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How do the protagonists of the novels *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D.Salinger and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain reflect the views of the authors towards their respective societies?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Abstract.....	1
II.	Introduction.....	2
III.	Chapter 1: Authority.....	4
IV.	Chapter 2: Differences.....	6
V.	Chapter 3: Hypocrisy.....	10
VI.	Conclusion.....	12
VII.	Bibliography.....	13

ABSTRACT

No matter when one lives, going from childhood to adulthood always entails similar experiences. Circumstances may change, values may differ, but taking this giant leap forward from childhood to manhood is always a difficult period reflecting a struggle between the teenager and the rest of society. Throughout history there have been numerous novels on teenagers and growing up. But perhaps the most well known are J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While there is nearly a century between the times in which these novels take place, both of these works reflect the feelings of rebelliousness, alienation, cynicism and sense of loneliness that are usually associated with teenagers coming of age. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the protagonist Holden Caulfield narrates a 3-day period in his life after he gets expelled from Pencey Prep in New York. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel that recounts the adventures of protagonist Huckleberry Finn after he runs away from his drunken father. That said, as in every novel, the authors put their personal imprint on the story based on their own upbringing and values. The authors use their novels to convey their views regarding the society they live in and do so usually from the eyes of the protagonist. So, the following research question arose:

How do the protagonists of the novels *The Catcher in the Rye* but J.D. Salinger and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain reflect the views of the authors towards their respective societies?

In order to get a detailed answer to this question, an in depth analysis of the two novels was required. Through this research, I have examined that both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, being coming-of-age novels, describe a different eras. While one takes place in Post World War II America, the other takes place in Pre Civil War America. The events taking place during these eras are major factors in the shaping of the protagonists' characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

In American literature history, there have been several novels attempting to explain and bring to light the lives of teenagers along with their thoughts. J.D.Salinger and Mark Twain have produced perhaps the most well known examples of this genre. Both authors use their protagonists as narrators, allowing the readers to get insight on what exactly the teenage mind of the protagonist is thinking and how it analyzes its surroundings. By doing so, both authors have managed to include their own thoughts regarding the societies, which they lived in.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield's cynical, pessimistic and critical approach to nearly everything and everyone around him has long been deemed as a "typical teenager". His apathy towards what awaits him in the future, his growing sense of alienation throughout the novel, his loneliness and his judgmental views towards everything have been considered as quintessential traits associated with teenagers. Throughout the novel, Holden is portrayed as a spoiled, ungrateful failure that takes the opportunities he is presented with for granted. He is sent to numerous boarding schools, all very pricey and top-notch schools, but he never tries to be like everyone else around him. He does what he believes is right, and most of the time that leads to his relationships with others being damaged. He doesn't take adults seriously, he undermines their authority, but he doesn't make them feel that. He listens to the lectures given to him by all his teachers and elders, but never actually acts upon them. The conversation Holden has with his history teacher Mr. Spencer on his last day at Pencey Prep is a clear example of his lethargy towards adult figures of authority.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huckleberry, or Huck, represents a different kind of teenager. Although he is against adult authority and, just like Holden, he decides to run away in order to be "free"; he is a kind, ethical, compassionate and resourceful young man. Contrary to Holden, Huck does not criticize others and he refrains from being as hypercritical as Holden. While both protagonists struggle against the different laws and structures of their respective societies, the way they cope with

these laws are relatively similar. They both decide to run away from their pains in hopes of finally being independent, freethinking individuals.

During my research, I have come across a few topics that specifically discuss the social lifestyle of the eras depicted in the novels. This essay will focus on those topics such as, authority, differences and hypocrisy. Although the novels are vastly different plot wise, the two novels share a lot more than just protagonists around the same age. Both novels possess a common theme of standing up against adults and living by their own rules, both the protagonists have trouble fitting into their respective societies and both escape the shackles of their society. The fact that there is nearly a century separating Holden Caulfield from Huckleberry Finn does not change the way they perceive and analyze certain events that take place around them.

CHAPTER 1: Authority

If *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye* were reduced to a single phrase, that would be "teens on the run". Both novels are about teens trying to escape immense calamity, whether it is running away from a drunken father and an uptight legal guardian, as is the case in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or running away from adult authority and trying to find solace in the biggest city in the world, as is the case in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden spends the majority of *The Catcher in the Rye* running away and distancing himself from his friends and family, all in hopes of lessening his loneliness. Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on the other hand, have multiple enemies, from whom they are running, but they are not running to escape, they are running to get to what in their opinion is "freedom".

"Authority" is a reoccurring element in both novels. Escaping the constraints of society and standing on their own feet is something both Holden and Huck attempt to do. While Huck does this out of necessity, Holden does it because he is unhappy with his life. Although it is not mentioned directly, he is viewed by critics as clinically depressed. Huck runs away from his drunken father, Pap, who beats and abuses him, whereas Holden runs away to have some time for himself and think. Both teens run away from adult authority in hopes of finally being able to stand on their own feet. Huck is sick and tired of being told what to do by his father, the Widow and Miss Watson, so he runs away to live a life of independence. Holden on the other hand, is against any kind of adult authority. He constantly undermines his elders and disregards their advice because he thinks of them all as "phonies".

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield's conversation with his old history teacher Mr. Spencer clearly shows his views towards adults. Mr. Spencer tells Holden "Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays by the rules" (8). Holden's answer is a mere nod followed by a "Yes sir. I know it is, I know it."(8), which displays complete lethargy towards Mr. Spencer's remark. Mr. Spencer is one of the few people Holden has been able to bond with, but despite this relationship that they have developed, Holden

still does not respect his authority because Mr. Spencer is, after all, an adult and more importantly a teacher.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Mississippi River is the ultimate symbol of freedom for Huck and Jim. Alone on their raft, Jim and Huck only have each other, they do not have to answer to anyone. The river leads both of them to freedom. For Jim, it's towards the free states, and for Huck it is away from his abusive father and the restrictive lifestyle of St. Petersburg. However, the river soon becomes a dangerous place for Huck and Jim. They notice that they are not completely free from the binds of the cities on the river's banks. The real world manages to intrude the paradise-like life they were leading on the raft when the river floods; thus bringing them in close contact with criminals, stolen goods and wrecks. Moreover, a thick fog causes Huck and Jim to miss the mouth to the Ohio River, which was their route to freedom.

It is also true that whenever Huck comes ashore, he seeks the refuge and safety of his raft. While watching the gunfight between the Grangerfords and Shepardsons, Huck becomes ill with all the violence going on around him and he says, "I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things". While on the raft, both Jim and Huck can truly be themselves without fearing what the land might throw upon them. The land symbolizes oppression and violence, while the river is a symbol of safety and freedom. Huck defines the differences between the land and the river clearly when he says, "Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft". The river is a place where Huck and Jim can feel absolutely free and independent of authority. Their raft is what keeps them away from the oppressive and violent society that is eating up the villages and cities on the shore.

CHAPTER 2: Differences

In both novels, society looks down upon people who are different from the rest, or out of the norm. For example, in Holden's society it is evident that when society sees someone who is not "normal", it automatically starts to pressure that person into becoming like the rest of its members. Holden's ideals in life and the way he views his environment set him apart from the rest of his peers. Similarly, Huck's actions and thoughts regarding slavery set him apart from his society. Huck is one of the only people who sees beyond Jim's skin color and accepts him for who he truly is.

Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden seems to be victimized by the world around him. He is alienated from everyone and he has trouble bonding with his peers. He feels trapped and constantly tries to find his way, when he actually does not belong there. Holden tells Mr. Spencer that he finds the world to be an unfair place divided into two: "hot-shots" and "the other side where there aren't any hot-shots". Holden feels himself to be a part of the latter along with others who have never even had the chance to start the game of life. As the novel progresses however, Holden's alienation turns into a method of protection for him. He uses his uniqueness as an excuse to not get into dialogues with others, always seeing himself as superior and looking down on them. Holden's loneliness is both a source of strength and pain for him. His loneliness is what propels him into arranging a date with Sally, but it is also why he ends up insulting and hurting her. He longs for care and affection, especially that of Jane Gallagher, but he is afraid of getting into any sort of contact with her. His parents stopped showing him the affection he needs because of his constant academic failures. He is a 17 year old, longing for love and care, roaming the streets of the biggest city in the world trying to overcome his loneliness by drinking and smoking excessively.

Throughout the novel Holden is seen as constantly consuming or needing alcohol and cigarettes. Holden not only feels the necessity to consume alcohol, but also to get excessively intoxicated. Similarly, his addiction to cigarettes makes him disregard rules at times. During one of Holden's outings he says, "Boy I sat at that goddam bar till

around one o' clock or so, getting drunk as a bastard". Holden also smokes on the subway in New York City knowing that is illegal. However, despite his excessive smoking, none of the adults around Holden seem to take much notice into this. In fact, a parent from Holden's school sees him smoking, but ignores the cigarette in his hand. Holden also greatly enjoys consuming large amounts of alcohol and he gets irritated when he is denied it. This is a common symptom in alcoholics. Holden apparently takes pride in the fact that his intoxication keeps him from seeing properly. This shows that teenage drinking can escalate into chronic alcoholism. Holden's excessive and constant drinking proves this notion. This inclination to drink and smoke does not apply solely to Holden, but also to several of his so-called friends; thus, it is evident that adolescent drinking and smoking are issues among the entire adolescent community and not just Holden. Holden's depression is the reason he drinks so much. In order to alleviate some of his depression, Holden resorts to drinking because when he is intoxicated, he does not think of his pains loneliness.

Holden believed that through excessive amount of smoking and drinking, he could get away from the thought of not fitting in. He knows he is different from the people around him and he realizes that no matter what he does, society tries to change him and mold him into something he is not. He clearly says he does not want to be like his peers when he talks about his ideals. He finds it illogical that someone has to attend years and years of school and in the end pick a job that they do not enjoy, but rather pays well. He believes in preserving and protecting the innocence and purity that accompanies youth. He wants to be the catcher in the rye. During his conversation with Phoebe, Holden mentions kids falling off a cliff and into the arms of the catcher in the rye. He says, "I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd be the catcher in the rye and all."(173). The fall symbolizes not only a loss of innocence, but also a loss of purity. Holden wants to prevent kids who, like him, want to be unique and out of the norm from losing faith.

While Holden has trouble fitting in and bonding with the people around him due to his hypercritical approach and cynicism, Huck has trouble fitting in because he thinks differently than everyone around him. The best example to show Huck's difference from others in his society is his relationship with Jim. Perhaps it is because Huck is too young to understand the concept of slavery and how it was perceived at the time, but he sees Jim for who he really is, a caring and smart human being. Unlike the rest of the adults in Huck's world, he sees beyond Jim's skin color and becomes his friend. This is something that could not even be fathomed at the time, but Huck and Jim embark on a series of adventures together, which helps them develop a bond, one that stretches far beyond mere companionship. While most everyone sees Jim as a slave or property, Huck stands by his friend through thick and thin. It is true that Huck hesitates at times and debates within himself whether he should turn Jim in because he is a runaway slave, but always decides against it. This shows how teenagers are always caught between two choices, undecided. During the process of going from childhood to manhood, teens tend to develop their own values and ideas on what is right and wrong. For Huck, the moments when he hesitates are the moments where readers can see this change. He realizes that the society in which he lives in is against runaway slaves and deems them criminals, but he also knows if he hands Jim in he will be severely punished. He always decided against it because he sees Jim not as a slave, but as a friend and he realizes that his society is wrong.

Throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is portrayed as a naive, but intellectual teenager. Similarly to Holden, Huck lacks a true, caring family. He has no mother, his father is a drunk who is unable to take care of himself, let alone Huck, and the widow and Miss Watson are not the people Huck wants to live with. When Huck's best friend, Tom Sawyer, decides to form a band of robbers with Huck and some other kids, they all get together in a cave. As Tom Sawyer lists the rules of the robbers band and the consequences that would follow in case someone were to disobey them, one punishment hurts Huck to the point where he is on the brink of crying. The boys proposed to kill the families of anyone who disobeyed the rules of the band, but Huck didn't have a family. He felt left out and alone. Huck says, "I was most ready to cry",

explaining how he felt at that precise moment and how, once again, the lack of a true family, although not for a good cause, has come back to haunt him. Huck feels alienated from his friends because he doesn't have a real family. He realizes that they all have mothers and fathers who care for them and live with them whereas he is stuck with a couple of legal guardians he does not even like.

Another instance where differences seem to affect the judgment of people is when Holden Caulfield and Mr. Antolini have their long talk at Mr. Antolini's house. After having a near full-blown breakdown in front of his sister Phoebe, Holden goes to visit Mr. Antolini, where they discuss Holden's current state of mind. Holden is invited to spend the night there, but when Mr. Antolini touches Holden's forehead during his sleep, Holden believes Mr. Antolini is making a sexual overture and leaves immediately. Holden classifies Mr. Antolini as a "flit" or homosexual. Earlier that night, Holden mentions his fear of homosexuals and how he does not want to become one. Society looks down upon homosexuals in Holden's world and his first reaction is also to run away and feel disgust. However, once he left Mr. Antolini's house and reflected back on what had happened, Holden realized that he might have been too hasty in judging the man. Holden says, "I started thinking that even if he was a flit he certainly'd been very nice to me"(195).

CHAPTER 3: Hypocrisy

In *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, hypocrisy is a major element that affects the lives of nearly all the characters. Throughout the novel, Mark Twain depicts the society that surrounds Huck as little more than a group of degraded rules and precepts that defies logic. A good example of this faulty logic is when the new judge in town agrees to grant Pap the custody of Huck despite being informed of Pap's current state. The judge puts Pap's "rights" to Huck before the child's welfare by giving Pap custody of Huck. This also shows that in that society, someone's "property", which in this case could be a child or a slave, is considered more important than the welfare of that "property". By doing this, Twain gives the message that no matter how "civilized" a society looks and no matter how modern they seem, that society can never be completely just if they allow slavery. Time and time again throughout the novel, Huck comes across people who seem to be good on the outside, but later turn out to be prejudiced slave-owners, like Sally Phelps. This shows that the shaky sense of justice in Huck's society that he constantly comes across actually lies at the heart of all the problems. Terrible acts of violence can go unpunished, but frivolous crimes such as screaming insults while intoxicated lead to executions. The speech given by Sherburn to the mob that has come to lynch him accurately summarizes Twain's view towards that society in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: rather than maintaining the collective welfare, society instead is marked by cowardice, a lack of logic, and profound selfishness.

Hypocrisy is seen again in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when Huck asks Miss Watson to smoke, but she tells him that smoking is harmful. Huck finds her to be a hypocrite because she smokes herself; so telling Huck he cannot do so seems to him as a nefarious thing to do. He thinks that as someone who smokes, she has no right to tell him about the dangers of tobacco and smoking.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden calls almost everyone a "phony". He calls people who say one thing, but act another way phonies, he calls people who act differently according to their surroundings phonies, but he never calls himself a phony.

He believes he and Phoebe are the sole non-phony people. The fact that he is able to criticize everyone around him based on the smallest things, but never look at his own shortcomings makes Holden a phony as well. Holden sees all adults as superficial phonies because they overlook the flaws they see to benefit themselves.

Hypocrisy is one of the main elements in both of these novels and it helps shape the perception of the protagonists regarding their respective societies. While Huck's description of the events taking place regarding his custody help transfer the ideas of Mark Twain to the readers, Holden's description of the people around him help readers understand the way J.D.Salinger perceived the 1940s in the United States.

CONCLUSION

While investigating the research question: **How do the protagonists of the novels *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain reflect the views of the authors towards their respective societies?**, it has become clear that while both novels examine the way a teenager going into adulthood sees the world around him, the time periods the novels are set in do not influence their perception of certain aspects. Some elements of society are perceived the same way no matter what time period one lives in. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* takes place in the Pre-Civil War era of the United States and depicts the story of a young boy named Huckleberry Finn. As the narrator, Huck puts his own opinions and views into everything he sees and experiences, therefore giving readers a detailed description of how he grasps certain subjects. J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* on the other hand, describes the 1940s United States society through the eyes of Holden Caulfield. Holden's loneliness and depression also affect the way he judges the people around him, and gives him his most famous characteristic: being hypercritical. Though the novels are vastly different in terms of plot, the fact that both authors use the protagonists to convey their own personal thoughts on these societies binds these two works together as two of the best works in the bildungsroman genre. Mark Twain uses Huck's views and descriptions to explain how unjust society was, the evils of slavery and the pressure imposed by authorities. He conveyed the idea that no matter how civilized a city is and no matter how modern it looks from the outside, a community that allows slavery to be performed can never be just. Salinger on the other hand, used Holden's views to communicate the idea that unless a real "Catcher in the Rye" steps up, everyone will follow the same fate and lead monotonous unhappy lives.

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