All Quiet on the Disillusioned Front: The Effects of World War II on American Literature

World War II created a noticeable cultural shift across the globe, the effects of which are still being felt today. What needs to be addressed is that an entire ocean separated one of the major contributors to the war—the United States—from the vast majority of the physical carnage. Soldiers had to go overseas, and citizens who remained at home were left with little more than propaganda and their own imaginations as means of interacting with the war. As a result, the United States had a remarkably different post-war experience than several European countries, and with a particularly different post-war cultural psychology. Because of social and geographical factors, the trauma inflicted on the United States by World War II had more of an underlying effect on the collective American conscious than had appeared in European countries, which manifested in some of the great literary works of the time.

Europe, of course, had its own situation to digest as the war came to a close. World War II left the continent with physical ruins. In Britain, by the end of the London Blitz, two million homes were taken out by German bombs, along with civic and other public buildings (Blitz WW2). France, meanwhile, had four percent of its municipalities considered “war-damaged,” a term which meant that thirty percent of the municipality’s buildings were damaged or destroyed (Exeter). In the grand scheme of things, that worked out to include twenty out of the twenty-seven biggest French cities, and eighteen percent of all buildings in France (Exeter). When it comes to potentially meaningless destruction, looking to the controversial Dresden bombings
highlights yet another incident that marked European mindsets. In February of 1945, towards the end of the war, Allied bombers dropped 3,900 tons of bombing materials, killing 25,000 to 35,000 civilians in Dresden, Germany, a town that was essentially just a culture center (Selwood). This extreme and callous destruction was not only pervasive, but lingering. What was left of these cities and others could not be cleaned up in a day, and the great thinkers of the time were left to stare at the ruin and try to articulate how it can make a person feel to see war everywhere, even once it was gone. Out of this physical manifestation of depression, it became reasonable to find some world-changing, although not cheery, philosophies, particularly existentialism. Some philosophers rejected the label of existentialism, finding their own nuances to it more important than falling under the umbrella term. However, existentialism remained a heavy theme in their work. The concept left a great mark on both the literary and philosophical history of Europe. The scenery is bleak—two men wait for nothing, three people explore the setup of Hell, and one French Algerian is only vaguely aware of his mother’s death, to name a few of the more remarkable and studied existential plots of the time. They stem from the bleak landscape of post-World War II Europe, all fairly reasonably.

The United States, however, was a different story. For better or worse, there were not as many physical reminders of the war for American authors and creators to meditate on—the buildings are standing, the fields are unscathed, and civilian life goes on. That does not mean, however, that the United States could pick itself up and be completely fine after World War II. A particular set of falling dominos affected American life in the immediate post-war years. Masses of soldiers were shipped out. As a result, millions of American families were missing their sons and fathers. This was already unsettling to a traditional family structure, but then someone still had to make money for the family, and so women were off to work. The United States accepted a
new labor force, one that had direct effects on the way traditional home life is run and on preconceived notions on something as socially fundamental as gender roles. When the men returned home from the war, of course, the United States had another upheaval. The people tried to get back to the way things were, which traditionally does not work well. All this shifting of the family unit, a major building block of society, happened and caused great upset. However, this was not like the European who stared out at his bombed city and could pin point more or less what was wrong in the rubble and ruin. The American family saw the same street they had always looked out on, it was just different for no precise reason. The country became an uncanny valley. Meanwhile, the government was trying to promote the post-war economic boom and insist that everything was fine, business as usual. Nothing was sitting right for Americans, and there were several reasons for this unsettled atmosphere.

One of the major first dominos to fall and cause this discomfort was the departure of the American soldier. Simply enormous chunks of the population were gone at some point or another during the war; “in all, 16.4 million Americans, the vast majority of them young men, joined the armed services during World War II” (Patterson 13). To break it down into age demographics, that is “nearly two-thirds of all American men aged 18 to 34 at the time” (Patterson 13). It was a baffling number, out of the country, at risk of dying. As a result, many American families changed their fundamental structures. Especially at a point in American social history where the standard family unit had relied on a father who was the present breadwinner and a mother who was running, but not heading, the household, the World War II family building block was unfamiliar to say the least. Along with the general distress of not knowing if a loved one is going to come home, the American family had to figure out a way to rework itself. Then the war dragged on, and this new way to do things became somewhat cemented, just
enough to be practically accepted, but not necessarily enough to become a part of the American system.

Obviously, the country did not stop because the men were away; World War II brought more women into the work force, and with a variety of effects. This was another change to the family unit, which was already under strain. A study of American women showed that “the percentage of women (14 and older) who were part of the work force increased from 26 percent in 1940 to 36 percent in 1945” (Patterson 32). While the type of work women were employed in varied between traditional women’s roles and the more traditionally masculine, “Rosie the Riveter”-esque roles, this was still a significant jump for a five year period. Women went into the work force, and therefore the public sphere, and by effect they stepped at least partially out of the private, domestic sphere. This was a major change to American society and social gender expectations. Then, almost as soon as women entered the work force and helped serve their country and support a higher cause, they were asked if they would step back into the home without complaint. The effects of the end of the war on the female work force were almost immediate; “by early 1946 approximately 2.25 million women workers had quit their jobs, either because they wanted to or because they saw the handwriting on the wall. Another million were laid off” (Patterson 33). 2.25 million out of the 6.3 million who joined the work force turning around and suddenly leaving is staggering, which Patterson describes as segregation “greater than in 1900 and sharper than segregation by race” (33). A large part of this unemployment trend was a symptom of the American need for normalcy in post-war years. Before the war, men worked formally and women worked at home, and the market sought to resume that pattern. However, as far as long term effects of war on the American workforce are concerned, while “demobilization drove many of these women from such jobs […] it only briefly slowed what was
already a powerful long-range trend toward greater female participation in the market” (Patterson 32). Not only did World War II require a significant shift in the American workforce, it was the first step in what would become a permanent cultural change, even with “a dominant cultural milieu that continued to place traditional notions of femininity above feminist quests for equal rights” (Patterson 32). Despite some stagnancy in cultural expectations at the time which brought about that wave of female unemployment, an irreversible change happened to the concept of public and private spheres because of the relationship between American women and the American workforce.

All of this trouble for the American psyche, and not an ounce of external manifestation to attach to when the war ends. Even before the end of the war, it was physically far away. American propaganda and entertainment tried to bring the war closer to home with newsreels, stories, songs, and posters. Even the most family friendly genres took up the war effort, leading to Mickey Mouse urging the purchase of war bonds and even the creation of currently popular characters like Captain America. However, despite being in a state of total war—nearly all minds, efforts, and media directed at the cause—the home front was denied a true sense of the war. Part of this is due to the nature of propaganda—support is needed, not worry, so propaganda is not going to promote any sort of disillusionment that might chip away at much needed patriotism and participation in war efforts. The other part is the sheer fact that only certain Americans were physically at war, a war that was all the way on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, a great number of Americans, without scarred countryside and rubbles of cities, lived in a double reality. Yes, the world was terrible, but it also appeared largely the same as it had been before to Americans looking at their own country. People worried about their soldiers, and half that worry was in just not knowing where they stood, and if they stood. Then
lucky men came back, families were reunited, and people tried to go back to normal. However, it very seldom works out to simply go back to the way things worked before, especially when the change is psychological.

America after World War II was changed, but in ways that Americans could not very well reach out and touch. Within World War II, a total of 338 different lines of posters were circulated in the American public that focused on the war, with themes like promoting the purchasing of war bonds, recruitment, and the importance of home efforts (Witkowski 72). However, even with the influx of posters, there was hardly a true sense of what was happening across the Atlantic, as “President Roosevelt preferred more positive imagery that involved citizens and personalized their own war efforts” (Witkowski 72). This uplifting imagery of happy Americans doing their patriotic duty was one of the significant sources driving American perception of the war, and was clearly quite different from the realities that were being experienced by the people who were actually in the various theaters of war. Where “Keep Calm and Carry On” asked British citizens to keep their heads during the war, Americans were primarily asked to keep up the patriotism. There was a lot of variety in American propaganda posters, but they were hardly the graphic reality that would come to be familiar when the U.S. eventually went to Vietnam, so despite the unavoidable knowledge that there was a war on, United States citizens who remained at home were fairly in the dark as to the realities of World War II’s carnage.

In another intangible issue, women started running into their “problem that has no name,” as put by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, which was more or less that they had stepped out of the home and did not want to be forced back in, but were still technically socialized to want to be in the home in the first place. This disjointedness sometimes led to more complicated
marital relationships. In a study of letters written by women during World War II to their husbands, researchers found a recurring theme of a “new sense of self,” as “the challenges of the war necessitated that women develop a new sense of who they were and of their capabilities” (Barrett Litoff and Smith 9). It was common in these letters for women to express “pride in their war work and often commented, with enthusiasm, about the new sense of responsibility and independence they were achieving” (Barrett Litoff and Smith 9). There are notes of thinking about what their husbands’ returns will bring:

“[w]e were talking about some of the adjustments we’ll have to make to our husbands’ return. I must admit I’m not exactly the same girl you left—I’m twice as independent as I used to be […] I want to make sure I make myself clear about how I’ve changed. I want you to know now that you are not married to a girl that’s interested solely in a home—I shall definitely have to work all my life—I get emotional satisfaction out of working and I don’t doubt that many a night you will cook the supper while I’m at a meeting.” (Barrett Litoff and Smith 10)

American women were not the same as they were before World War II, and neither were their husbands.

Upon their returns to the United States after World War II, many American men were dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but without recognition. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, was not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980, so soldiers returning home from World War II were not exactly given all the assistive tools they needed to deal with what they had seen and experienced. Not only was PTSD a factor in their relationships on the home front, but soldiers experienced their trauma in a place so separate from their wives’ experiences that it became even harder to adjust back into civilian life, both for the
distance of their experience and for their families’ difficulty in imagining the experience of
World War II battle. The disparity was overwhelming. Another aspect of the changed American
home was the effects of World War II and all these factors on the children of World War II.
Children in this time experienced a rapidly changing family unit and came out into a whole new
teen culture that arose from the post-war economic boom, but still had the threat of the bomb
looming over their treehouses. These kids may have been all right, but they were not the same,
and were involved in the discomfort of post-World War II American culture just as much as
anybody else.

It is important to note that while these issues weighed heavily on the United States, they
cannot be said to have affected all the individuals of the nation in the same way. The experiences
of people of color and of the lower classes in the United States differed vastly from middle to
upper class (and typically white) experiences at this time. The economic boom caused by World
War II allowed for many immigrants and other, more rooted people of color to buy property,
“which they cherished as a sign of their social mobility” (Patterson 19). While not anywhere near
a perfect fix to the nation’s race and class problems, owning property generally allowed these
groups to feel a little closer to the American ideals being promoted at the time. However,
economic advancement for these groups did not equate to integration. Focusing on the largely
white narrative in this paper is not an attempt to disregard or a sign of disinterest in the
experience of the rest of the nation at this time, but rather an attempt to analyze a narrower part
of the American experience. It could be argued that significant literary works from this era by
people of color (such as Invisible Man or A Raisin in the Sun) are also affected by some of the
issues presented here, and hopefully will be argued with due attention.
As a general rule, World War II shattered living room windows for the American sense of family and the American sense of authenticity. The family did not seem quite correct to older mindsets, and neither did the individuals who made up these families. Still, everyone tried to make it so. This sensation, a forced correction of what should not need correcting, leaked into other concepts, namely a continued questioning of authenticity. Americans got disillusioned like the Europeans did, but it had more of a duality to it. Where European literature and philosophy was directly existential, Americans were grappling with more mixed feelings, and uncertain of what to present. Popular media at the time, like *I Love Lucy* and *The Ed Wynn Show*, seemed miles away from the facts of the post-war world, and the question became whether to go along with Lucille Ball and Ed Wynn or to brave the malaise. Americans wondered what patriotism was while it supposedly blared in their faces, and how honest it was to claim victory in light of morally dubious bombs. Devastation was far away, but still out there. Success was labeled as theirs, but not held in their hands. Rather than victory, the atomic threat loomed. Americans were presented with choosing culture that was coming from one end of the spectrum or the other, and the fact that both were readily available made the validity of each questionable. This questioning of authenticity and the problems of the day, of course, became thematic discussion and seeped into American literature.

*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is a seminal piece of American literature, and holds a particularly manifested and pertinent relationship to this view of post-war American psychology. *Death of a Salesman* was published in 1949, within five years of the end date on World War II, and is now heavily canonized, having left its mark on the literature of the United States. Commonly hailed as the great American tragedy, the play presents the life of Willy Loman, a travelling salesman, and his east coast family. With two strapping grown sons, a caring
wife, and a place in New York, *Death of a Salesman* has the ingredients to be a success story if it were outside of this post-war damage. However, Miller was writing for his time, and therefore dealing more heavily in the tragedy and discomfort of the American circumstance than in any realistic belief in the American Dream. The Lomans are not a success story, but rather a disillusioned and depressed imagining of a family still trying to live a non-existent success. Unfortunately, Willy Loman is a failure who refuses to admit it, and cannot cope with the psychological fallout.

Because of *Death of a Salesman*’s immediate success and continued canonization, there are vast amounts of academic energy spent on Miller’s play. While there was some backlash from critics in large part because of its popularity, “its increasing acceptance as one of the most important American plays made it a subject of discussion, explication, and analysis” very quickly after its release (Weales xiii). Critics often broach the question of *Death of a Salesman*’s relationship to the American Dream. While the definition of the American Dream is fairly amorphous, the generally accepted traditional idea is that if you work hard in America, you should be able to get ahead. Somewhere along the line, Willy Loman made the mistake of believing in the American Dream, and while most of the play is the fallout of that belief, Miller uses time so that the actual decision that leads to Willy’s tragic fall (Willy’s affair, his first day as a salesman, moving out to New York—take your pick), precedes the play. By playing with time like this, Miller adds an element of disorientation to his tragedy, making it unique to the postmodern period and even more unsettling to the American audience. Just as the majority of Americans did not see war in front of their eyes, they do not get to see Willy Loman’s mistake, only the repercussions.
Willy Loman, like mainstream America in its immediate post-war years, knows deeply that something is wrong and does not know (or does not want to know) how to put his finger on it. Like America’s soldiers, Willy is often gone from home, and as the play begins it is noted that he has been “travelling every week” (14). Linda is left to run the home, and interactions between the two are also an example of the newly-complicated power structures of the American home, as shown in their early conversations. Linda regularly offers advice phrased as commands, like “take an aspirin,” or “talk to them again” (15). Sometimes Willy listens, sometimes he does not, but there is no distinct pattern of one of them having power over the other as opposed to an older, more patriarchal power structure. The difference between Willy and Linda is that Linda has her level-headed mental health, but when Willy is home, he clearly has his own form of propaganda that he attempts to use as a way to give himself more power. He insists that he is “vital in New England” despite struggling to make ends meet (14). He blames other people for his failures, insisting that “if old man Wagner was alive I’d a been in charge of New York now” (14). Unfortunately, Willy is a very big, very sad, balloon of hot air. The audience understands this, and as a result further sees Linda in charge, even if she is willing to defer to Willy’s delusions. Willy might not realize it, but Linda is willing to defend him to the death, explaining to her sons that it is because “I love him […] He’s the dearest man in the world to me, and I won’t have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue” (55). Miller shows that the dynamic has always been like this in a flashback, where Willy brags that “I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston,” which Linda inadvertently prods at until it turns into “about a hundred and eighty gross in Providence. Well, no—it came to—roughly two hundred gross” (35). Willy values the idea of success too much to admit that he still has not attained it as his career comes to a close. He especially will not admit it to those around him, and
definitely not to his valued wife or sons, but this knowledge wears on him and he knows it throughout the play.

Willy’s constant stress and sense of his own unarticulated failure clearly detracts from his mental health. Early on in the play, Willy admits to “strange thoughts, such strange thoughts” while he loses control over driving (14). He says “I’m getting awfully tired, Ben” right as Uncle Ben’s apparition enters his consciousness, like he is ready for it and unsurprised (44). He tries to hide this sadness and destabilization from Linda until he cannot, until the insurance inspector comes and informs Linda “that all these accidents in the last year—weren’t—weren’t—accidents” (58). Linda ends up being the one who says this, the one who admits to Willy’s weakness, taking some of Willy’s agency unto herself, exploring more power within her role and less within his. The dynamic calls to mind the women who took on more economic power in World War II in the space of their husband’s departure. In Willy and Linda’s case, that departure is both literal with his travelling and figurative with his deteriorating health. Furthermore, the whole exploration of Willy’s mental health feels almost uncomfortably close to the mental health struggles of soldiers dealing with PTSD at the time, unadmitted but seen by those around him. Adding this clear but relatively undiagnosed mental health problem to the play is an echo of the same mental health circumstances a significant part of the nation was dealing with at the time.

Part of Death of a Salesman’s accessibility and tragedy is its familiarity—the narrative takes place largely in the Loman’s home, nowhere foreign or exotic, but deeply American. The Loman’s home is generic and prototypical, pre-existing in audiences’ heads as something they have seen before, maybe even some place they live. The emphasis is significant in a post-war piece of literature because of the close ties between the home and the family and the changes happening in that domain. The first pivotal visual readers get from Miller in his stage directions
is that “before us is the Salesman’s house” (11). The city imposes itself on the house, which is described as a “fragile-seeming home” with a “kitchen at center” (11). The Loman’s home is set up to be like the standard American home—worrysome, but in focus, and particularly organized around the kitchen, the hearth-like center of the home. Miller also takes the time to set up the Loman’s house in smaller details. Clothing in particular denotes the home life, with Linda in a robe at the beginning of the play and Charley appearing in “a robe over pajamas, slippers on his feet” for his first appearance (42). The relation to the home is later explicated when Willy says “I’ll take a walk” and Linda’s response is “But you’re in your slippers”—slippers, bathrobes, and the like are firmly for the home, and are closely noted (53). Putting this detail in the script determines the aesthetic of the play, one that at least partially costumes in the private clothes of the home in perpetuity. The house is connected to loving family relationships too, as the setting where Linda can say that “it was so nice to see [Biff and Happy] shaving together, one behind the other […] and going out together” (15). The boys appreciate it too, in their own scene. Happy says, “with deep sentiment: Funny, Biff, y’know? Us sleeping in here again? The old beds” and “pats his bed affectionately” (20). Miller does not leave space in his stage directions for interpretation—the boys are fond of their childhood home and what it represents. Most of their play revolves around that home, and is acted out by primarily the immediate family or close family friends with lots of integrated history. The theme is unavoidable, and even heightened by the way Miller frames the home: kitchen decidedly in center.

The kitchen is understood by many to be the heart of a traditional home, but American politics in the post-war years took the symbolism to a whole new level with the Kitchen Debates. The Kitchen Debates were a series of talks between former Vice President Richard Nixon and former Premier Khrushchev in 1959, during the American National Exhibition in Moscow.
While this was years after *Death of a Salesman*, the emphasis on the kitchen is still important. These talks circulated when Nixon “bragged truculently about gleaming American kitchen conveniences […] in order to remind Khrushchev (and the world) of the fantastic economic potential of the American way of life” (Patterson 317). While the talks also covered the tension between the capitalist United States and communist U.S.S.R., the emphasis for the American public centered around two things: the color television broadcast itself and its emphasis on the home and kitchen appliances. It was a direct call to the domestic American way of life, and despite its global stage, the Kitchen Debates readily connected to the American private sphere. Even if the Loman’s Hastings refrigerator is no good, a small advertisement lies in *Death of a Salesman*: “Charley bought a General Electric and it’s twenty years old and it’s still good, that son-of-a-bitch” (73). Charley has good ole American products to match his good ole American success, just like the Kitchen Debates tried to imply to the world. The kitchen Nixon defended presented a certain image that Americans were chasing, something that was traditional and modern at the same time, with new-fangled appliances mixed in with traditional values, all in stunning technicolor and available at what was assured to be a modest price.

Alongside a well-applianced home, cars were seen as a large part of a successful American lifestyle in the late 1940s. Miller understood and included this element in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy drives everywhere in cars he adores, mentioning Chevrolets, Studebakers, and Model-Ts. The car motif helps establish his traveling career, and his love of cars makes his reckless driving all the more noticeable for the reader. One of his first prolonged points of talking to himself involves his sons taking care of his beloved car, remembering some time in the past. He says “I been wondering why you polish the car so careful. Ha! Don’t leave the hubcaps, boys. Get the chamois to the hubcaps. Happy, use newspaper on the windows, it’s the easiest
thing. Show him how to do it, Biff!” (28). Between the specific and caring instructions and the way Miller integrates the car with the boys, Willy’s love of the car is clear. When Willy describes his hero in sales, David Singleman, the audience already has a foreboding sense that the ideal “death of a salesman” will not be Willy’s fate, but Miller knows how to make things even worse by using Singleman as a car-less antithesis to Willy. Not only does his last name hint that his situation might not be what every man receives, but “without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living” (81). Willy is nowhere close to that set up. Finally, Singleman dies “the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford” (81). Singleman is not in a car, and Miller has put too much work into associating Willy and cars to make Willy like Singleman. Willy Loman’s death in a car is both tragic and uniquely American. To design Willy’s death in this way is to tie his death to America, which certainly goes along with the malaise Miller has already constructed in this play.

While Biff Loman’s tragedy may not be the same as his father’s, it is equally tied to ideas of post-war American culture, particularly back to that sense of unsettlement around the traditional family unit and its virtues. It is in the most idyllic scenes, in Willy’s flashbacks, that readers find out what Biff’s flaws are. In talking to his dad about a school football, he admits “I borrowed it from the locker room” and “laughs confidentially” (29). Where a virtuous father would reprimand his son, Willy’s response is “laughing with him at the theft” and gently saying “I want you to return that” instead of a stronger, more imperative command (30). He even stands up for his son when Happy gets stricter with him, pointing out that “he’s gotta practice with a regulation ball” and that “Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative” (30). This behavior foreshadows when an adult Biff steals Bill Oliver’s pen. Biff explains that “I didn’t
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exactly steal it” and “I never intended to do it,” backing into the lessons in justification which his father implicitly enforced (111). Willy tries to suggest a solution, and Biff connects the incidences himself: “I took those balls years ago, now I walk in with his fountain pen? That clinches it, don’t you see?” (112). Perhaps most tragically of all, Biff is let down by his father. After a whole play of seeing this tense but firm father-son connection, the audience finds out what made Biff finally disconnect from his father—discovering Willy’s affair. Biff’s reaction in the flashback is acidic. He suddenly thinks his math teacher “wouldn’t listen to [Willy]” about changing Biff’s grade, and calls him a “liar” and a “phony little fake” (120, 121). Biff sees that his father’s virtue is absent, attacks his authenticity, and has to wonder where that leaves him, sans role model.

Biff comes home to a mother trying to deal with his suicidal and still quasi-heroic father, and is forced into a dual life, something inauthentic in Biff’s perspective. There are constant connections drawn between Biff and Willy, which ultimately lead to Biff’s discomfort. Early on, Happy informs Biff that “most of the time [Willy’s] talking to [Biff]” (21). When Willy says that Uncle Charley is “liked, but he’s not—well liked,” it takes about three more pages for Biff to say the exact same phrase about Bernard (30). Willy does the same thing himself, telling Biff not to say “gee” because “‘Gee’ is a boy’s word,” but using it himself to Linda later and having the same problem Biff has of not being taken seriously (65). However, Biff cannot comfortably align himself with his father after his disillusionment. On coming home, he says that every time he returns home to avoid his failures, “I get here, and I don’t know what to do with myself” (22). Something happened to his relationship with his dad and therefore to his relationship with his home, and now the whole environment and much of Biff’s life is tilted. Broadly speaking, Biff’s situation is somewhat analogous to the state of the children of returned American soldiers.
Something no longer sits well with their families, whether it comes down to a power struggle about mothers having gone to work or a mental struggle about their fathers’ states of mind post-war. All this upheaval, and an economic boom like Americans had not known for a long time. The immediate post-war years had sort of a relief to them, where “years of material deprivation had filled a deep reservoir of pent-up demand that burst open with a flood of consumer spending after the war. American consumers quickly forgot about frugality and instead pursued their private consumption agendas,” which even included spare change for teens in the right socioeconomic classes (Witkowski 70). The teenager becomes defined largely in part of this boom and the consumer culture it creates. When Miller notes that Biff, the older son more connected to Willy, is less successful and less financially stable than Happy, who hopes to be a merchandise manager, a subtle and symbolic generational division is created.

Of course, to talk about post-war adolescence without talking about Holden Caulfield would be akin to heresy. *The Catcher in the Rye*, written by J. D. Salinger and published in 1951, is just about as commonly read as *Death of a Salesman*. The work retains a place both within post-war studies and within adolescence studies. *The Catcher in the Rye* has been loved, hated, and commonly banned from its publication up through the present. Despite polarizing views on the main character (relatable teen or annoying lost cause?), *The Catcher in the Rye* was plenty popular: “within two weeks [of publication], it had been reprinted five times, the next month three more times […] his book stayed on the best-seller list for thirty weeks, though never above fourth place” (Whitfield 567). Not only was it a common purchase at the time, but all told, “the novel sold over three million copies between 1953 and 1964, climbed even higher by the 1980s, and continues to attract about as many buyers as it did in 1951” (Whitfield 567). Whitfield cites journalist Stefan Kanfer’s reasoning for its continued popularity as succinctly being that “the
new audience is never very different from the old Holden. They may not know the words, but they can hum along with the malady” (568-69). While this may be true, the fact still stands that *The Catcher in the Rye*, like *Death of a Salesman*, encapsulates the concerns of the American post-war era in a noticeable way, which may be part of the reason for its immediate publication success.

The thing about Holden, though, is that he is not important just because he is a teenager (even though he is arguably The Teenager), nor is it just because he is an alternative to Hester Prynne for high school reading lists. Rather, scholars keep coming back to Holden Caulfield and *The Catcher in the Rye* because he continues to represent an important cultural reaction to World War II. *Death of a Salesman* is about dying out at the beginning of this new and not-so-pleasant age, but Holden is growing up into it and at least mostly acknowledges that he has to live in it. Some scholars see Holden’s attitude as symptomatic of larger scale political issues, and pin him with debates of the time such as McCarthyism—with that red hunting hat, who could blame them? However, it also makes sense to read *The Catcher in the Rye* with an interest in Holden’s individualism. Yes, Holden’s story can be seen as an anecdote of the larger cultural mindset of the time. *The Catcher in the Rye* could be read as allegory, but his microcosm can also remain a matter of questioning himself and his inner circle. Towards the broader world, he is almost exclusively dismissive. The conflict and the interest of the novel arise on a much smaller level, on Holden’s obsession with his own validity in the world, on the authenticity of himself and those around him.

If *Death of a Salesman* haunts the post-war family unit, *The Catcher in the Rye* puts a target on the back of post-war ideas about authenticity. Holden lathers his speech with the word “phony,” using it thirty-five times in the text. As exemplified by this near-excessive use, “the
epithet ‘phony’ was omnipresent during the postwar period in the United States” (Cheever 2). In post-war United States, “Authenticity […] is imagined as that which separates the individual from the social world, as what might be uniquely one’s own rather than a consequence of social influence,” which is of course a reasonable thing to be concerned with after a war which has shown just how horrible the world can be (Cheever 3). The phony, then, is the person who not only has a lack of something to set them apart from the culture around them, but actively chooses to be a conforming part of this terrible world. Holden Caulfield takes hating phonies above and beyond the hipster-beatnik call of duty, going so far as to leave a school “because I was surrounded by phonies. That’s all. They were coming in the goddam window” and “it makes me so depressed I go crazy” (19). Being worried about phoniness is a constant for Holden, whether it comes down to hating the word “grand” because “it’s so phony” or just using “phony” as an added dig, like for “Mr. Hass […] the phoniest bastard I ever met” (138, 19). The extent to which Holden is obsessed with criticizing authenticity is so present that it is almost unhealthy.

All of this concern is heightened by Holden’s many examples of being a phony himself and not realizing it, a true sign of that below-the-surface American post-war distress. Holden desperately wants to be a grown-up. A repeated symptom of this need for adulthood is the way Holden views and interacts with women. Early on, Holden points out that at Pencey, “There were never many girls at all at the football games. Only seniors were allowed to bring girls with them. It was a terrible school, no matter how you looked at it” (5). Holden’s interest in girls is about one part being a junior in high school and two parts perceiving that sexuality is part of being an adult. When it actually comes down to it though, Holden goes into childlike panics over women, proving that he is still ultimately a kid. When the elevator man first offers “a good time,” Holden admits that “I didn’t know what he was driving at or anything” until he uses a more forward
innuendo—“Innarested in a little tail t’night?” (118). Holden is so taken aback that he cannot help but respond “Me?” despite knowing it is “a very dumb answer” (118). In a classic sentiment, he confides in the reader that he has “had quite a few opportunities to lose my virginity and all, but I’ve never got around to it yet. Something always happens,” he insists (120). What happens this time is the kid gets nervous, insisting that he “had an operation very recently” on his “clavichord” (126). He just is not an adult, but he wants so desperately to be that it makes the reader cringe.

Part of what shows that Holden’s inauthentic relationships with women are a mark of his need to be an adult rather than his adolescence is the consistent way Salinger ties women to alcohol. In one of the hotels he stays in, Holden visits the night club and immediately notes that “there were very few people around my age in the place” (90). He is consistently age conscious, noting how old people look, particularly “these three girls around thirty or so” at the table next to him (90). Holden describes them as “pretty ugly, and they all had on the kind of hats that you knew they didn’t really live in New York” but notes that “one of them, the blonde one wasn’t too bad” (90). He even deigns to give her “the old eye,” as if asking the reader to again believe him that he has any sort of experience with this sort of thing whatsoever (90). Salinger takes care to ruin the illusion though, as Holden orders a drink and says “it fast as hell, because if you hem and haw, they think you’re under twenty-one and won’t sell you any intoxicating liquor” (90-91). Holden gets denied at the bar, but tries ogling the women again. The scene becomes a disaster, interweaving Holden’s ineptitude with women and his inability to order anything stronger than a Coke. Later, Holden meets up with an acquaintance, Luce, at the Wicker Bar “and had a couple of Scotch and sodas before old Luce even showed up” (185). Even though he gets served, Holden is again hyperconscious about his age: “I stood up when I ordered them so they could see
how tall I was and all and not think I was a goddam minor” (185). Immediately after worrying about appearing to be a minor (which he is), Holden watches a heterosexual couple, observes a group of gay men, and recalls that he mainly knows Luce through the lectures he would give about sex (185). Luce’s first quoted line is “Very funny […] same old Caulfield. When are you going to grow up?” (187). Holden’s response, drink in hand, is “How’s your sex life?” and then refuses to drop the question, talking about girls over drinks (187). The association is almost oppressive as Holden keeps entwining alcohol, sex, and age, all while muddying the reader’s view of him and his supposed need for authenticity while faking his way through all those aspects of his life.

Another significant aspect of Holden’s relationship with women and authenticity is his poor attempt to be seriously grown up with the women he views as significant, instead of the ones he reacts to in passing. One such woman of substance is Sally Hayes. Holden says “I wasn’t too crazy about her, but I’d known her for years” (137). The thing about Sally, according to Holden, is that he used to think she was intelligent but now thinks she is not anything special, and reflects that “I think I’d have found it out a lot sooner if we hadn’t necked so damn much. My big trouble is, I always sort of think whoever I’m necking is a pretty intelligent person” (138). As he waits for Sally on the afternoon of their date he schedules despite being unimpressed by her intellect, Holden watches girls and reflects that “it was sort of depressing […] most of them would probably marry dopey guys” (160). So Holden sits there, thinking about marriage and what a disappointment it could be for these women, and as he sees Sally approach, he realizes that “I felt like marrying her the minute I saw her. I’m crazy. I didn’t even like her that much, and yet all of a sudden I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her” (162). Holden is participating in the cultural need to establish a traditional family unit. Much like
the rest of the United States at the time, Holden appears to have this underlying assumption that there is something worthwhile in the traditional set up, even though he remains clearly upset by the world around him. His specific connection between marriage and Sally Hayes relates back to knowing her since he was little, before breaking out of his family and into his upsetting individuality. He connects her to being younger, to his past when he was more involved with his family, and wants to unite the two. This continued pull for Holden’s own nostalgia recalls the nostalgia that made Americans insist that everything in the post-war period could be fine if they just made it more like the pre-war period, and again places Holden and his story firmly as a product of the time.

Holden does something similar to his relationship to Sally, perhaps more successfully, with the idealized Jane Gallagher. His roommate Stradlater has a date with her, and Holden exclaims that “she practically lived right next door to me, the summer before last” (40). His emphasis on that imagery of being next door, especially in the warm and welcoming summer, highlights Holden’s value of the home and his implicit connection of the home with Jane. He mentions her dog, her hobbies, and their habit of playing checkers immediately in his recollections, focusing more on familiar time than on any sexual intent (40-41). He insists that “he knew her like a book” and that “I really got to know her quite intimately. I don’t mean it was anything physical or anything—it wasn’t—but we saw each other all the time. You don’t always have to get too sexy to know a girl” (99). Holden’s relationship with Jane is very domestic—their mothers squabble, they know each other from being home, and there is a distinct lack of sexual tension. When she gets upset, he kisses her on “her whole face except her mouth […] it was the closest we ever got to necking” (102). Avoiding the mouth keeps the interaction non-
sexual, pure, and again idyllic. At the movies, Holden “felt this hand on the back of my neck, and it was Jane’s” (103). Holden himself even notes the domesticity of this, thinking that

“It was a funny thing to do. I mean she was quite young and all, and most girls if you see them putting their hand on the back of somebody’s neck, they’re around twenty-five or thirty and usually they’re doing it to their husband or their little kid—I do it to my kid sister Phoebe once in a while, for instance. But if a girl’s quite young and all and she does it, it’s so pretty it just about kills you.” (103-04)

Holden is aggressively positive here. He finds the scene funny, and it does not seem like he just means it as an oddity, because he also finds it beautiful. He positively connects Jane this idea of domesticity and the sorts of things married women do. He even goes so far as to bring in a reference to his adored younger sister, Phoebe. Holden makes his love for Jane reflective of his love of simple family life, despite the bar haunting and girl chasing activities which pepper the rest of the novel.

One of the places where Holden does seem truly authentic is with his little sister, Phoebe. Phoebe, in her role as a member of that implicitly valued family and in her distance from Holden’s attempted-sexual side, presents a different lens through which to evaluate Holden’s authenticity. Phoebe is one of relatively few people whom Holden calls during his adventure in New York, because she was “somebody with sense and all” (87). Already high praise from Holden. He goes on to add that “if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you’re talking about” and that “if you take her to a lousy movie, for instance, she knows it’s a lousy movie. If you take her to a pretty good movie, she knows it’s a pretty good movie” (88). All of Holden’s typical criticisms about people—that they are unintelligent, that they are senseless, that they have no discernment when it comes to art—seem not to apply to Phoebe, and
he would never dream to call her a phony. These examples are some of Holden’s greatest moments of optimism, along with being pretty sincere and authentic sentiments.

Holden’s interactions with Phoebe are also where we see Holden at his most genuinely grown up, like when he recounts that he and Allie would take her to the park, “especially on Sundays” (89). In addition to this idyllic and virtuous scene and his habit of touching the back of her neck sometimes, he practically sounds like a proud father when he goes to visit her. He thinks about her little habits and notes that “She’s very good in spelling. She’s very good in all her subjects, but she’s best in spelling” (208). The two have enough familiarity that she can call him out for hating most of his world, and Holden loves her enough to admit that “I like it now […] I mean right now. Sitting here with you and just chewing the fat and horsing—[…] It is so something really! […] Why the hell isn’t it?” (223). Holden is happy, and happy in the moment instead of the memory of the way things were at one point or another in the past. This is a big step for him, available perhaps exclusively because not only does Phoebe make him happy and remind him of good times at home, but she also lets him be somewhat grown up without faking it. The feeling is short lived, and it is difficult to read the narrative of someone in a psych ward and assume they end the novel content, but the feeling is a glimmer of what could make some post-war American like Holden happy—a return to authenticity, ideally entwined with a satisfying relationship with the concept of family.

Willy Loman will not admit to his failures, Holden Caulfield seems to be blind to his own hypocrisy, and the reader is left terribly uncomfortable. A sense of irony runs through both works so strongly that the reader feels like they must have read a Greek chorus somewhere and simply forgotten to mark it. Readers see the irony when Willy and the rest of the characters repeat conversations like ghostly echoes, and he even has apparitions such as Uncle Ben coming
into his life to highlight his shortcomings. Holden, with less hallucination but still speaking from a psych ward, exists in the dual reality that hypocrites occupy as both the judged and the accused. The overall effect matches America’s post-war emotions perfectly—something is terribly wrong, but there is no clear sense of what to do about it. This time, because the audience is perceiving instead of living the situation, they are able to think critically about the circumstances around them and react strongly to these manifestations of their current predicaments. Despite its aforementioned bestseller success, it took all of five years for *The Catcher in the Rye* to wind up declared “objectionable” by the National Organization for Decent Literature (Whitfield 575). This combination, considered both popular and contentious, shows that this novel indeed struck a cultural nerve with more people than just the teens. Meanwhile, *Death of a Salesman* appears to have enjoyed similar success, with “extremely favorable” initial reception from general audiences, but largely without the controversial objections *The Catcher in the Rye* received (Weales xii). Where *The Catcher in the Rye* wound up on banned books lists for language and sensitive topics, it was primarily an issue of its prevalence on high school reading lists, and a wish to protect children from such atrocities. *Death of a Salesman* suffered no such fate, perhaps because it interacted less with teen audiences, and perhaps due to a certain understanding of tragedy—the discomfort it presents ought to be expected. In fact, one critic noted that “Mr. Miller has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre” (Atkinson 1). The reader gets a sense that Atkinson believes that Miller is speaking to the American situation as a whole, saying that he is “writing like a man who understands people” (1). Atkinson’s language indicates someone who believes that Willy Loman is common, that he is the American man. The play was welcomed by a nation feeling its own weariness—a nation made of Willy Lomans.
While the depression that results from war may not loom as prominently in American literature of the time as it does in the European literature, it manifests itself through a different set of questions. The United States had to ask if it was possible to continue on with the old system, where Europe found it immediately evident that the old system was never going to be an option. In the American attempt to continue on, writers found themselves voicing the uncertainties Americans were feeling about how to adjust to normalcy on the most basic, familial levels and how to authentically be. The results were significant pieces of literature which capture that moment in American history and now serve to memorialize the time.
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