

## ABSTRACT

CURRAN, TYLER JENNINGS. The Incorporation of Identity: Alienation and the Marketplace in Melville, Salinger, and Crews. (Under the direction of Dr. Anne Baker).

This thesis examines how the history and development of capitalism affect the characters in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851), J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951), and Harry Crews's Car (1972). In particular, it examines the ways in which the individual copes with the alienating economic pressures of the mid-nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Relying on historical and sociological perspectives, this project reveals the degree to which these novels elucidate a marked tension between capitalism and democracy – between private interests and the public trust. The introduction contextualizes the novels and provides a historical account of corporate capitalism's development from the Civil War to the present. The subsequent chapters present analyses of the novels that are informed by history. They demonstrate that the alienation and existential dread experienced by Melville's, Salinger's, and Crews's characters are exacerbated by the dominance of capitalism over social life. Finally, this project examines the ways in which these novels scrutinize systems of social organization and it finds that these novels encourage readers to evaluate systems of social organization for points of revision, reform, or potential improvement.

**THE INCORPORATION OF IDENTITY: ALIENATION AND THE  
MARKETPLACE IN MELVILLE, SALINGER, AND CREWS**

by

**TYLER JENNINGS CURRAN**

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

North Carolina State University

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

**ENGLISH**

Raleigh

2006

**APPROVED BY:**

---

Dr. Jim Clark

---

Dr. Mike Grimwood

---

Chair of Advisory Committee  
Dr. Anne Baker

For my family

## BIOGRAPHY

Tyler Curran earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Florida in May 2003. He received his Master of Arts in English with a concentration in American Literature from North Carolina State University in December 2006.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Anne Baker for her generous guidance, patience, and interest in my project. Thanks also to Dr. Mike Grimwood and Dr. Jim Clark for your confidence in my abilities and your interest in my work. You all will inspire me in the years ahead.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I: <u>Moby-Dick</u> .....	14
Chapter II: <u>The Catcher in the Rye</u> .....	33
Chapter III: <u>Car</u> .....	53
Conclusion.....	71
Bibliography.....	73

## Introduction

In 1998 the United States Congress passed legislation making identity theft a federal offense. According to the United States Department of Justice, identity theft is a crime that is predominantly committed for economic gain.<sup>1</sup> It is characterized by fraudulent activity whereby the perpetrator collects another's personal data such as one's social security number, banking account number, or credit card number in order to secure loans, credit lines, and other means of profit at the victim's expense. Everyone accepts this definition without question and with good reason. The consequences of identity theft are stark realities, and each of us is in jeopardy of becoming the next victim.

One hears or reads about identity theft daily. The term "identity theft" has been incorporated into the cultural landscape. However, the term is a misnomer. "Identity theft" is not an accurate term for the crime that it describes, but it does pack a stinging rhetorical punch and it reveals a set of values. It implies much more than the definitions provided by the Department of Justice or the Federal Trade Commission suggest. One can discern the implications of the term "identity theft" in the Citi Bank commercials in which identity thieves "speak through the mouths of their victims."<sup>2</sup> The criminals are identified by the products or services they have purchased, and the victim is largely identified by the observable possessions in his or her environment. Indeed, the primary

---

<sup>1</sup> "Identity Theft and Fraud." 30 May 2006. U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division. July 2006. <<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fraud/text/idtheft.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Thor. "Commericals I Hate Forum, Tolerable Ads, Citi Identity Theft." 19 May 2006. Commericals I Hate. 19 July 2006. <[http://forums.commericalsihate.com/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=1946&get=last](http://forums.commericalsihate.com/forum_posts.asp?TID=1946&get=last)>.

means through which the audience identifies the identity thief as a biker, a geek, or a redneck is through the description of purchases made with stolen funds. The Citi Bank advertisements efface age, gender, and ethnicity (class is another story) by drawing attention to such distinctions and then dismissing them as superfluous in the face of one's true identity – one's credit standing.

The Citi Bank ad campaign consists of thirty-second television commercials that are variations on the same idea.<sup>3</sup> The effectiveness of the ads lies in the contrast between the victim's and the perpetrator's demographic disparity. Young white female of questionable intelligence and suspect moral integrity steals the identity of middle-aged blue-collar weight-lifting black male. Computer-hacking, female-robot-building, white male college student steals the identity of young salon-and-spa-going black female. Physical distinctions such as weight, size, skin color, and gender are initially emphasized and contrasted with seemingly mismatched voices to create a comical effect. On the surface the ads seem harmless and humorous, but further inspection reveals some troubling elements. Making it clear that anyone can be a victim of identity theft, the ads establish common ground for the audience. However, the audience's common ground is not based on any intrinsic value that each audience member shares equally. Also, any inner-directed mode of identification such as one's faith, belief system, or morality is not even acknowledged. Instead, identity is reduced to one's credit standing; it is represented by one's possessions, and it has no reality outside of the social. One's possessions or the services one purchases indicate one's social status. We shall see that the functioning of

---

<sup>3</sup> To view Citi Identity Theft Solutions commercials visit:  
<<http://www.citibank.com/us/cards/cardserv/advice/commercial.htm>>.



products as status symbols – as signs of one’s identity – is a focal point of the novels at hand. We see it in the “fine ladies and gentlemen” who “regale themselves” with perfume in Moby-Dick (1851).<sup>4</sup> We see it in Holden Caulfield’s “bourgeois” possessions in The Catcher in the Rye (1951).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in Car (1972) Mister Mack’s brand-new Cadillac Sedan DeVille, “the standard of excellence that everything’s measured against,” also serves as a status symbol.<sup>6</sup> One does not lose one’s actual identity when one is a victim of identity theft. Nevertheless, the consequences of identity theft are experienced as stark realities and the use of that term reveals America’s profound materialism and commercialism.

Citi Bank’s ad campaign is a direct reflection of the construction of social reality. Where corporate capitalism is concerned, “television is very often the messenger of choice.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, television is not merely a messenger; it – and other media – acts as the face and voice of capitalism. The media are essential tools through which corporate capitalism conducts a growing multi-billion dollar campaign to reduce people to mere consumers. In the conception of identity signified by “identity theft’s” emergence in American culture, the “final frontier” is the human mind and as gods of capitalism corporations are at the helm – surveying and charting the landscape, conducting cerebral colonization. Corporate capitalism regards human rights, “men’s minds,” and the “great

---

<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: Penguin, 1988) 447. All further references will be to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye (Boston: Little, 1951) 108. All further references will be to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Crews, Car. Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader. Ed. Harry Crews (New York: Touchstone, 1995) 389. All further references will be to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> T.A. Callister, Jr. “Media Literacy: On-Ramp to the Literacy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or Cul-de-sac on the Information Superhighway?” Advances in Reading/Language Research. 7 (2000): 405.

globe itself” as commercial fare (Moby-Dick 435). Rights and liberties have historically been gained through conflict and maintained by consensus. Consensus, competition, and conflict determine the management of global resources. Corporations target the human mind in order to build and maintain consensus. As dominant social institutions, corporations have the means to target the widest audience via sophisticated technology, and their messages are sculpted by teams of extremely bright, creative, and talented people. As a result, the individual constantly faces the threat of manipulation and must develop a sharp skepticism and suspicion, which can in turn lead to alienation.

The individual’s struggle to forge an identity and a sense of fulfillment that is not defined by the marketplace is a dominant theme in much nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature. The following pages examine the impact that immense and complex economic processes have on the individual. As white men, Ishmael, Holden Caulfield, and Herman Mack represent a demographic group that, historically, has had greater access to economic opportunities than other groups. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Ishmael, Holden, and Herman are arguably in positions of relative economic privilege, they each experience the anxiety and alienation that individuals often face in the modern world. They embody hope in the face of existential dread – dread that is exacerbated by capitalism’s reduction of the human individual to potential profit.

How did we arrive at a point in history in which the individual is increasingly alienated by economic forces? The answer to that question requires an examination of the economic processes that began in earnest during the nineteenth century and just prior to the Civil War. The seed that eventually germinated into the Industrial Revolution was

planted in 1712 when Thomas Newcomen developed a steam engine to pump water out of English coal mines. The Newcomen steam engine increased productivity significantly. The emphasis created by this and other technologies on more “product” per man hour, which continues to this day, ultimately gave rise to the modern corporation. One way of tracing the development of industrialism to the modern capitalist corporation is to focus on the problems that each addresses. Industrialism solved the problem of making more products efficiently, but in turn created a new problem. How does one unload a surplus of products? One focuses on the consumer. One shifts one’s attention from production to consumption or, rather, one begins producing consumers. The necessities of an increasingly capitalist society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to a new industry – advertising.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between advertising and the marketplace has developed over time by making the long transition from print advertisements that initially highlighted function to electronic advertisements that primarily tell audiences stories about who we are supposed to be, where we have come from, and where we are going. The stories that advertising tells always serve the interests of the company that is advertising – not the interests of the audience.

The transition from capitalist industrialism to the modern corporation was remarkably swift. According to Walter Fuller Taylor, “[I]ndustrialism developed in this country not just in and of itself, but as the tool and instrument of Capitalism.” Furthermore, industrialism developed under a capitalist system “that was committed to a politico-economic scheme of free enterprise, competition, and *laissez-faire*.” In addition,

---

<sup>8</sup> Advertising and the End of the World, Dir., ed., written by Sut Jhally, MEF, 1997. For transcript of video see: <<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdfs/AEW.pdf>>.

it developed in an expansive nation “whose rapid growth enormously stimulated production,” and it matured in a nation that practiced a “tradition of minimized government.” Industrialism developed in a nation that emphasized the free market and therefore “preclude[d] any state control” of production in the “general interest” or public trust. The result “was an uncontrolled capitalistic industrialism, a gigantic, unpruned socio-economic growth that sprawled over the national life at random, and shed off indiscriminately both healthful and poisonous fruits.”<sup>9</sup>

A number of factors coincided to facilitate the transition from capitalist industrialism to the form of capitalism in place today. Certainly, technological innovations played a significant role. The development of electrical telegraphy in the mid-nineteenth century, including the completion of the first sustainable transcontinental telegraph line established in 1866, facilitated information exchange and gave a shot of adrenaline to commerce. The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 significantly decreased the travel time from coast to coast, and the enhanced ability to transport goods and materials created new markets, which in turn stoked the furnace of other industries such as steel, textiles, and coal. The Gilded Age is associated with self-made business-men such as Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller. Today’s corporation, in contrast to those in the Gilded Age, is largely “faceless,” or more accurately it is represented via the media, by such figures as Ronald McDonald and the Geico Gecko. Certainly, a handful of CEOs have become household names, but the

---

<sup>9</sup> Walter Fuller Taylor, The Economic Novel in America (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1942) 24.

modern corporation is largely peopled by the “organization man,”<sup>10</sup> a person who stifles personal interests or attitudes by conforming to the precepts of the organization in which he or she is employed.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the organization man relinquishes or neglects all interests other than those that concern the organization to which he or she belongs. In the Gilded Age “the ‘faceless’ corporation and the ‘organization man’ had not yet arrived as public perceptions,” but they soon followed (Trachtenberg 5).

Modern corporations were not fully actualized until after the conclusion of the Civil War, when the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified on July 9, 1868. Initially, corporations were associations or groups of people who were granted, under government regulation, temporary charters to conduct projects that were in the public’s interests. For example, most of the projects were aimed toward improving the lives of the community by developing infrastructure such as roadways or bridges. The charter was granted so that the association or corporation could perform a specific function. They could not buy or sell other businesses, and the individuals associated with the corporation were held liable for the actions taken under its charter. The Fourteenth Amendment was designed to grant recently freed slaves the same rights to “life, liberty, [and] property” that all U.S. citizens share; and furthermore, it declared that those rights should not be denied “without due process of law.” Corporate lawyers took advantage of the Fourteenth Amendment to claim that a corporation was a “person,” and in 1886 “the Supreme Court ruled in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* that a private corporation is a

---

<sup>10</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York, Hill, 1982) 5.

<sup>11</sup> See, William H. Whyte, The Organization Man (New York, Simon, 1956).

natural person under the U.S. Constitution . . . and is thereby entitled to the protections of the Bill of Rights, including the right to free speech.”<sup>12</sup> Of the 307 cases brought before the Supreme Court under the Fourteenth Amendment between 1890 and 1910 . . . 288 were presented by corporations and 19 were presented by African Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Corporations share all of the rights of any U.S. citizen. Corporations can buy and sell property. They can buy and sell other corporations. They can engage in litigation. Unlike the average U.S. citizen, however, many of today’s corporations have larger economies than some nations. According to David Korten “General Motors’ 1992 sales revenues (\$133 billion) roughly equaled the combined GNP[s] of Tanzania, Ethiopia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Zaire, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, and Pakistan. Five hundred fifty million people inhabit these countries, a tenth of the world’s population.”<sup>14</sup> More important than the fact that corporations share the same rights as a U.S. citizen is that a corporation does not have a conscience. The slippery reality of a corporation is that it has “no soul to save and no body to incarcerate.”<sup>15</sup> Corporations took advantage of the turmoil created by the Civil War to gain “control over key state legislative bodies,” which permitted them “to virtually rewrite the laws governing their own creation.” The courts continually decided in favor of corporate interests and “steadily chipped away” at any regulations on corporate power until, “step-by-step, the court system put in place new

---

<sup>12</sup> David C. Korten, When Corporations Rule the World. (West Hartford: Kumarian, 1995) 59. All further references will be to this edition.

<sup>13</sup> The Corporation, dir. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, DVD, Zeitgeist, 2004. See also, “14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution”. 25 Oct. 1997. Martin Luther King Jr., National Historic Site. 19 July 2006. <<http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/amend14.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Korten 220-21.

<sup>15</sup> The Corporation.

precedents that made the protection of corporations and corporate property a centerpiece of constitutional law.”<sup>16</sup> The advantages for corporations are readily apparent.

The shareholder’s primary interest is profit. In order to maximize profit, a corporation’s shareholders need to stifle their consciences. Why? They need to limit liability. As shareholders, protected by the façade of a corporation, represented by an iconic brand, they can not be held solely responsible for any questionable or potentially illegal actions that are committed in the pursuit of quarterly gains. The internal organization of a corporation is like the U.S. government’s system of checks and balances, only inverted. The U.S. government’s duties and responsibilities are distributed among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches while the news media or press monitors government activity. The internal organization of the U.S. government is designed as a self-regulatory system to prevent abuses of power and sustain a vital democracy. Corporations, by contrast, are designed to maximize power and ignore abuses. To distance themselves from responsibility, they devise and employ what economists refer to as “externalities.”<sup>17</sup> An externality is a tactic or policy that corporations use to slough off accountability into the laps of third parties – typically taxpayers. An externality is simply the twenty-first-century equivalent of “passing the buck,” shirking responsibility, or letting another party absorb the costs created by one’s actions. In addition, the relationship between the internal organization of the U.S. government and that of the corporation is complicated by the fact that the vast majority of media outlets – television stations, cable stations, studios, distributors, and publishing

---

<sup>16</sup> Korten 58-9.

<sup>17</sup> The Corporation.

companies – are owned by a relatively small number of corporations. Therefore, journalists face difficult decisions daily. They must try to behave ethically and inform the public without running the risk of losing their livelihood – a difficult task for a journalist who has a story that questions the reputation or activities of his or her parent company.

The inevitable result of economic development since the Civil War is a profound tension between private interests and the public trust – between capitalism and democracy. The idea of democracy received a severe blow when corporations gained the rights of U.S. citizens because they could then claim the right to “influence government in their own interests,” which in turn, “pits the individual citizen against the vast financial and communications resources of the corporation and mocks the constitutional intent that all citizens have an equal voice in the political debates surrounding important issues.”<sup>18</sup> “[A]ny account . . . of the influence of corporate life on thought and expression . . . must include subtle shifts in the meaning of prevalent ideas, ideas regarding the identity of the individual, the relation between public and private realms, and the character of the nation.”<sup>19</sup> Not only has corporate life “colonized the spaces of [American] culture” via electronic media and physical spaces such as the school and the street, but its primary target for colonization is the minds of people. That is the reason for which in 1997 alone over 175 billion dollars were spent on advertising.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Korten 59.

<sup>19</sup> Trachtenberg 5.

<sup>20</sup> Advertising and the End of the World.



Examples of the tension between private and public interests are abundant. The current philosophy praises the market as the ultimate and best determinant of outcomes. That line of reasoning suggests that we should privatize everything. Should we privatize fire departments? Is competition so effective and valuable that it will improve the functioning of fire fighters? Fire departments began as private companies in America and their private status compromised public safety. A public trust developed as a result. People recognized that their best interests would be better served through a system that could provide assistance to citizens whose lives and property were threatened by fire.<sup>21</sup> We face several complex issues in the years ahead – issues directly linked to the tension between private and public interests, such as fossil fuels, clean air, clean water, and biotechnology. What began as industrialism – an emphasis on thrift, on yielding more from less, has mutated into a form of capitalism in which “anything that is alive except a full birth human being” can be patented.<sup>22</sup> On one side of the tension between private and public interests are those who espouse the virtues of the free market. This group argues that we would all be better off if everything were owned. Our problems would be solved if every body of water was owned, because an individual (more likely a corporation) would have a vested interest in its maintenance. On the other side of the tension between private and public interests are those who argue that the free market has its limitations. They argue that “the problem is not business or the market per se but a badly corrupted global economic system” that is quickly moving “beyond human

---

<sup>21</sup> The Corporation.

<sup>22</sup> The Corporation. Also, for more information see the 1980 Supreme Court ruling on *Diamond, Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks v. Chakrabarty*.

control.”<sup>23</sup> According to this group, the corporation’s influence on the market is “deepening our dependence on socially and environmentally destructive technologies that sacrifice our physical, social, environmental, and mental health.”<sup>24</sup> They argue that every living thing on Earth already has a vested interest in the maintenance of the environment.<sup>25</sup>

In many ways, the tension between private and public interests is manifested in the novels at hand via the central figures’ experiences of isolation or solidarity. Isolation fosters exploitative selfishness and greed. Solidarity fosters egalitarianism. One of the most profound symbols of this tension between isolation and solidarity is the “elongated Siamese ligature” of the monkey-rope that binds Ishmael to Queequeg in the operations of whaling (349). Unlike works of nonfiction such as Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies, which explores mammoth historical and geographical processes, the novel is intrinsically or at least traditionally limited in scope, though Moby-Dick may be an exception. Whereas The Catcher in the Rye relies on first-person narration and Car relies on third-person omniscient narration, Moby-Dick employs variable narration. Ishmael initially provides readers with a first-person perspective, but through the course of the novel Ishmael’s narration shifts into third-person limited and third-person omniscient. Despite Moby-Dick’s unique features and its encyclopedic subject matter, it is largely character-driven. Indeed, novels are typically character-driven. They tend to focus on individual human experience. However, that

---

<sup>23</sup> Korten 13.

<sup>24</sup> Korten 13.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on, and examples of, the tensions between public and private interests see the Democracy Center website at the following: <<http://www.democracycctr.org/bechtel/>>.

trait does not preclude the novel's ability to capture the macrocosmic and microcosmic perspectives. Moby-Dick, The Catcher in the Rye, and Car provide readers with intimate access to the subjective experiences of their central characters and also provide a portrait of the world that those characters inhabit. Subsequent chapters will present evidence of the hulking presence of capitalism in these novels and the detrimental impact of capitalism on their characters. Whether by taking to sea, wandering the streets of New York City, or setting out to accomplish the impossible by literally consuming an automobile Ishmael, Holden, and Herman are figures who are struggling to conquer the encroaching commodification of their lives and eke out an existence the value of which can not be calculated, measured, or quantified.

## Chapter One

The title of the first chapter in Herman Melville's seminal novel Moby-Dick is highly suggestive of the impalpable experience that awaits its readers. Indeed, "Loomings" is the first of many thematic seeds that Melville plants throughout the novel. Ishmael immediately speaks of going to sea by citing an economic motivation: ". . . having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" (3). Furthermore, Ishmael explains his decision to go to sea by pointing to his "purse" and suggests that "a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it" (5). Indeed, one of the more prominent and arguably neglected themes that one encounters in Moby-Dick is the influence of the marketplace on human relations. Scholars have discussed the representation of industrialization in the novel, but few elucidate the dark imagery and tone that Melville employs in order to criticize the detrimental characteristics of nineteenth-century American capitalism. Moby-Dick presents a world in which capitalist industrialism reduces human relationships to economic transactions and human existence to economic value; that is to say, the anxieties in Moby-Dick are intensified by the fact that one's worth is predominantly determined by the marketplace. Moby-Dick exposes the exploitation of human labor and raises concerns about the exploitation of natural resources. Finally, Moby-Dick explores the alienation, dehumanization, and commodification of human beings as a result of the marketplace's exploitative processes.

Despite its brevity “Loomings” transports readers into a maelstrom of themes ranging from suicide to class conflict, to slavery, to religion, and finally to free will. However, all of this is done in the rather affable tone that is characteristic of Ishmael. It is this type of sensibility displayed by Ishmael that recurs throughout the development of the novel. Ishmael is a liminal character who drifts through the physical world like an apparition. As a result, he struggles with life’s material realities such as filling one’s purse with artificial and arbitrary representations of value. One may liken Ishmael to an apparition, for he refers to Greek mythology by suggesting that Narcissus “who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (5). Ishmael concludes a deliberation on the mysteries of water with this reference to Narcissus. Narcissus could not literally take hold of his reflection, but in another sense of “grasp,” he could not comprehend the reflection of his embodied self. In his pursuit of ontological knowledge, he perishes. According to Ishmael, the fluid, fluctuating, ever-flowing water mirrors our own “ungraspable,” fluctuating, phantom-like selves. Indeed, one could argue that Ishmael is in the throes of existential angst and his suffering, frustration, and confusion are exacerbated by the shaving down and classification of everything into percentages. He is in a perpetual identity crisis. Ishmael is “tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote” (8). He is continually seduced and tempted by the unknown. After pointedly admitting his deficient skill in spotting whales from atop the mast-head Ishmael characterizes himself as a young man:

[Once] lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space. (172-73)

Ishmael struggles to reconcile his identification with an ethereal self with the reality of his embodied self. Though his spirit is inclined to become “diffused through time and space,” he cannot deny that it is “glued inside of its fleshy tabernacle, and cannot freely move about in it, nor even move out of it, without running great risk of perishing” (170). “Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death” ponders Ishmael. “Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance . . . . Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being” (42). Additionally, Ishmael suggests that “no man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part” (60). Unlike the landsmen who divert their gaze from the “ungraspable phantom of life” and who are “pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, [and] clinched to desks” (4) Ishmael rejects the false security

of the ports and avoids the “pistol and ball” (suicide or homicide) by casting himself upon the sea (3).

Furthermore, Ishmael must survive by operating within the social constraints of the marketplace, as is evident when he negotiates his “lay” with Bildad and Peleg prior to shipping with the Pequod. Bildad and Peleg are “part owners” of the Pequod (80). They supply the ship with all necessary provisions and oversee the recruitment of a crew, but they don’t sail with the ship. The Pequod is their investment and they give Ishmael the three hundredth lay, which means that the lives and labor of two hundred and ninety nine people are considered more valuable than his (87).

Ishmael introduces himself to readers and begins his story at a point in his life that is characterized by what Andrew Delbanco terms “divestiture.” “[Ishmael] has eliminated almost all his inherited conceptions – religious, social, political, even linguistic – from the categories of the sacred and the prudent and has moved them into the category of the arbitrary. Everything becomes unmoored, vulnerable, dispensable.”<sup>26</sup> Ishmael is a character who is in the process of peeling away layers of values and assumptions. His burgeoning friendship with Queequeg serves as a catalyst for his process of divestiture. “I felt a melting in me” declares Ishmael, “No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. [Queequeg] had redeemed it” (57). Bereft of “civilized hypocrisies and bland deceptions” (57), Ishmael’s “sudden flame of friendship” with Queequeg “would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted” with the average “countryman,” but with Queequeg “those

---

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Delbanco, introduction, *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville, (New York: Penguin, 1988) xviii.

old rules would not apply” (58). Despite Ishmael’s arguably melancholic or cynical perspective, his listlessness, his initial air of superiority, and his seemingly judgmental nature, he redeems himself through what Delbanco calls his “capacity for humor at his own expense.” He is “amused by his own absurdities.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, according to Ishmael “a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more’s the pity. So, if any one man, in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him not be backward, but let him cheerfully allow himself to spend and be spent in that way” (33). In fact, Ishmael admits that he “would be social” with a “horror” if permitted, for it is best “to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (8).

Further evidence of Ishmael’s ironic and cynical yet affable character is abundant, but one final observation will serve as a capstone. Ishmael reflects upon labor aboard a whaling ship and one’s subjection to another’s will by saying, “I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way – either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content” (6). If everyone is busy exchanging thumps, then how can they free their hands for a shoulder rub? Ishmael’s qualifying inclusion of the term “should” demonstrates the disproportionately greater frequency of exchanged “thumps” to “rubs.” According to Ishmael’s assessment, one must cope with the dominance of self-interest and competition in life. They are the standard mode of operation and one must do one’s

---

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Delbanco, introduction, *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville, (New York: Penguin, 1988) xvii.



best to function within their framework. Ishmael's reflection is relevant because it captures the full range of potential human relationships from egalitarianism and cooperation to exploitative selfishness and competition. Moby-Dick examines the ways in which the marketplace directs human relationships toward the latter.

While describing his reasons for going to sea Ishmael explains:

. . . they make a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never pay passengers a single penny that I ever heard of. On the contrary, passengers themselves must pay. And there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid. The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But *being paid*, - what will compare with it? The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition! (6-7)

This passage sets the tone for the representation of commercial exchange in the remaining one hundred and thirty four chapters. It reminds readers of the temporal aspect of life, and it elucidates the absurdity involved in the over-arching preoccupation with the acquisition of money that becomes useless to the individual once deceased. It illuminates the divisive and destructive effects of the marketplace on human relations. Ishmael claims that paying is "the most uncomfortable infliction . . . entailed upon us," and he indicates the pleasure of receiving money. No one enjoys paying others, but no one

regrets inflicting discomfiture on others in the act of receiving funds. Moby-Dick reveals some of the injustices and the imbalances of power that often result from capitalist activity, and indeed it is likely that Melville is commenting upon the economic pressure that he felt in his own life.<sup>28</sup>

The tension between solidarity and exploitative selfishness, which is represented in Ishmael's reflection on the act of paying versus being paid, can be attributed to the fact that capitalism, being born out of industrialism, is based on competition rather than cooperation. Indeed, the free market is highly valued because it fosters intense competition. Michael T. Gilmore speaks of "the spirit of mutuality springing from commerce" when he says, "Capitalist enterprises such as whaling did not preclude positive interaction between individuals."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Gilmore suggests, "The sailors who produce the sperm oil work in concert rather than alone, and the physical experience of life on the whaler encourages an ethic of cooperation."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Gilmore suggests that "commerce can foster a sense of trust and mutual responsibility."<sup>31</sup> Gilmore's use of the terms "preclude" and "can" is extremely suggestive because they are conditional and imply that commerce can foster numerous other kinds of relationships. Moby-Dick purposefully contrasts scenes of solidarity with scenes of isolation. Any "spirit of mutuality" in Moby-Dick does not spring forth from commerce, but springs forth in spite

---

<sup>28</sup> See, Andrew Delbanco, Melville: His World and Work (New York: Knopf, 2005). Melville was consistently plagued by debt during his literary career. His limited audience lost interest shortly after the publication of Moby-Dick, and Melville turned from writing prose fiction to poetry. After a brief and unsuccessful tour of the lecture circuit, Melville worked for the U.S Custom Service from 1866 to 1885.

<sup>29</sup> Michael T. Gilmore, American Romanticism and the Marketplace (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 121.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmore 121.

<sup>31</sup> Gilmore 122.

of commerce and therefore draws attention to the alienation, exploitation, and dehumanization that the individual experiences under marketplace forces. Gilmore uses the “Monkey-rope” chapter to support his claim of a “cooperative capitalist enterprise.” Yet that same chapter also highlights the potential dangers associated with such an enterprise.

Ishmael describes the revelatory experience of being tethered to Queequeg by saying, “I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death” (349). Rather than simply displaying one side of this image, the image of cooperation described by Gilmore, this scene also expresses the possibility that the life of every human being is in the hands of every other human being and we can either give life or take it away. Melville’s use of the “joint stock company” metaphor succinctly captures the tension between private and public interests. The metaphor suggests that business relations should mirror personal relations more closely, because others’ interests are one’s own interests. The best business model does not sacrifice others’ interests for one’s own, but strives to accommodate the interests of all parties concerned. The Pequod is a microcosm of the globe and the “Monkey-rope” is a cautionary and suggestive image for readers. One sees this when Ishmael suggests, “I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die”

(349). Melville pinpoints the human condition in this passage. It is not mere coincidence that Stubb chides Dough-Boy for bringing ginger to Queequeg by saying, “we’ll teach you to drug a harpooneer; none of your apothecary’s medicine here; you want to poison us, do ye? You have got out insurances on our lives and want to murder us all, and pocket the proceeds, do ye?” (351). Hereby Stubb touches on one of capitalism’s striking features – insurance. Life insurance enables one to apply a pecuniary value to one’s life in the event of an untimely death. Insurance is a clause in the rule book of capitalism that reinforces the economic status of one’s identity.

Melville calls free will into question in the “Monkey-rope” chapter, as well as throughout the rest of the novel, and highlights our ability either to care for one another with mutual respect or vindictively exploit one another for personal profit. Melville seems to suggest that if humans do have free will, then they should recognize that their choices affect those around them. Moby-Dick implies that the individual’s freewill, if he or she has any, is severely limited by the “uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us.” As uncomfortable as it may be, one must pay one’s way in this world – a necessity that often causes one to serve a function that is not directly inspired by one’s personal aspirations. One sees this conflict in the “Try-Works” chapter, in which the crew seems to have lost all autonomy and instead are possessed by industriousness.

The “Try-Works” presents a dark vision of the Pequod’s crew in the actual business of whaling. The crew does not operate out of any sense of mutual interest. In fact, they are stripped of both mutual and self interest. Their interests are consumed by

the whaling industry and they operate in order to ensure the health and stability of the marketplace. If a whaling ship were a human, then the try-works would be its heart. If a whaling ship were a machine, then the try-works would be its engine. According to Ishmael, “an American whaler is outwardly distinguished by her try-works,” which “are planted between the foremast and mainmast, the most roomy part of the deck” (461). In other words, the try-works are the most prominent feature of the Pequod and command the most space. Very little kindling is required after the initial ignition of the try-works. The whale carcass provides its own fuel. Ishmael likens it to a “plethoric burning martyr” or “a self-consuming misanthrope” and wishes that it would consume its own smoke, for its “smoke is horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for the time . . . . It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment . . .” (462). The self-consumption of the burning whale and its smoke on board the microcosmic Pequod parallel the decadent consumption and the surplus of waste and pollution created by the marketplace. The “Try-Works” presents readers with a view of an industrialized environment akin to a factory or a steel mill. Yet Melville sings the industrialized environment with elements of the apocalypse in which “the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers . . .” (463). Thereby, Melville suggests that industrialism is a form of hell on earth. Rather than working in a spirit of mutuality, the crew seem possessed. Their autonomy appears to have dissolved or to have been transplanted by a hive or mob mentality. In many ways, the chapter attests to the cultural dominance of capitalist industrialism and provides an unabashed

commentary upon industrialist activity brimming over with satanic images of forks, flames, prongs, snakes, scorched eyes, and soot.

If the “Try-Works” laments the effects wrought by man’s embrace of industrialism, then “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish” reveals the ideology motivating such an embrace. At one point Ishmael introduces the notion of private property by asking, “. . . is not Possession the whole of the law” (435). Melville extends the image of the “Siamese connexion” presented in the “Monkey-rope” chapter from individuals to nations when Ishmael asks, “What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish . . . [and] . . . . What at last will Mexico be to the United States” (435). Industrialism is accompanied by complex organization, centralization of human populations, and an emphasis on efficiency. Industrialism also requires a great many resources, and the acquisition of land serves as a considerable contribution to a nation’s pool of resources. In addition, imperialism, colonization, and the general expansion of a sovereign nation’s territory create new markets.

One can detect a precursor to twentieth and twenty-first-century cerebral colonization in Ishmael’s question about Mexico’s fate. Moby-Dick seems to mourn the reality of the human condition, or rather, the choices humans make to cope with that condition. In its acute portrayal of humanity’s many flaws, one can identify a strong desire within Moby-Dick for things to be other than they are. One can detect this desire when Ishmael concludes the chapter by inquiring, “What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men’s minds and opinions but Loose-

Fish . . . . What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (435).

According to Ishmael, a Loose-Fish "is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it" (433). A citizen's rights are fairly well caught from birth, and unless one retains one's rights as if they were Fast-Fish (objects or commodities that "belong[ ] to the party fast to it"), then it is safe to assume that someone else will pursue them (433). Ishmael's first question also exposes a potentially sinister and Nietzschean line of thought, for this question can lead one to reason that all is there for the taking. In other words, it can lead to an extremely self-centered and individualistic frame of mind. Indeed, Moby-Dick suggests that this rationale is quickly becoming the standard. Ishmael's first question reveals a potentially violent ethic, and historically laws have been established to protect those already in power, not the inverse. "Is not Possession the whole of the law?" is an ironic question when applied to the slave who owns no property but is owned by another human being (435). America was founded upon conquest, genocide, and slavery. Does one change what is wrong from within? Should one adopt an egalitarian ethic of equity and mutual respect or adopt the same means as one's oppressors? This seems to be one of the many questions for which Melville seeks an answer in Moby-Dick.

Ishmael's second question at the conclusion of "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" carries us away from physical intimidation or coercion into a more subtle type of manipulation. Indeed, the captain of the Pequod is a veritable veteran at this form of control, as Ishmael indicates: "Starbuck's body and Starbuck's coerced will were Ahab's, so long as Ahab kept his magnet at Starbuck's brain . . ." (230-31). Again, one can detect a precursor to

the commercial colonization of the modern mind, the further development of which can be observed in The Catcher in the Rye and Car. This line of reasoning suggests that if violence need be committed it is best to convince others that it is in their best interest to execute it in one's stead. The minds of Ahab's crew are Fast-Fish and Ahab is the party in pursuit. Although Ahab's fanatical pursuit of the whale is free from expectations of profit, he knows that the best way to secure the minds of his men is with the promise of money. Shortly after reflecting on Ahab's influence over Starbuck, Ishmael describes Ahab's thoughts by saying, "For even the high lifted and chivalric Crusaders of old times were not content to traverse two thousand miles of land to fight for their holy sepulchre, without committing burglaries, picking pockets, and gaining other pious perquisites by the way" (231). Furthermore, Ishmael relates, "I will not strip these men, thought Ahab, of all hopes of cash – aye cash" (232). Although Ahab's quest may appeal to the crew because it offers some loftier meaning to their lives other than the mundane process of hunting and slaughtering whales for a paltry living, Melville chooses continually to tie the crew's acquiescence to the potential for profit. Thus, Moby-Dick confirms that one of the most reliable methods for gaining control is through cash incentives.

Now, let us address the final two inquiries put forth by Ishmael at the conclusion of "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish:" "What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish?" "And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" The first question suggests that the entire planet is a Loose-Fish, encompassing land, peoples, and natural resources. Should one scramble to get what one can while one can, or should an ethic of sharing preside over the globe? At this time, colonization and the expansion of territory were still



largely linked to physical presence, but in order to make a physical presence felt, a nation must persuade and motivate the minds of men to stand as representatives of its presence. In other words, a nation must aim its magnet at the brains of men in order to populate an army. Moby-Dick displays a primitive or nascent form of cerebral colonization. Rather than convincing the opposition that it is in their best interest to relinquish control of their land, resources, and people, the party in pursuit convinces people to physically conquer the pursued under the auspices of sovereignty. These are the issues that Melville raises by putting these words into Ishmael's mouth. However, Ishmael's final question is highly suggestive.

It is a striking question that momentarily threatens to destroy the narrative thread entirely. By asking, ". . . what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" Melville surfaces in his own novel. Although his question speaks to the multitudinous "Siamese connexions" that every soul shares with countless others, it also speaks specifically to the relationship between author and reader. In today's world these connections are amplified to an incalculable frequency. One driving down the highway, listening to the radio, places one's life in others' hands while holding the lives of others in one's hands. In addition, the car radio broadcasts advertisements that pursue the Loose-Fish of one's mind in order to solicit consumption. Melville was already keenly aware of this interdependency in the nineteenth century. The final question indicates Melville's admission that he was in pursuit of his readers' minds. Although Melville is commenting upon generally universal aspects of the human condition, he also comments intimately upon his relationship with the reader. Melville admits to his participation and

acquiescence in the commercial activities that he seems to criticize. All of Ishmael's concluding questions in "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" are centered on possession. Men's minds, rights, opinions, and even the planet are all cast as potential objects for acquisition and control. Once again, we return to the question of how the marketplace influences human relations. Moby-Dick suggests that it makes private or self-interest the highest priority even at the expense of others. However, there are exceptions. Ishmael and Queequeg represent an egalitarian relationship that thrives in spite of the marketplace.

Ishmael describes Queequeg: "There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits" (57). Continuing this description Ishmael says, "In a countryman, this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted . . ." (57). The key terms or phrases in these passages are "civilized hypocrisies," "bland deceits," and "a thing to be much distrusted." In these passages one can detect an inherent distrust for the customs familiar to Ishmael, and Queequeg seems to represent the ideal qualities so often lacking in typical human interaction. One need look only at the numerous occasions in which Queequeg sacrifices his own well being in order to secure the safety of others, as in the case of the "greenhorn" in the "Wheelbarrow" chapter and with Tashtego in the "Cistern and Buckets" chapter. The notion of self-sacrifice and sharing is also reinforced when Ishmael states, "[Queequeg] took out his enormous tobacco wallet, and groping under the tobacco, drew out some thirty dollars in silver; then spreading them on the table, and mechanically dividing them into two equal portions, pushed one of them towards me, and said it was mine" (58).

However, the three shipmates (Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask) are a stark contrast to the egalitarianism exhibited by Ishmael and Queequeg. Alan Heimert presents a convincing interpretation of the three shipmates and their respective harpooners when he suggests, “The harpooners . . . who so ‘generously’ supply ‘the muscles’ for the ‘native American’ mates, are representatives of the three races on which each of the American sections . . . had built its prosperity in the nineteenth century.”<sup>32</sup> Stubb represents the west and Starbuck the north. Heimert points to one of the more sinister elements of American culture and history exposed in Moby-Dick by poignantly suggesting that, “Flask, perched precariously on Daggoo’s shoulders, seems, like the southern economy itself, sustained only by the strength of the [slave]” (307). Heimert’s analysis of the mates and harpooners exposes the exploitation of human labor, the exploitation of natural resources, and the alienating and dehumanizing effects of industrialism in Moby-Dick.

Of the three shipmates Stubb represents Queequeg’s opposite in at least two instances. Upon viewing the Rose-bud, Stubb sarcastically exclaims, “Poor devil! I say, pass round a hat, some one, and let’s make him a present of a little oil for dear charity’s sake” (441). In direct contrast to the present Queequeg offers to Ishmael, the reader soon learns that Stubb has no intention of assisting the crew aboard the Rose-bud. Indeed, he swindles them instead. For Heimert the French captain of the Rose-bud “is gulled of one ‘Fast-Fish,’ as his nation of Louisiana, by the fast-talking Stubb” (307).

---

<sup>32</sup> Alan Heimert, “Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism,” Moby-Dick as Doubloon: Essays and Extracts (1851-1970) (New York: Norton, 1970) 307.

After deceiving the Frenchmen Ishmael relates the ensuing scene: “Stubb . . . at once proceeded to reap the fruit of his unrighteous cunning” and describes his fellow crewmate’s reactions by stating, “[they] were all in high excitement, eagerly helping their chief, and looking as anxious as gold-hunters” (445-446). The Rose-bud gam typifies the negative influence that the marketplace can foster in human relations. The camaraderie displayed by the Pequod’s crew in this instance is at the expense of the Rose-bud’s crew, and Ishmael concludes the episode by saying, “and this, good friends, is ambergris, worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist. Some six handfuls were obtained; but more was unavoidably lost in the sea . . .” (446). Ambergris is an “important article of commerce” and Ishmael mockingly wonders why “fine ladies and gentlemen . . . regale themselves” with a substance found in the “inglorious bowels of a sick whale!” (447). Ishmael’s observation elucidates the absurdities that result from a preoccupation with social status. Ambergris is a rare and expensive commodity. Due to its limited supply and price, the “fine ladies and gentlemen” who use it, perform an act of fashionable consumption.

The final example of what commerce *can* foster among laboring men occurs in “The Castaway” chapter. The potential greed and resulting injustices that often accompany commercial activities are revealed with stark clarity in the misfortune that befalls Pip. Readers can detect the dark tone of “The Castaway” chapter when Ishmael says:

When the cunning jeweler would show you the diamond in its most  
impressive lustre, he lays it against a gloomy ground, and then lights it up,  
not by the sun, but by some unnatural gases. Then come out those fiery

effulgences, infernally superb; then the evil-blazing diamond, once the divinest symbol of the crystal skies, looks like some crown-jewel stolen from the King of Hell. (451)

Ishmael initially sets up an analogy of Pip as a brilliant diamond and describes how his experience “had most sadly blurred his brightness” (451). Ironically, Stubb’s greed has a compounding influence. It was during the theft of the Rose-bud’s ambergris that one of Stubb’s oarsmen was injured, thereby resulting in Pip’s presence on the whaling boat. The detrimental effects of commerce on human relations are horrifically expressed when Stubb says, “Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I wont pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama. Bear that in mind, and don’t jump any more” (452). Pip’s status is a stark example of the commodification of human beings in a culture dominated by the marketplace. Whereas Ishmael and the other crew members are at least paid something for their trouble, albeit a paltry sum, the slaves alluded to by Stubb not only receive zero compensation, but in fact are regarded as commodities. Ishmael reflects upon this problem by saying, “Hereby perhaps Stubb indirectly hinted, that though man loves his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence” (452). Hereby perhaps *Ishmael* indirectly hints that man loves himself more than anything else, and money is a sure-fire way to safeguard self-preservation – at least in the short term. Indeed, perhaps man does not love his fellow so much at all, but merely feigns love via the “hollow courtesy” of “Christian kindness” (57).

No doubt, Moby-Dick grapples with a tension concerning whether commercial activity encourages isolation or solidarity. Images of both acute isolation and extreme sociability are proffered throughout the novel, and they force the reader to think about human interaction. Despite a few instances in which congenial behavior between individuals occurs, the over-arching theme suggests that a system of social organization dominated by the marketplace often exacerbates severe selfishness. For the rare instances of congenial behavior occur in the face of the commercial circumstance; when it does occur, it is in spite of commercial activity, not because of it.

## Chapter Two

“Call me Ishmael” demands the narrator at the opening of Moby-Dick (3).

Ishmael provides very little information about his history. We know nothing about his family or where he was born. We don’t know his surname. We aren’t even certain about his first name, though we can be pretty sure that it is not Ishmael. Similarly, Holden Caulfield foregoes any “David Copperfield kind of crap” in the opening line of The Catcher in the Rye (1). He does not begin his story with the hour of his birth. He does not reveal where he was born, what his “lousy childhood” was like, or what his parents were doing before they had him (1). However, we learn much about Holden’s history as the story unfolds, and we learn early in the story that Holden is sixteen, but due to his height and the gray hair on the right side of his head, he looks older than his age. In addition, Holden confesses that, despite his appearance, he often acts as if he were twelve or thirteen (9). The nature of Holden’s story has led some to describe him as a “quest” figure. He has been compared to Huck Finn, which is quite understandable because The Catcher in the Rye presents a marked tension between childhood and adulthood.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Holden’s story is a kind of bildungsroman.

Our present analysis, however, will address The Catcher in the Rye as bildungsroman only in so far as maturation in America involves the commercialization of

---

<sup>33</sup> See, Edgar Branch, “Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity,” Studies in J.D. Salinger, ed. Marvin Laser and Norman Fruman (New York: Odyssey, 1963). Also, Charles Kaplan, “Holden and Huck: The Odysseys of Youth,” Critical Essays on Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, ed. Joel Salzberg (Boston: Hall, 1990).

one's identity. Joshua Meyrowitz suggests that, "as the confines of the prison, the convent, the family home, the neighborhood, the executive suite, the university campus, and the Oval Office, are all invaded through electronics, we must expect a fundamental shift in our perceptions of our society, our authorities, and ourselves."<sup>34</sup> The Catcher in the Rye epitomizes our culture's struggle to make the "fundamental shift in our perceptions" that Meyrowitz discusses. Set in December 1949, Holden's story takes place in a world forever changed by the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.<sup>35</sup> The Cold War is in full swing by the time Holden is expelled from Pencey Prep. The Hollywood Ten – ten filmmakers suspected of Communist affiliation – had already been subpoenaed to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The filmmakers were later convicted of contempt of Congress, sentenced to one year in prison and one-thousand dollar fines. Following their conviction, the Hollywood Ten were blacklisted from Hollywood productions.<sup>36</sup> Television was in its infancy at the time, but the television networks and newsreels (shown in theaters before feature films) covered the HUAC investigations.

A reiteration of the relationship between electronic communications technology and commerce may be useful at this point. That is, the first does not exist without the other. The proliferation of electronic communications technology and the saturation of

---

<sup>34</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: the Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) viii.

<sup>35</sup> The chronology of the novel is uncertain. Based on Holden's age at the time he leaves Pencey (16), the fact that he is 13 on the date of his brother Allie's death (18 July, 1946), and his age at the conclusion of the novel (17), it appears that the story takes place during December of 1949. For more information see: <[http://www.geocities.com/exploring\\_citr/when.htm](http://www.geocities.com/exploring_citr/when.htm)>.

<sup>36</sup> Ephraim Katz, The Film Encyclopedia (New York: Harper, 1998).



society with electronic messages not only depend upon economic processes, but are fueled by them as well. Electronic communications technologies are the means through which the marketplace permeates modern life. Again, the marketplace and electronic communications technologies are not themselves responsible for any negative impact they have on individuals. Economic systems and technologies do not have agency – people do. Economic systems are social constructs used to organize society, and technologies are tools used to reinforce those economic systems. Holden lives in a world threatened by weapons proliferation and atomic annihilation. He lives in a society that is increasingly dominated by market interests, and new communications technologies serve as tools that secure those interests. Finally, the dominance of the marketplace over Holden’s life is a significant factor that leads to his “madman” days in New York City during December 1949, and this becomes immediately apparent from a cursory examination of the opening paragraph (1).

The opening of the novel, along with each subsequent page, is loaded with evidence of the impact of the marketplace on the individual. First, the concept of labor is called into question and the definition of “prostitution” is extended beyond the sale of one’s body or the provision of sexual favors for cash. Prostitution is extended to include the sale of one’s energies for a questionable purpose as is evinced when Holden refers to his brother D.B. who is “prostituting” himself in Hollywood as a screenwriter (2). Second, the reader’s attention is drawn to the automobile as an item of fashionable consumption. Holden explains that “[D.B.] just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand

bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't *use to*" (1). Holden's tone expresses disapproval of D.B.'s purchase and his wealth. Holden focuses on the cost of the car and the speeds that the car can reach. His attention to those details indirectly highlights the absurdities involved in the purchase of such a car. He alludes to the irony of selling expensive automobiles that greatly exceed legal speed limits. A second account further establishes the automobile as an item of fashionable consumption. In an argument with one of his peers, Holden complains that people who are "crazy" about their cars "worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they're always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that's even newer" (130). Holden expresses his frustration with hyper-consumerism in this passage: "I don't even like *old* cars . . . I'd rather have a goddam horse. A horse is at least *human*, for God's sake. A horse you can at least --" (131). Holden's exasperated listener cuts him off, but a horse can be fed. Horses have siblings and parents. A person who owns a horse establishes a relationship with the animal that, some would argue, one can not have with a manufactured automobile. Holden makes it quite clear that he has not been able to establish a connection with automobiles or anything else that he has been socialized to value.

Immediately following Holden's account of D.B. we learn that Holden attended a private boarding school:

[Pencey Prep] is this school in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads, anyway. They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hot-shot guy on a

horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere *near* the place.

(2)

In this passage, Holden points out a discrepancy between the leisure lifestyle that Pencey Prep advertises and the reality of his experiences at the school. Holden's world is no longer characterized by an economy that is powered by manufacturing. According to Christopher Brookeman, Holden lives in a postindustrial world in which "leisure industries, financial services, and consumption" stimulate the economy.<sup>37</sup> Holden is acutely sensitive to this fact and he recognizes how highly valued appearances and performance are in his culture. He confesses that he was once almost lured into the advertising industry: "I almost was once in a movie short, but I changed my mind at the last minute. I figured that anybody that hates the movies as much as I do, I'd be a phony if I let them stick me in a movie short" (77). In the same manner that he analyzes the school's magazine advertisement, Holden exposes and deconstructs "the official ideology of Pencey Prep" and the larger culture within which the school exists.<sup>38</sup>

Holden is being groomed for an Ivy League college and a subsequent profession appropriate to his upper-middle class station, and his parents are interested in his development from a safe distance. After admitting his irresponsibility with money Holden says, "My father's quite wealthy, though. I don't know how much he makes – he's never discussed that stuff with me – but I imagine it's quite a lot. He's a corporation

---

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Brookeman, "Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in *The Catcher in the Rye*," *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, ed. Jack Salzman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 67.

<sup>38</sup> Brookeman 62.

lawyer. Those boys really haul it in. Another reason I know he's quite well off, he's always investing money in shows on Broadway" (107). Holden's father has never discussed "that stuff" with his son. The novel does not give readers any indication that his father has discussed many subjects with Holden. Holden must use his imagination to estimate how much his father makes. Broadway investments and a professional title indicate his father's wealth and social status. In addition, Holden can gauge his father's status on the basis of his interaction with his peer group and the representation of lawyers in the mass media. Pencey Prep is at least the third private school that Holden has attended. Educational institutions are the liaison between Holden and his parents. They represent Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield's interest in their son's development. Otherwise, Holden's parents are largely absent from the lives of their children. The father is absent to the extent that he can't attend his daughter Phoebe's Christmas pageant because "he has to fly to California" (162). The mother makes a single brief appearance towards the end of the novel to check up on Phoebe after returning home from a late-night party in Connecticut. Holden's observations on the values that he encounters at Pencey Prep "lead him to conclude that the whole official vision of the school as a cooperative caring family is a mask for an actual ideology of intense competitive struggle between its individual members and factions."<sup>39</sup> Holden's problem is that he is being socialized to participate in a way of life that he abhors. His socialization, however, has been relatively effective. He has become proficient at a game that he despises. He knows the rules quite well, and for a sixteen-year-old, he can read the opponent with startling accuracy.

---

<sup>39</sup> Brookeman 61.

An example of Holden's sophisticated grasp of the cultural codes that determine social interaction among his peers occurs when he and Stradlater are in the "can." Stradlater is pressuring Holden to write an essay on his behalf and Holden temporarily defuses the situation by putting on a comical performance. He pretends to be the son of a Governor who wants to be a tap-dancer. The Governor wants his son to go to Oxford, but Holden insists that tap-dancing is in his "goddam blood" (29). Holden narrates the climax of his performance by saying, "'Its opening night of the *Ziegfeld Follies*' . . . . 'The leading man can't go on. He's drunk as a bastard. So who do they get to take his place? Me, that's who. The little ole goddam Governor's son'" (28). Holden manages to distract Stradlater with an impromptu take-off on a popular Hollywood musical, but he also mocks the fact that both he and Stradlater are expected to attend Ivy League schools and conform to the mandates of their social class. Stradlater is not impressed with Holden's performance. Actually, he sees through it. He knows that Holden is merely stalling, so he quickly returns to his request for academic "assistance." However, Holden is quick on his feet and diverts the subject again by asking Stradlater who his date is for that evening. Holden and Stradlater are dissociated from one another. In fact, one of the only reasons that Holden rooms with a "stupid bastard" like Stradlater is that one of Holden's former roommates at Elkton Hills kept telling him that his luggage was "bourgeois as hell" (108-9). Holden's world is replete with an intense stratification of social position that is based upon rigid economic standards. According to Carol and Richard Ohmann, Holden's "desires point him toward a world in which human qualities

like intelligence and a sense of humor would be the ground of relatedness, rather than Mark Cross luggage and the money that stands behind it.”<sup>40</sup>

Holden conveys his views on his culture, his role in that culture, and the timeline of his development in that culture, in at least three instances. While arguing with Sally Hayes, he criticizes private schools by saying, “[They are] full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day . . . and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques” (131). Holden naively asks Sally to run away with him. She insists that the idea is too “fantastic” and assures him that there will be “oodles of time” and “oodles of marvelous” places to go after he goes to college (133). Holden disagrees. He insists that “it’d be entirely different” after college:

I’d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid newsreels. Newsreels. Christ almighty. There’s always a dumb horse race, and some dame breaking a bottle over a ship, and some chimpanzee riding a goddam bicycle with pants on. (133)

The life that Holden imagines is completely devoid of anything that is not connected to commerce. He imagines that he will make as much money as possible and he will read the paper in order to be informed on any developments that may concern his interests.

---

<sup>40</sup> Carol Ohmann and Richard Ohmann, “Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye,” Critical Inquiry 3.1 (1976): 31.

He will play bridge in his leisure time and probably do a little social networking, and of course he will go to the movies. Finally, Holden's vision is complete with the image of a chimpanzee riding a bicycle and wearing pants. The image raises at least two questions. What makes humans and chimpanzees different, and how different are humans and chimpanzees from one another? Jane Goodall has done much to answer the latter question. Her work demonstrates that humans and chimpanzees are closely related.<sup>41</sup> However, the first question is more difficult to answer. One important distinction, though, between humans and chimpanzees, is that humans have a much more complex social organization. Holden is frustrated with the complex social organization of humans because it is dominated by the marketplace, and the performing chimpanzee is a glaring example of that fact. The image of the chimpanzee wearing pants and riding a bicycle represents corrupted purity. The chimpanzee has been incorporated into the business of making money. The bicycle-riding chimpanzee is a parody of Holden as an adult, putting on a suit, and taking a taxi to work. Holden is concerned that after college he will be fully immersed in a commercial culture. In addition, he can not picture himself in any of the roles he is expected to fill. All of the roles he imagines are "incompatible with the spontaneous feeling and relatedness" he wishes for.<sup>42</sup>

Holden imagines that he will be "working in some office" after college, but he cannot define the kind of office or the kind of work he will do there. He can not imagine a life for himself that won't compromise his principles. Phoebe tells him to name

---

<sup>41</sup> Jane Goodall Institute for Wildlife Research, Education and Conservation, 20 Sept. 2006  
<<http://www.janegoodall.org/default.asp>>

<sup>42</sup> Carol Ohmann and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Critical Inquiry* 3.1 (1976): 33.

something that he would like to “*be*” and she offers a “scientist” or a “lawyer” as suggestions (172). Holden thinks lawyers are all right if they save innocent people all the time, but he is afraid that they don’t do that. He is afraid that “if you’re a lawyer,” then “all you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot” (172). Holden is even more concerned that if he were a lawyer he might lose himself in the role and forget why he became a lawyer in the first place. He is afraid that he might compromise his integrity and principles:

Even if you *did* go around saving guys’ lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really *wanted* to save guys’ lives, or because you did it because what you *really* wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn’t*” (172).

Holden is concerned with identity here. He feels that one would not know that one was a “phony” because a person’s identity is increasingly determined by the marketplace – an artificial system. Holden’s problem is that he is beginning to struggle with the idea that one can not escape being “phony” if one’s identity is defined economically. Ultimately, Holden is also concerned with storytelling. If so much of what constitutes day-to-day human reality is based on social organization and artificial systems, then why don’t we make up a better story? Holden is disappointed that, in the story in which he lives,



people don't go around saving each other. They trade in new cars for newer ones, they gather together in cliques, they commit genocide, and they drop bombs on one another.

Holden is engulfed in a maelstrom of social change. As the economy has become the dominant organizing principle of social life, science and technology have developed at an accelerating rate. Holden has convenient access to abundant products and services under the shadow of the atomic bomb. "Advanced capitalism" has made it conceivable that there could be enough "stuff" for everyone – that poverty could be eliminated, and that this abundance could co-exist with equality and "brotherhood." Capitalism "feeds" the desire for this coexistence, but prevents its "fulfillment." "Only a few can hope" for affluence, which is achieved "at the expense of the many." Consequently, one must stifle "awareness of the many" to enjoy one's affluence.<sup>43</sup> William K. Shrader suggests that the awareness of the threat of the destruction of civilization by man-made weapons "can be seen to feed insecurity and cynical consumerism."<sup>44</sup> Holden is painfully aware of cynical consumerism's cultural presence, but he rejects it rather than embraces it, and he can not shut out his "awareness of the many."

Electronic communications technologies are one of the primary scientific and technological developments that contributed to the social changes that Holden experiences, and they play a pivotal role in The Catcher in the Rye. Electronic media, film and television in particular, gave people a glance into one another's lives. As mentioned earlier, the Hollywood Ten investigations were broadcast two years before

---

<sup>43</sup> Carol Ohmann and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye," Critical Inquiry 3.1 (1976): 35.

<sup>44</sup> William K. Shrader, Media Blight and the Dehumanizing of America (New York: Praeger, 1992) xvii.

Holden's "madman" journey home. Film and television put a face on public figures. They gave government a personality in the eyes of the public. William L. Rivers suggests that:

The media have played a major part in transforming the social order into a mass society. More than that, they are an increasingly important means of power for the elite of dominant institutional orders. They not only filter man's experience of external reality; they also help to shape his experience. They tell him who he is, what he wants to be, and how he can appear to be that way to others.<sup>45</sup>

In the Cold War era of Holden's adolescence, film and television were still new tools for communication and propaganda.<sup>46</sup> As time has passed, and people have become accustomed to them, their use has become more subtle, more sophisticated. Electronic media can certainly entertain and can sometimes, though not always, inform citizens. Lewis Lapham discusses an idea that he calls the "Eternal Now": ". . . the corporate media assume that because they are omnipresent they are also omniscient. Accustomed to believing themselves the creators of the character of the American president . . . they don't draw careful distinctions between democracy as a system of government and democracy as a form of entertainment."<sup>47</sup> Lapham indicates the difficulties that arise when corporations own the media. Corporate media tend to impede the democratic

---

<sup>45</sup> William L. Rivers, *The Mass Media and Modern Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1971) 296.

<sup>46</sup> *The Atomic Café*, dir. Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, Pierce Rafferty, docurama, 1982. A dark, comic documentary of the early Cold War period presented via government archives, period music, newsreels, and military training films.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis Lapham, *Lights, Camera, Democracy* (New York: Random, 2001) xii.

process by turning it into profitable entertainment through editing and selective coverage. In an electronically mediated environment – perception, belief, and truth are often based on performance – a performance of the type that Holden criticizes as he tries to expose the “phoniness” in the world.

Holden is poised on the cusp of the transition from a print society to an electronically mediated society. As a result, he seems to be sensitive to the impact of electronic communications technologies on the economic organization of society. Television and film have deemphasized language, literacy, and speechwriting in politics and emphasized body language, appearance, and performance. Holden has one foot planted firmly in the literary world and the other planted in the visual. He is an “ace composition writer” who is flunking every course but English (182). He discusses Shakespeare with a pair of nuns in a restaurant (111). He prefers The Great Gatsby to A Farewell to Arms (141). Readers learn by the second page that Holden claims to hate the movies, but he is peculiarly fascinated by them. In fact, Holden admits that he enjoys imitating movies during his Ziegfeld Follies routine in the “can” at Pencey Prep (29). After he gets punched in the stomach by Sunny’s pimp (Maurice) at the end of chapter fourteen, he has an elaborate movie fantasy in the film noir tradition. He pretends that Maurice “plugged” him, so he sort of shuffles to the bathroom with a “bullet in [his] guts” (104). Then, Holden imagines that he craftily avoids the elevator and calmly walks down a few flights of stairs – dramatically dripping with blood the whole way. After putting six shots through Maurice’s “fat hairy belly” and dropping the gun down the elevator shaft, he “crawls back to [his] room and call[s] up Jane to have her come over

and bandage up [his] guts” (104). Then, he pictures himself bleeding all over the place while Jane holds a cigarette for him to smoke before he declares, “The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I’m not kidding” (104).

The following series of observations and experiences signify the transference of ritualized spiritual or religious ceremonies to the commercialized entertainment or cinematic experience. Holden observes that “Broadway was mobbed and messy. It was Sunday, and only about twelve o’clock, but it was mobbed anyway. Everybody was on their way to the movies – the Paramount or the Astor or the Strand or the Capitol or one of those crazy places” (115). He continues this description by saying:

Everybody was all dressed up, because it was Sunday, and that made it worse. But the worst part was that you could tell they all *wanted* to go to the movies. I couldn’t stand looking at them. I can understand somebody going to the movies because there’s nothing else to do, but when somebody really *wants* to go, and even walks fast so as to get there quicker, then it depresses hell out of me. Especially if I see millions of people standing in one of those long, terrible lines, all the way down the block, waiting with this terrific patience for seats and all. (115-16)

Via repetition, Holden emphasizes the fact that it is Sunday and the scene that Holden describes above evokes the line for communion in a church or the line that forms as people are shaking hands with the clergymen before they shuffle towards their cars. Salinger juxtaposes the image of a cinematic communion with a different image: “This family that you could tell just came out of some church were walking in front of me – a

father, a mother, and a little kid about six years old” (115). Holden says that they “looked sort of poor” (115). The father is wearing “one of those pearl-gray hats that poor guys wear a lot” (115). The little kid is walking along the curb, precariously near the loud, speeding traffic, and he is singing “If a body catch a body coming through the rye” (115). The family makes Holden feel less depressed among the swarm of holiday shoppers and moviegoers on Broadway. Seeing them makes him think that maybe some things are sacred. Maybe some things have a value that can not be determined by the marketplace. They give Holden hope.

The day after Holden warns that movies can “ruin you,” he goes to the movies. He says he’s going just to pass the time, but Holden is becoming increasingly desperate. He could pass his time in numerous other ways, but everyone on Broadway is heading to the movies. As much as Holden seems to disapprove of the ritual, he joins the solemn spectatorship of the movie theater because he is looking for a connection to people and the world. He seeks an identity, a sense of fulfillment, and relationships that are not strictly determined by commercial interests. He does not find what he is looking for on this particular trip to the theater. Instead, he finds a dazzling display of human objectification. When Holden enters the theatre the stage show is on: “The Rockettes were kicking their heads off, the way they do when they’re all in line with their arms around each other’s waist. The audience applauded like mad, and some guy behind me kept saying to his wife, ‘You know what that is? That’s precision’” (137). The synchronized precision of the Rockettes mirrors the regulated movement of mechanical parts. The individuality of the dancers is subjugated to conformity with profit-seeking

practices. Then Holden describes a second portion of the stage show: “. . . they had this Christmas thing they have at Radio City every year. All these angels start coming out of the boxes and everywhere, guys carrying crucifixes and stuff all over the place, and the whole bunch of them – thousands of them – singing ‘Come All Ye Faithful’ like mad” (137). Holden continues: “Big Deal. It’s supposed to be religious as hell, I know, and very pretty and all, but I can’t see anything religious or pretty, for God’s sake, about a bunch of actors carrying crucifixes all over the stage” (137). Finally, Holden concludes: “When they were all finished and started going out the boxes again, you could tell they could hardly wait to get a cigarette or something” (137). Holden doesn’t see the pageantry before him as sacred in any manner. He sees an advertisement for any and all products, an advertisement for consumerism.

Holden claims that he cannot “stand” ministers because they are “phony” (100). They “all have these Holy Joe voices” (100). He cannot understand why they don’t speak in their “natural” voices (100). He suspects that their sermons are not genuine, that they are too much like a performance. They are more like actors than ministers. Holden offers a similar critique of Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontaine, actors who “[don’t] act like people” and “[don’t] act like actors” (126). Instead, Holden believes that they act like celebrities (126). In Holden’s world, corporate capitalism has strategically maneuvered and positioned itself to address any doubts concerning the existence of God. In the event that God does not exist, corporate capitalism offers itself for devotional purposes. Corporate capitalism is God’s understudy.

The relationship of religion with corporate capitalism is revealed by Holden's discussion of his dormitory at Pencey Prep, which is named after an alumnus, Ossenburger, who has "made a pot of dough in the undertaking business (16). Ossenburger is a successful product of Pencey's assembly line, and he is a figure after whom the students are expected to model themselves. He receives "obligatory" cheers when he attends school football games.<sup>48</sup> Ossenburger tells the student body at an assembly in the chapel that he "was never ashamed . . . to get right down on his knees and pray to God" (16 -17). Holden describes Ossenburger's address by saying, "He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all. He said *he* talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car" (16 -17). "That killed me," says Holden (17). He imagines Ossenburger, "the big phony bastard," shifting "his big goddam Cadillac . . . into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiffs" (16-17). According to Carol and Richard Ohmann, Ossenburger's "phoniness is rooted in the economic and social arrangements of capitalism, and in their concealment." Holden's account of Ossenburger "demystifies" the social order "better than if he had said, 'this man claims legitimacy for his money, his Cadillac, his business ethics, his eminence and class privilege, by enlisting religion on his side.'" <sup>49</sup>

Holden's problem with movies is that they threaten to co-opt his imagination in the same way that corporate capitalism co-opts religion. Holden gives the movie he sees a scathing review: "It was so putrid [he] couldn't take [his] eyes off it" (138). Ironically,

---

<sup>48</sup> Carol Ohmann and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye," Critical Inquiry 3.1 (1976): 29.

<sup>49</sup> Carol Ohmann and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye," Critical Inquiry 3.1 (1976): 29.

the main character in the film shares significant similarities with Holden. He is a member of a privileged class who wanders “all over London, not knowing who the hell he is” (138). However, their similarities end there. The film’s main character falls in love and regains his memory before the film ends. Holden’s negative review of the movie can be attributed to its “happy ending” and its lack of verisimilitude. Holden’s story ends with an uncertain future in a psychiatric facility. Later in the evening, after Holden has left the movies, he goes to a bar and starts drinking. Once he is drunk, Holden says, “I started that stupid business with the bullet in my guts again” (150). Nearly twenty-four hours after his encounter with Maurice, Holden is still engaging in an elaborate movie fantasy: “I was the only guy at the bar with a bullet in their guts. I kept putting my hand under my jacket, on my stomach and all, to keep the blood from dripping all over the place. I didn’t want anybody to know I was even wounded. I was *concealing* the fact that I was a wounded sonuvabitch” (150). Even after Holden leaves the bar, he keeps his hand on his “wound.” He is so influenced by movies that he is detached from himself and the world. He transfers his moral, psychological, and emotional wound to an imagined gunshot wound. He is performing concealment. The performance of his fantasy is not for anyone else. He does not share it with anyone. He uses it to cope with his estrangement from his parents, his society, and himself.

Phoebe is the only person with whom Holden has a genuine, sustained relationship. After leaving the bar, Holden heads home to see her. In many ways, she is responsible for stabilizing Holden by suggesting that he does not like “*anything* that is happening” and by challenging him to name “one thing” that he likes (169). We know



Holden likes Phoebe, he likes his dead brother Allie, and he likes D.B.'s short story, "The Secret Goldfish." Holden also likes the way Jane Gallagher holds his hand and puts her hand on the back of his neck, and he likes that family that he saw on Broadway who were just leaving church – the one with the kid singing "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" (115). When Phoebe challenges Holden to name something that he would like to be, Holden dismisses her suggestion that he become a lawyer. In light of his recent encounter, he says, "I'd just be the catcher in the rye" (173).

The first person that Holden must catch is himself. Phoebe needs Holden just as much as Holden needs her. In fact, Holden and Phoebe seem to catch one another. Determined to hitchhike out west, Holden fails to conceptualize his solitary existence away from one of the most important people in his life. In addition, he fails to imagine Phoebe's life in his absence. We have already gained a glimpse into Holden's adolescence and his parents' emotional distance. His father is a workaholic and his mother is "nervous as hell" (158). Most nights, she sits up smoking cigarettes until morning, "she doesn't enjoy herself much when she goes out," and she suffers from frequent headaches (177). Without Holden's presence, Phoebe's home-life is bleak.

When Holden leaves to spend the night at Mr. Antolini's, Phoebe gives Holden her "Christmas dough" in Queequeg-like fashion (179). The gesture makes Holden cry and he returns the gesture by giving Phoebe his red hunting hat. When Holden grows anxious to travel out west, he arranges to have Phoebe meet him at the museum in order to say good bye. Phoebe arrives with Holden's red hunting hat on. She is lugging one of his old suitcases and she is intent on accompanying him out west. This time, when

Holden refuses to let her go along with him, Phoebe cries. She takes the red hunting hat off as a sign of her anger and disappointment. Later, when their brief feud subsides, Holden says, “then what [Phoebe] did – it damn near killed me – she reached in my coat pocket and took out my red hunting hat and put it on my head (212). Holden confesses, “I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy” (213). Phoebe is the catalyst in Holden’s redemption. He comes to realize that she depends on him, and their relationship enables him to conceive of a future in which he can navigate the economically determined social order. Phoebe’s pointed questions and her demonstration of love force Holden to take responsibility for his own actions. The pressure that Holden feels to conform to social mandates is intense, but Phoebe brings him to realize that he can create a life for himself that is comparable to his vision of “the catcher in the rye.” The solidarity that Holden shares with Phoebe makes the social order endurable. He may not be able to change the systems of social organization that create the Ossenburgers or the “hot-shot lawyers” of the world, but Holden finally realizes that it might be worth giving it a shot.

## Chapter Three

Harry Crews's autobiography A Childhood: The Biography of a Place "provides a key to the social significance of his fiction."<sup>50</sup> He was born into an oral culture. As a result he became a "teller of tales shaped not simply by a single imagination, but by the imagination of numerous men and women over many years' time."<sup>51</sup> Crews describes the process of naming farms by saying, "It was a tradition that gave direction to the county . . . . It gave people's lives points of reference" (51). For instance, once a farm was named, typically after a particular family, it retained that name regardless of its residents until the house and barns were no longer standing. In addition, Crews emphasizes the significance of physical places and structures through his description of his family's frequent relocations. At one point, Crews describes his memory of moving to Jacksonville: "It was a magic moment for me because I had always been fascinated with boundaries and borders--the Little Satilla, for instance, separating Appling County from Bacon, made me feel safe and good when I started to sleep at night" (131). In short, Crews's autobiography tells of a time and place in which storytelling was a communal process, through which people told stories to one another about who they were without regard for financial profit – an experience far removed from Holden's New York City or Herman's Jacksonville, Florida. Although people still tell each other stories today in

---

<sup>50</sup> Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long, "Harry Crews's A Childhood: A Resource for Teaching Sociology," Teaching Sociology 9 (1982): 458.

<sup>51</sup> Frank J. Popovich, "Place and Imagination in Harry Crews's A Childhood: The Biography of a Place," Southern Literary Journal 19 (1986): 5.

much the same way they did in Crews's youth – high school peers reminisce about events past or cast themselves as legends in the eyes of underclassmen, and grandparents relate their experiences during the Great Depression – these stories are localized and their audience is select. The tradition of naming farms in the Bacon County, Georgia of Crews's youth is a form of meaning-making far removed from the thirty-second television commercials that are seen across the country daily. A national advertising campaign for Wal-Mart represents actual Wal-Mart stores that are essentially identical whether they are in West Virginia or Wyoming. The voice of local culture is like the sound of a pin dropping at a rock concert. It is drowned out by the voices of global corporations. The development of the corporation has torn down previous boundaries and supplanted them with the elaborate and all-encompassing, yet seemingly permeable and flexible, boundary of capitalism.

One must keep in mind the tremendous momentum that has been building since the nineteenth century and that has catapulted society along a trajectory from industrialism to capitalism. Moby-Dick presents an industrial vision of labor and the marketplace. The Catcher in the Rye presents a vision of a professional class that is preoccupied with materialism and Hollywood. Car exemplifies the dominance of the marketplace within social life via technologies that include radio, telephone, and television. The negative impact of the marketplace on the individual is the common link among all three novels. Car examines the individual's experiences in modern society, and that examination involves the individual's experience of his or her physical and social place. That is, Car represents the ways in which individuals make sense of the

world. It presents a world in which one is in the clutches of commodification and sensationalism manifested by the ubiquity of electronic communications technology and the marketplace. As a result, one struggles to create meaning and a sense of non-commercial fulfillment in the absence of ritualistic spirituality. Car delineates the consequences of a system of social life that is predominantly organized around the marketplace. It explores the disappearing distinction between man and machine, and it probes the costs of unsustainable exploitation of natural resources for profit. Finally, Car engages ontological issues of existence and identity, and suggests that a social system that is predominantly organized by the marketplace is deleterious to the individual's wellbeing.

According to Joshua Meyrowitz, "The evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the experience of people and events . . . . The walls of the family home, for example, are no longer effective barriers that wholly isolate the family from the larger community and society." Indeed, the "family home" is an increasingly boundary-free zone as a result of the relatively constant "access" that families have to "other places and other people through radio, television, and telephone."<sup>52</sup> The primary conflict motivating Car is revealed by the narrator who informs readers that the central figure, Herman, was declaring his intention to consume an automobile on "the radio. On the television. In the Florida *Times-Union* newspaper" (339). The publicity Herman generated causes a tense moment between his twin brother Mister and their father Easy, during which Mister, with clenched fists tells his father, "I

---

<sup>52</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 308.

just wouldn't say one word if I'd raised a son who was advertising in public that he was going to eat a car" (339). Herman's public performance essentially displaces the Mack family from their residence at "Auto-Town" and relocates them to a transient space at Mr. Edge's hotel. Hotels are typically places of transitory associations among strangers that are largely defined by the marketplace. The woman with whom Herman ultimately finds love, Margo, is one of the hotel's few "permanent" residents – she is a prostitute who services both male and female guests at the hotel. She is "on call twenty-four hours a day" (426). She is entirely defined by her economic function, which never ceases. Similarly, the Mack family is described in strictly economic terms:

The thing about Herman was that he couldn't take hold. He never had been able to. The others took hold and found their places, but not Herman. Junell drove Big Mama and ran Salvage House. Mister ran the disposal end of the business, operating the car-crusher, directing the hired man Paul on the crane, and overseeing the loading at the dock. Their father, who had founded Auto-Town, kept the books and tried to see into the future. (337)

In a way, Margo and the Mack family are extreme representatives of the citizens of the world, and Mr. Edge's hotel is a microcosm of that world. The marketplace has transformed the home and the community into a hotel via its mouthpiece – electronic communications technologies.

Car opens with Mister crushing automobiles into "suitcase-sized . . . manageable unlovely square lump[s]" (332). The image of cars compacted into suitcases evokes a

false sense of unbridled mobility. The cars are no longer functional, but even in a post-operational state they are associated with mobility – with the luggage that normally is packed into the trunks of automobiles. The narrator describes “a brand-new 1970 Cadillac” that slides “into the cradle” of Mister’s crusher. Just before the appearance of the Cadillac, the narrator says, “No pattern had developed during the morning, and that was all right because [Mister] did not expect it to. He never expected a pattern, but he was ready if one came” (331). The wrecked, but “brand-new,” automobile poised within a cradle in preparation to be converted “back to raw unmolded metal” evokes a decadent and wasteful culture, while the absence of any “pattern” suggests an environment of chaotic meaninglessness. This episode captures the existential conundrum facing all of the characters in Moby-Dick, The Catcher in the Rye, and Car. It conflates the distinction between cradle and grave or birth and death and emphasizes the gray area between.

When reading Car one ventures into a post-industrial landscape or cyborgian environment that is painted with the brush of physiology and biology. The seemingly mismatched descriptors create a heightened sense of distance and isolation. Rather than belonging to the natural world, Mister is immersed in a technological environment. However, the narrator’s language suggests a memory of a groundedness in the natural or at least a suspicion that such an existence is or was possible. Ultimately, readers are left wondering to what degree an individual resides in the natural or the technological worlds. The post-industrial landscape laid forth in Car is replete with cars that have stomachs. The environment is filled with finned automobiles that swim “upstream, savage and

unrelenting, to the headwaters of the American heart” (332). It is filled with valleys and mountains of wasted material in which humans make the sound of “rats scurrying over dried grain” (335). In this environment, Mister manipulates levers in a mechanized rhetorical system of communication and causes the “colossal vice” of the car-crusher to dispose of the next junked car. The crusher “throbs” and “pulses” under Mister’s direction as if it were a living organism – as if Mister’s flesh and blood were fused with the machine. Where does Mister begin and the car-crusher end? He spends most of his days perched atop the crusher like a twisted descendant of a whaler atop a mast-head who is entangled in circuitry. No hunting is required of Mister. His whales are delivered to him. He is practically drowning in them. The distinction between Mister and the machine is blurred with every manipulation of the lever and every car crushed. Does Mister crush the cars or does the machine? Do the pistol and bullet commit the murder or does the one who pulls the trigger? While nestled in his perch in the heart of Auto-Town, Mister is flanked by the “roiling excremental flow” of the Saint John’s River, a river described as “ten feet of gasoline on top of fifty feet of shit” (332). The Saint John’s serves as a natural border between Auto-Town and Jacksonville, Florida. However, it has also been incorporated into the business of automobile disposal that the Mack family conducts at Auto-Town. Along the shores of the Saint John’s River, an endless rotation of barges belly-up along Auto-Town’s docks to receive their loads and bear them away. Where do all of the junked cars come from? On the other side of Auto-Town, the side opposite the Saint John’s River, lies the expressway.



The post-industrial landscape extends beyond the borders of Auto-Town and into Jacksonville. The narrator describes Mister's walk from the car crusher back to Salvage House (the Mack family home), where "he broke out onto a plain of wrecked and mangled cars laid out neatly in rows, one after the other, more than ten acres of them spreading out to his left and ending where the expressway arched over Auto-Town . . . " (334). The expressway casts a shadow over the neat rows of the Mack family's cash-crop: junked cars. Its presence is oppressive. At the opening of chapter two, Easy Mack drives into Jacksonville via the "limited-access superhighway." On the highway, "the young people refused to lock into traffic and stay put. Instead, they jockeyed for position, their oversized engines whining and snarling, challenging for the right to break out and leave the pack. But cars were bumper to bumper for twenty miles in any direction. There *was* no way to leave the pack" (342). Melville may have captured this phenomenon of interdependency best through the image of the monkey-rope. Everyone on the road, in the skies, or in the world shares a "Siamese connexion" or invisible umbilical cord with every other driver, pilot, air traffic controller, person, or living organism. The young highway jockeys sharing the road with Easy are blinded to this fact by the illusion of limitless freedom and independence that capitalism promises. Like the term "place," "mobility" has two meanings. The drivers who vie for position on the highway with Easy Mack *are* literally moving. The bumper-to-bumper traffic along the road and the competition to "leave the pack" imply a desire for social mobility in the characters peopling Car. The "low, sleek, and powerful . . . Cougars . . . Furys . . . [and] Stingrays" that the young jockeys drive serve as status symbols in much the same way

that D.B.'s Jaguar functions in The Catcher in the Rye. They are relational identifiers. As Frank W. Shelton suggests, "Crews explores how characters are defined by and cope with technology, in this case the automobile."<sup>53</sup>

However, Crews seems to explore how identities are shaped by and cope with electronic communications technology as much as he explores the impact of the automobile. Indeed, "Car describes the market's penetration into all aspects of human life."<sup>54</sup> It marks the evolution from an industrialism that manufactured and sold products for profit based on their functions, to a capitalism that markets products or services for profit based on their symbolic value. What distinguishes capitalism from industrialism is that it necessitates the creation of consumers. It requires mass marketing and the indoctrination of a "philosophy of futility."<sup>55</sup> The philosophy of futility is practically synonymous with the "cynical consumerism" discussed in the previous chapter. Cynical consumerism is caused by the individual's powerlessness in a world threatened by weapons of mass destruction. As a result, individuals divert their attention from what they have very little if any control over, and preoccupy themselves with what they can control – consumption. Cynical consumerism is a reaction to global events, whereas a philosophy of futility is a consequence of the concerted effort of advertising to maintain and even nurture an atmosphere of cynical consumerism. The philosophy of futility requires individuals to be completely dissociated from one another, or more accurately the only association that individuals share under this philosophy is a commercial one. If

---

<sup>53</sup> Frank W. Shelton "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," Southern Literary Journal 12 (1980): 5.

<sup>54</sup> Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long, "Harry Crews on the American Dream," Southern Quarterly (1982): 42.

<sup>55</sup> The Corporation.

the marketing industry does its job, then a philosophy of futility becomes the standard. Individuals within this framework are largely concerned with conspicuous or fashionable consumption. Their goal is to satisfy as many “created wants” as possible. A created want is simply a product or service that an individual did not desire until the desire was planted, instilled, or created by advertisers. Herman’s audience exemplifies a philosophy of futility in their eagerness to buy miniaturized versions of the Maverick that Herman passes each morning (377). The first half-ounce pellet that Herman passes is “auctioned off to the highest bidder” and according to Mr. Edge, “each subsequent” miniature “will be sold at twelve dollars and fifty cents each plus state sales tax on a first come first serve basis” (377). Crews’s inclusion of the “state sales tax” in the price points to the government’s complicity in corporate capitalism’s practices. Mr. Edge wants to ensure that the audience can participate in the spectacle in the “most intimate way” and asks the audience if they can think of a better way to make that possibility a reality than to leave the Sherman Hotel with a replica dangling from their own key-chains (378). Herman’s audience is indoctrinated with a philosophy of futility and they demonstrate that fact through their desire to satisfy the created want represented by the Maverick key chain. They are saturated with a philosophy of futility and preoccupied with useless consumption.

The world of Car is peopled by individuals who are unwittingly identified by consumption. They are manipulated by symbols that tell them stories about who they are. Shelton suggests, “In most of [Crews’s] novels are found a performer and an audience,

the rituals of religion having been in effect replaced by the rituals of entertainment.”<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, Herman is a performer at the Sherman Hotel. He is the main attraction. Mr. Edge tells Easy Mack that he won’t have Herman “perform” on the marquee in front of his hotel (345). Herman’s performance is a parody of capitalist processes. His attempt to consume the Maverick mirrors America’s hyper-consumption and its accompanying wastefulness. A portion of Herman’s waste is recycled into the Maverick replicas discussed above, but the upholstery, glass, and other miscellaneous materials are simply discarded.

Mr. Edge’s concern is for profit and he wants Herman to perform indoors, where he can charge admission. Crews’s characters confront “the commodity-intensive lifestyle that corporations are selling worldwide via the culturally homogenizing technology of television and its parent, advertising” described by Jerry Mander.<sup>57</sup> Herman is completely immersed in America’s consumer culture, and he worships the automobile as the symbol of unbridled mobility and consumption. He is “attempting to perform a communion ritual with his god,” but his attempt is ruined by Mr. Edge and Mister, who want to profit from Herman’s attempt to reclaim some form of ritualistic spirituality.<sup>58</sup> When his father confronts him about his intention to eat the Maverick, Herman tells Easy, “the car is where we are in America,” and when Easy chidingly asks his son if he is going to eat a tree when he finishes the Maverick, Herman “smile[s] fondly” at his father and asks, “how can you talk about trees and cars in the same breath?” (349). Herman’s

---

<sup>56</sup> Shelton, “Man’s Search for Perfection” 2.

<sup>57</sup> Jerry Mander, The Case Against the Global Economy: and for a Turn Toward the Local (San Francisco: Sierra) 6.

<sup>58</sup> Shelton, “Man’s Search for Perfection” 5.

question is ironic because automobile exhaust contributes to air pollution, and trees are vital components of ecosystems and the carbon cycle, which maintain chemical balances of breathable air. Herman points to the street below him and his father, and says, “you don’t see a tree down there. Not a one. Your car is where it’s at” (349). Down on the street Easy sees the commodity-intensive life-style that Mander describes. Easy notices among the crowd of on-lookers craning their necks for a glimpse of Herman and the Maverick a family seated on the street curb beside four lanes of congested traffic that is “stalled and solid and roaring in a gaseous mist of combustion” (349). The family sits among the crowd of people and cars, and in between deep breaths of exhaust, they eat from a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken that bears the likeness of Colonel Sanders. Once they finish their meal, the mother tidies up by placing all of the refuse within the bucket and sets it on the sidewalk, whereupon her son proceeds to kick the bucket into the street. The scene epitomizes the process of consumption and waste that Herman’s act parodies, and Easy gazes down into the chaos on the street below as the narrator gives readers access to his thoughts:

Who would have thought it would come to this? Who would have thought it *could* come to this? Easy remembered the first car he had ever seen. High and square and shining and open. Sure it had been noisy. But everything else had been so quiet that the noise had been beautiful and singular for the very reason it was manmade. It had been smoky too, but the smoke had only been lovely on the pristine, almost brittly pure air of the world. (350)

The scene that Easy observes in the street outside the Sherman hotel is full of the overindulgence and wastefulness that is wrought by an overzealous emphasis on the marketplace, and Easy's reflection is a lamentation of that fact. To what is Easy referring to when he uses the term "it" in the two questions that lead his reflection? In the context of the scene, "it" immediately refers to the congested traffic on the street and the fact that his son is entirely earnest about eating the Maverick. The rest of Easy's reflection, however, broadens the sense of the term "it" to include American culture. The car was once "high and square and shining and open." It was full of promise. The automobile was novel, and its noise pollution was "beautiful" because it was manmade – its air pollution was "lovely" and "pristine" because the air of the untamed world was still pure. The automobile, and by implication, all of its accompanying technologies, created a sense of security. They afforded people some comfort in a mysterious universe, and provided an illusion of control, but the technologies that afforded that sense of control are now *out* of control, and the characters in Car are completely divorced from the natural world. One might rephrase Easy's initial question by asking, "Who would have thought that by strictly organizing social life around the marketplace we would alienate people from themselves, from each other, and from the universe?"

In contrast to Herman, Mr. Edge overzealously praises the virtues of the marketplace. He is in the "hotel and entertainment business" (344). He is intent on making a profit, and he would cheat Herman without a second thought. His job is to deliver "a little of the old pizzazz" (344). After all, he has "got to make [his] money back" (345). Mr. Edge's use of the term "pizzazz" is comical. He is venturing into

unknown territory. He is obviously ambitious and although he is clearly in the hotel business, the only other evidence of his experience in the entertainment industry, aside from his deal with Herman, is the prostitution service he has established. He is a novice and his use of the old-fashioned term “pizzazz” is a clear indication of that fact.

“Pizzazz” conjures up images of painted-on smiles, glinting teeth, and jazz hands. He does not use sophisticated terminology such as the philosophy of futility mentioned above. In many ways, Mr. Edge seems to be as seduced by the spectacle at his hotel and the potential to make a profit as the audience is by the Maverick key-chains. Finally, Mr. Edge makes an extremely unwise investment that ultimately results in a significant loss. After all, according to the plans set forth by Herman and Mr. Edge, more than ten years would pass before Herman finished eating the Maverick (375).

However, Mr. Edge is not a complete fool and he does his best to profit from Herman’s entertainment value. He knows that a photograph of Herman with his father would be beneficial because it would present a credible image to the buying public. Therefore, he has one of his photographers capture the desired image with his “zoom lens” camera, and Easy is left “helpless and hopeless” under the influence of Mr. Edge’s exploitative powers (350). When Easy tries to stand up for himself and threatens to take legal action if Mr. Edge uses his picture without his permission, Mr. Edge reminds him that Herman is now a “public personality,” and that the pictures that were taken are at his disposal, and furthermore, Mr. Edge gloatingly taunts Easy, “if you sue, it’ll just help the sales when the show really starts” (352). In order to ensure the success of what is billed simply as “HERMAN AND THE MAVERICK” Mr. Edge insists that Junell, Herman’s

sister, don a new wardrobe (372). She customarily wears the same outfit due to her job as a tow truck driver. ““Those leathers are bad for the image,”” explains Mr. Edge, ““We’ll have the press people here in force”” (373). Shelton describes Crews’s fiction by saying, “he uses grotesque characters to suggest man’s incompleteness and alienation, his estrangement from the world, and a sense of the existential absurdity of human existence,” and Crews does so with great humor.<sup>59</sup> One can assume that “leathers” would be appropriate attire for a spectator at an event at which a man appears in front of an audience each day to “pass” a number of melted-down metal-pellets and a few capsules containing upholstery. After all, Herman’s performance is not exactly a black-tie affair. Mr. Edge’s attention to the details of image and performance captures the excessive self-consciousness of the modern human whose identity is increasingly less rigid across the lines of race or gender, but is increasingly determined by commercial interests. Advertisements tell their audiences that they are inadequate, that they are somehow incomplete without the product or service being advertised. The common identity shared by individuals in modern civilization is that of “consumer,” and contradictory voices express various appeals to consumers with intense frequency. Mr. Edge is not the only character in Car who is sensitive to the altered social situations created by electronic media and the marketplace; Mister is standing by his side.

Prior to examining Mister’s contribution to the exploitative spectacle of a man attempting to eat a car, a brief and final look at Meyrowitz’s examination of the transition from a print to an electronic culture may be useful. Despite the fact that Crews was

---

<sup>59</sup> Shelton, “Man’s Search for Perfection” 1-2.



raised in a largely illiterate culture in which information was exchanged orally, the larger social structure that extended beyond Bacon County, Georgia, was organized through literacy, which reinforced a social hierarchy. According to Meyrowitz, “The Victorian era--the height of print culture--was a time of ‘secrets’ . . . . But the fascination with these layers did not drive the Victorians to destroy secrecy, but rather to enhance it as a natural condition of the social order.” In contrast to the Victorian era, Meyrowitz suggests:

Our own age . . . is fascinated by exposure. Indeed, the *act* of exposure itself now seems to excite us more than the content of the secrets exposed. The steady stripping away of layers of social behavior has made the ‘scandal’ and the revelation of the ‘deep dark secret’ everyday occurrences.<sup>60</sup>

Exposure, scandal, and spectacle are central themes in Car. The potential to make money from broadcasting – exposing – the scandalous spectacle of Herman’s automobile consumption is far too tempting for Mister to resist.

As a result, Mister becomes a victim of “branding.” Is the advertising industry’s use of that term mere coincidence? A company’s “brand name” serves as its identity, but it also figuratively brands its consumers. At the beginning of the novel Mister is ashamed of Herman for attempting to eat a car, but when Herman and the Maverick are moved from the Marquee to the ballroom, Mister realizes that Herman is serious and he decides to discuss “finances” with Mr. Edge (370). The two of them form a partnership and Mr. Edge informs Mister that he is working on a deal with the television networks to “send

---

<sup>60</sup> Meyrowitz 311.

Herman to Japan via satellite” (371). After Mister strikes a deal with Mr. Edge, he proudly walks his father to a car dealership. Inside the showroom, a family that is utterly branded, completely indoctrinated with a philosophy of futility, is “standing stock still” and “gazing intently” up at a Cadillac as the father mutters “someday . . . someday” and his sons nod in “quiet affirmation” (389). In the lot behind the dealership Mister’s new Cadillac Sedan De Ville basks in an “acre of [artificial] light” (390). In response to his father’s disbelief Mister says, “‘You know we’ve always wanted one.’ ‘The standard of excellence that everything’s measured against.’ ‘They say so, and you’ve always said so.’ ‘And we’ve finally got there.’ It’s ours.’” (389). “They” probably refers to “everyone,” but it certainly includes advertisements. Yet Easy is noticeably unenthusiastic. He is stupefied by the fact that the car has four cigarette lighters, and once seated in the car he feels “hermetically sealed from the world” (391). He feels threatened by both the actual and the symbolic power of the car. Easy “writhe[s] on his seat” trying to adjust to the commodity-intensive life-style in which he is complicit, and the narrator asks, “Could there ever be a time when four people would want to light a cigarette at the same time and each of them demand a lighter of his very own” (391)? As a result of these thoughts, Easy feels that he may vomit, and Mister fears that his father might vomit in the car. Here, Mister exhibits the dissociative behavior that the marketing industry promotes, and their strategy is so effective in Mister’s case, that he disproportionately values the material wellbeing of his car more than his father’s health. Thereafter, Mister “was dressed in a green silk shirt. His tie had a diamond stick-pin. He affected English boots with built-up heels to make himself look taller” (415). Like Mr. Edge, Mister succumbs

to what Debord and Long describe as the phenomenon of “marketing objects as symbols and manipulating symbols for profit.”<sup>61</sup> Mister’s mental hide has been seared by the brand, and he joins “the mainstream of America” when he buys that Cadillac. The Cadillac is not merely a functional device to save labor or time; it has symbolic value to him and it imbues his own conception of himself with false worth.

Ultimately, Car is about the commodification of human beings. Just as Herman is “bought from coast to coast” as a celebrity who can bring in revenue for countless people via airtime sold to advertisers, Margo is sold by her pimp and bought by strangers for sex (387). Of course, Herman can’t eat the Maverick. “I think because I love it so much, I can’t stand for it to cause me that kind of pain in me” he tells Margo (424). In contrast, Mister is so thoroughly seduced by the “American Dream” that is broadcast over the airwaves in a ceaseless pattern of seduction that he can’t endure falling from the social rung he had reached on the shoulders of his brother. Therefore, he takes Herman’s place, and tries to avoid the possibility that he might lose “the ten-thousand-dollar Cadillac” (417). Or, worse, Mister’s bleakest vision places him “back on the car-crusher pounding junk again” and “breathing the turgid breath of the turdy Saint John’s River” (417).

In an interview that was first published in the Prairie Schooner (1974), Sterling Watson observes that Harry Crews has a “withered leg” and asks him, “Do the freaks in your work reflect your own view of yourself?” Crews responds by asking, “Did you ever stop to think how much we’re influenced by the kind of body we inherit?” Crews’s answer includes an imaginative description of the life of a midget: “When a midget walks

---

<sup>61</sup> Debord and Long, “American Dream” 42.

into a place to get on a stool to get a hamburger, he's got ten problems to solve with people looking at him. He's got to somehow get up on the stool, he's got to somehow negotiate everything that's out of place."<sup>62</sup> In Car, Crews delineates the individual's place in the modern world, and the stool that his characters must negotiate is a social order dominated by the marketplace. Obviously, Crews struggles with capitalism, but he admits that for communism to work "you'd have to have an entire population of what Jesus is reported to have been." Yet, he also admits that he believes that "property is theft."<sup>63</sup> "Because of mobility, television, and affluence, people simply can't stay alive in the tiny pockets of labor on farms any longer. And so that's all gone by the way, and it's foolish to say or think otherwise," argues Crews (55). As a result, readers are left with an American literary tradition that includes Car – a tradition that has gone on to explore the modern world, where readers can hold hands with Herman and Margo in the cave of a mountain of cars, and watch "motes of dust r[i]se in front of [their] faces . . . [which] h[a]ng in the dead air" (436).

---

<sup>62</sup> Sterling Watson, "Arguments Over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews," Getting Naked with Harry Crews, ed. Erik Bledsoe (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999) 57.

<sup>63</sup> Erik Bledsoe, "An Interview with Harry Crews," Perspectives on Harry Crews, ed. Erik Bledsoe (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2001) 164.

## Conclusion

My goal when I began this study was to demonstrate the ways in which Moby-Dick, The Catcher in the Rye, and Car explore the alienation of individuals who live under the pressure of an economically determined social order. Ishmael struggles to cast off the shackles of the “civilized” ports, but the hierarchical organization of the Pequod and the fact that Ishmael is given the “three hundredth lay” indicate that he remains shackled even at sea. As a minor, Holden is at the mercy of the social institutions that he scathingly criticizes. Like Herman, Holden has a difficult time taking “hold.” He is not operating in proper accordance with economically sanctioned social mandates. As a result, he passes through a series of institutions – from educational institutions to a mental institution. Finally, Herman attempts to take “hold” by turning consumption into a sacred ritual, but his efforts are exploited. Ishmael characterizes himself as an “orphan” in the final sentence of Moby-Dick and in many ways Holden and Herman share that title (625). Each of these characters is orphaned by an economically determined social order that promises freedom and equality, but that actually neglects, abandons, and alienates its members.

However, Melville, Salinger, and Crews do more than craft scathing social commentaries of capitalism’s flaws. Certainly, they present varied visions, contextualized by time and place, of the tension between capitalism and democracy. Through the experiences of their characters, Melville, Salinger, and Crews implicate the economically determined social order in the degradation of the individual and of human

relationships. However, they also remind readers that the social order should be the result of consensus. It is the individual's responsibility to ensure that the social order is organized to serve the best interests of *all* of its members. Moby-Dick, The Catcher in the Rye, and Car remind readers that social systems are established to mediate human relationships: they filter, frame, and structure interaction. Consequently, these novels also remind readers that the social order is negotiable, that it is not static. Indeed, the analysis of these three novels, taken together, demonstrates the momentum of social change since the Civil War, which has progressively fortified the domination of social life by capitalism. Melville, Salinger, and Crews appear to value or advocate a form of social life that values unmediated, spontaneous interpersonal relationships as opposed to an intricate, technologically supported global society that is structured by corporate capitalism. Finally, Moby-Dick, The Catcher in the Rye, and Car are valuable tools for examining historical and sociological processes. Melville, Salinger, and Crews prompt readers to consider the ways in which we organize our lives, and most important, they prompt readers to evaluate and discuss those systems of social organization.

## Bibliography

- Advertising and the End of the World. Dir. Sut Jhally. MEF, 1997.
- Bledsoe, Erik. "An Interview with Harry Crews." Erik Bledsoe Ed. Perspectives on Harry Crews. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001.
- Branch, Edgar. "Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity." Marvin Laser and Norman Fruman Ed. Studies in J.D. Salinger. New York: Odyssey, 1963.
- Brookeman, Christopher. "Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in The Catcher in the Rye." New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye. Jack Salzman Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Callister, Jr., T.A. "Media Literacy: On-Ramp to the Literacy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century or Cul-de-sac on the Information Superhighway?" Advances in Reading/Language Research 7 (2000): 403-20.
- Crews, Harry. A Childhood: The Biography of a Place. Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader. Harry Crews Ed. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
- . Car. Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader. Harry Crews Ed. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
- DeBord, Larry W. and Gary L. Long. "Harry Crews's A Childhood: A Resource for Teaching Sociology." Teaching Sociology 9 (1982): 452-60.
- . "Harry Crews on the American Dream." Southern Quarterly (1982): 35-53.
- Delbanco, Andrew. Melville: His World and Work. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- Gilmore, Michael T. American Romanticism and the Marketplace. Chicago: U of

- Chicago P, 1985.
- Heimert, Alan. “Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism,” Moby-Dick as Doubloon: Essays and Extracts (1851-1970). New York: Norton, 1970.
- “Identity Theft and Fraud.” 30 May 2006. U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division. July 2006. <<http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fraud/text/idtheft.html>>.
- JaneGoodall.org. “Jane Goodall Institute for Wildlife Research, Education, and Conservation.” 2006. 29 Sept 2006. <<http://www.janegoodall.org/default.asp>>
- Kaplan, Charles. “Holden and Huck: the Odysseys of Youth.” Joel Salzberg Ed. Critical Essays on Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye. Boston: Hall, 1990.
- Katz, Ephraim. The Film Encyclopedia. New York: Harper, 1998.
- Korten, David C. When Corporations Rule the World. West Hartford: Kumarian, 1995.
- Lapham, Lewis. Lights, Camera, Democracy. New York: Random, 2001.
- Mander, Jerry. The Case Against the Global Economy: and for a Turn Toward the Local. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1996.
- Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Ohmann, Carol and Richard Ohmann. “Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye.” Critical Inquiry 3.1 (1976): 15-37.
- Papovich, J. Frank. “Place and Imagination in Harry Crews’s A Childhood: The Biography of a Place.” Southern Literary Journal 19 (1986): 1-6.
- Rivers, William L. The Mass Media and Modern Society. New York: Rinehart, 1971.



- Salinger, J.D. The Catcher in the Rye. Boston: Little, 1951.
- Shelton, Frank W. "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection." Southern Literary Journal 12 (1980): 1-8.
- . "Harry Crews After A Childhood." Southern Literary Journal 24 (1992): 3-10.
- Shrader, William K. Media Blight and the Dehumanizing of America. New York: Praeger, 1992.
- Taylor, Walter Fuller. The Economic Novel in America. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1942.
- The Atomic Café. Dir. Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty. Docurama, 1982.
- The Corporation. Dir. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott. Zeitgeist, 2004.
- Thor. "Commercials I Hate Forum, Tolerable Ads, Citi Identity Theft." 19 May 2006. Commercials I Hate. 19 July 2006.
- <[http://forums.commercialsihate.com/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=1946&get=last](http://forums.commercialsihate.com/forum_posts.asp?TID=1946&get=last)>.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age. New York: Hill, 1982.
- Watson, Sterling. "Arguments Over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews." Erik Bledsoe Ed. Getting Naked with Harry Crews. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999.
- Whyte, William H. The Organization Man. New York: Simon, 1956.