother to summer camp. Humbert achieves his immediate goal—the long anticipated seduction—and from this point on he uses all means at his disposal to ensure he retains his prize.

If Humbert’s initial relation to Lolita is something more than one of mastery and possession—Lolita is at first an eager collaborator—this is only the first move in a narrative and a set of relationships whose precise nature proves dauntingly elusive. Whereas Humbert in his first early moments of intimate contact with Lolita had asserted that she had been “safely solipsized” (59), he must resort to all forms of stratagem in efforts to maintain his authority and preserve his control of the girl. However effortless the act of consummation, it becomes clear to Humbert that his claims rest on entirely shaky foundations. This is not simply because, as Humbert himself occasionally recognizes, there is a gap between the aestheticized image of Lolita and the “disgusting conventionality” with which she is repeatedly associated. Having committed statutory rape and essentially abducting Lolita as they set out on the first of their journeys across America, Humbert is in flagrant violation of the Mann Act—legislation which had made the transport of minors across state lines for sexual purposes a federal offense. Suspicious of other males, both old and young, inquisitive strangers, policemen, hotel receptionists and, ultimately, Lolita herself, he resorts to bribes, threats and whatever physical coercion is necessary to ensure her subjugation and her silence.

But if ultimately Humbert desires Lolita, the “fairy child” of his imagination, for the power she possesses, as he never tires of repeating, to “enchant,” her irresistibility is a function of the particular narrative Humbert has chosen to tell (or, as he would have it, he has no choice but to tell), one whose generic parameters have the effect of both creating and circumscribing the world he inhabits. In a tale which situates both Humbert and Lolita in a realm where aspects of the supernatural, the uncanny, the “demonic” hold sway, he himself, on the levels of imagination and text, undertakes to escape the world of adult responsibility and adult predation (in which, to be sure, in sexually exploiting Lolita, he is fully implicated). In so doing, however, he necessarily ascribes Lolita powers on which his own fantasy world depends and from which his own verbal “magic” derives. Thus if Humbert’s “artful” tale is, as Alfred Appel contends, more “involved” than has been suggested by critics who posit a polarity between Humbert’s “artystry” and Lolita’s “vulgarity” (or the consumerist impulses Humbert, on occasion, takes her to task for), the novel’s aesthetic derives from something more than Humbert’s talent for seeing in the bubble-gum chewing, postwar (pre-)adolescent girl the fairy-tale enchantress his imagination calls into being. Despite Nabokov’s contention that the value of any literary text derives from the “aesthetic bliss” it affords, the “aesthetic” for Nabokov (as for Humbert)
the sea” (with Humbert’s further allusion to Poe’s marriage to his child bride), becomes the template for Humbert’s own elaborately woven love story. Poe’s lyricism with its stress on the child-like qualities of hero and heroine and the subsequent drama—one of Romeo-and-Juliet type persecution by uncomprehending adults (“her high-born kinmen came/And bore her away from me”)—informs Humbert’s characterizations both of Lolita and of himself in his relationship to her. As Michael Long has suggested, the return to and recovery of childhood—and what for Humbert constitutes the primordial, never-to-be-repeated rapture of first love—frames and provides the terms in which he will play out his relationship to Lolita. When Humbert first sets eyes on Lolita, she is, to be sure, fixed as the object of the male gaze, but Lolita herself has no hesitation in returning that gaze and seeing in him her equal, the encounter described in terms of her nullification who or what Humbert feels himself to be qua “adult,” i.e., of everything that he has become in the twenty-five years which have passed since his first love affair as a thirteen-year-old boy. Referring to “the impact of passionate recognition,” he recounts how my glance slithered over the kneading child . . . I passed by her in my adult guise . . . the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride . . . my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that ‘princedom by the sea’ in my tortured past.

Long observes here that “From back across the gulf of severance a magic salvation seems to offer itself. The worlds of child and adult seem to offer to re-join . . . Time collapses and the life of childhood and pubescence consents with the adult in perfect accord” (138). Indeed, Humbert’s account takes us yet a step further. Initially characterizing himself as a child “in my adult disguise” (40), this first encounter deprives him of all being and substance. His adult life—education, marriage, his various occupations—has been instantaneously negated and rendered void of meaning: “The twenty-five years I had lived since then tapered to a palpitating point and vanished!” (39), Humbert is a child again. Thus what Humbert experiences in undertaking to transcribe all that he goes through and suffers for the sake of Lolita is a consequence not of his commitment, in some general, otherwise unspecified meaning, to “art” but to a highly specified aesthetic centered on “childhood” and a particular cluster of genres which have a special connection to childhood and youth: these include the traditional forms of romance, pastoral and fairy tale, but also the commedia dell’arte and the Punch-and-Judy show, as well as modern genres like the comic strip and the Hollywood western. The poets and writers alluded to in the course of his narrative—Poe, Dante, Petrarch, the troubadours, Merimee, Flaubert—who are invoked to justify Humbert’s project on the aesthetic level, signify a highly specific deployment of art and
tradition, one which prescribes, in accord with “the laws of genre,” the figures occupying speaker and object positions—the object invariably a young girl; the speaker, whatever his actual age, the ardent young lover. In evoking the “pure limpidity” of “fairy child beauty,” images of “maidens who to... - demonic” and “enchanted islands haunted by nymphs”? (16-17), a world of arbors and spring days, gamboling shepherds and shepherdesses, “slender-leaved mimosa groves and clusters of stars palely glowing” (14), Humbert underscores the aspects of romance, fairy tale and Arcadian pastoral which inform the “magical” world in which he would prefer to dwell. Images of nubile young maidens and the rhetoric of innocent sensuality which characterize pastoral evoke a realm where sexuality is void of violence, and thus of any element of domination or coercion. As textual mode, pastoral celebrates not only passion—whether consummated or not—but the essential, and essentially innocent, juvenility of the poet and loved object: “her equal, a faunet in my own right” (18). Whereas Humbert has few qualms about exploiting his powers and prerogatives as an adult male to exercise control—e.g., his subsequent efforts to claim Lolita as his legal ward; his role as watchful “Dad” laying down the “rules” (no dances, no dates, etc.)—the inner drama of his relationship is played out on the basis of a fantastic commitment to the mutuality of the relationship: a dream-like world of child lovers, in which Lolita, like her literary model, takes the initiative and reciprocates his affection (“no other thought/Than to love and be loved by me” [qtd. Appel 329]). If it is in terms of this childhood plot and a refuging of himself as child that Humbert embarks on, and, in some sense, justifies his relationship to Lolita, Humbert’s commitment to an essentially aestheticized vision of the world is inextricably linked to celebration of a particularized figure—a desirable, sexually active, but not yet adult girl whom the protagonist/narrator characterizes as his equal.

Read from this perspective, Humbert’s attacks on Charlotte, Lolita’s teachers and school counselors, and ultimately the murder of his rival and nemesis Clare Quilty, have less to do with his sophistication or the “blandness” of American tastes than with that which stands between him and his pursuit—what might be read as the Ur-American dream of perennial youth. In establishing an imaginary relation to Lolita, Humbert’s fantasy (or, that fantasy as Nabokov himself would see it played out) begins to shape the narrative at other levels: in the uncanny ease with which a character referred to as “McFate” has his way and adults, at the outset, beginning with Charlotte, are dispensed with and removed from the scene. The narrative does not simply suggest Humbert has regressed to a pre-adult phase of life and acts out what is essentially childhood fantasy but that the narrative (including the meta-narrative which would seem to betray authorial intervention) becomes itself the acting out of that fantasy. At points, Humbert’s account takes on an aspect of outright fairy tale, in which children—or those pretending to be children—effect their emancipation from a realm ruled over by adults. Viewed in this light, Humbert’s characterization of Charlotte Haze as the nagging, oppressive mother, his scathing dismissal of conventional domestic life, his criticism of intrusive school authorities “more interested in communication than in composition” and eager to ensure their students are “well-adjusted” (175) become less a matter of cultural superiority than an essenceadolescent rejection of all that is connected with the adult world. When he imagines “some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. Her mother . . . eliminated, along with everybody else for miles around” (52), he is yielding to a childish fantasy of instant gratification where adults, and all they signify in terms of control and prohibition, simply vanish. In the abruptness with which the mother is “in fact” subsequently disposed of, the action takes on an almost comic-strip-like irreality.

But if the narrative is more than either an account of illicit pleasures or paean to the fairy child Lolita and Humbert’s powers as artist—transfiguring Lolita into aesthetic object—it is also one in which Humbert qua child necessarily descends to the same level as Lolita, a process which entails a bifurcation of self which has the effect of conferring upon her a certain parity and authority over her maker (“the little Herr Doktor” [39])—a fact which helps to explain the power she comes to possess (and, for instance, Humbert’s otherwise puzzling preoccupation with her IQ) and begins to wield as she grasps the extent to which he has become captive to his own narrative. When we learn late in the novel that Lolita’s true passion was for Humbert’s rival, the writer Clare Quilty—the one man “she had ever been crazy about” (270)—and that they had started a clandestine affair shortly after she and Humbert return from their first cross-country journey, it is evident she finds in Humbert an adultObject she can exploit and manipulate as she becomes ever more zealous in pursuit of her own desires. If in seeking to “immortalize” Lolita, Humbert has ascribed her powers—she is “demonic,” possesses some “perilous magic” which places him under her “spell” (17)—he has also, in his own machinations, abstracted her from the real and restituted her in a realm wholly divorced from the bland Alltags of postwar America, with its movie poster ideals of beauty—and indeed, he expends his time ensuring she remains suspended in the fantastic world he has conjured into being. Perhaps not altogether by design, Humbert’s lyrical, “aestheticized” narrative underscores Lolita’s “difference”—her distance from the world of ordinary family life, schools, other young girls. However discrepant the image of Lolita as defiant “delinquent” and her incarnation as “fairy child” enchantress, the two ultimately converge and overlap in ways that serve to portray Lolita as antithetical to all that adulthood and adult authority represent. If Humbert’s first-person narrative denies readers any more sustained access to what Lolita thinks and feels, it betrays enough about her for us to surmise that, if not a “rebel” in any overtly political sense of the term, she has in fact little use for adults and the power they wield, whether it be the regime imposed by her mother or,
ultimately, that of Humbert himself whom she had briefly and mistakenly welcomed as her “liberator.”

But it is precisely in what the narrative only obliquely reveals that we begin to sense that beyond Humbert’s tale of passion and all it entails in terms of “enchantment” lies a more complex drama—one which begins to suggest that Lolita, however deprived or disadvantaged, is not entirely without her own resources. If she can be seen as initially little more than abject plaything (Humbert’s “Dolly,” as Karshon points out) she proves herself to be increasingly assertive, to the point where virtually every action Humbert takes is by way of response to some move initiated by Lolita. When Humbert and Lolita return East and have settled in the town of Beardsley, it will be Lolita who takes the initiative, makes the decisions and determines the course of events which propel the action to its denouement. Indeed, as Karshon argues, because “Lolita prefers play,” the narrative is “fundamentally shaped by her spirit, not his” (172).

As she devises strategies for escaping the home and Humbert’s watchful eye—a role in the school drama as the “farmer’s daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch” (198) (with all that “witchcraft” may signify in terms of her budding power) and ever cagier in her movements about the town—Lolita is increasingly aware of Humbert’s anxieties about eager teenage boys, nosy neighbors, teachers’ queries (“why are you so firmly opposed to all the recreations of a normal child” [194]). Attuned to Humbert’s fears, she finds an opportune moment to propose they leave Beardsley and again set out—“look, I’ve decided something. I want to leave school. I hate that school...[Let’s] never go back”—albeit with the caveat that “this time we go wherever I want...C’est entendu!” (205). Indeed, given what has become his abject dependency, Humbert has little choice but to give way before his ward, who in her youth acts with a degree of initiative and determination which Humbert by this point can barely mimic. As they head out again for the American West, it is, for Lolita, with a newfound sense of confidence and authority. If Humbert’s suspicions are aroused, there is by this point little he can do. When he suspects, rightly, they are being tailed by a man in a “Red Aztec,” he becomes rattled, edgy, erratic. As they proceed across the plains further west into Colorado and the Rockies, Humbert begins to lose his grip. When Lolita is suddenly hospitalized with a mysterious ailment and, in the final move in what is now her game of “hide and seek,” abruptly disappears, Humbert is helpless to act. Significantly, Lolita effects her escape from two years under Humbert’s thumb in the American West; her own subsequent trajectory takes her yet further west (to the northwest town of “Grey Star,” which Nabokov himself refers to as “the capital of the novel”), and when Humbert encounters her for the final time, she is newly married and an expectant mother, planning to settle with her young husband in Alaska. She manages her escape and achieves her independence on the Fourth of July, a date, which despite Nabokov’s claims he avoided anything suggestive of the political, is a signifier of sufficient weight—of independence, of new beginnings, of an egalitarian social and political order—to suggest Lolita’s actions be read in the larger historical framework of rebellion against illicit authority. In making her break from Humbert in the West, Lolita comes to be identified with yet another tradition of ideologically colored pastoral—America as “‘the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country’” (173)—and images of the frontier and the mythic American pioneer who decides when and where she will move, when and where she will settle, the life she will live. In this counter-narrative, which Humbert can only adumbrate in outline form, Lolita comes to personify certain American ideals—indeed, freedom, pragmatic readiness to make use of whatever lies at hand to achieve one’s ends. Thus if the novel never grants Lolita a sustained voice, it provides sufficient evidence of a subtext in which she is not simply sexual (and aesthetic) object, but rebellious, assertive, self-authoring subject. Ultimately compelled to recognize Lolita’s independence—and his own final defeat—Humbert does so, inevitably in terms of yet another version of the pastoral and fairy-tale fantasy to which he seems condemned, albeit a realm, in this instance, to which he is barred entry: “there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorabe regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me” (283).4

Insofar as the gap between “art” (the creation of Humbert’s fantasy) and the “real” (the actuality of Lolita’s behavior) grows ever wider as the narrative progresses (marked by Humbert’s fears of losing Lolita to something beyond the “soppistic world” of his imaginations), one sees the novel foregrounding rather than presuming the question of the “aesthetic”: the question of what precisely art is capable of, of what effects it elicits, of what kind of impact it can exert upon a reader and here, perhaps more urgently, of how it stands in relation to the exercise of power. As Humbert’s efforts to preserve possession of Lolita are rendered increasingly futile, Lolita’s actions suggest a set of other-than-aestheticist imperatives which leave their own distinctive trace on the narrative. In a text still mostly read as testimony to Humbert (or Nabokov) and his “creative” powers, it is also one which is unsparing in recounting Humbert’s demise and the emergence in the course of the story of a Lolita capable of resisting her tormentor and his disciplinary stratagems: “another” Lolita and indeed, another vision of America itself.

Once Lolita disappears (in best Western fashion, over the horizon), Humbert is bereft, powerless to act on his ever-unrequited passion. Abandoned, in a state of abject despondency, he retains sufficient composure to grasp just how rooted in fiction his vision of Lolita has been. If what he projects onto Lolita is empowering—in the sense that it signifies an abdication of whatever authority he may have possessed as an adult male and her stepfather—and a corresponding transfer of that authority to a pre-adolescent girl—it has also blinded him to what she is actually capable of; his self-created, aestheticized version of Lolita makes no allowance for change, growth or development. If Lolita exploits the fictional image he has created of her and
the power it confers upon her to dictate terms and, ultimately, to emancipate herself from the man who has made himself, and sought to make her a prisoner of his fantasy, it is precisely insofar as she becomes something other than Humbert as stepfather, artist and idolater who would have her be. Whereas Humbert’s narrative of the “enchanté,” “demonic girl subjects Lolita to an apotheosis of sorts, by the final chapters she has succeeded, again by virtue of a vitality and resourcefulness associated with her youth, in deflecting his fantasy and, paradoxically, in opting for a more conventional life of marriage and motherhood, and has defied all expectations, embarking on a course Humbert could never have anticipated for her. Humbert’s recognition of the limits of his art comes late in his account by way of what appears to be a digression. Humbert receives a letter from John Farlow, a friend of Lolita’s mother and a figure first introduced by Humbert as a conventional middle-class husband and father. Farlow writes that his wife has died and that he has gone off to South America, met and is about to marry “a Spanish girl” and then set off for India on their honeymoon. Humbert is “bewildered” by this news, not so much because he feels any special affection or sympathy for Farlow, but because Farlow had always represented a particular “type.” Humbert uses the occasion to reflect that “we endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire”:

No matter how many times we reopen ‘King Lear’, never shall we find the good king hanging his tankard . . . at a jolly reunion, with all three daughters. Never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert’s father’s timely tear . . . similarly, we expect our friends to follow [the] conventional pattern we fixed for them. Thus X will never compose the immortal music that would clash with the second-rate symphonies he has accustomed us to. Y will never commit murder. Under no circumstances can Z ever betray us. . . . Any deviation in the fates . . . would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical.

(263)

Here, Humbert would seem to recognize that perceptions and judgments of others often involve deep-lying cognitive tendency to aestheticize those whom we encounter and get to know; that the “other” is endowed, for the perceiving subject, with the predictability of a literary character. Humbert’s comments here serve as the immediate prelude to the letter he receives from Lolita, now Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, informing him that she is married and expecting a child; in other words, the news that Lolita has become the very thing, a wife and mother-to-be, that Humbert in all of his exceedingly artful evocations could never have imagined her being. The more significant point is not simply that Lolita has gone her own way and made decisions about the sort of life she will have, but that “art,” inasmuch as it constitutes a realm divorced from the real, has no power to “fix” or predetermine the real. This recognition necessarily brings the whole of Humbert’s project into question. If art is denied the transfiguring power Humbert accords it, then, given the extravagant claims he puts forward in defense of the aesthetic, the artful forfeits much of its raison d’être. Indeed, this recognition coincides with that moment in which Humbert experiences for the first time fits of remorse and resolves to kill Quilty, a figure who, in his relation to Lolita, serves as Humbert’s double. Humbert arrives at his decision not because Quilty has run off with Lolita, but because Quilty had wanted to subject Lolita to the same sexual abuse (as we learn from Lolita) Humbert now sees himself having inflicted upon her. In identifying Lolita with a realm—associated with the frontier, the American West, rebellion, independence and the start of a new life—which lies beyond that which in some fundamental sense can be regimented, disciplined or codified, Humbert also recognizes, at least momentarily, an imperative other than the aesthetic—whether we identify this with the “ethical,” or simply with the “marginality,” “defiance” or proto-dissidence of youth and all that stands apart from the social in some larger sense. In placing himself at the service of a Lolita he sees himself as having violated, Humbert would seem to signal that the reversal of positions is complete. His transformation—from impenitent predator to pursuer of justice on Lolita’s behalf—results in the killing of an adult male, precisely that which, in another sense, Humbert has tried at the outset to “kill off” in himself. While accentuating the disparity between Humbert—older male, old-world scholar, accomplished artist/aesthete—and a pre-adolescent American girl who becomes his ward, Humbert’s narrative traces a reconfiguring of authority, wherein by the conclusion it is Lolita—a figure in whom a discourse of the American postwar disillusion or proto-rebel has been transformed and fused with that of enchanted, immortal “faery child”—who determines our frames of reference. In crucial ways, Lolita—and the fact that she remains in some sense ultimately outside of or beyond “the realm of art”—becomes a force in her own right, something that Humbert is ultimately powerless to master. If the novel finally compels us to reconsider how Lolita stands in relationship to Humbert as narrator and of what she signifies in cultural terms, we inevitably situate Nabokov’s work within the larger social and political dynamic of American postwar culture which ascribed a new moral and cultural authority to American youth—a dynamic which, arguably, Nabokov’s image of a brash, sexually active young girl both reflected and, perhaps not altogether intentionally, would contribute to and serve to reinforce. The novel, whatever its complexities and degrees of “playfulness”—or the extent of Nabokov’s own allegiance to “play”—brings into focus issues related to age and generational politics feminists and more rhetorically focused critics have both generally elided. If Lolita dies in childbirth, her death—on the symbolic plane of the larger cultural narrative—signals the implication of Nabokov, following in the footsteps of the narrator he has created, in a historical and cultural moment which would extend to youth—that which ultimately lies beyond the range of adult understanding and knowledge—a new degree of authority as the nation’s moral arbiter.


3. Lolita has been variously characterized as “the most allusive and linguistically playful novel in English since Ulysses and Finnegans Wake” (Appel, xi); a “cunning work of aesthetic enchantment” (Pifer, 83); a text that “parodies all literary conventions” (Blum, 214); and a work that Nabokov himself likened to a “riddle” (McNeely). James Phelan has drawn upon narratological method to stress the effect of Nabokov’s “linguistic virtuosity” and “the complex coding of Humbert’s narration,” which “disposes the authorial audience to regard Humbert as a reliable interpreter,” even if the narrative eventually reveals “Humbert’s theory of nymphets . . . as an elaborate rationalization of pederasty” (234-235).

4. Ellen Pifer notes that “Each year during his lecture on Bleak House, Nabokov took pains to criticize the casual manner in which modern readers and critics dismiss as so ‘sentimentality’ the theme of childhood innocence . . . In regard to Dickens’s evocation of the plight of children [and] the strain of ‘specialized compassion’ and ‘profound pity’ that runs through Bleak House, Nabokov flatly rejected ‘the charge of sentimentality.’ [Nabokov] praised Dickens’s ‘striking’ evocation of innocent children—‘their troubles, insecurity, humble joys, and the joy they give, but mainly their misery’” (89-90).

5. Steven Marx has noted that “pastoral is generated by a rejection of adulthood and middle age.” See his Youth Against Age: Generational Strife in Renaissance Poetry (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), 2.

6. In comments which anticipated my argument here, Monica Visser suggests that “Humbert’s narrative does not succeed in obscuring the autonomous Lolita completely . . . [she] is neither passive victim nor a depraved seductress . . . She is a girl who facilitates her own escape from Humbert.” See Lolita’s Daughters (MA thesis, University of Florida, 2010) 82, 137.

9 Jack Kerouac’s On the Road
“Oedipus Eddy” and “the Story of America”

In a letter to his friend Hal Chase composed in April 1947 immediately before he set out on the first of the journeys across America fictionalized in the novel On the Road, Jack Kerouac—twenty-three years old at the time, a college dropout and as yet unpublished—would set forth his ambitions as a writer. Declaring that his “subject is of course America” and that he “must know everything about it,” Kerouac described his aims as “Balzacian in scope . . . to conquer knowledge of the USA,” which he refers to as “the center of the world for me just as Paris was the center of the world for Balzac.” He makes a point of noting that he has immersed himself in books centered on early American history—“Parkman’s Oregon Trail,” another book concerned with that trail and also every other important trail in the country . . . a history of the United States, a biography of George Washington, a history of the Revolutionary War (campaign and maps included)” —and would add, “all but not least,” he has “undertaken a huge study of the face of America itself, acquiring maps of every state in the USA.” Affirming a determination to “know America” as I know the palm of my hand,” he observes that “the ruling thought in the American temperament is a powerful energetic search after useful knowledge” (Letters 107). Having renounced the leftist ideals of his youth, Kerouac also disavowed his interest in European literature and literary models (he mentions Stendhal and Dostoevsky). Europe represented “a culture of turmoil, resentment and inter-human struggle” to which he opposes America and its heroic “culture of livelihood, purpose, land and natural struggle” (Letters 108).

Kerouac has been, with occasional exceptions, viewed as a proto-dissident writer—indeed, he has been variously characterized as a “revolutionary,” as a figure who promoted “domestic rebellion and juvenile delinquency” (Plummer), as a “speaker of wisdom and prophecy” (Grace 2007) whose writing “galvanized a generation of . . . alienated American youth into spiritual and sociopolitical action” (Chandralapaty 104), a writer whose vision “inspired . . . rebellion in the 1960s” (Reno 31), but Kerouac’s interest in American history and his references to the “land and natural struggle” (and his letter to Hal Chase is probably the clearest statement of Kerouac’s intentions as he prepared for the first of his journeys across America), bears