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## **Examining Diversity in School Stories**

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Examining Diversity in School Stories

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation in the Honors College

By

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a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

## Examining Diversity In School Stories

A simple Google search for texts ordinarily studied in a high school English classroom generates a list of works written by, and featuring, white men. Currently, the texts taught in English classrooms in the United States are generally written by white men and feature middle-class white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual men as protagonists. There are of course a few exceptions, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) or Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), but they are exceptions. Most protagonists of stories read in schools are not representative of other kinds of students? This lack of diverse texts conflicts with the makeup of the students in the United States. According to a 2017 study by the National Center of Education Statistics, only 51% of school-aged children are White (NCES), with 49% of students being Black, Hispanic, Asian, Alaskan Native, Native American, or two or more races. A census of children under 18 from the Kids Count Data Center also confirms that 49% of students are female<sup>1</sup> (Kids Count Data Center), and one from The Williams Institute reveals 1% are transgender, and 8% are LGBTQ (The Williams Institute). This means that a large percentage of students are not reading about characters that reflect back to them their own unique identities, experiences, and backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> There is limited research on people who have non-binary, agender, or genderqueer identities, particularly among school-age children, making it difficult to estimate what percentage of this population identifies as neither male nor female ("Non-Binary Gender Identities Fact Sheet"). Though the language used on the website says 'gender', it is possible they may be referencing biological sex.

Though Common Core Standards<sup>2</sup> place importance on “authentic reading material” and “a balance of gender and a diversity of voices representing a spectrum of cultures, perspectives, orientations, races, ages, time-periods, and geographies” (NYSED), their initial suggested reading lists did not reflect those stated objectives. In 2012, Common Core authors released a list of suggested texts for students to study in secondary ELA classrooms. Under the ‘Stories’ category for grades 9-11, which houses short stories, novels, and novellas, only 11 of the 36 recommended texts were written by women, and only nine were written by people of color, with overlap of authorship between the two categories. Additionally, most of the translated works were by White Europeans (Strauss), which does provide a more global perspective, but they easily could have chosen impactful and valuable translated texts from global authors of color. Despite their efforts to diversify curriculum, Common Core authors still fell short of creating a truly inclusive list of stories and continued to suggest classic or outdated texts that center on White and generally male protagonists.

Such texts include the school stories *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger, *A Separate Peace* (1959) by John Knowles, and *Dead Poets Society* (1989) directed by Peter Weir. The lack of cultural and identity marker diversity present in these texts is problematic not because stories about privileged majority groups are inherently ‘bad,’ but because these stories are overwhelmingly the only ones taught in schools. There is little variation in the race and ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, and class of characters and protagonists. These texts are each

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<sup>2</sup> Common Core State Standards are a set of rigorous and evidence-based academic standards that address ELA skills such as reading, writing, listening, and presenting. Currently, Common Core Standards in public schools is compulsory in 41 states (“About the Standards”).

valuable and push boundaries from the non-diverse norm of the canonical school story in various identity marker categories, but there are arguably other texts with just as much value that are more inclusive. Predetermined national or state-wide curriculums which lists books schools must read do not exist and text choices are made at the local level (NYSED), yet over and over again administrators and educators choose to teach texts that exclude the experiences of many of their students. The demographics of the U.S. population are shifting and becoming increasingly diverse over time (NCES), and texts students read in school should reflect those new demographics. Educators need to make better text choices and create inclusive classrooms which welcome and appreciate students of all backgrounds and identities. This paper will examine the diversity in the three focus texts, make note of who is included or excluded, and assess how positively are they represented. This is done not to present a definitive list of interpretations of potential or canon character identities, but in order to call attention to the issue of exclusivity in school stories and make the process of choosing appropriate, valuable, and diverse texts easier for educators.

### **The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, School Social Racialization, and Bibliotherapy in English Classrooms**

One crucial way teachers can create a more inclusive classroom for students is by using culturally relevant pedagogy<sup>3</sup>. Various case studies, considering both qualitative and quantitative data, support the claim that using culturally relevant teaching can improve students' academic outcomes and racial attitudes (Byrd 6). Culturally relevant pedagogy challenges “the traditional Eurocentric curriculum” and “dismantle[s] the

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<sup>3</sup> This term was coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995 (Fink).

notion that [some] students are the ‘other’” (Cupchoy & Dennis 92) by using materials and methods which represent and value diverse cultures, religions, languages, identities, and backgrounds. Students must be given opportunities to use personal funds of cultural knowledge, see parts of their identities directly represented in materials, and address issues of racial inequality and social injustice through class activities and assignments (Byrd 2). When students feel a connection to what is being learned in class, they are more likely to be engaged, which also may contribute to improved academic outcomes.

However, culturally relevant pedagogy is not only beneficial to students of color. Even if a class is culturally homogeneous, it is still important to teach about cultural diversity. By choosing more diverse texts, teachers are engaging in school social racialization, which is essentially “messages [sent] to students encouraging positive racial attitudes and an understanding of the role of race and culture in society” (Byrd 1). School social racialization allows students to better connect with people of different backgrounds in future interactions, which is becoming an increasingly important skill as trends of economic and social globalization continue. Additionally, if nothing else, understanding how identity markers like race, class, and gender contribute to characterization and relationships is crucial for analyzing texts in an English classroom. English classrooms are environments which are naturally conducive for introducing social justice topics, as well as a place where thinking critically about them can genuinely be used for discussion, assignments, and essays.

Choosing diverse texts to read in the classroom is a specific way to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy but can also be used to promote inclusion for people with different

sexual orientations, gender identities, economic classes, and physical or mental abilities. Teachers can use texts to create peer awareness about marginalized people and “build a foundation for authentic inclusion in the classroom environment” (Maich & Belcher 206). This method is especially helpful when the teacher chooses texts that represent populations in their class. Reading about and discussing how they can improve their own personal attitudes and actions towards various kinds of people is what creates the peer awareness required for authentic inclusion. Giving students this ability to solve in-class issues through observing the experiences of book characters is known as ‘bibliotherapy’ (Maich & Belcher 207). If students can observe characters making deliberate, positive, healthy, or kind choices in adverse situations, then they are likely to follow this model for how to react when they are placed in similar circumstances. For example, in one study on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy, a primary school teacher used picture books about Autism Spectrum Disorder to create peer awareness about the exceptionality in a class containing a student with an autism diagnosis. Improved social dynamics and attitudes of students towards the student with autism were observed following the teacher’s experiment with bibliotherapy (Maich & Belcher 212).

Studying texts which take place in a learning environment, such as the three texts mentioned earlier, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Dead Poets Society*, would be beneficial if a teacher’s goal was to provide students with a model of how to act in certain situations or treat certain people. Use of *Dead Poets Society* for this purpose would be particularly interesting as it shows an unconventional teaching approach set in a more traditional learning venue. However, these texts do not offer the diverse range of characters necessary to teach those sorts of lessons. Texts chosen to aid in creating a

more inclusive classroom should have both literary value and characters which positively represent traditionally marginalized people (Maich & Belcher 209). Positive representation means including diverse characters, labelling them appropriately, and portraying them in a favorable way. This is not to say these three texts' literary value and societal impact are insignificant, but their intentional exclusion of certain populations and lack of positive, diverse representation perhaps make them *less* valuable and relevant than other potential texts. It is thus important work to properly examine diversity in school stories and understand the messages they may be sending to the students that read them about particular groups of people.

### **Defining the *School Story* Genre**

Something each of these texts have in common, other than their lack of diverse cultural representation, is their setting. They focus on boys' boarding school experiences, placing them in the school story genre. According to Beverly Clark, author of *Regendering the School Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys* (1996), the defining feature of a school story is that it is set, completely or partly, at a school. They generally take place over one school year or term and show some sort of growth or coming-of-age maturation before school lets out. School stories lend themselves well to bibliotherapy and school social racialization because "schooling is, in part, a metaphor for the effect a book is supposed to have, whether it endorses traditional schooling or tries to school us in subversion" (Clark 7). Early school story authors were often women looking to teach their children certain morals and values, so the stories were wrought with didacticism and a Christian agenda. Their use of didacticism indicates that they

were usually quite aware of the impact having school-age characters modeling preferred values in literature would have on their own children and students' behavior.

Knowing the origins of the school story genre does help comprehension of the lack of diversity of characters in texts that align with the canonical school story, as Christianity is not traditionally welcoming to those who do not identify or express gender within the traditional masculine/feminine binary, or those who are attracted to the same gender. However, Clark does discuss in depth over the course of her book how "crossgendered" stories, ones in which the author writes from the point of view of a protagonist of the opposite gender, transgresses conventions of the school story genre. She believes that in crossgendered stories, it is easier to investigate the intersections of age, gender, class, race, and other "vectors of marginality" (Clark 2), which may also include gender expression, sexuality, and various intellectual and physical abilities. Additionally, authors of crossgendered stories were often able to liberate their characters from masculine and feminine stereotypes, perhaps making the girls more independent and tomboyish, and the boys more sensitive or affectionate with their friends (Clark 34).

When Clark references the canonical school story, she is referring to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes (1857) and other school stories that follow its general formula. Hughes' novel was not the first of its genre, but he had "stabilized the genre" (Clark 177), and many authors after him followed the examples he set in terms of plot. The canonical school story has numerous tropes and conventions, some of which are specific to gender. For example, common tropes in the traditional boys' boarding school story include brotherhoods and codes against breaking peer loyalty (Clark 77), insurrection (Clark 63), participation in sports or athletic contests (Clark 48), and

invalidism as a means to attain virtue (Clark 133). Girls' school stories share some of the same tropes, such as peery loyalty and sisterhood, but have additional tropes such as gluttonous midnight feasts (Clark 18) and parallels between school and parental authority (Clark 15). The tropes align traditionally masculine traits, such as athleticism, independence, and rebellion to boy protagonists, as well as feminine traits, such as daintiness, to the girl protagonists. Loyalty to one another is encouraged in both boy and girl school stories, but girls are not encouraged to act as leaders or be disobedient to school authorities. Feasting is not seen as a rebellious act for boys like it is for girls, who are expected to maintain a dainty figure. Eating beyond need is one of the ways which girl characters were able to find freedom and independence in a school setting, while boy characters typically have more options for 'authorized' rebellion.

*Dead Poets Society*, written by Tom Schulman and directed by Peter Weir<sup>4</sup>, overwhelmingly aligns with the conventions of the canonical school story. The movie takes place in a boys' boarding school, Welton Academy. Banners shown in the opening scene of the movie indicate that Welton prides itself on a reputation of tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence. It houses and teaches only those who can afford to attend such a school, and there is no mention of any student, parent, or faculty member who is financially insecure. The cast of the movie is entirely white and mostly male, including the favorite teacher Mr. Keating, as well as the main characters Neil, Todd, Charlie, Cameron, Meeks, and Knox. The boys meet nightly for secret Dead Poets Society meetings in pursuit of sucking "the marrow out of life." The society meetings double as a display of brotherhood and insurrection for the boys, though that rebellion is not against

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<sup>4</sup> There are some notable differences between the written script by Schulman and the final popularized movie direct by Peter Weir. For the purpose of this paper, only the Peter Weir version will be discussed.

Mr. Keating himself. He refers to his students as “lads” and makes learning fun and approachable to the boys by teaching lessons outside or through sports. This causes Mr. Keating to become one faculty member that the boys trust, while making him a social and professional outcast amongst Welton staff. Mr. Keating’s transgressive behavior and pedagogical approaches alter the traditional authoritative adult/powerless student power dynamic seen in other school stories. This small change encourages the boys to rebel in ways which they feel is authorized by a teacher, thus changing the typical school story arc and resulting in a student suicide and broken code against tale bearing.

Kathy Piehl<sup>5</sup> makes a compelling case for the classification of *A Separate Peace* as a school story. *A Separate Peace* is set at the Devon school during a summer session at the onset of World War II. The novel tells the story of Gene Forrester and his roommate Phineas’ deteriorating friendship and Finny’s ultimate death. She notes that the novel has minimal adults, physical distance from the rest of society, an emphasis on sports (Piehl 68), school rules with potential for rebellion (70), bedtime prayers, and the existence of a secret society (73). The trope of invalidism as a solution for amorality is also seen when Finny breaks his leg. However, Finny’s broken leg does eventually contribute to his death, so achieving morality post-invalidism is also not a possibility in this school story.

At first glance it might appear that *The Catcher in the Rye* strays most from the canonical school story, but a third of the novel is still set at his current school and the narrator provides periodical flashbacks to previous educational experiences. The

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<sup>5</sup> Author of the article “Gene Forrester and Tom Brown: A Separate Peace as a School Story,” published in *Children’s Literature in Education* in 1983.

protagonist and narrator, Holden Caulfield, begins the story at Pencey Prep, an all-boys boarding school, then packs up and leaves because he flunked out. He then continues to reflect on his time at various boarding schools as he recklessly travels around New York City and tries to cope with what is obviously a depressive episode. In terms of the other tropes and conventions of the school story genre, he personally rejects sports but acknowledges their importance to others at Pencey, and also does not appear to have any strict sense of peer loyalty. This may be attributed to an apathetic attitude caused by depression. Due to the school setting and his continuous rebellion, it is clear that this is a school story, but of the three texts it is also clear that *The Catcher in the Rye* pushes the boundaries of, and destabilizes, the school story genre the most.

### **Gender: Damaging Representation for Women and Girls**

What is interesting in terms of representation is that though many early school story writers were women, there are not many early school stories about girls. According to Clark, this is largely because “girls were often educated at home by a mother or governess, and [...] also more likely than a boy to attend a day school.” It was viewed as “potentially dangerous” (Clark 15) for girls to go to school and develop allegiance to authorities that were not their parents. The major fear about girls attending school was that they would gain some sort of independence from their families rather than grow up to serve a domestic role in adulthood. Thus, the canonical school story featured boys rather than girls, and this trend continued in school stories for long after. This resulted in a genre centered on men and numerous school stories where girl characters are either underdeveloped or absent altogether.

In *Dead Poets Society*, the women present in the movie are so few that they can be briefly listed. These women include Todd and Neil's doting mothers, Charlie's love interest Chris, the two girls Charlie brought to a Dead Poets Society meeting, a photograph of a woman viewers know to be Mr. Keating's fiancée, and two naked women on posters. Weir does not appear to intentionally represent women negatively, but they are simply an afterthought. Women only exist in this movie if they have a relationship to a male character, and each one carries a specific function, thus this movie does not offer girls positive female representation. The mothers exist to be caretakers for the boys, Chris exists as Charlie's object of affection, the two girls at the society meeting exist as potential love interests, Mr. Keating's fiancée exists to masculinize a teacher of the liberal arts, and the naked women exist as sexual objects. This sends the message that in order to be included, a girl must serve a male in some designated role, making his life an integral part of her identity. Authors of early school stories often chose to keep boys' families in parts of the story to include women (Clark 51), but by doing so they reaffirmed that women function as secondary beings to men and must serve them in some way to be worthy of mentioning.

The lack of women is even more severe in *A Separate Peace*, and as in *Dead Poets Society* they exist with a particular function. One very minor female presence in the novel is a telephone operator who connects Gene to Finny (Knowles 82). Her function is extremely specific and because the interaction is so brief, there is no further description of her. There is also the slightly more developed character of Lepellier's mother. Elwin Lepellier, nicknamed Leper by his peers at Devon, invites Gene to his home in Vermont after being discharged from the army. This is where Gene meets Leper's mother and

observes her in a caregiver role. She cooks and serves three meals like clockwork every day (Knowles 143) and runs to her son's aid immediately after Gene pushes Leper out of his chair. She seems to be the stereotypical mother and housewife, making an "abundant Vermont lunch, more like a dinner" (Knowles 146) for the boys during the visit, but at least is not described as a sexual object by Gene. He notes that she is "large, soft, and gentle-looking" (Knowles 145), but these descriptors are not particularly sexually charged. She still adheres to a traditionally feminine role, which is not necessarily a negative thing. However, when this is the only role women are ever given by school story authors, and all female characters' lives revolve around meeting the needs of their families or lovers, it might suggest to impressionable young readers that this is the only thing a girl is capable of being. Knowles does allow her character to feel and show signs of fear, happiness, and holding grudges, but all of these emotions are tied to the well-being of her son. If this is the only kind of representation that women receive in school stories, then it does not matter that Mrs. Lepellier has feelings and worries. Her humanity is overshadowed by a part she must play in a society which revolves around men.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* differs from *Dead Poets Society* and *A Separate Peace* in that multiple girl characters are represented. This is perhaps because while the film takes place almost entirely at Welton, Holden Caulfield is only at or reflecting on his boarding schools Pencey or Whooton for part of the novel. Since he is not physically at the all-boys school for the duration of the novel, there is more opportunity for women and girls to be involved in the plot. However, this does not mean that the portrayal of girls in this text are any better than that of girls in *Dead Poets Society*. In fact, Holden's

view on women is misogynistic, rendering descriptions of and experiences with women from his point of view quite negative.

Holden seems to doubt the complexity of women as individuals and demeans them through his descriptions. For example, one thing which Holden does frequently over the course of the novel is assert how mindless or dense girls can be. He shares that he thinks “most girls are so dumb and all. After you neck them for a while, you can really *watch* them losing their brains” (Salinger 92), and that it’s hard to “get an intelligent answer out of those...dopes” (Salinger 73). He doubts the intelligence of both girls his own age, like Sally Hayes, who loves the Lunts, movies, small talk, and other things that he deems stupid and ‘phony.’ He also looks down on older women, such as the women he danced with in the Lavender Room, or Rudolph Schmidt’s mother, who believes made up stories he tells about her son’s activities at Pencey. One exception to this rule is he thinks his younger sister Phoebe is one of the smartest people he knows, saying that if “you told old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what you’re talking about” (Salinger 67), and that “she was smart even when she was a very tiny little kid” (Salinger 68). This might be because, as his younger sibling, she holds similar views to Holden. She always understands what he is saying or feeling, disposing Holden to thinking she must be smart. It also may be because of her age. Holden values youth and seems to respect children more than most adults. He feels more connected to childhood than the adult world and thinks that “most kids are [nice and polite]” (Salinger 119), as they have not been corrupted by the world and do not yet know how to be phony, even if they tried. While he thinks of girls as generally unintelligent, this same harsh criticism does not apply to young children.

Whenever women are present in the text, Holden also feels the need to comment on their physical features. If Holden believes girls are dumb, then it's easier for him to ignore their thoughts and feelings and view them as sexual objects. For example, he pays special attention to how Bernice from the Lavender Room danced, making her "pretty little butt [twitch] so nice and all" (Salinger 73). Holden also notes "how cute [Sally's] little ass looked" (Salinger 129) when they were ice-skating at Radio City. He even points out that Rudolph's mother "had quite a lot of sex appeal" (Salinger 56) even though she is clearly much older than him and tries to invite her to get drinks with him on the train. Holden, like most men in 1950's American society, was conditioned to view women as objects. Yet, when Holden is actually given the opportunity to engage in sexual relations with women, he gets nervous and does not follow through with it. He admits that part of it is because girls sometimes ask him to stop and he listens to them, but when Holden has already paid for a prostitute who is willing to have sex with him, he becomes embarrassed and feels "much more depressed than sexy" (Salinger 95). Society taught him to think sexually mature thoughts about girls, but he is not yet mature enough to handle sexual activity. This disconnect between how Holden describes women and how he actually interacts with them is likely relatable for high school students caught between childhood and adulthood. While the novel is providing overwhelmingly negative characterization of girls, it might at least allow for students to have a productive discussion about what misogyny looks like and its damaging implications on the treatment of women.

Only girls that Holden views as intelligent earn exemption from these sorts of descriptions, such as Phoebe and Jane. Holden does describe their physical traits, but

they lack sexual connotation. He shares that Phoebe has cute ears and is “roller-skate skinny” from skating in her free time (Salinger 67), which creates an endearing image of a younger sibling. When describing Jane, he says that she was not “strictly beautiful” and was “sort of muckle-mouthed” (Salinger 79), seeming more interested in the fact that she “read very good books” (Salinger 79). His connection with Jane is clearly based on more than just physical attraction. Holden is able to recognize that “you don’t always have to get too sexy to get to know a girl” (Salinger 76), but only in the context of Jane. It appears that Holden respects certain girls if he has familial ties or affection for them, but this respect has to be earned and is not extended to all members of the opposite sex.

The problem with these texts is not that they are boys’ school stories. Authors can, and do, choose to write stories about various genders. Young boys deserve to see themselves represented in the books they read and the films they watch, but so do girls, and transgender and non-binary kids. It is important to question why only boys’ school stories are popular, particularly for studying as works of classic literature, and why there are not more with girl protagonists. Additionally, when women and girls are present in the texts, why are they only characterized as unintelligent, sexual objects, caregivers, or lovers? Why must their identity be tied to how they can serve others? The issue with these texts is not just the lack of female presence, but the misrepresentation and misogynistic characterization of women that can be damaging to students’ perceptions of an entire gender. Reading these texts through a feminist lens, critiquing how the narrators described women and questioning why the authors characterized women the way they did, is definitely an option for educators to consider when teaching these texts. However, as more school stories written by women and featuring women are created

over time, educators should also seriously consider choosing new texts for their students to study which would promote a more positive view on women's and girls' abilities, capacities, and worth.

### **Gender Expression and Sexuality: Negative Implicit and Explicit Messages**

Clark notes that “friendship between two boys, boys who ‘adore’ and ‘worship’ each other” is not common in school stories written by male authors, and usually only took place in stories by female authors or between two girls (141). This standard of friendship that boys must adhere to, as well as the behaviors and feelings they are taught to resist in order to achieve a traditional heterosexual masculinity, conflict with what naturally results from activities generally participated in at boarding schools. Through experiences such as contact sports, secret societies, rule breaking, and codes against tattling, boys create strong bonds between one another. Through a traditional curriculum, by men for future men, they are taught that they are of the superior sex, yet do not ever receive permission to appreciate each other physically or romantically. With these factors, in addition to the absence of many girls, boys' boarding school stories become a place conducive for exploring the idea of same-sex desire in adolescence. This was likely not the original motivation for creating school stories, as the authors were usually trying to teach Christian lessons through their writing, but the conventional rules for how friendship and masculinity must be portrayed has changed over time, allowing for more freedom for authors to push boundaries through their work.

As Eric Tribunella notes, the nature of Gene and Finny's friendship in *A Separate Peace* conflicts with this convention of the genre and is often read as having an “underlying theme of homosexuality” (82) or “subtle homoeroticism” (83). This theme

can be extrapolated from both the physical contact the two boys engage in and their emotional intimacy. Sports, in essence, masculinize body contact between boys and men by attaching status and indications of strength and dominance to sport participation. Contact sports provide opportunities for boys to become physical without any negative retributions from peers, teachers, or a society which values heterosexuality. At a school which values sports as highly as Devon, it makes sense that much of Gene and Finny's physical contact occurs under the guise of sport and roughhousing. For instance, early on in the novel, readers see Gene and Finny begin to wrestle each other. The wrestling match occurs in rebellion of following the schedule of the school bell and "hurrying and conforming" (Knowles 19), but the sexual diction used indicates the scene's subtle homoeroticism is not accidental. Gene doesn't describe them wrestling as cathartic or fun but instead says that Finny was "definitely pleased," liked it when he "jumped on top of him," and "couldn't ask for anything better" (Knowles 19). It appears that the Knowles' word choice is encouraging readers to question the boys' physical attraction to each other early on in the novel, and this sets the tone for the rest of the novel by giving readers a lens to view Finny and Gene's relationship through.

The intimacy of Finny and Gene's friendship is best exemplified by the time they skipped class to bike to the beach together. This escapade off Devon property broke multiple school rules and both boys knew they would be risking expulsion if they got caught, so a large amount of trust must have been present between Finny and Gene to take a trip like this together. Additionally, Gene admits to the readers in retrospect that he hated long bike rides like the one this trip would require (Knowles 46), which indicates that the only reason he agreed to go was to please Finny. Finny seems to

understand that this is the only reason Gene is going, so he shares stories about his childhood to provide entertainment and “did everything he could think of for [Gene]” (Knowles 47) while they were there. This willingness to make sacrifices for each other illustrates the way the boys deeply care about one another.

While on the boardwalk at the beach, Gene tells the reader that he “noticed that people were looking fixedly at [Finny], so [he] took a look [him]self to see why.” After giving himself an excuse to take notice of Finny’s physical attributes, he describes how Finny’s skin “radiated” and his eyes shone “with a cool blue-green fire” (Knowles 47). The intricate and positive illustration Gene provides of Finny seems to extend beyond what is usual for people who have only platonic feelings. Gene keeps these thoughts to himself, which contrasts with how Finny approaches the same topic. He openly states that he thinks “everybody is staring” at Gene because he picked up a “movie-star tan” (Knowles 48) while at the beach. Finny also later admits that Gene is his best friend, an admission which Gene cannot bring himself to audibly reciprocate. Gene explains that he was “stopped by that level of feeling, deeper than thought, which contains the truth” (Knowles 48). Readers could interpret this feeling as resentment towards Finny for being so effortlessly well-liked and good at sports, but it could also be that Gene has trouble admitting that his best friend is someone he may have deeper feelings for.

While readers get to know how Gene felt about Finny throughout the story, the feelings Finny may have had for Gene are not shared through his own first-person perspective. However, the way Gene describes Finny and the dialogue he chooses to include in his narration make the idea of Finny having romantic feelings towards him believable. Finny’s gender expression does frequently push boundaries of a traditional

masculinity defined by heterosexuality. His character breaks gendered expectations of boys at the time when he tells Gene that he is his best friend, because “exposing a sincere emotion nakedly like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide” (Knowles 48). Another prime example of this would be his pink shirt, which he wears “as an emblem” (Knowles 25) to celebrate a U.S. victory in World War II. Finny’s intention is to support U.S. military moves, but because the color pink is typically associated with femininity, readers and other students at Devon might view the pink shirt an emblem of something else entirely. Gene seems astounded that his roommate would wear such a shirt and points out that it makes him “look like a *fairy*” (Knowles 24), a derogatory word used to describe flamboyant, feminine, or gay men. Finny marvels at the thought of what would happen he “looked like a fairy to everyone” and casually jokes about suitors “clamoring at the door” (Knowles 25) to their room for only a moment before switching the topic of conversation. This nonchalant attitude about how others perceive him may be because he doesn’t care about his reputation, or that he does actually wish to be perceived this way by others.

Knowles makes some progressive decisions with his characterization of Finny and Gene, creating the potential for a novel which includes boys who express themselves in more stereotypically feminine ways or may experience same-sex desire. Despite the ultimate fate of these characters, the fact that they are included at all is a move in the right direction in terms of representation. Additionally, it is likely not a mistake that Finny, the character who is arguably most unanimously loved in the novel, is also the one who breaks gendered expectations and traditional notions of masculinity. Yet, the novel still falls short in terms of positive representation because the author never labels

either Gene or Finny's sexuality (in-text or in-canon), one of them dies before the end of the school term, and same-sex desire is seen as something the boys can outgrow.

Tribunella reads *A Separate Peace* as a coming-of-age school story which marks same-sex desire as something the protagonist must confront in adolescence and overcome over the course of the novel as he matures and reaches "the 'adult' heterosexual and democratic citizen" (92). If readers accept that Gene's jouncing of the tree limb was an intentional attempt to sever his ties with and thus his feelings for Finny, then Finny's death is also the death of queer possibility for Gene. After Finny's death, Gene eventually marries into a heterosexual relationship and narrates this story for readers from his position as an adult. The only options for boys in this story who challenge expectations of gender expression and heterosexuality are to conform or be punished. If the school story trope of invalidism as means of moral redemption results in the student learning their lesson and changing for the better, then death must be the punishment for someone who cannot be morally redeemed. When a message such as this can be extrapolated from text-evidence, then it is arguable that though one can interpret Finny and Gene's relationship as having 'queer potential,' the characters are not providing true positive representation for LGBTQIA+ people.

A similar message is sent through Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society*. Many claim that it is revolutionary in terms of its portrayal of masculinity and humanities, as sensitivity and sentimentalism are encouraged. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century world which encourages boys to adopt heterosexual masculinity, is refreshing for viewers to see boys being excited about poetry and theater. However, as Sally Robinson says in her book, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, the film "masculinizes poetry [...] by framing it as a

privileged expression of heterosexual courtship and of male virility” (82). Mr. Keating frames poetry like this by citing it as a way to “woo women” and having his students recite poetry while playing sports, a traditionally masculine activity. This turns the study of what Neil’s father and other Welton faculty members view as an emotional and impractical subject into something the boys can justify pursuing and even enjoying. Weir thus finds a way for the students to push boundaries of heterosexual masculinity in a Welton-approved manner.

Much like how Finny’s character had to die because he failed to conform to traditional heterosexual masculine behaviors, Neil must die because he can’t, or doesn’t want to, conform to his father’s expectations. To Neil’s father, the humanities represent the “antithesis of male responsibility” (80) and his son’s involvement in threatened his ability to mature into a man who would act as a provider and authoritative figure. All of the boys rebel against concepts of tradition and conformity promoted by Welton Academy by participating in Dead Poets Society meetings, but Neil takes it a step further and defies his father’s wishes by acting in a play. While Finny wondered what would happen if the world viewed him as a fairy, Neil actually became a fairy by playing the role of Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummers Night Dream*. Both boys must die before the end of the text because they cannot comply with the rigid heterosexual masculine behaviors that others expect of them. If the characters are not able to complete a coming-of-age storyline by maturing in an accepted way before the end of the school term, they are evidently not allowed to come of age at all.

While there are negative implicit messages being sent about LGBTQIA+ people in *Dead Poets Society* and *A Separate Peace*, there are explicit messages in *The Catcher in*

*the Rye*. For example, there is an entire page where Holden meditates on Carl Luce's vast knowledge about 'flits'<sup>6</sup> and lesbians. Holden begins this topic by stating that Luce knows a lot about sex, "especially perverts and all," and then goes on to give examples of such perverts, listing flits and lesbians directly after guys that "go around having affairs with sheep" and guys that wear "girls' pants sewed in the lining of their hats" (Salinger 143). This immediately tells the reader that Holden has a misunderstanding of what it means to be gay or lesbian, as he places them in the same category as people who engage in bestiality. It's unfortunate that Holden views gay people this way, but this association of his is further supported later on in the novel when a former teacher of his, Mr. Antolini, violates his personal space by "petting [him] or patting [him] on the goddamn head" (Salinger 192). Holden viewed Mr. Antolini as a trusted adult and his house as a safe space, but that trust was broken when Mr. Antolini made "a flitty pass" (Salinger 194) at Holden. The main issue here is not that Mr. Antolini may be attracted to men, but that Holden is a child and Mr. Antolini is an adult. Mr. Antolini tried to take advantage of Holden when he was vulnerable, and one consequences of this event is Holden association of homosexuality with pedophilia.

Holden also claims that Luce can tell if someone is gay just by looking at them, and that someone "could turn into one practically overnight, if you had all the traits and all." These are both incorrect statements which perpetuate damaging stereotypes for gay men. Gender expression and sexuality are not the same, and it's not possible to tell if someone is gay just by looking at them. Salinger does seem to touch on this thought, as Luce will even label a "big, tough guy that plays gangsters and cowboys all the time"

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<sup>6</sup> A slang term used in 1950's America to describe a gay man.

(Salinger 143) as a flit, but Holden still labels behaviors as 'flitty,' so understanding that the way someone acts, speaks, or dresses does not always allow you to know their sexuality is not a lesson fully learned. Holden at one point even questions if Luce is gay because some of Luce's behaviors seem flitty, but Holden ultimately rejects this theory because "he was a pretty intelligent guy, though" (Salinger 143), as if being gay and being intelligent are mutually exclusive events. Additionally, claiming that someone could 'turn' gay overnight if they have all these traits, which one could assume to be any trait that is not stereotypically masculine, reinforces a need young boys feel to conform to heterosexual masculinity which is driven by fear. If this novel was a student's only exposure to discourse about gay men, they might buy into these negative stereotypes and also be compelled to act particular ways due to fear of being labelled a 'creep,' 'pervert,' or 'flit' like gay people in the novel.

When the representation of an entire group of people is so consistently negative in a text, it is worth questioning if it is worth studying those texts in schools. Particularly with consideration to these three texts, educators must make the choice between studying texts that only offer negative representation for LGBTQIA+ people and one of the many other texts which offer no representation but would do no further damage to perceptions of an already marginalized population. That is not to say that having no representation ~~isn't~~ is not damaging in itself, because it most definitely is. It would likely feel discouraging to non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming students when they are not well-represented in any of the three texts, or any texts studied over the course of an entire school year. Lesbians are also not well-represented, but perhaps this would be different if the texts were set at girls' boarding schools. It is hard to argue

that gay men or boys are represented, as none of the characters ever labeled themselves as such. However, discussions about sexuality and gender expression are difficult to have in high school classrooms because LGBTQIA+ people's existences are highly politicized. Many teachers are restricted from fully exploring this topic in the classroom due to pressure from either administration or parents. Under these conditions, students might only absorb the damaging implicit and explicit messages being sent from the texts without critiquing them. Students would be reading about a people who are usually marginalized in literature, but not in a way which would promote a more inclusive environment. These texts would be valuable if students were given the opportunity to question, critique, and break down the characterization of people with various sexualities and gender expression, but faced with fast-paced curriculums and taboo status of politics, it's clear that this opportunity is not available in every classroom.

### **Disability<sup>7</sup> and Invalidism as 'Solutions'**

When speaking about disability, there are a few models to consider which can help frame or situate disability. One is the medical model, which "defines disability as a deviation from structural or functional norms" (Breen). Through the lens of the medical model, a person's disability is an impairment and something that they should aim to 'cure' or alleviate physical effects. It is their responsibility to lessen the difficulties they encounter as an individual with a disability. On the other hand, through the social model of disability, "the responsibility for disability [shifts] from the individual to society" (Breen). The social model recognizes the role that social barriers such as

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<sup>7</sup> The term disability will be used throughout this section because it is the prevailing term in the fields of both English literary studies and education.

inaccessibility, stereotyping, discrimination, and unwillingness to accommodate play in the challenges a person with a disability might face. Educators are encouraged to frame disability through this lens, with a large focus on universal designs for learning (UDL) which provide plan accommodations and modifications for all students, differentiation, and using “people first language<sup>8</sup>.” Teachers are expected to always offer the least restrictive environment possible, altering their physical classroom and delivery methods before altering the material being learned or goals for students with learning disabilities (Hyatt & Filler). However, students are not always taught to view disability through the social model, sometimes creating a less inclusive environment for all students, particularly those with disabilities.

Sociologists know that negative attitudes “contribute to an overall lack of social inclusion for those with disabilities,” but they also know that the misperceptions, generalizations, and stereotypes that those attitudes are based on can be changed through “emotionally engaging representations of the social experience of disability” (Breen). Reading school stories about students with various abilities would certainly count as an emotionally engaging representation, yet again highlighting the importance of including representation for all kinds of people in young adult literature, particularly texts studied in school. Books can reflect the attitudes and perceptions of the author or society in a certain era, but they can also change attitudes by informing their readers and modeling idyllic behavior (Harris & Baskin 188). Representation for students with disabilities is particularly important because they can educate all students, increase

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<sup>8</sup> People first language will be used throughout this section in an attempt to recognize an individual before their disability or impairment.

social exposure which may help remove barriers, improve all students' inclusive mindsets, and help students with disabilities develop a positive self-image.

Karen Harris and Barbara Baskin, both special educators and disability rights activists, discuss how to choose texts featuring characters with disabilities for the classroom in an article titled, "Evolution of Disability Characterization in Young Adult Fiction." The text should be valid literature, meaning that the characters are developed, the plot is engaging, and the author's use of language is purposeful. A well-meaning text with flat characters or no implicit meaning is not as valuable for analyzing in an English classroom. The text should also be accurate, with an honest portrayal of the disability. Situations and challenges the character encounters, effects of the character's disability on daily life, and responses from others should all be realistic to avoid misrepresentation. This includes recognizing the common desires, needs, and goals between any able-bodied person and the character, thus affirming personhood of the character rather than defining them by their disability. Lastly, it should offer models of behavior for the reader to consider, either by giving an example for able-bodied people to copy or criticize and reject (Harris & Baskin 190).

Though no one with a disability is featured as a main character, there are several references to people with disabilities in *Catcher in the Rye*. This novel characterizes people with disabilities as unfortunate and shameful but, discussing the way that Holden and Phoebe talk about them could be productive as long as the teacher encourages students to reject the attitudes present in the novel. The first instance of this happens when Phoebe tells Holden about a great movie she saw. The movie was about a doctor who suffocates and kills a child "that's a cripple and can't walk" (Salinger 162).

The doctor is sent to jail for murder, but the child's ghost comes to the doctor in jail to thank him and tell him that "he was a mercy killer" (Salinger 163). This tells the reader a few things about how Phoebe, Holden, and 1950's America viewed people with disabilities. Firstly, the usage of the word 'cripple' indicates a difference in language which can be acceptably used to refer to people with disabilities. This is not a descriptor someone would use in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if they wished to be respectful. Secondly, the message of the movie seems to be that it is better to die than to live with a disability, essentially telling its audience that people with disabilities do not have value or purpose. It cannot be known if the intention of this movie's writers, producers, or directors was to encourage this mindset or prompt viewers to criticize it. However, if this is the media that Holden's community consumes, then this message is also likely one which informs and shapes their opinions about people with disabilities. This assumption, that Holden's society views disability as shameful, is further supported later on in the novel when Holden is talking with Mr. Antolini about Richard Kinsella, a boy in his Oral Expression class at Pencey. Richard was giving a speech and starts to tell his class about how "his uncle got polio and...he wouldn't let anybody come to see him in the hospital because he didn't want anybody to see him with a brace on" (Salinger 184). Richard's uncle clearly associates shame and weakness with wearing a brace and doesn't want his family to see him in a state which conflicts with his perception of what a person and man should be.

In a setting, which does not appear to highly value people with disabilities, it is shocking that later on in the novel, Holden figures that he might live a happy life pretending he was "a poor deaf-mute bastard" (Salinger 199) so he "wouldn't have to do any goddamn stupid useless conversations with anybody" (Salinger 198). Holden

simultaneously recognizes that being unable to hear or speak would make him a “poor [...] bastard,” indicating comprehension that having this particular impairment would negatively affect how others perceive him, and views it as a solution to his current situation. Holden is able to imagine himself having a disability as a way to avoid phonies and responsibility because he knows he would never truly live life without being able to hear or speak. If one day he decided to stop the act, he would be able to. If one day he needed to communicate through audible speech because it was more convenient, he would be able to. Holden has a surface level understanding that there are barriers that a hearing-impaired person would encounter but sees them as potentially liberating rather than restrictive.

This idea of disability, impairment, or invalidism as a solution is also seen in *A Separate Peace* and *Dead Poets Society*. When discussing the trope of invalidism as a means of moral redemption, the time of healing from illness or injury is understood as time of transformation, during which a character can reflect on their actions, identity, or whatever the author deemed as morally ‘wrong,’ and grow from it. However, in these two texts, Finny and Neil’s self-reflection both result in an affirmation of their identities prior to injury. After Finny breaks his leg, he does not change his identity but rather transfers it onto Gene as Gene became “a part of Phineas” (Knowles 85). His inability to transform while healing from his trauma-based impairment, to solve the parts of his identity that were not morally aligned with societal expectations, resulted in his death. Being dead is arguably the most ‘invalid’ a person could ever be. Neil, unable to see himself transforming to meet the expectations of his father, commits suicide and also attains this level of invalidity. The issue with the trope of invalidism or disability as a

solution to a moral problem is that it associates having an impairment or illness with diminished morality. The authors of these texts intend for the acquisition of a disability to be a form of punishment, potentially negatively impacting how readers view people with disabilities in the real world. It might also negatively impact students with disabilities to read texts which frame disabilities this way, decreasing their confidence and causing them to question their self-worth.

Perhaps these texts could be useful if there were class discussions centered on critiquing these texts' framing of disability, but the difficulty with asking students to read a text in which they are expected to reject a particular attitude or behavior is that they may not understand if this is an author's or educator's intention. If a teacher chose to teach a text in which this rejection is required, they would need to scaffold and lead students to a point where this is possible. This might include reading additional non-fiction texts, exposing students to multiple perspectives on or models of disability, and having conversations about ways to promote inclusivity in their own classroom. It is of course unethical for a teacher to tell students what they must believe or think, but there are certain classroom expectations that must be met in order to make every student feel valuable and included. In order for students to meet these expectations, they must also understand how particular attitudes and behaviors towards peers with disabilities can both positively and negatively affect their inclusion and learning.

### **Race and Ethnicity: Lack of Diversity, Misrepresentation, and Appropriation**

Having characters from marginalized groups present in texts is important, but so is how they are represented. Often, people of color in books are not the main character

and only exist to serve a specific function, such as furthering plot, revealing another character's morals, or to educate about racial inequality (Clark 126). While it is crucial to choose texts which have diverse characters, it is also crucial to ensure that they are fully developed characters with substance on their own. The presence of fringe characters without substantial characterization is not problematic in itself, but if this type of character is the only representation for people of color in a story it sends the message that they are not worthy of a more important role. Additionally, the borrowing of a culture does not count as representation of the culture, but rather appropriation of that culture.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, there are only a few references to characters which are not white. One is Carl Luce's unnamed Chinese girlfriend. The only information readers learn about her is that she is from Shanghai, she just came to the U.S. a few months ago, and she is a sculptress. The way that Holden and Luce talk about the latter's girlfriend is problematic because it makes her ethnicity her defining feature, while simultaneously connecting this identity marker to sex. In this way, we see an intersection of how men in the novel view women and how white characters view people of color. The presence of Luce's Chinese girlfriend reminds readers that identity markers do not exist in a vacuum, and that each individual may be perceived as an 'other' in multiple ways.

Unpacking the connotations and implications of Holden and Luce's conversation about the girlfriend is valuable for determining how positively or negatively Salinger chooses to portray the sole Chinese character in the novel. Holden asks Luce if he "like[s] that? Her being Chinese?" to which Luce replies, "obviously." Holden then inquires why, because apparently there must be some sort of specific reason to like a

woman who is a different ethnicity. Luce then shares that he likes her because he finds “Eastern philosophy more satisfactory than Western” and they view “sex as both a physical and spiritual experience” (Salinger 146). The way both boys naturally connect sex to Chinese philosophy reveals that they may view Chinese women as inherently sexual beings. Luce also clarifies that he believes this philosophy about sex applies not just to China, but to the East in general. This grouping of China with other Asian cultures reduces the complexity each individual country’s cultural values and beliefs, as well as implies that all Asian countries are essentially the same, which is simply not true. If Carl Luce were truly the intellectual Holden believes him to be, perhaps he would realize his statements insinuate his own ignorance.

*A Separate Peace* also mentions Chinese people, but at least the specific reference to Madame Chiang Kai-Shek makes sense in the context of a conversation about World War II, as she was a political figure and spokeswoman for China in the U.S. during this time (Karon). The boys make a joke that Brinker Hadley is Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and is dubbed “Chinese. The Yellow Peril, right here at Devon” (Knowles 109) by Finny. This becomes Brinker’s nickname for the rest of his time at Devon and is inevitably this shortened to “Yellow,” which makes Brinker uncomfortable. His new identity at Devon suddenly became a word used pejoratively against Asians in the U.S. Similarly, derogatory words and sentiments about the Japanese and Germans are also expressed by students throughout the novel, which they were likely encouraged to do as they were on the verge of enlisting in World War II. As a white boy, the word does not have the same damaging effect on Brinker as it would on an Asian boy, but he is aware that his new nickname has a negative connotation. Furthermore, Gene’s ability to

perceive his discomfort about this nickname proves that the students at Devon do understand how racist words can be hurtful but still choose to use them anyway.

A second reference to a non-white character in *The Catcher in the Rye* is the “colored kid” (Salinger 200) Holden saw while bringing the note for Phoebe to her school. Separate from the issue of the outdated and racist language, it is important to recognize that aside from Luce’s girlfriend, no other child or person mentioned by Holden in his many observations and digressions were coded by race. Race was not used as a descriptor for other characters, so one can only assume that every other character was white. Additionally, the language Holden uses to indicate the child’s race is not considered appropriate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This novel was published in 1951, and perhaps this was common jargon at the time. Yet it does not feel right to read this sentence out loud to students now, or to ask them to read it independently and never address it the connotations of the phrase. A similar thing is done in *A Separate Peace* when Gene describes trees as “pygmies<sup>9</sup>.” Gene’s intention is to illustrate how small the trees seem now that he is an adult, but in doing so he misuses a word used to describe ethnic groups with small stature which have historically been disproportionately affected by genocide, poverty, and inequality (“Twa”). If teaching these texts in a classroom, it would be important to directly address this and investigate how historical context affects language used to describe identity markers. Salinger and Knowles may not have intended to write something offensive in the 1950’s, but that doesn’t mean it will not be offensive or taken personally by a student in today’s context.

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<sup>9</sup> The Pygmy are an ethnic group that have faced discrimination and oppression due to their small stature and perceived ‘uncivilized’ hunter/gatherer lifestyle (“Twa”).

Similar to how *A Separate Peace* references “pygmies,” the other two texts also reference ‘Indians’ or an indigenous groups, yet not as characters. These references allow readers to compare and contrast the alleged ‘savagery’ of these cultures with the ‘civilized,’ educated, masculine, and authoritative men that the boys in these stories are expected to grow into. They also seem to represent an alternative lifestyle where this outcome is not required. Examples of these references are seen when The Dead Poets Society meets nightly in the old Indian cave, Holden’s way of differentiating museums in New York City are asking if it is “the one where the pictures are, or the one where the Indians are?” (Salinger 119), and Gene compares trees to ‘pygmies.’ Despite the lack of inclusion of authentic and developed racially/ethnically diverse characters, the boys in these texts pay special attention to, or play pretend that they are, indigenous people.

The most obvious example of students playing pretend in *Dead Poets Society* when the boys end their first society meeting at the old Indian cave reciting Vachel Lindsay’s poem “The Congo” and appropriating the dance styles of indigenous peoples. The poem conjures images which reinforce racial stereotypes<sup>10</sup> (“Vachel Lindsay”), explicitly stating ways in which Congolese people inherently own “stupor and savagery and sin and wrong” (Lindsay). Charlie dubs himself ‘Nuwanda,’ and the boys chant a line from this poem, bang pans together as ‘drums,’ roll their tongues, and dance as they imagine ‘Indians’ might do. By borrowing dance and song from cultures that they do not understand, this group of White boys are participating in the appropriation of those

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<sup>10</sup> There is discourse over whether Lindsay’s “The Congo” was written with racist intent. While his poetry calls attention to a marginalized group and his use of rhythm and sound were deemed revolutionary by American scholarly peers, this style was in fact copying rhythmic structures invented by Black jazz musicians. His appreciation for their musical rhythm contrasts with his appropriation of the style and often insensitive portrayal Africans, Black culture, and other people of color (“Vachel Lindsay”).

cultures. They reap the benefits of feeling liberation, joy, and amusement from these activities without experiencing the oppression that accompanies being a part of Black or indigenous cultures that created them. Playing pretend in this case functions as a way for the boys to momentarily become someone else so that they do not have to become the people Welton or their parents require them to be. Perhaps it allows them to become the exact opposite, which is coincidentally what they desire. This would be consistent with Neil's literal becoming of Puck in *A Midsummers Night Dream*. Playing pretend as 'savages,' specifically, allows the boys to further distance themselves from conformity to a prescribed masculinity and tradition, as well as their maturation into men.

It is a recurring theme that the problem with these texts is not just their absence of diverse racial groups. Lack of diversity is harmful to students' self-image and does nothing to ameliorate perceptions of people of color, but misrepresentation and appropriation directly contribute to building those negative perceptions. The misrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups in them, particularly Asians and Indigenous people, is consistent and perpetuates harmful stereotypes and attitudes. The display of cultural appropriation without consequence also gives students a poor model about how this same sort of situation would play out in their everyday lives.

### **Social and Economic Class: Class Privilege and Intersectionality**

Thus far, this paper has approached the analysis of each identity marker group as if they are mutually exclusive, but in reality, people may belong to more than just one of these groups. The intersectionality<sup>11</sup> of one's identity can influence the way they

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<sup>11</sup> A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how the crossing of racism and patriarchy affect oppression faced by women of color.

experience social barriers and representation in media and texts. Being economically or socially disadvantaged can amplify the marginalization faced by ethnic and racial groups, people with disabilities, those in the LGBTQIA+ community, and women. For example, research has shown that the intersection of race and class can affect stereotype expression and perceptions of and discrimination against an individual (Moore-Berg & Karpinski), and racism and sexism intersect to influence women of color's experiences with employment and violence (Crenshaw). This means that a person with a position of class privilege will experience life differently than someone who has a social or economic disadvantage, even if they both share other identities which would typically place them in a marginalized community. The same is true for the characters in these school stories. Characters who attended Welton, Devon, or Pencey were privileged to be born into a family who could afford this educational experience. Each of these boarding schools were placed in New England, which was considered to be a more prestigious and elite part of the country in the 1950s (McGavran 67). Readers and viewers of the texts also do not see any of the main characters struggle with money, and this changes both the characters' experiences and the readers perception of those experiences.

Holden actually seems to be the most aware of the impact money has on quality of life, as he has to watch how he spends his money while he hovers around New York City, but this is a circumstance created by his own choices. This doesn't change the fact that his father is a lawyer, his family can afford to employ a maid (Salinger 158), and that as a teenager, he has enough money to last him several days on his own in the city. In fact, Holden notes that he was "pretty loaded" and had a "grandmother that's quite lavish with her dough" (Salinger 52). Meanwhile, in *Dead Poets Society*, Todd throws a

perfectly nice, and likely expensive, desk set gifted to him off of a roof because he feels ignored by his parents. Emotional neglect by parents is a real issue that many children may face and this statement is not intended to minimize that feeling. However, it's also important to recognize that Todd displayed his economic privilege in that moment. Todd knows that he will never have to worry about going without school supplies, so throwing away that desk set felt cathartic and liberating. Yet one could imagine how painful it might feel for a student who can't afford pencils, notebook, or lunch to watch this scene and no longer feel like they can relate to the characters in a film which is critically acclaimed for its portrayal of 'universal experiences.'

The truth is that the struggles faced by the protagonists of these texts would be much different if they did not have the advantage of class privilege. What makes these texts feel relevant and valuable, such as portrayals of struggles with depression, growing pains, sexuality, family conflict, friendship, nostalgia, or war time anxiety, are not experienced by these characters the same way they would be if they were not wealthy. For example, Holden's deteriorating mental health is obvious to readers, as explicitly states that he is depressed and his struggles with healing from the trauma of losing his brother Allie are shared. He also contemplates suicide multiple times, once by feeling like "jumping out the window" (Salinger 104) and again by sharing he would volunteer to be taken out be a "firing squad" or "sit right the hell on top of [an atomic bomb]" (Salinger 141) if he ever had to live through another war. Other signs of Holden suffering from depression include his failing grades, giving away of material possessions, and general apathy. Holden was ultimately placed in some sort of mental health treatment facility, the place from which he tells this entire story. He was lucky enough to have

parents that could afford this treatment and cared enough to offer him support. However, it has been shown that children living in poverty have a decreased access to mental health services, as well as an increased probability of developing a mental illness (González). Social and economic inequity negatively affects mental health, and Holden's situation may have had a drastically different outcome if he did not have financial and social support from his family.

The way that these characters always have a safety net of money or family to fall back on allows them to feel free to rebel and avoid conformity. Rebelling, finding oneself, and avoiding conformity is generally a privilege that wealthier children have, which allows the characters to act in ways which fulfill the school story tropes of rebellion and insurrection. The audiences of these texts may feel like they can relate to the characters because they are experiencing feelings and events that many humans do, but fail to realize that the opportunity to act freely the way that the characters in the texts do is not a luxury available to everyone.

### **The Limitations of Scholarship and Activism on Publishing Trends**

It is important that educators do not underestimate the positive academic and social effects that can come from providing students with quality literature with diverse characters and perspectives. It is equally important that they do not underestimate the damage that can come from reinforcing negative stereotypes, perceptions, and misrepresentations of marginalized groups through the study of literature. This is why examining diversity in texts studied in English classrooms is crucial, as well as why increasing attention should be paid towards publishing diverse texts, assessing diversity in current popularized texts, and teaching diverse texts.

This need is being recognized by activist scholars, which has resulted in an increase in scholarship in the area of diversity in YA literature. Between the years of 2010-2014, there was a “dramatic increase” in scholarship about diversity research in the library and informational science field, with the majority of this research focused on the identity categories of age, gender and ethnicity (Sung & Parboteeah). Likely due to this increase in scholarship on the topic, several journals and websites dedicated to presenting this research have emerged in recent years. One example of such journals is *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature (RDYL)*, which was founded in 2016. *RDYL*’s mission is to “publish scholarship attending to issues of diversity, equity, social justice, inclusion, and intersectionality in youth literature, culture, and media” in order to diversify discussion and amplify the voices of those in fields which inclusivity of literature also affects, such as education and publishing (“About This Journal”).

Public discourse about this issue in young adult (YA) literature also seems to be moving in this direction recently, with multiple activist groups forming which pay attention to the issue of inclusive literature for youth. For example, the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign demands changes to children’s literature publishing trends in order to accomplish their goal of producing and promoting diverse literature that “reflects and honors the lives of all young people” (“About WNDB”). The campaign began on Twitter as a hashtag in 2014 following the announcement of an all-White and all-male panel for that year’s BookCon and has become a non-profit continuing to work on the cause in the years since. Another campaign which started on Twitter is the #OwnVoices campaign, which gives people a platform to recommend books featuring and authored by diverse groups of people. This campaign addresses not just the issue of

representation in YA literature, but also the oppression of diverse authors and authors of color in the publishing industry.

The publishing industry is not responding to this demand for more diverse literature and authors like one might think. Though the number of diverse children's books published in 2018 hit 30%, only 7% of children's books published were authored by people of color that same year. The majority of children's literature, both diverse and non-diverse, is still written by white authors(CCBC). The good news is that ELA curriculums are responding to the changing YA landscape and public interest in inclusive texts. The New York State Education Department published a more text suggestion list for grades 9-12 in 2014 than previously provided, perhaps in response to the surge in scholarship on diversity in literature in the years preceding, though it is comprised mostly of non-fiction, poetry, or short stories rather than full-length novels or films (NYSED). Schools are not required to follow these suggestions, but it is one step closer to upgrading the literature that students read. It is clear that YA literature, the people who read it, and those who publish it all have the power to impact the landscape of secondary English education, and if the trends of diversifying the publishing workforce and texts continues, the school story genre will hopefully become destabilized in a way which invites more inclusivity and positive representation for all students.

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