



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Katelyn E. Cooley for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English presented on November 25, 2013. Title: Emersonian Non-Conformity in J.D. Salinger and Hunter S. Thompson.

Abstract approved:

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David Robinson

The purpose of this thesis is to thematically explore two novels which are considered to be “non-conformist” for the ways that the characters struggle to understand themselves as separate from society. By comparing the non-conformity of each character to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theory of individualistic non-conformity, as presented in his 1841 essay *Self-Reliance*, I attempt to identify the connections, if any, between the non-conformity presented by Emerson and that which is embodied by each of the characters. In so doing I will inevitably question which of the characters is the truer Emersonian.

Key Words: non-conformity, J.D. Salinger, Hunter S. Thompson, society, enlightenment

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Emersonian Non-Conformity in  
J.D. Salinger and Hunter S. Thompson  
by  
Katelyn E. Cooley

A PROJECT  
submitted to  
Oregon State University  
University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English (Honors Associate)

Presented November 25, 2013

Commencement December 2013

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English project of Katelyn E. Cooley presented on November 25, 2013.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Katelyn E. Cooley, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my advisor Professor David Robinson for his patient guidance and encouragement throughout the entirety of this project. I am truly honored to have had the opportunity to work with such a renowned and inspiring Emerson scholar. I would also like to thank my committee members, Professor Chris Anderson and Professor Gary Ferngren. I am thankful for their support and willingness to work with me on this project as well as their flexibility during its final stages. I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to take several thought-provoking and life-altering classes with these inspiring three professors, as well as those I have had the privilege to learn from throughout my entire education.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family for their unwavering love and support during this project and throughout my college experience. Thank you for allowing me to ramble on as I bounced my ideas off of you and not allowing me to lose my mind in the process.

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## DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad—thank you for letting me be myself.



## Emersonian Non-Conformity in J.D. Salinger and Hunter S. Thompson

### Introduction

In 1841 American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson published his influential essay, “Self-Reliance,” and in so doing introduced the world to his individualistic theory of non-conformity. Though the U.S. is a country which preaches individualism as a central ideology, we are still taught to believe that we are only important if we are accepted by others and that we will only be accepted if we look, act, and think like everybody else. In such a society—where originality is theoretically celebrated but condemned in reality—living a life aside from (or in opposition to) the status quo is difficult to conceive, let alone actualize. Self-reliance is an understanding of the necessity of following one’s personal values and desires rather than those of others. Self-reliance is the attitude with which we are to conduct a life of purposeful non-conformity.

One of the greatest disservices done by our increasingly like-minded society is the assumption that truth and wisdom are finite—accessible and communicable only by the greatest (or oldest) minds. Emerson encourages us to stop assuming that the thoughts and ideas of others are the only ones worth having and learn to find and appreciate truths within ourselves. “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain

alienated majesty” (Emerson 85). Emerson insists that a life spent in submission to the judgments and expectations of others is a life but half-lived.

“Conformity” is the pressure to adhere to particular standards of society. We are compelled to conform out of fear: a fear of our own inferiority and the resulting assumption that the opinions others hold of us are more accurate than our own sense of worth. Accordingly, conformity is the first of two major obstacles which Emerson believes interfere with a life of self-reliance. “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it” (89). As members of society we are conditioned to crave the approval and acceptance our peers and superiors. However, if we intend merely to fulfill the expectations others hold for us, we will fall short of our potential for personal greatness. “It is easy to live in the world after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (89). Here, Emerson emphasizes the extreme difficulty of maintaining one’s individual opinion within society. The true difficulty does not begin with the *choice* of whether to follow our own will but in the ability to determine our own will amongst the wills of others *for* us.

“Consistency” is the second obstacle Emerson warns against, referring to the way that we limit ourselves based on what *we* have done or said in the past. “But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have state in this or that public place?

Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousandeyed present, and live ever in a new day” (91). Why do we immediately give less credit to our present thoughts than we do to our past thoughts—as if there is there an inherent superiority to those thoughts which we had first. “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall” (91). If we strive for consistency we will ultimately do more damage than good. Giving little credit to present thoughts has the potential to limit what we would *truly* like to be doing as much, if not *more*, than society limits us.

Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.—‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (91).

Our perceived need for consistency stems from a fear that any contradicting statement, idea, or action will render us hopelessly misunderstood.

Emerson stresses that our desire for the understanding of others is damaging rather than beneficial, unless we aspire to be average rather than great. “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, —that is genius” (85). Whether we are aware of it or not, everybody ultimately recognizes very similar truths. True genius stems from individuality and the belief that what is meaningful and important *personally* should be equally meaningful and important

for others. The commitment to such a belief is true “self-reliance” and the necessary starting point for a life of non-conformity.

Within this thesis I aim to explore two modern novels for elements of Emerson’s influential philosophy. Though their publications span a period of twenty years, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) are both considered to be modern “non-conformist” novels. The protagonists not only exist on the fringe of society but believe that the answer to their problems may lie outside of society itself. I will examine each novel separately, and explore major themes in each novel which will help provide an understanding of both the motives and characteristics of each character’s non-conformity. After considering both novels individually, I will endeavor to understand the novels in relation to each other and to Emerson’s theory of Self-Reliance. In so doing, I will inevitably question whether Emerson’s philosophy can provide explanations for the individual successes and failings each character faces within the novel.

## The Catcher in the Rye

### Holden's Journey

*The Catcher in the Rye* begins as protagonist Holden Caulfield is preparing to leave Pencey Prep before he is officially expelled for failing all but one class. Having attended prep schools his entire life, Holden feels not only that he is leaving Pencey, he is leaving the only world he has ever known—a world of luxury, status and conformity. Holden is beginning to see that the life of privilege he is being groomed for is neither the life he wants to live nor the world he belongs to. Holden is resentful of society for the way it requires its members to conform to a particular set of norms. Holden is hesitant to become part of a system which operates by stripping its members of their individuality for the sake of productivity, conformity, and control for fear of losing himself.

Holden is outspoken in his disgust of the “phoniness” of society, recognizing that few people act like themselves or say what they truly mean. Holden is also upset that credit and attention is most often given to those that are wealthy and attractive rather than judging people based on merit.

For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an *hour*, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. it makes me so depressed I go crazy (Salinger 14).

Holden disagrees with the way that society encourages conformity rather than originality, rewards people for being phony and rejects those who are true to themselves. He realizes that he must eventually work and participate within society to survive yet he fears that dependence on society will inevitably change him. Though he does not necessarily want to remain an outsider, he wishes that he was not expected to be someone that *society* considers successful and important, and was free to determine what constitutes success and importance *personally*.

## Innocence

For Holden, the concept of a child's innocence is almost synonymous with his understanding of non-conformity. All of the adults in Holden's life have given themselves over to the conformity and competition of society. Innocence is sacrificed to the system of conformity, production, and consumption that constitutes modern American society. Accordingly, Holden associates innocence with children—those who view the world uninfluenced and unfiltered and whose uniqueness and individuality are effortless. Children are able to act on their every whim because it's what *they* want to do—regardless of what they're supposed to do. Holden admiringly recalls the way his childhood friend Jane would keep her kings in the back row whenever they would play checkers. “What she'd do, when she'd get a king, she wouldn't move it. She'd just leave it in the back row. She'd get them all lined up in the back row. Then she'd never use them. She just liked the way they looked when they were all in the back row” (31). As a child Jane symbolizes the innocence of one who has yet to internalize an external set of

rules and regulations as her own. She did not feel compelled to play by the rules nor sacrifice herself to succeed.

Like Jane's attitude while playing checkers, each of Holden's siblings is a symbol of innocence. Holden's older brother D.B. represents innocence corrupted. With his first mention of D.B. it is obvious that while he *used* to be Holden's idol, he has lost both his respect and admiration. D.B. used to be a children's book writer, at which Holden considered him brilliant. However, he recently traded what Holden considered to be an ingenious and independent career for the success, money, and fame of a Hollywood screenwriter. "Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me" (2). D.B. characterizes Holden's disgust that individuals are enticed to conform by the possibility of money and success.

Allie, Holden's deceased younger brother, is the symbol of eternal innocence. Having died in childhood, he never had the opportunity to be changed or corrupted by society. It is likely, too, as indicated by Holden's preoccupation with thoughts of Allie throughout the novel, that Holden's traumatization at the sudden death of his younger brother is a partial cause of his passionate desire to protect the innocence of himself and others. Holden is clearly comforted by thinking of Allie when he feels fearful about losing himself to the conformity of society.

Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me [...] Then I started doing something else. Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, 'Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie' (198).

Despite the tragedy of losing a brother at such a young age, the memory of Allie is inspiring because it provides Holden with the hope that innocence may not always be temporary.

Holden's youngest sibling, Phoebe, is Holden's guide throughout the novel. She is one of the only people that he feels comfortable discussing his concerns with and because of her innocence, the *only* person that he trusts wholeheartedly. Prior to his conversation with Phoebe, Holden's only solution was to leave society altogether. "Finally, what I decided I'd do, I decided I'd go away. I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again [...] I figured I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars. I didn't care what kind of job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody" (198). Phoebe ultimately becomes Holden's savior, insofar as she is the only person who can convince him to change his plans—by demanding to go with him. Not only does Holden deny her pleas to go, he gets very defensive and angry about it. " 'You're not *going*. Now, shut up! Gimme that bag,' I said. I took the bag off her. I was almost all set to hit her. I thought I was going to smack her for a second. I really did [...] I think I hated her most because she wouldn't be in that play any more if she went away with me" (206). Holden fears that his leaving will result in her losing her innocence. Holden realizes that part of what he loves about Phoebe, part of who she is, is connected with her place within society. She is safe in her childhood. By recognizing the changes that would accompany *Phoebe* escaping society—he realizes that he would inevitably be changed as well. Holden cancels his plans to leave when he realizes that it could actually *cause* the loss of his innocence. " 'I'm not going away anywhere. I changed my mind. So stop crying and shut up,' I said.



The funny part was, she wasn't even crying when I said that. I said it anyway, though" (207). By telling her to stop crying after she had already stopped crying, Holden is attempting to justify his change of decision to both Phoebe and himself. He is reassuring himself that he is doing the right thing—even if only for the sake of his sister.

Holden is beginning to understand that he cannot leave society without *also* leaving the people that he loves. He cannot leave without causing those who love him pain and sadness. He begins to notice a change in Phoebe's attitude towards him almost immediately. "'I said I'm not going back to school. You can do what *you* want to do, but I'm not going back to school,' she said. 'So shut up.' It was the first time she ever told me to shut up. It sounded terrible. God, it sounded terrible. It sounded worse than swearing. She wouldn't look at me either, and every time I sort of put my hand on her shoulder or something, she wouldn't let me" (208). When Phoebe tries to act older than her age and curses, Holden recognizes an innocence and childishness within her that she is unable to realize within herself. Holden begins to understand that growing older does not necessarily require a loss of innocence—and that there may be some childlike innocence which remains in him yet. In response, Holden decides to take Phoebe to the carousel—a symbol of childhood—in an attempt to restore both her temporarily forgotten, and his potentially fleeting innocence.

When they get to the carousel, Holden recalls how much Phoebe loved it when she was little and asks her if she wants to ride. She replies that she does not want to, because she is too old. Holden assures her that she is not too old and that he will watch her ride rather than ride himself. He realizes that he does not have to change simply because he is getting older, and that he does not have to stop loving the things he loves.

“All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she’d fall off the goddam horse, but I didn’t say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them” (211). Holden wants to preserve that innocent, hopeful spirit within the children that compels them to grab for the gold ring on the carousel. He realizes that warning them of a potential danger changes them—and that children are only innocent as long as they are naturally able to obey their pure inner guidance.

### Corruption

Holden believes that society is inherently corrupt in the way it requires individuals to compromise themselves—their personal desires, values, and ideals—for those of society. He believes that society is corrupted, and that conformity is the main act of corruption. Holden is hesitant to accept or appreciate *anything* within society. Under pressure from Phoebe to think of *one* thing he’d like to do—he is unable. “All I could think of were those two nuns what went around collecting dough in those beat-up old straw baskets [...] and this one boy I knew at Elkton Hills” (170). For Holden, the nuns and James Castle, the boy from Elkton Hills, represent the pressures to conform to popular ways of thinking. James Castle was a former classmate of Holden’s who killed himself rather than take back what he said about a popular boy. His suicide was a drastic attempt to uphold what he believed as true. The two nuns are a source of conflicting inspiration for Holden. He admires and respects the way they are unconcerned for their personal wealth or power, as well as their lifelong dedication to charity and education.

However, he fears that they too would exclude him because he doesn't share their religious beliefs.

Holden is worried about becoming working member of society for fear that his personal values will be compromised, which could ultimately lead to complete conformity. "Lawyers are all right, I guess—but it doesn't appeal to me," I said. "I mean they're all right if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't *do* that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" (172). Based on his impression of his father and how others act, the *real* purpose of being a lawyer is to be wealthy and play golf--rather than an intention really to *help* people.

And besides. 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 if 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 dirt movies? How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn't*" (172).

Even if lawyers actually *do* good things, Holden is concerned that they are not done for the right reasons. He is worried that the reward—being wealthy and socially prominent—becomes more important than being a good person.

Despite his intelligence and curiosity—Holden is skeptical of the educational system. He recognizes that the education institution aims to control and influence the minds of its students rather than broaden them. Holden's opinion of society's goal for education is made clear when talking with his childhood friend Sally. "You ought to go to a boy's school sometime. Try it sometime [...] It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to buy a goddam Cadillac some day" (131). Additionally, Holden was unwilling to spend time learning subjects which he

didn't find personally interesting or valuable. Holden decidedly leaves Pencey because he felt he was being groomed for a life of conformity and that an institutional education would not allow him to achieve his personal goals.

Holden is unwilling to accept a role in a system which fundamentally opposes his values—participation within society demands a sacrifice of innocence and individuality. Perhaps he is also fearful that he would be unable to succeed in the adult world. Holden recognizes that children are taught that they will only be valuable if they are productive, popular and successful. Holden not only wants to avoid succumbing to this mentality *himself*, he wants to protect all of the remaining innocent children from making the same mistake.

You know what I'd like to be? I mean if I had my goddam choice? [...] Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy (173).

Immediately after Holden understands that his desire is to be “the catcher in the rye,” he contacts Mr. Antolini, an old English professor he admires, hoping that he will provide him with some advice on how to realize his dream. Antolini is concerned that Holden is prepared to make himself a martyr for loss of innocence within society.

I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall. But I don't honestly know what kind [...] This fall I think you're riding for—it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really even got started (186).

Antolini does not disagree with Holden's view of society, but knows that Holden cannot bear this burden without destroying himself in the process. "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one" (Emerson 188). Recognizing Holden's natural talent for writing, Antolini believes that academia is a platform where Holden's ideas can be expressed and appreciated. He advises Holden to wait until he learns which types of information will be valuable to him, rather than becoming overwhelmed and discouraged by the aspects of education that he *dislikes*. "Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry" (Salinger 89). Antolini helps Holden realize that he can't simply wait for society to change into what he thinks it should be. He must learn to identify and focus on those aspects of society which *do* align with his values.

While waiting to meet with Phoebe at her elementary school, a place that *should* be a haven for the innocent, Holden is confronted directly with the corruption he despises so thoroughly.

But while I was sitting down, I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody'd written "Fuck you" on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant, and how they'd all *think* about it and maybe even *worry* about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it (201).

It isn't until Holden is finally faced with an instance of innocence *being* corrupted that he *really* knows how he would react in such a situation. After fantasizing about beating up the "pervert bum" that wrote the "fuck you", he admits that he would never have the guts to do it in person—as he barely had the guts to rub it off of the wall himself. This indicates a significant change in Holden's perspective—as he begins to realize the limits of what he is able to change. His discussion of his *next* encounter with a scribbled "fuck you" reveals this, as well as new feeling of defeat towards what can realistically be done against the corrupting nature of society. "I went down by a different staircase, and I saw another 'Fuck you' on the wall. I tried to rub it off with my hand again, but this one was *scratched* on, with a knife or something. It wouldn't come off. It's hopeless, anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* of the 'Fuck you' signs in the world. It's impossible" (202). Not only are there parts of the world that are corrupted already—the parts of the world that are pure, "nice and peaceful", are merely awaiting their impending corruption. "That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any. You may *think* there is, but once you get there, when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write 'Fuck you' right under your nose" (204). Holden finally begins to understand that society isn't corrupted—but rather that society *is* corruption insofar as it *requires* conformity. Therefore, he can neither change it nor escape it.

## Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

### Duke's Journey

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* begins as the copious amount of drugs consumed by journalist Raoul Duke and his attorney begin to take effect. "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold" (Thompson 3). Written by journalist and novelist Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was intended to be a piece of pure non-fiction journalistic experience--an attempt to demonstrate that meaning comes from pure experience rather than later reflection and analysis. "But what *was* the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo Journalism" (12). "Gonzo journalism" is a form of literary journalism popularized by Thompson. This approach to writing denies the need for objectivity and extensive editing, relying heavily on the ability of immediate, personal experience to convey truth.

Despite Thompson's intentions for the text to be an experiment of "pure Gonzo Journalism," he spent over a year editing the material. As a result, the veracity of the whole novel becomes questionable as it is impossible to determine which experiences are real and which were constructed after the fact. Raoul Duke is the protagonist of the novel *intended* to be Thompson's alias. From the beginning, this novel is presented as a highly fragmented documentation of their wild drug-fueled journey in Las Vegas to find "The American Dream".

## The American Dream

“The American Dream” is the term for the reward of wealth, happiness, and comfort that is promised to accompany a life of conformity and productivity within society. One of many social assumptions which are accepted as truths, The American Dream is the myth which entices an individual to conform to the expectations of society. It is the promise that if you are a participating and obedient member of society, you will lead a happy and meaningful life. Accompanying the happiness of the American Dream is the threat of punishment for bad behavior and the assumption that our every action is being observed by a figure of authority.

Throughout the novel Duke claims to be seeking the American Dream, though his methods are unconventional and highly illegal. This suggests that the narrative is attempting to destabilize the myth of the American Dream as well as question the actual power of authority in this country.

I could barely hear the radio...slumped over on the far side of the seat, grappling with a tape recorder turned all the way up on “Sympathy for the Devil.” That was the only tape we had, so we played it constantly, over and over, as a kind of demented counterpoint to the radio. And also to maintain our rhythm on the road. A constant speed is good for gas mileage—and for some reason that seemed important at the time (4).

Duke attributes his desire to listen to “Sympathy for the Devil” repeatedly to the way it helps him maintain a constant speed on the road and admits being surprised at his desire for good gas mileage. “Indeed. On a trip like this one *must* be careful about gas consumption. Avoid those quick bursts of acceleration that drag blood to the back of the brain” (5). Duke immediately attempts to negate his acknowledgment of such a



conventional concern. His sarcasm is an attempt to assure himself of the unconventional nature of his experience.

Duke professes that the purpose of this drug-fueled journey is to find The American Dream—but he obviously is not attempting to achieve a life of conformity and comfort. In fact, Duke wants to disprove the *necessity* for conformity in achieving the American Dream. Having failed to achieve what *he thinks* he deserves from conventional life, he attempts to achieve those rewards promised him—wealth, freedom, happiness and specifically, the feeling of enlightenment that is supposedly attained once a person has “made it”. Duke and his lawyer hope to take advantage of some of the benefits afforded by the system. This is reflected by the fact that their journey is in Las Vegas—a city filled with those attempting to gamble their way into prosperity.

You have no faith in the essential decency of the white man’s culture. Jesus, just one hour ago we were sitting over there in that stinking baiginio, stone broke and paralyzed for the weekend, when a call comes through from some total stranger in New York, telling me to go to Las Vegas and expenses be damned--and then he sends me over to some office in Beverly Hills where another total stranger gives me \$300 raw cash for no reason at all...I tell you, my man, this is the American Dream in action! We’d be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out till the end (11).

Duke is able to take advantage of the trust given to him by his employer as well as almost completely negate his work responsibilities to go on a journey that, he admits, seems like pure recklessness. “Old elephants limp off to the hills to die; old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars” (18). Duke is insistent however, that despite the wild and illegal nature of their journey—it does indeed have a purpose. “But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country—but only for those with true grit. And we were chock

full of that” (18). They are attempting to show that while there is no truth and nothing right in the national character, there is still potential outside of society. Duke clearly believes that there is a possibility for truth and happiness but that it is only available to those who are not afraid to break the rules.

Accompanying the happiness of the American Dream is the threat of punishment for bad behavior and the assumption that our every action is being observed by a figure of higher authority (in the form of the government, for example, or God). Duke’s drug use is, at the same time, a way for him to exercise his freedom and a way to distance himself mentally from society. He is rebelling against the authorities who condemn drug use by using drugs to lessen his fear of authorities.

Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas. To *relax*, as it were, in the womb of the desert sun. Just roll the roof back and screw it on, grease the face with white tanning butter and move out with the music at top-volume, and at least a pint of ether (12).

To Duke, it is no longer possible sufficiently to relax while one’s mind is still operating on its normal level. Along the same lines, it is no longer conducive to a mindset of complete non-conformity simply to leave society and spend time in nature. Not only is our survival tied to our ability to function within society—our lives are centered on the necessity to work so that we can afford food and shelter. Physically leaving society does not necessarily change our mindset and render us less reliant on society. Our minds become hardwired specifically for our role in society. Drug use is an important tool for Duke to think like a non-conformist because of the way it alters his mindset—it allows him to be less reliant on those aspects of his mind that are influenced by society.

Duke seems to be intending for this drug-fueled, liberating experience to propel him into a state of enlightenment which will be permanently and positively life-altering. “My attorney has never been able to accept the notion—often espoused by reformed drug abusers and especially popular among those on probation—that you can get a lot higher without drugs than with them. And neither have I for that matter” (63). Assuming that Duke is not expecting to experience a drug high without actually consuming drugs, we can assume that by “higher” he is referring to reaching higher levels of consciousness—and in so doing, becoming enlightened.

Ultimately, drug use is a non-conventional method to attain what is falsely promised to accompany a conventional life. Duke’s journey can be seen as an experiment in non-conformity insofar as he realizes the necessity to distance himself from society to get what he wants. He is at the same time attempting to circumvent the prescribed formula for success and subvert the forces of control in this country.

### The Paranoid Chase

Like the American Dream which is always promised yet never received, the assumption of all-knowing and all-punishing authority figures are also tactics to ensure the conformity, obedience, and productivity of all of society. Despite Duke’s desires for his drug use to relieve him of these engrained “false truths” he is still clearly affected.

Rather than experiencing feelings of self-realization or mental liberation Duke repeatedly subjects himself to paranoid fantasies. His paranoia continually increases throughout his experience to the extent that this energy largely drives the novel. After picking up a young hitchhiker, Duke begins to panic that their “condition” will become

obvious and begins worrying about highly implausible situations. “How long can we *maintain*? I wondered. How long before one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy? What will he think then? This same lonely desert was the last known home of the Manson family. Will he make that grim connection when my attorney starts screaming about bats and huge manta rays coming down on the car?” By letting this scenario play out in his head it becomes almost real. Duke becomes agitated to the point that he feels threatened by this boy with whom he has barely spoken. “If so—well, we’ll just have to cut his head off and bury him somewhere. Because it goes without saying that we can’t turn him loose. He’ll report us at once to some kind of outback nazi law enforcement agency, and they’ll run us down like dogs” (5). The intensity of Duke’s paranoia is revealed when he likens the police authority to the Nazis. His fear that the authorities are both all knowing and all powerful is an example of the constant reverence for authority that is demanded, he thinks, from all society.

Despite his intentions, Duke’s fear of authorities is actually heightened by his use of drugs. This is an early indication that whatever Duke’s plan, it is not going as he intended. It is not difficult to make a connection between Duke’s hopes for his drug experience and the effects/realizations/assurances made by Timothy Leary, psychologist and LSD pioneer and advocate. Leary professed that LSD allows users experience non-conformity while connecting to a truer version of themselves. By lessening the extent to which they are dependent on societal truths they are distanced from the version of themselves that has been conformed to society. When experiencing an objective view of reality we forget the ways that we have been conditioned to look at the world and ourselves. Those aspects of society which govern and direct our lives are exposed as

trivial and meaningless and as a result, we feel “enlightened”. In Leary’s autobiography he explains the meaning behind his well-known phrase “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out” which he found useful in explaining the benefits of LSD use.

*Turn On* meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. *Tune In* meant interact harmoniously with the world around you—externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. *Drop out* suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. *Drop Out* meant self-reliance, a discovery of one’s singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change (Leary 253).

Leary advocated LSD use because of its alleged ability to help people detach themselves from societally *mentally* rather than physically. Duke is not merely using drugs to circumvent his need to participate within society but to show that enlightenment is *impossible* to achieve within society.

The assumption that Duke is seeking enlightenment outside society is based on Leary’s beliefs in the power of LSD use, specifically the ability to find truth by accessing a truer version of oneself through a state of mental non-conformity. That *this* could be the purpose of Duke’s trip becomes less plausible when he reflects on his first experience with LSD and reveals that he was, in fact, a follower of Leary in the sixties.

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era--the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something*. Maybe not, in the long run [...]. There was madness in any direction, at any hour [...]. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning (66).

Duke, like other of Leary’s followers believed that they had stumbled upon truth—that they were accessing something beautiful, meaningful and, because others were accessing it too, *universally* true. In the meantime, he has come to recognize Leary as little more

than a false preacher, perpetuating the belief that they could access something that may be ultimately unattainable.

We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave...So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark--that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back (68).

Though LSD had helped them feel that they were escaping conformity, the effects were not permanent—the end of the acid culture meant they were no longer able to continually consume LSD in a social manner. “That was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary’s trip. He crashed around America selling ‘consciousness expansion’ without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously” (178). At the end of the sixties, Leary’s followers lost contact with the universal sense of truth they thought they were attaining and left worse off than when they had started. Duke makes it clear that not only is he *still* looking for what Leary promised, but that he attributes his increasingly depraved self to taking Leary too seriously.

Leary himself admitted that while there is a need to repeat the process of detachment afforded by LSD, many mistook this as an excuse to “get stoned and abandon all constructive activity” (Leary 253). Duke recognizes a shift in the mindset between those who used drugs purposefully and conscientiously and contemporary drug users. “The popularity of psychedelics has fallen off so drastically that most volume dealers no longer even handle quality acid or mescaline except as a favor to special customers [...]. What sells, today, is whatever Fucks You Up—whatever short-circuits your brain and grounds it out for the longest possible time” (Thompson 202). Leary assured them that enlightenment was possible and that drug use was one of the only remaining ways to

achieve it—ultimately advocating drug use to a generation that sought to “turn off” rather than “turn on”.

Those who *did* intend to use drugs thoughtfully, as he had intended, were left unenlightened—continually searching for truth and happiness in the only way they knew how. “What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped to create...a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or at least some *force*—is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel” (Thompson 178). Ultimately Leary’s acid culture was merely a different way to perpetuate the belief that truth and happiness are actually attainable.

Duke makes a direct connection between the assurances made by Leary that LSD would provide answers and the belief in a higher power that holds all the answers. “This is the same cruel and paradoxically benevolent bullshit that has kept the Catholic Church going for so many centuries. It is also the military ethic...a blind faith in some higher and wiser “authority.” The Pope, The General, The Prime Minister...all the way up to ‘God’” (179). Here Duke is assuming that all of society operates by continually reliance on things that, he believes, do not exist. Truth and authority are purported to be universal and existent yet they are ultimately unattainable--always maintained by some other “higher authority”. Despite the paranoid fantasies which saturate the text—Duke is neither apprehended nor identified—indicating that the presence of authority, like the American Dream, is just another empty promise.

Even though Duke manages to consistently evade the police, he still maintains the assumption that the force of authority in this country is all-powerful and all-knowing. He

cannot escape the image of himself as a criminal or the paranoia that accompanies it. Additionally, he is clearly unable to experience a less societally-influenced version of himself. Since Duke was clearly unable to achieve enlightenment conventionally, and though we previously assumed Duke's intentions were to experience enlightenment and self-reliance through mental non-conformity, after the sixties he realized that it was *also* unattainable by experiencing reality from another perspective. This suggests that rather than attempting self-reliance through *societal* non-conformity, Duke is attempting to experience enlightenment by distancing himself from reality altogether.

This is accomplished in two ways, the first being Duke's decision to have this experience in Las Vegas—a place he admits is the furthest place from reality.

“Psychedelics are almost irrelevant in a town where you can wander into a casino any time of the day or night and witness the crucifixion of a gorilla-on a flaming neon cross that suddenly turns into a pinwheel, spinning the beast around in wild circles above the crowded gambling action” (190). The fact that reality is practically non-existent in Las Vegas enforces this conflict between Leary's non-conformist intentions for LSD use and Duke's journey. Leary's purpose was to connect to a truer version of self by experiencing reality from a different *perspective*, but to view reality nonetheless.

If we reevaluate the excessive extent of Duke's drug use we realize that despite having previously denied it (as we saw when he rejected the assumption that their journey was pure recklessness) there are several instances that suggest that Duke realizes the dangerous and excessive nature of the drug use.

The trunk of the car looked like a mobile police narcotics lab. We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers...and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen



amyls [...]. Not that we *needed* all that for the trip, but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can” (4).

Acknowledging that his use of drugs was *indeed* reckless and excessive further indicates that drug use is the second way that he intends lessen his grip on reality. This novel reflects the latest of many failed attempts to find happiness and meaning in his life. Duke, like many members of society, has been conditioned to believe that happiness, meaning and power, are all found externally. Because of this, Duke only knows how to search for them through societal or even anti-societal methods but he never thinks to look within himself. He would rather lose himself completely than attempt to find himself. Perhaps Thompson is suggesting that because of the way we have been shaped by society our whole lives there is no *self* left for us to discover.

## Comparison and Evaluation

This section of the thesis will focus on comparisons between the non-conformity of each character and Emerson's principle of non-conformity in an attempt to determine which of the two characters is the truer Emersonian. Holden is Emersonian in his non-conformity for the way that he is stubbornly true to himself. He desires the ability to live his life in a way that is truly self-reliant and in line with his personal principles. He fears that participation within society may be the only way to provide for himself and that in doing so, he will inevitably be changed. This fear, that society will render him unable to follow his own will, is his motivation for his non-conformity.

The events in the novel are the result of Holden attempt to distance himself from his associations with society. He is, at the same time, rejecting his education (which would otherwise usher him into adulthood) and avoiding the moment when he must decide what to do to survive instead. However, it is not sufficient to base a judgment of Holden's self-reliance on his actions (or lack thereof) alone, it is crucial to consider the attitude with which he conducts himself. During his time in New York, Holden solicits a prostitute named Sunny, with whom he does not actually sleep. He soon realizes how young and immature Sunny is and recognizes some innocence left in her. "She was very nervous, for a prostitute. She really was. I think it was because she was young as hell. She was around my age" (94). Holden is clearly unbothered by the fact that prostitution is illegal, in fact it is not until he realizes that he might be responsible for the loss of her innocence that he decides to sleep with her.

Holden's attitude during this experience is Emersonian insofar as he is not allowing society to provide the basis for his morality but determining for *himself* what is

right and wrong. “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what against it” (88). Holden’s ability to determine between his virtues and those of society, as well as his commitment to his personal virtues appear to be effortless.

Holden is Emersonian in his persistent loyalty to his personal truths and the way he naturally expects all society to reflect his personal desires. Holden is stubbornly true to himself, yet unconscious about it. While he may not base his personal virtues on those of society, Holden’s mistake is in looking outward at all. He cannot help but believe that what he considers right and important should be true for all of society. However, he believes this so strongly that he expects society to reflect his beliefs and, when it does not, he wants to change it. He is unable to be completely content in himself because he ultimately believes that, were they true, society would reflect them as well.

Both Duke’s motives for non-conformity and method of attempting to achieve it are less pure. Duke desires a life of non-conformity only insofar as it may produce feelings of enlightenment, which he has been otherwise unable to achieve. His method of attaining non-conformity is problematic as well. Drug use is desirable to Duke for the way it allows him to distance himself mentally from society—understanding that society is the source of his problems—however, it also renders him reliant on an altered mindset to achieve non-conformity and therefore not reliant on himself.

For Duke “the American Dream” is promise of happiness, wealth, and (ultimately) enlightenment, which entices individuals to conform to society. According to

Emerson, the American Dream is an empty promise because it suggests that satisfaction and fulfillment are found within society rather than within oneself.

Throughout the novel, Duke reveals the extent of his search for enlightenment. He emphasizes that the “American Dream” is that which caused him to desire it so intensely, having never achieved the reward for the life of productivity, conformity, and normality that he had lived. Drug use (LSD initially) was a way to distance himself from society psychologically. It allowed him to diminish his reliance on his normal, socially influenced state of mind. Timothy Leary professed that LSD use allowed its users to reach higher levels of consciousness and, ultimately, self-reliance, by accessing reality through a different, more objective lens.

Having failed to achieve enlightenment by playing by society’s rules, as well as accessing a version of reality which was less socially influenced, this novel represents Duke’s attempt to find enlightenment by distancing himself from reality altogether. We can conclude, however, that his attempt failed, based on the paranoid and frantic (rather than liberating and self-empowering) nature of the journey. Though Duke believes he has exhausted all his options, Emerson indicates another, still un-attempted by Duke. Emerson advises to look inward for truth and fulfillment rather than outward, holding that enlightenment can only come to those who are fully committed to knowing and following their personal desires and needs.

Emerson stresses that the motive behind any action should come from within rather than from the desires or expectations of others. For Holden, this is a clear distinction. He easily notices differences between what he wants to do and what others want him to do--to the extent that he makes a point not to do things because they do not

interest him or because he does not agree with them. For Duke, there is no clear distinction between our own will and the will of society. Society's expectations and rules have the potential to be deeply ingrained in our psyche as truths--making it all the more difficult to determine between personal truths and those of society. Society's desire for our productivity is translated into our personal goal for success and we absorb the rules designed to keep us obedient to the extent that we govern ourselves.

Emerson recognizes the difficulty in remaining self-reliant in *principle*, if we are dependent on the social system for our own survival. "The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature" (87). The correct attitude to have in life is one, like that of young boys, that is unconcerned with *how* they will be fed, yet sure of it nonetheless. It is harmful to be consistently concerned with our means of consumption as well as the societal structure within which we must participate to do so. The more time spent working to provide for ourselves, the more time we are focused on our relationship to society and not trusting ourselves.

A boy is in the parlor what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent genuine verdict. You must court him; he does not court you (87).

Boys are equally unconcerned with behaving or thinking in any way besides that which comes naturally to them. They speak their every thought without regard to those receiving it, and act on their every whim without regard for the consequences. "But the man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with *éclat* he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or hatred of

hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this” (87). To Emerson, the admirable attitude of boys lasts until they become conscious of the potential success of their words or actions—and inevitably begin to tailor themselves according to how they will be received. Once lost, there is no hope of returning to the mindset of “affrighted innocence.” Here, Emerson is indicating a turning point that is emphasized in both novels.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden is disgusted by the way childhood innocence is irrevocably lost by conforming to society’s expectations and opinions. He recognizes the turning point as the moment when we are forced to accept our societal role, to cooperate in a system of endless production and consumption which requires us to sacrifice our individuality for the sake of conformity. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke believes that the turning point is gradual and practically unnoticeable. Throughout the course of our life we are taught to regard social assumptions as ultimate truths and as a result, alter our beliefs and actions. Our minds become slowly and permanently enslaved by society to the extent that we can no longer control what we think about ourselves or our actions.

Emerson believes that there is no escaping the grip of conformity once you have succumb to it, and fears that the longer one spends fulfilling the expectations of society, the more hopelessly we are lost. Though Duke is aware of the ways he is affected by society, his drug use is an attempt to remedy this, and return to a state of self-reliance that was lost long ago. Unfortunately, Duke’s drug use did more harm than good—causing him to be reliant on an unnatural and temporary state of mind, rather than on his *true* self.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to thematically explore two novels which are typically considered to be “non-conformist” because of the ways the main characters grapple with their place in society and attempt to seek answers outside of society. By comparing the non-conformity of each character to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theory of individualistic non-conformity as presented in his 1841 essay *Self-Reliance*. I attempted to identify the connections, if any, between the non-conformity presented by Emerson and that is embodied by each of the characters.

Ultimately, Holden’s non-conformity is much more, if not purely, Emersonian. Holden desires the ability to live according to himself and is fearful the way that society will change him and is stubbornly true to himself and his personal principles. Despite the monetary and social incentives to sacrifice his individuality for the sake of conformity, Holden is unwavering in his loyalty to his needs--in spite of society's needs for him. Conversely, Duke is anti-Emersonian in both his motives and methods of non-conformity. Duke desires non-conformity only insofar as (he believes) it will help him achieve some end, rather being the end in and of itself. Additionally, Duke’s drug use renders him unable to be self-reliant throughout the entirety of the novel. For him, non-conformity is merely a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself.

Ultimately, both of these novels allude to the importance of both self-reliance and non-conformity, as opposed to relying on external influences. Yet at the same time, they question whether living a life of self-reliance is truly possible. Salinger makes us question whether we can truly survive without functioning in society, while Thompson makes us

question whether we even *have* a “self” outside of society, and apart from our cumulative influences. Despite all this, Emerson is insistent that we can only live a fulfilling life through *self*-fulfillment—a belief in the inherent correctness of our unique experience and the ability internally to recognize eternal truths. “He who knows that power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and, so perceiving throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself [...]. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (109).



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