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The Wild Ones: A Diachronic Analysis of the Depiction of Teen Angst in Fiction

Veelenturf, Jackson

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The Wild Ones:

A Diachronic Analysis of the Depiction of Teen Angst in Fiction

MA Thesis Literary Studies

Student name: Jackson J. Veelenturf

Date: 20 July 2025

First reader: Dr E.J. van Leeuwen

Second reader: Dr K. Rolfe

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INTRODUCTION

“They said, all teenagers scare the livin’ shit out of me,” opens the chorus of My Chemical Romance’s 2006 hit single “Teenagers.” The song addresses adolescent angst, particularly focusing on the societal prejudices and pressures teenagers can face from adults.¹ Simultaneously, it highlights the existing threat of teenage violence and crime—issues that remain highly relevant in contemporary society.² The teenage, or adolescent, phase in life marks a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, characterised by significant cognitive, physical, and psychosocial developments.³ These profound changes and the challenge to adapt to them can result in acute emotional turmoil—commonly referred to as “teen angst.” In its most extreme form, this distress can manifest in maladaptive behaviours such as violence or delinquency, giving rise to the teenage stereotype depicted in My Chemical Romance’s song.

“Teenagers” is far from unique in its subject matter. The figure of the teenager has been extensively explored across various forms of media—ranging from rock music and romance novels to psychological dramas and sitcoms. Given this diversity, one might expect the portrayal of adolescents to vary accordingly. To some extent, this is indeed the case: the exact nature of an adolescent’s experiences is shaped by numerous factors, most notably their socioeconomic context of their immediate environment. For instance, the British Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2022–2024) primarily portrays the experience of queer adolescents in contemporary British society, exploring themes such as sexual and gender exploration, coming out, and homophobia. In contrast, the American coming-of-age film *Dead Poets*

¹ April Prince, “11 Tracks That Perfectly Encapsulate Their Entire Era of Music,” *Alternative Press Magazine*, June 07, 2023, <https://www.altpress.com/songs-that-define-an-era/>.

² Nme, “My Chemical Romance Discuss Teen Gun Crime,” *NME*, October 25, 2006, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/my-chemical-romance-127-1347470>.

³ “Adolescent health,” *World Health Organization*, accessed 21 February, 2025, https://www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health#tab=tab_1.

Society (1989) foregrounds themes of societal expectations, parental pressure, and individual non-conformity in the context of the affluent class in 1950s America. Yet despite these distinct cultural and temporal contexts, such works often resonate with a broad audience. *Dead Poets Society* was not only a significant commercial and critical success upon its initial release; it has maintained a lasting legacy, continuing to resonate with new generations of viewers.⁴ Similarly, *Heartstopper* achieved widespread international recognition, reaching Netflix's top 10 list in 54 countries.⁵ In both cases, the core of the work—centred around navigating adolescence—transcends the demographic of the protagonists. This suggests that, while the situational factors vary, these portrayals share a universal dimension in their depiction of adolescent angst.

This thesis investigates the representation of teenage angst across three fictional works by examining two key factors that influence and shape the adolescent experience: identity formation and the relationship between adolescents and their parents. This diachronic comparative analysis aims to assess the extent to which depictions of teen angst differ or align across distinct historical and cultural contexts. The three works selected for analysis are: William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* (c. 1600), the American psychological novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger, and the American independent film *Thirteen* (2003), directed by Catherine Hardwicke. These texts have been selected for their diversity in era, medium, and cultural setting, which enables a broader examination of adolescent representation across time and format. Each work also centres on a protagonist from a markedly different socioeconomic background: Hamlet is a royal prince in late medieval Denmark; Holden Caulfield represents a middle-class teenager in post-war America; and

⁴ Luke Buckmaster, "Dead Poets Society: 30 Years on Robin Williams' Stirring Call to 'seize the Day' Endures," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/16/dead-poets-society-30-years-on-robin-williams-stirring-call-to-seize-the-day-endures>.

⁵ Amber Dowling, "'Heartstopper' Sets New Trending TV Record as 'She-Hulk' Storms In," *Variety*, May 23, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/heartstopper-record-she-hulk-cgi-1235275369/amp/>.

Tracy Freeland is a working-class girl in early twenty-first-century Los Angeles. Due to their differing circumstances, one might expect vastly different causes and manifestations of teen angst across these works. Additionally, *Hamlet* and *The Catcher in the Rye* have been selected because both Hamlet and Holden have become archetypes of the “troubled teenager” in Western literature. Comparing these canonical figures with a more recent depiction in *Thirteen* allows for a critical evaluation of whether these foundational portrayals remain relevant and relatable in a contemporary context. *Thirteen* has been chosen as the contemporary case study because it is critically acclaimed yet relatively unexplored in academic scholarship. Lastly, each of these works foregrounds teenage angst, making them well-suited for this study.

Chapter One outlines the concept of angst and introduces the psychological frameworks utilised to analyse adolescent development within the selected texts. These frameworks focus on identity formation and the adolescent-parent relationship, two of the most formative components of adolescent development. This is followed by a brief overview of the historical evolution of adolescence and its depiction in literature and media. The analysis of each work follows chronologically: Chapter Two focuses on *Hamlet*, Chapter Three on *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Chapter Four on *Thirteen*. Each chapter centres on the primary character, as the depth and scope of analysis required for secondary characters fall outside the parameters of this thesis. The conclusion summarises and compares the findings of the three case studies. Ultimately, it argues that—despite the temporal, cultural, and socioeconomic differences of the characters and the authors—there is a notable consistency in the representation of adolescent angst across these fictional works: the challenges associated with identity formation and the fundamental impact of the adolescent-parent relationship on the psychosocial development of the adolescent.

CHAPTER ONE

Adolescence in Developmental Psychology and Fiction: A Literature Review

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “angst” as “[a] feeling of anxiety, dread, or unease.”⁶ The term was first used by Søren Kierkegaard in his philosophical work *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844). Kierkegaard contends that angst emerges from the awareness of a person’s freedom to choose their actions, a freedom that renders every potential course of action equally possible, including undesirable ones.⁷ This freedom can be overwhelming and daunting for a person, as it places the full responsibility for choosing wisely on the individual, thereby engendering feelings of anxiety and dread, i.e., angst.

While Kierkegaard’s definition centres on the anxiety stemming from moral freedom and the uncertainty it entails, later scholars extended the notion of angst to encompass the anxiety provoked by broader existential concerns, such as cultural changes, societal instabilities, or the fear of leading a meaningless existence.⁸ In essence, angst can be understood as a response to “insecurity in the face of a complicated world.”⁹ Human beings generally depend on a certain degree of stability, structure, and coherence in their lives to provide a sense of direction and purpose.¹⁰ When individuals are confronted with disruption or uncertainty in too many dimensions of their life, they tend to become overwhelmed, leading to profound existential anxiety. Within this broader conceptual framework, the

⁶ “Angst (n.),” *Oxford English Dictionary*, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9821143326>.

⁷ Ana Maria Lopez Calvo de Feijoo and Myriam Moreira Protasio, “Kierkegaard’s Ideas on Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy,” *Existential Analysis* 26, no. 1 (2015): 147.

⁸ Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1950), 3–16.

⁹ May, 9

¹⁰ May, 10.

phenomenon of “teen angst” also emerges as a distinct form of existential anxiety rooted in developmental and societal uncertainties.

Teenage angst refers to “an acute feeling of anxiety or apprehension”¹¹ caused by the adolescent developmental stage. This transitional phase that bridges childhood and adulthood is marked by “rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth,”¹² involving significant disruptions and changes in various aspects of an individual’s life and identity. Adolescents frequently struggle to adjust to all these changes, as the accompanying uncertainty and instability can lead to heightened emotional distress. For instance, as adolescents gain greater autonomy and develop the capacity for more complex thought, they are confronted with increased freedom and possibilities to choose from, which can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.¹³ Experiencing teenage angst is a normal part of adolescence and typically dissipates as adolescents mature and learn to adjust to the changes.¹⁴ However, when they do not receive adequate support to navigate the developmental changes, their angst can serve as a precursor to more severe mental health and behavioural problems.¹⁵ In this context, the theme of adolescent-parental relationships becomes particularly salient.

The most crucial developmental process of adolescence is arguably identity formation, as an individual’s identity “serves as an indispensable compass to navigate through ... adult life.”¹⁶ Without a clear sense of self, individuals struggle with decision making and commitment as they lack a frame of reference to rely on. Although identity formation is a life-long process, most scholars agree that identity formation is a specifically

¹¹ Mary E. Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges for Advanced Practice Nurses: A Reference for Front-Line Health Care Providers* (New York: Springer Publishing Company), 1.

¹² “Adolescent health,” *World Health Organization*.

¹³ Luyckx et al (2008); Schulenberg et al (1996); Schwartz et al (2005).

¹⁴ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 3–4.

¹⁵ Jenalee Collins, “What Is Teenage Angst, and Is It Normal?” *Clear Behavioral Health*, March 21, 2024, <https://clearbehavioralhealth.com/teenage-angst/>.

¹⁶ Kazumi Sugimura et al, “Adolescents’ Identity Development Predicts the Transition and the Adjustment to Tertiary Education or Work,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 52, no. 11 (2023): 2345.

important characteristic of adolescence.¹⁷ The majority of contemporary research and theoretical frameworks concerning identity formation are grounded in, or make reference to, the foundational work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968),¹⁸ which argues that identity formation reaches a critical stage during adolescence.¹⁹

In early childhood, identity is established through identification: children identify with the personality traits, beliefs, and behaviours of those around them.²⁰ This fulfils their need for an identity and provides them with guidelines for their behaviour and decision-making.²¹ As children mature, they begin to forge their own identity by simultaneously rejecting and integrating aspects of their childhood identifications.²² During adolescence, individuals enter a “stage of crisis” in their identity development, “triggered by physical changes during puberty, cognitive development, and societal opportunities and expectations.”²³ Teenagers realise that one’s identity is “a unique product” rather than merely “the sum of all the successive [childhood] identifications,” and, consequently, they engage more actively in identity exploration to resolve their identity crisis.²⁴ This crisis, also referred to as “identity confusion,” is a feeling “of vagueness about what one is doing in life and is characterized by a lack of lasting commitments to important life choices.”²⁵ The confusion gradually dispels as adolescents develop a clear sense of identity, or “identity synthesis,” which is the feeling “that various aspects of one’s identity fit together, representing a sense of feeling that one knows where one is headed.”²⁶ Typically, a fully developed sense of identity

¹⁷ Luyckx et al, (2013); Luyckx et al, (2008); Bogaerts et al, (2021).

¹⁸ Marcia, (1980); Luyckx et al, (2008); Crocetti et al, (2008).

¹⁹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

²⁰ Erikson, 53.

²¹ Erikson, 54.

²² Erikson, 159.

²³ Lotte van Doeselaar et al, “Adolescents’ Identity Formation: Linking the Narrative and the Dual-Cycle Approach,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 49, no. 4 (2020): 819.

²⁴ Erikson, “Identity, Youth and Crisis,” 87.

²⁵ Sugimura et al, “Adolescents’ Identity Development,” 2345.

²⁶ Sugimura et al, 2345.

is achieved during early adulthood. In contemporary Western societies, this means that this developmental transition often extends into the late twenties and is completed around age thirty, due to recent sociocultural and economic shifts.²⁷ These changes have resulted in the postponement of traditionally age-structured life events such as marriage and entry into the labour market, creating a prolonged period of identity exploration compared to previous generations.

Achieving identity synthesis is imperative as adolescents with a better-developed sense of self are generally more psychosocially well-adjusted, successful, and satisfied with their lives.²⁸ Conversely, adolescents who primarily experience identity confusion endure more psychosocial difficulties, maladjustment, and more depressive symptoms, resulting in more teenage angst. In extreme cases, identity confusion can lead to self-isolation, inability to commit to education or career, delinquent behaviour, and even psychotic episodes.²⁹ As a coping mechanism for their confusion, adolescents can overidentify with others to compensate for their lack of identity or show intolerance toward those who deviate from their perception of normal to preserve their sense of self.³⁰ This perception of normal is largely shaped by one's social environment.³¹ Repeated exposure to particular behaviours or ideas—whether positive or negative—tends to conventionalise them in the eyes of the observer. While this normalisation facilitates adaptability to new circumstances, it can also lead to the acceptance of harmful or problematic behaviours, as their negative consequences become desensitised and gradually perceived as ordinary.

²⁷ Luyckx et al, "Personal Identity Processes from Adolescence Through the Late 20s: Age Trends, Functionality, and Depressive Symptoms," *Social Development* (Oxford, England) 22, no. 4 (2013): 703. doi:10.1111/sode.12027.

²⁸ Susan Branje, "Adolescent Identity Development in Context," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 45 (2022): 3.

²⁹ Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 131–2.

³⁰ Erikson, 132.

³¹ Amanda Ruggeri, "How the Abnormal Gets Normalised – and What to Do about It." *BBC News*, March 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240314-how-the-abnormal-gets-normalised-and-what-to-do-about-it>.

As children grow up, they are introduced to the norms and values of their environment, to which they are often expected to conform. This expectation creates a question: to conform or not to conform? As noted above, individuals develop the cognitive capacity for more advanced self-reflection and critical thinking, which enables them to engage more deeply with societal norms and expectations. This developmental shift often coincides with a heightened concern for constructing a distinct and authentic identity. As a result, some adolescents begin to critically evaluate the social norms and can perceive them as flawed, restrictive, or misaligned with their own values and beliefs. For example, they may find that certain dominant ideologies within their culture limit their ability to express themselves authentically.³² In response, these adolescents may choose to resist or reject such norms, a stance that can lead to social exclusion. The majority of adolescents tends to conform to societal expectations, largely driven by a strong desire for social acceptance and a need to be perceived as “normal.”³³ Ultimately, adolescents are faced with the complex task of negotiating a balance between adhering to social norms to gain social acceptance and remaining true to their personal convictions. This process can be challenging and may contribute to significant identity confusion. Hence why some individuals may initially adopt extreme positions, either fully embracing or completely rejecting societal norms as they navigate their developing sense of self.

The development of a person’s identity, or the lack thereof, is influenced by a variety of factors. Aside from innate personality traits, social interactions play a significant role.³⁴ For healthy identity formation to occur, “individuals need to experience individuality and

³² Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 130.

³³ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 3.

³⁴ Branje, “Adolescent Identity Development in Context,” 4.

belongingness,”³⁵ which can be facilitated through social engagement. Adolescents develop a sense of belonging when they maintain stable relationships with family and peers and feel like an accepted member of a community. Simultaneously, they can experience individuality within social contexts by differentiating themselves from others and receiving external recognition of their unique identity. Social interactions also provide feedback on one’s identity, on the basis of which identity commitments can be re-evaluated or consolidated.³⁶ Furthermore, receiving adequate support and positive reinforcement from friends and family grants adolescents the security and confidence necessary for identity exploration. Discussing their experiences with others helps adolescents to comprehend their experiences which bolsters identity synthesis and reduces feelings of existential angst.³⁷

Among the various people with whom adolescents interact, parents are typically regarded as a fundamental influence on their psychological development.³⁸ The type of parental care a child receives lays the foundation for their “social, emotional, and cognitive development,” which can have lasting effects on their behavioural and emotional functioning throughout life.³⁹ Numerous studies have demonstrated that the parent-child relationship impacts adolescents in areas such as mental health, school performance, and social development.⁴⁰ During adolescence, teenagers spend progressively more time with peers and less with their parents due to a growing desire for independence.⁴¹ While peer-relationships

³⁵ Sabrina Koepke and Jaap J A Denissen, “Dynamics of Identity Development and Separation–Individuation in Parent–Child Relationships during Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood – A Conceptual Integration,” *Developmental Review* 32, no. 1 (2012): 74.

³⁶ Branje, “Adolescent Identity Development in Context,” 3.

³⁷ Branje, 3.

³⁸ David S Hong, “Editorial: Imaging the Identified Patient: The Importance of Parent–Child Relationships in Pediatric Neuroimaging Research,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 63, no. 10 (2024): 967.

³⁹ Bridget L Callaghan and Nim Tottenham, “The Neuro-Environmental Loop of Plasticity: A Cross-Species Analysis of Parental Effects on Emotion Circuitry Development Following Typical and Adverse Caregiving,” *Neuropsychopharmacology* 41, no. 1 (2016): 163.

⁴⁰ Kang et al, (2024); Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, and Cauffman, (2006); Giuanta et al, (2021).

⁴¹ Paul R Smokowski et al, “The Effects of Positive and Negative Parenting Practices on Adolescent Mental Health Outcomes in a Multicultural Sample of Rural Youth,” *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* 46, no. 3 (2015): 333.

are also significant contributors to the adolescent's mental state and development, "parent contributions to adolescent well-being tend to be pervasive."⁴² The parent-child relationship sets "the stage for both the selection of friends and the management of these relationships,"⁴³ thereby influencing the nature and impact of peer-relationships.

The nature of a parent-child relationship is primarily determined by the parenting style, which is commonly classified as one of four main categories. Three of these categories—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive—were established in the 1960s by psychologist Diana Baumrind.⁴⁴ Authoritative parents provide ample support and are attentive of their child's needs, whilst also being firm when needed. They enforce rules alongside encouraging independence. In contrast, authoritarian parenting involves "high levels of control in an effort to shape behavior and increase obedience."⁴⁵ These parents tend to employ forceful methods to control their child's behaviour and show little regard for their child's needs. Permissive parenting is characterised by high parental warmth but low demands and insufficient behavioural control, which stimulates the child to be self-reliant. In 1983, psychologists Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin introduced a fourth style to Baumrind's framework: neglectful parenting.⁴⁶ Like permissive parenting, neglectful parenting is marked by minimal parental firmness and a high degree of self-direction by the child. However, unlike permissive parenting, neglectful parenting is also devoid of warmth.⁴⁷

⁴² Karen S Mooney et al, "Social Support and Positive Development: Looking on the Bright Side of Adolescent Close Relationships," in *Approaches to Positive Youth Development* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 199.

⁴³ W. Andrew Collins and Brett Laursen, "Changing Relationships, Changing Youth: Interpersonal Contexts of Adolescent Development," *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 24, no. 1 (2004): 58.

⁴⁴ Baumrind, (1966).

⁴⁵ Smokowski, "The Effects of Positive and Negative Parenting Practices," 333.

⁴⁶ E. E. Maccoby and J. A. Martin, "Socialization in the context of the family: parent-child interaction. In *Handbook of Child Psychology: Socialization, Personality, and Social Development*," 4:1–101 (New York: Wiley, 1983).

⁴⁷ Laurence Steinberg, Ilana Blatt-Eisengart, and Elizabeth Cauffman, "Patterns of Competence and Adjustment Among Adolescents from Authoritative, Authoritarian, Indulgent, and Neglectful Homes: A Replication in a Sample of Serious Juvenile Offenders," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 16, no. 1 (2006): 48.

Most scholarly research utilises this four-category model for classify parenting styles.⁴⁸

While this four-category model is necessarily streamlined and generalised, such classification is essential for organising research and interpreting findings. Human relationships are inherently complex and shaped by a multitude of interacting factors; however, the use of general frameworks like Baumrind's is valuable, particularly as a foundational structure in empirical studies. These categories are especially useful for analysing and categorising individual parenting behaviours. By evaluating the frequency and consistency of behaviours associated with each category, researchers can make informed judgments about an individual's overall parenting style. Whether these four categories are sufficient depends on the specific focus of a given study; in some cases, additional subcategories or contextual variables may be necessary to capture the full nuance of parent-child dynamics.

Authoritative parenting (not to be confused with authoritarian parenting) has proven to generate the most positive results: "young people who have been raised in authoritative ... households are more psychosocially competent, more successful in school, and less prone to internalising or externalising problems."⁴⁹ The support, guidance, and active involvement that children receive from their parents foster positive parent-child relationships, enabling the development of, amongst other things, prosocial behaviour, self-esteem, and maturity. These qualities help adolescents excel in various domains of life and reduce the risk of mental illness.⁵⁰

Conversely, many of the qualities that define permissive, authoritarian, and neglectful parenting are considered "negative parenting" and can cause a multitude of developmental

⁴⁸ J. G. Smetana, N. Campione-Barr, and A. Metzger, "Adolescent Development in Interpersonal and Societal Contexts," *Annual Review of Psychology* 57, no. 1 (2006): 261.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, and Cauffman, "Patterns of Competence," 47–48.

⁵⁰ Brett Laursen and W. Andrew Collins, "Parent-Child Relationships During Adolescence," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology Volume 2: Contextual Influences on Adolescent Development*, eds. Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg (Wiley, 2009), 26.

problems. When adolescents do not receive support and warmth from their authoritarian or neglectful parents, they exhibit low self-esteem which makes them more susceptible to depression.⁵¹ Furthermore, a lack of parental warmth has also been linked to anxiety symptoms⁵² and has been found to exacerbate the development of antisocial behaviour.⁵³ Insufficient parental monitoring and behavioural control leads to externalised behaviour such as “drug use, truancy, and antisocial behavior.”⁵⁴ This is because permissive and neglectful parents do not provide behavioural guidelines and rules and do not encourage appropriate behaviour by rewarding positive actions and disciplining negative ones, thus failing to regulate their teenager’s activities and behaviour. On the other side of the spectrum, authoritarian parents exert excessive control and monitoring over their children, which can lead to internalised behaviour such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. The high demands, strict rules, harsh punishment, neglect of their emotional needs, and lack of autonomy that authoritarian parents impose elicit negative emotions that adolescents are unable to express externally due to the strict behavioural control, forcing them to internalise their feelings. In essence, the parent-adolescent relationship exerts a substantial influence on adolescent development, including the vital developmental task, identity formation. As such, parents have a profound impact on the extent of angst teenagers experience and their ability to manage it.

Contemporary popular culture with an ample supply of novels, films, and other media manifests all facets of adolescence, today also within Young Adult (YA) fiction. Although many popular-culture texts present adolescence as a profoundly volatile period with unstable

⁵¹ Smokowski, “The Effects of Positive and Negative Parenting Practices,” 334.

⁵² Alexander T. Vazsonyi and Lara M Belliston, “The Cultural and Developmental Significance of Parenting Processes in Adolescent Anxiety and Depression Symptoms,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 35, no. 4 (2006): 501.

⁵³ Mark E. Feinberg et al, “Parenting and Adolescent Antisocial Behavior and Depression - Evidence of Genotype x Parenting Environment Interaction,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 64, no. 4 (2007): 463.

⁵⁴ Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger, “Adolescent Development in Interpersonal and Societal Contexts,” 262.

teenagers behaving unruly as the norm, research indicates that only a minority of adolescents encounters severe difficulties.⁵⁵ This does not, however, entail that the depictions of extreme cases are themselves inaccurate, but rather that the frequency may be exaggerated. The abundance of YA fiction is only a recent phenomenon. Prior to World War II, the “teenager” was not a recognised concept, and society was divided into adults and children. “Teenagers” infiltrated society along with youth culture after the institution of compulsory schooling and the banning of child labour in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ Due to these changes, adolescents spent more time with peers and less with adults, which facilitated the creation of their own culture. Subsequently, the post-war economic boom enabled parents to spend more money on their children, making teenagers of commercial interest for the capitalist market. This prompted the mass production of products, including YA fiction, specifically for adolescents, enabling them to further differentiate themselves from both children and adults and establish themselves as a distinct demographic group.

The film industry, in particular, developed a strong association with youth culture during its early stages. Not only was there a significant increase in the number of films that centred on adolescents in the 1950s,⁵⁷ cinemas became a popular “youth venue,”⁵⁸ further contributing to the growing visibility of teenagers as a demographic. This rise in youth-centred cinema was largely fuelled by the prevailing societal moral panic in the United States concerning juvenile delinquency.⁵⁹ Hollywood capitalised on these anxieties by producing a wave of films that addressed such concerns, effectively establishing a subgenre of juvenile delinquency films. Notable examples include *The Wild One* (1953) and *Blackboard Jungle*

⁵⁵ Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger, “Adolescent Development in Interpersonal and Societal Contexts,” 259.

⁵⁶ Derek Thompson, “A Brief History of Teenagers,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/02/brief-history-teenagers/>.

⁵⁷ Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), 33.

⁵⁸ Driscoll, 13.

⁵⁹ Robert J. Ashmore, “Bad Boys, Reform School Girls, and Teenage Werewolves: The Juvenile Delinquency Film in Postwar America,” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2016, 1–2.

(1955), which depict adolescents as both a threat to themselves and to society. These films reflected and amplified contemporary fears surrounding youth gangs, sexual deviance, youth crime, and sudden moral decline among previously well-behaved adolescents. In addition to portraying these issues, cinema played a formative role in shaping Western youth culture of the 1950s. Many adolescents adopted the fashion and attitudes of their cinematic icons, such as Marlon Brando's rebellious persona in *The Wild One*, further cementing film's influence on youth identity and expression during this period.⁶⁰

Although teenagers were not formally recognised as a distinct demographic group prior to World War II, "coming-of-age" narratives centred on youths transitioning into adulthood have a long-standing history. While these stories were fewer in number and less diverse, folklore tales featuring young, inexperienced individuals setting out into the world to find their fortune were already circulating in medieval times.⁶¹ In these tales, the protagonist would acquire insights about life through their experiences and mature into adulthood. Eventually, these stories entered the literary tradition through works such as the medieval epic *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach and the novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669) by Hans von Grimmelshausen. These narratives ultimately evolved into the literary genre the Bildungsroman. In contemporary discourse, the terms "coming-of-age" and "Bildungsroman" are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. The Bildungsroman is a specific subgenre of the broader coming-of-age genre. The modern coming-of-age genre encompasses any story about growing up, whereas the Bildungsroman refers to a particular type of coming-of-age narrative. The term Bildungsroman has been in use since 1819 to describe to "a novel recounting the early emotional development and moral education of its

⁶⁰ Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*, 43.

⁶¹ "Bildungsroman," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, 2020.

protagonist,”⁶² spanning from childhood to adulthood. In these stories, a young, often naive, protagonist is followed on their journey from childhood to adulthood.⁶³ The protagonist is typically in conflict with their personal beliefs and societal norms and must navigate a balance between the two. Key to this genre is the display of the main character’s subjectivity and the psychological growth they undergo as the result of their experiences.⁶⁴ Traditionally, a Bildungsroman was not written for adolescents, despite its focus on characters of that age. Classic English-language examples of the genre include *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens, *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain.

The range of topics discussed in coming-of-age fiction have evolved along with society but have also expanded over time. As noted above, in the 1950s, the arrival of youth culture initially sparked widespread fear among adults regarding juvenile delinquency, which influenced coming-of-age fiction.⁶⁵ This societal development notably gave rise to the ultimate film classic about teenage angst and rebellion *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which cemented its lead actor, James Dean, as the symbol of youth defiance and delinquency. Contemporary works of fiction address modern issues such as divorce, substance abuse, and challenges related to modern consumerism and social media. Due to social emancipation, there are now stories featuring protagonists who are female, queer, people of colour, or belong to other marginalised groups, in addition to the traditional white, cisgendered and heterosexual (cishet) male protagonists.⁶⁶ Despite the cultural differences across generations of adolescents, many classic narratives have retained their appeal. For instance, *Little Women*

⁶² Kenneth Millard, “Introduction: Contemporary Coming of Age – Subject to Change,” in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 2.

⁶³ Sarah Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

⁶⁴ Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman*, 13.

⁶⁵ Thompson, “A Brief History of Teenagers.”

⁶⁶ Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman*, 1.

received its seventh film adaptation in 2019,⁶⁷ and *Great Expectations* was adapted into a miniseries in 2023.⁶⁸ James Dean's legacy as the quintessential juvenile delinquent endures in contemporary pop songs, such as Lana Del Rey's "Blue Jeans" (2012) and The Weeknd's "Ordinary Life" (2016). This suggests that despite the different societal contexts in which the narratives unfold, there is a unifying quality to adolescence that remains constant over time, enabling the stories to continue resonating with new generations of teenagers.

⁶⁷ *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig (Columbia Pictures, Regency Enterprises, and Pascal Pictures, 2019).

⁶⁸ *Great Expectations*, developed by Steven Knight (FXP, BBC, Scott Free Productions, and Hardy Son & Baker, 2023).

CHAPTER TWO

Is It a Phase, or Is It not a Phase; That Is the Teenage Angst in *Hamlet*

The tragedy *Hamlet* is arguably William Shakespeare's most renowned play and remains one of the most influential texts of the Western literary canon. First performed around 1600, the play continues to resonate in contemporary culture, with references still frequently emerging in modern media. A notable example is a recent TikTok trend that repurposes an audio fragment scene from the British sitcom *Peep Show* (2003–2015), in which one character uses a reference to *Hamlet* to insult another character. Set in Denmark during the late Middle Ages, the play centres on Prince Hamlet, who has returned home from university in Wittenberg to attend the funeral of his father, King Hamlet. Meanwhile, his mother, Getrude, has hastily remarried to Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who has assumed the throne. Hamlet soon encounters the ghost of his father, who reveals that he was murdered by Claudius and urges his son to exact revenge. The remainder of the play focuses on Hamlet's inner turmoil as he grapples with feelings of revenge, grief, betrayal, and existential doubt, often conveyed through his soliloquies. His emotional and psychological unrest is largely driven by filial obligation, the contemporary societal and gender norms, and a sudden loss of identity—all of which Hamlet must navigate without parental guidance.

Hamlet is not universally understood as an adolescent character due to ambiguity surrounding his age. Hamlet's age has been the subject of a longstanding scholarly debate, stemming from a tension between two lines in the first scene of Act 5 and Hamlet's overall characterisation in the play. The version of this scene found in the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*,

“routinely accepted as the most accurate early edition”⁶⁹ and used as the basis for most modern editions, suggests that Hamlet is thirty years old. This inference arises from two exchanges between the gravedigger and Hamlet. When Hamlet asks the gravedigger how long he has been working, the gravedigger replies that he has been performing his duties since “that very day that young Hamlet was born.”⁷⁰ He later clarifies that “I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years,”⁷¹ which implies that Hamlet is thirty. Additionally, the gravedigger identifies a skull as that of Yorick, who has been dead for “three and twenty years.”⁷² Hamlet recalls playing with Yorick as a child, indicating that he must be at least 26, given that people generally lack memories from before the age of three. Despite this evidence, many scholars and readers argue that Hamlet’s characterisation aligns more with that of “an adolescent youngster on the verge of achieving manhood,”⁷³ pointing to his behaviour, his status as a university student,⁷⁴ and the frequent references to his youth by other characters:

LEARTES: A violet in the youth of primy nature.⁷⁵

GHOST: ... thou noble youth.⁷⁶

KING: ... his youth and havior.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Robert Cohen, “Shakespeare’s Sixteen-Year-Old Hamlet,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25, no. 2 (1973): 181. doi:10.2307/3205867.

⁷⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, edited by Sylvan Barnet (Penguin Random House, 1998), 124, A5S1, l. 150.

⁷¹ Shakespeare, 124, A5S1, ll. 163–164.

⁷² Shakespeare, 125, A5S1, ll. 174–175.

⁷³ Cohen, “Shakespeare’s Sixteen-Year-Old Hamlet,” 179.

⁷⁴ The age range for university students during the period is not clearly defined. According to Lewis, while the average age of matriculation among the aristocracy was approximately sixteen, it was “common for the well-educated sons of socially elevated families to enter university as young as eleven or twelve” (Lewis, 316). Based on this context, Hamlet’s age could plausibly fall anywhere between eleven and twenty-three. This broad range further complicates efforts to ascertain his precise age.

⁷⁵ Shakespeare, 19, A1S3, l. 7.

⁷⁶ Shakespeare, 29, A1S5, l. 38.

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, 40, A2S2, l. 12.

Various interpretations have been proposed to challenge or reinterpret the lines from Act 5, including the suggestions that Shakespeare made a consistency error or that the scene should be dismissed as comic relief rather than taken literally.⁷⁸ Barabara Everett has posited that thirty does not refer to Hamlet's exact age, but that the number is merely a symbolic indication that Hamlet has transitioned into adulthood.⁷⁹ Robert Cohen has presented evidence suggesting that the piece of evidence from the Second Quarto likely contains a spelling and punctuation error, with the original intended reading indicating Hamlet's age as sixteen. Cohen also uncovered evidence that suggests the second line is a later revision of the scene, with an earlier version indicating that Yorick had been dead for only twelve years. More recently, Rhodri Lewis has argued that the numbers should not be taken literally, as "cultures of early modern England and Europe were not arithmetically advanced."⁸⁰ Lewis suggests that "Hamlet and the Gravedigger only feign to know what they are talking about,"⁸¹ as neither wants to admit to their inability to perform simple mental arithmetic, thus rendering the numbers unreliable.

Ultimately, Hamlet's exact age is not essential to my analysis. What is of primary significance are the themes, as well as the character's conduct, which have predominantly been interpreted—both historically and in contemporary criticism—as adolescent behaviour. On this basis, Hamlet may legitimately be understood and analysed as an adolescent figure. This perspective is supported by numerous contemporary productions that depict Hamlet as a teenager, including the 2009 adaptation by the Performing Arts Department of Washington University⁸² and the 2014 production *Hamlet Jr.*, adapted by Toneelgroep Amsterdam

⁷⁸ Cohen, "Shakespeare's Sixteen-Year-Old Hamlet," 180.

⁷⁹ Barabara Everett, "Hamlet: Growing" in *Young Hamlet: essays on Shakespeare's tragedies*, 11–34 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 16–33.

⁸⁰ Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021) 319.

⁸¹ Lewis, 323.

⁸² Liam Otten, "Hamlet as a Teenager? PAD Production to Explore Adolescent Mind," *The Source*, January 13, 2016, <https://source.washu.edu/2009/02/hamlet-as-a-teenager-pad-production-to-explore-adolescent-mind/>.

specifically for their youth repertoire.⁸³ More recently, this adolescent portrayal has been further explored in *Teen Hamlet*, a production by Synetic Theater,⁸⁴ as well as in the current adaptation by Jacob Derwig and Erik Whien.⁸⁵ I therefore concur with Lewis' assessment that Hamlet "is an adolescent" in character, to all intents and purposes, and that "[t]o venture anything more precise is guesswork or special pleading."⁸⁶

Hamlet lacks authoritative parents to help him navigate his adolescence and growth towards adulthood, which exacerbates the challenges he faces. As his father is deceased, Hamlet no longer receives parental involvement from him, aside from two brief encounters with his father's ghost. However, these interactions are insufficient to provide constructive parental involvement, regardless of their emotional significance. The turbulent relationship between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude, are defined by two key aspects: Gertrude's parenting style and Hamlet's condemnation of his mother's marriage to his uncle, Claudius. It is the latter which primarily fuels Hamlet's hostility towards her. Hamlet immediately voices his disapproval in the very first scene in which he appears:

HAMLET: O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourned longer—married with my
 uncle,
 My father's brother, but no more like my father
 Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!⁸⁷

In his first soliloquy, Hamlet considers the marriage a betrayal and an affront to his father, particularly as it occurred so quickly after his death. Additionally, Hamlet views the marriage

⁸³ "Hamlet Jr. (ta-junior)," *TGA*, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://tga.nl/voorstellingen/hamlet-jr-ta-junior#:~:text=Een%20voorstelling%20over%20de%20puber,producties%20voor%20jong%20en%20oud>.

⁸⁴ "Teen Hamlet ... the rest is silence," *Synetic Theater*, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://synetictheater.org/events/teen-hamlet-the-rest-is-silence-2/>.

⁸⁵ "Hamlet," *Internationaal Theater Amsterdam*, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://ita.nl/en/shows/hamlet/3675537/>.

⁸⁶ Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*, 323.

⁸⁷ Shakespeare, 15 ll. 150–157.

as an act of incest, reflecting his subscription to the dominant marriage ideology of Shakespeare's era,⁸⁸ according to which marriage to the widow of one's brother was regarded as incestuous. Hamlet's inability to accept the legitimacy of his mother's marriage to his uncle—an enduring struggle throughout the play—causes him to lose all faith in women, as evidenced by his statement: “frailty, thy name is woman.”⁸⁹ Hamlet's judgement of holding Gertrude responsible for the marriage may initially appear unjust given the limited agency women often had in marital decisions during the Early Modern period.⁹⁰ However, Gertrude's union with Claudius does not appear to conform to the Early Modern conventional social expectations. Although remarriage among widows was not uncommon, a union with a deceased husband's brother was considered incestuous and would have been deemed inappropriate. Such unions were only socially tolerated when the widow was childless, “thus, the marriage ... [also] insults the living prince by ignoring his birth.”⁹¹ Moreover, there is little historical or textual evidence to suggest that Gertrude was under any societal obligation to remarry, let alone to marry her deceased husband's brother. Widows were expected to observe a period of mourning, during which any romantic or sexual engagement was prohibited.⁹² The frequent reference in the play to the “o'erhasty”⁹³ nature of the marriage indicates that Gertrude did not adhere to this prescribed mourning period, further undermining any notion of external pressure. This strongly suggests that Gertrude's decision to marry Claudius was made of her own volition. The Ghost's claim that Claudius “won”⁹⁴ Gertrude's affection implies that persuasion, rather than coercion, was required—indicating

⁸⁸ Shakespeare, 223.

⁸⁹ Shakespeare, 15, A1S2, l. 146.

⁹⁰ Sherri Klassen, “Widows and Widowers,” *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed June 23, 2025, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/widows-and-widowers>.

⁹¹ Jason P. Rosenblatt, “Aspects of the Incest Problem In Hamlet,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1978): 351. doi:10.2307/2869145.

⁹² Klassen, “Widows and Widowers.”

⁹³ Shakespeare, 42, A2S2, l. 57.

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, 29, A1S5, l. 45.

that Claudius could not simply have asserted his authority to secure the marriage. Whether Claudius was genuinely in love with Gertrude or he seduced her, the necessity of consent for the marriage reflects Gertrude's personal agency. Even if her acceptance stemmed from emotional weakness or submissiveness, this does not negate the presence of choice—it merely reflects a failure to resist a morally questionable decision. Thus, Hamlet's accusations against his mother gain validity; her autonomous decision to marry Claudius contributes significantly to the angst he experiences, for which she can reasonably be held accountable. As Hamlet never manages to accept the marriage, his persistent disdain becomes a definitive aspect in his relationship with his mother, defining most of their interactions.

The other definitive characteristic of the relationship is Gertrude's neglectful parenting style. As discussed in Chapter One, neglectful parenting is characterised by a lack of both parental warmth and firmness, wherein the parent remains emotionally uninvolved in the child's life. Parental warmth typically manifests through actions such as offering emotional support, encouragement, bidirectional communication, acceptance, and assistance in overcoming challenges.⁹⁵ In contrast, parental firmness is commonly expressed through practices such as discipline and parental monitoring, and functions to foster appropriate social behaviour. Gertrude fails to adequately exhibit any of these behaviours, with the exception of one brief moment where she offers Hamlet some emotional support:

QUEEN: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
 And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
 Do not forever with thy vailèd lids
 Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
 Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,
 Passing through nature to eternity.⁹⁶

These six lines mark Gertrude's single attempt to aid Hamlet in overcoming his grief over his father's death. The inadequacy of this effort is demonstrated by Hamlet instantly expressing

⁹⁵ Mooney et al, "Social Support," 193.

⁹⁶ Shakespeare, 12, A1S2, ll. 68–73.

suicidal thoughts upon being left on his own and his continuous emotional turmoil throughout the play. Gertrude is aware that Hamlet is struggling, as is most of the court, due to his erratic behaviour. She even reveals that she has a strong suspicion of the cause: “I doubt it is no other but the main, His father’s death and our o’erhasty marriage.”⁹⁷ Despite her suspicion, she makes no further attempts to engage with him about his grief or provide emotional support. Instead, she and Claudius enlist two of Hamlet’s childhood friends, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, “[t]o draw him on to pleasures,”⁹⁸ in an attempt to distract Hamlet from his depression and to uncover the true source of his distress.

Even when Gertrude is directly confronted with Hamlet’s emotional turmoil and her son is in dire need of emotional support, she fails to provide it. During their conversation in Gertrude’s private chamber, Hamlet openly expresses his grievances, articulating his disapproval of the marriage and his confusion over why she chose to marry Claudius. Instead of offering comfort or attempting to address their conflict, Gertrude makes no effort to help her son navigate his emotions. Rather, she pleads with him to stop speaking: “Hamlet, speak no more. Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, and there I see such black and grainèd spots as will not leave their tinct.”⁹⁹ She makes herself emotionally unavailable by expressing a clear desire to avoid discussing her son’s frustrations. As Hamlet continues to vocalise his feelings, she repeats her plea for him to stop. This behaviour further signals her reluctance to confront his emotions, as she focuses primarily on her own emotional needs. Her pleas are ultimately answered when the appearance of the Ghost shifts Hamlet’s attention away from his mother’s faults and towards his own responsibilities. Throughout this scene, Gertrude remains largely passive, offering only brief emotional responses, such as “O Hamlet, thou

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, 42, A2S2, ll. 56–57.

⁹⁸ Shakespeare, 40, A2S2, l. 15.

⁹⁹ Shakespeare, 89, A3S4, ll. 89–92.

hast cleft my heart in twain,”¹⁰⁰ which offer no comfort or support to her son despite his evident emotional distress.

This scene also best demonstrates Gertrude’s lack of firmness in exerting behavioural control. The confrontation was initiated by Polonius, one of the King’s councillors, as a last resort to address Hamlet’s behaviour before resorting to Claudius’ plan to send him to England. The fact that Polonius has to suggest to Gertrude that she should discipline her son indicates that the Queen typically does not do this of her own volition. This is further emphasised by Polonius’ explicit instructions to Gertrude on how to address her son: “‘A will come straight. Look you lay home to him. Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with, and that your Grace hath screened and stood between much heat and him.”¹⁰¹ Here, Polonius advises Gertrude to adopt a firm but authoritative stance in addressing Hamlet’s behaviour. The distinction between authoritative and authoritarian approaches to behavioural regulation and discipline is critical in this context. The authoritative approach involves setting reasonable behavioural expectations through clear communication and explanation, with the objective of encouraging social responsibility and an awareness of how one’s actions affect others.¹⁰² In contrast, authoritarian discipline prioritises obedience to parental demands—regardless of their reasonableness—often relying on coercion and punishment rather than reasoning and explanation. Although Polonius urges Gertrude to “lay home to him,” his instructions emphasise explaining to Hamlet that his behaviour has become too erratic and harmful to others. This method appeals to Hamlet’s sense of social responsibility and aligns more closely with an authoritative approach. At the same time, Polonius’ broader strategy—having Gertrude speak to Hamlet before Claudius resorts to sending him to England—introduces a contrast between authoritative and authoritarian discipline. Exile, as a punitive

¹⁰⁰ Shakespeare, 91, A3S4, l. 157.

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, 86, A3S4, ll. 1–5.

¹⁰² Laursen and Collins, (2009).

and non-dialogical response, reflects an authoritarian method that prioritises control over behavioural development. However, due Gertrude's usual inability to discipline her son, she fails to assert the necessary firmness in this critical moment, thereby allowing Hamlet to quickly take control of the conversation:

HAMLET: Now, Mother, what's the matter?
 QUEEN: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
 HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.
 QUEEN: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
 HAMLET: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.
 QUEEN: Why, how now, Hamlet?
 HAMLET: What's the matter now?
 QUEEN: Have you forgot me?
 HAMLET: No, by the rood, not so! You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
 And, would it were not so, you are my mother.
 QUEEN: Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak.¹⁰³

Although Gertrude begins by attempting to rebuke him, Hamlet quickly redirects the discussion with his response. Gertrude was supposed to chastise Hamlet, but she finds herself being scolded by him after only one line. She then allows the conversation to stray from its original topic by responding directly to the substance of Hamlet's remarks, instead of continuing to reprimand him. Her attempt to withdraw from the conversation and pass the responsibility onto someone else after just a few lines points to her lack of determination to discipline her son. As such, she fails to follow Polonius' instructions and encourage appropriate behavioural in Hamlet.

Gertrude's approach to parenting constitutes a failure of parental responsibility not only by contemporary standards but also by the conventions of an Early Modern audience. Although Early Modern societal gender norms often restricted women's formal power, aristocratic women typically exercised considerable influence within the domestic sphere. Especially during their husbands' absences from home, "women gained wealth, authority and

¹⁰³ Shakespeare, 86, A3S4, ll. 9–18.

power as they managed their husbands' property and households, arranged the marriages and careers of their children, maintained and exploited the kin and client networks essential to their families' political power, and supervised the transmission and distribution of property to the next generation."¹⁰⁴ Even when their husbands were present, aristocratic mothers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generally had a "profound and caring impact ... on their children."¹⁰⁵ In fact, mothers were expected to be actively involved in childrearing and thus received extensive instruction on parenting practices. Many mothers embraced their responsibilities and adapted didactic materials to suit the specific needs and circumstances of their families. Polonius' suggestion that Gertrude speak with Hamlet can be interpreted therefore as an attempt to prompt her to fulfil her maternal responsibilities and behave in accordance with the Early Modern expectations of a mother.

Gertrude continues to neglect her maternal duties by remaining passive when Hamlet kills Polonius. She briefly laments that it was a "rash and bloody deed"¹⁰⁶ but does not confront Hamlet or impose any consequences for his actions. Instead, she once more allows Hamlet to steer the conversation away from his actions and towards hers:

QUEEN: O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!

HAMLET: A bloody deed—almost as bad, good Mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

QUEEN: As kill a king?

HAMLET: Ay, lady, it was my word.¹⁰⁷

When Hamlet raves about Gertrude's marriage and she requests him to stop, she again fails to be firm with him. Rather than asserting herself, she pleads with him by trying to appeal to his sympathy by expressing her own pain: "These words like daggers enter in my ears. No more,

¹⁰⁴ Patricia Nardi, "Mothers at Home: Their Role in Childrearing and Instruction in Early Modern England," ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2007, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Nardi, 18.

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, 87, A3S4, l. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, 87, A3S4, ll. 28–32.

sweet Hamlet.”¹⁰⁸ With each repeat of her plea, she uses fewer words, making it seem as if she is losing the strength to respond. Ultimately, she completely contradicts her initial promise to Polonius to be firm with her son, as this is not her usual conduct.

Gertrude’s maternal neglect is further illustrated by her apparent disinterest in engaging with any parental responsibilities. After Polonius suggests to the King and Queen that Hamlet’s madness is a result of his lovesickness for Ophelia, Gertrude shows no inclination to address the issue herself. When Hamlet approaches her, Claudius, and Polonius, it is Polonius, and not Gertrude, who offers to “board him presently”¹⁰⁹ for his behaviour towards Ophelia. Furthermore, when Claudius and Polonius decide to spy on Hamlet in Act 3, Gertrude again expresses no desire to be involved and simply exits at her husband’s instruction without resistance. In similar fashion, Gertrude relies on Claudius to resolve the situation after Hamlet has killed Polonius. Once her confrontation with her son has ended, Gertrude immediately runs to her husband to pass the problem onto him, whilst demonstrating no interest to participate in resolving the situation. She does not offer any suggestions and is absent when Hamlet has been brought to Claudius to face the consequences of his actions, even though Claudius does invite her to assist: “Come, Gertrude, we’ll call up our wisest friends and let them know both what we mean to do.”¹¹⁰ Thus, Gertrude consistently fails to provide any of the essential parental acts required for the healthy development of her son, as understood within both modern and Early Modern frameworks of parental responsibility.

The final parental figure in Hamlet’s life is his uncle and stepfather Claudius; however, the King exhibits a level of neglect comparable to that of his wife. Act 1 Scene 2

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, 89, A3S4, ll. 96–97.

¹⁰⁹ Shakespeare, 46, l. 170.

¹¹⁰ Shakespeare, 95, A4S1, ll. 38–39.

features his single attempt, like Gertrude, to offer emotional support to Hamlet, and he rarely interacts with his stepson directly throughout the play. This absence of meaningful interaction does not appear to stem from the demands of kingship, as Claudius devotes considerable time and effort to spying on Hamlet and devising schemes to manage his behaviour or eliminate him. Nonetheless, any genuine effort on Claudius' part to assume a parental role would likely have been ineffective, as Hamlet's rejection of him as a father figure would likely have prevented him from responding positively.

Thus, Hamlet experiences a profound lack of positive and constructive parental interactions, which are crucial to healthy adolescent development. Consequently, he displays many of the typical symptoms of a neglected adolescent. Neglectful parenting can lead to difficulties in emotional regulation, often resulting in both internalised and externalised behaviours, such as low self-esteem, aggression, and delinquency.¹¹¹ In Hamlet's case, parental neglect of his psychological wellbeing shows itself in his inability to regulate emotions, particularly anger, which manifests in externalised behaviours such as hostile outbursts of anger and offensive actions. An example of this can be found in the first scene of Act 3, when Ophelia returns Hamlet's love letters. Hurt and enraged by Ophelia's rejection, Hamlet fiercely lashes out at her, denouncing her, women, and humankind, leaving her devastated when he exits the scene.¹¹² Hamlet's difficulty with emotional regulation also gives rise to internalised behaviour. As is common for children with neglectful parents, Hamlet exhibits traits that modern psychology would associate with low self-esteem and depression. In the Early Modern period, however, Hamlet's behaviour would typically have been interpreted as indicative of "melancholy"—a disease characterised by persistent sadness and

¹¹¹ Di Giunta et al, (2022).

¹¹² Shakespeare, 66, A3S1, ll. 134–164.

anxiety without a clear external cause.¹¹³ In this context, melancholy encompasses a much broader range of mental disturbances than what modern psychology defines as depression. Early Modern understandings of the term include psychological states which would now be classified as “obsessive-compulsive conditions, paranoia, and other delusional states and anxiety disorders.”¹¹⁴ This affliction was believed to result from an imbalance of the bodily humours, particularly black bile, which affected the soul—a concept roughly equivalent to what we now refer to as the mind. The initial imbalance could be triggered by a wide array of factors, including traumatic experiences, behavioural habits, diet, exercise, or even excessive daydreaming. Due to one or more of these factors, “we feel sorrow and are made melancholy; our disheartened mood, engendering a change of (bodily) humoral temperature, colors and further distorts our outlook; our sadness then becomes a symptom of our melancholy but also a cause of further melancholy.”¹¹⁵ In this way, melancholy was understood as a self-perpetuating condition in which the symptoms also function as the causes, independent of any identifiable external trigger. Thus, while Early Modern audiences utilised a different conceptual framework to interpret Hamlet’s behaviour in comparison to modern audiences, they would nonetheless have recognised the prince’s conduct as a manifestation of mental illness.

A good example of Hamlet’s low self-esteem features in Act 3 during his confrontation with Ophelia:

HAMLET: I am myself indifferent honest,
but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were
better my mother had not borne me: I am very
proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at
my beck than I have thoughts to put them in,
imagination to give them shape, or time to act them

¹¹³ Jennifer Radden, “Melancholy as Disease: Learning about Depression as Disease from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*,” *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology* 25, no. 4 (2018): 227. doi:10.1353/ppp.2018.0033.

¹¹⁴ Radden, 228.

¹¹⁵ Radden, “Melancholy as Disease,” 228.

in. What should such fellows as I do crawling
between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all;
believe none of us.¹¹⁶

Without positive interactions and encouragement from his parents to counterbalance his feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, Hamlet has developed a deeply negative self-image. His low self-esteem has made him more susceptible to depression, as high self-esteem “serve[s] as a buffer against depression.”¹¹⁷ His deeply depressed state is first made evident in the opening line of his first soliloquy in Act 1, where he expresses a wish to die: “O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew.”¹¹⁸ This desire is echoed throughout the play, most notably in the line “to be, or not to be.”¹¹⁹ As a result of parental neglect, Hamlet has never learned to regulate his emotions, which combined with his low self-esteem has led to a deepening of his psychological distress, culminating in suicidal ideation.

Hamlet’s angst is exacerbated by challenges related to his identity formation. Like many adolescents, the prince is still constructing his sense of self, a process that becomes significantly more challenging when he is confronted with an acute identity crisis. A coherent sense of self hinges on a feeling of “self sameness and continuity over contexts and time.”¹²⁰ This continuity not only relates to an individual’s experience of the self, but also how “this experience corresponds with the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning to significant others, such as family members and friends.”¹²¹ Hamlet’s sense of continuity is shattered

¹¹⁶ Shakespeare, 65, A3S1, ll. 122–130.

¹¹⁷ Smokowski, “The Effects of Positive and Negative Parenting Practices,” 334.

¹¹⁸ Shakespeare, 14, A1S2, ll. 129–130.

¹¹⁹ Shakespeare, 63, A3S1, l. 57.

There is a lot of debate surrounding this line and its meaning. This is partially because different versions of the speech are found in Q1 and Q2. The Q1 version denotes more clearly suicide. The Q2 version is more ambiguous and seems to refer to action versus inaction, which does not necessarily denote suicide. Nonetheless, suicide has always been a popular interpretation. See for example: Gana, (2004); Canino, (2008); Belsey, (2022).

¹²⁰ Branje, “Adolescent Identity Development in Context,” 1.

¹²¹ Branje, 3.

following his father's death, as Isaac argues: "Hamlet's identity as a son, prince, and a student are all threatened when Claudius unexpectedly asserts himself as King."¹²² Due to his mother's remarriage, Hamlet experiences discontinuity in his identity as a son. Although, he still perceives himself as the son of King Hamlet, this identity is no longer validated by those around him, as both Claudius and Gertrude repeatedly identify Hamlet as Claudius' son:

KING: Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.¹²³

QUEEN: Thou hast thy father [Claudius] much offended.¹²⁴

Furthermore, Gertrude's marriage to Hamlet's uncle positions her in a dual and conflicted familial role, prompting Hamlet to refer to her as his "aunt-mother,"¹²⁵ revealing the disruption Hamlet experiences of traditional familial relationships. Therefore, Hamlet experiences a dual loss of filial identity, as both his parental figures are destabilised.

In addition to the collapse of his familial identity, Hamlet's sense of self as a student is abruptly ended when Claudius and Gertrude beseech him not to return to Wittenberg. Hamlet's own expressed desire to return to Wittenberg underscores his attachment to the role of student and highlights the personal frustration he experiences at being denied this continuity of his identity. Lastly, Hamlet's identity as a prince is undermined, as he has not assumed the throne following his father's death. Claudius was able to ascend to the throne instead of Hamlet due to the elective nature of the Danish monarchy, in which kingship was not automatically inherited by the eldest son.¹²⁶ Despite the elective structure of the monarchy, Hamlet had anticipated succeeding his father, as his status as the King's eldest son

¹²² Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare: reinventing the Bard in young adult literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000), 73.

¹²³ Shakespeare, 14, A1S2, l. 117.

¹²⁴ Shakespeare, 86, A3S4, l. 10.

¹²⁵ Shakespeare, 52, A2S2, l. 384.

¹²⁶ Shakespeare, 232.

and his popularity among the people made him a strong candidate for succession. However, by marrying Gertrude, Claudius became the new monarch and effectively deprived Hamlet of the throne. Claudius' assumption of the crown disregards Hamlet's status as the most likely heir, disrupting his vision of his future in which he would succeed his father on the throne. This leaves him uncertain about his role and future prospects. Hamlet's shares his frustration about this with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

ROSENCRANTZ: Good my lord, what is your cause of dis- temper?

...

HAMLET: Sir, I lack advancement.¹²⁷

The various disruptions to Hamlet's experiences of continuity have fractured his sense of self, plunging him into a deep state of identity confusion.

Hamlet's identity confusion is demonstrated by his persistent uncertainty and inability to commit to definitive actions. Adolescents experiencing heightened identity confusion can struggle with indecisiveness, as they have not yet formed a stable sense of self to guide their decision-making.¹²⁸ A clear example of this can be seen in Hamlet's internal debate regarding suicide. He recognises that suicide is considered a sin within his religion: "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter."¹²⁹ Nonetheless, he questions the validity of this doctrine:

HAMLET: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
and by opposing end them. To die, to sleep

...

To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Shakespeare, 80, A3S2, ll. 344–347.

¹²⁸Koen, Luyckx et al, "Capturing Ruminative Exploration: Extending the Four-Dimensional Model of Identity Formation in Late Adolescence," *Journal of Research in Personality* 42, no. 1 (2008): 76.
doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2007.04.004.

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, 14, A1S2, ll. 131–132.

¹³⁰ Shakespeare, 63, A3S1, ll. 57–66.

Hamlet deliberates whether it is indeed nobler to endure life's suffering, as opposed to ending his pain through suicide. However, his uncertainty about the unknowable consequences after death, particularly the consequences for dying in sin, leads him to question whether ending his life would truly bring relief. This internal conflict ultimately prevents him from taking his life, as he is unable to take definitive action.

In similar manner, Hamlet is constantly deliberating over his options to avenge his father's murder, rather than committing to a definitive course of action. When the ghost of King Hamlet first appears and commands his son to seek revenge, Hamlet appears resolute in his devotion, declaring:

HAMLET: Yea, from the table of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!¹³¹

At this point, Hamlet is confident about the nature of the Ghost, "It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you."¹³² However, in Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet begins to question the spirit's nature—"The spirit that I have seen May be a devil"¹³³—despite no new information emerging to provoke such doubt. This shift occurs after Hamlet has scolded himself for his inaction, calling himself a coward.¹³⁴ Yet rather than taking concrete steps toward vengeance, he devises a plan to confirm Claudius' guilt. This rationalisation appears more as a means of deferring action than as a necessary step in the pursuit of justice.

A similar pattern emerges in Act 3, Scene 3, when Hamlet has the ideal opportunity to kill Claudius. Hamlet has just overheard his uncle confessing to the murder of King Hamlet

¹³¹ Shakespeare, 31, A1S5, ll. 98–104.

¹³² Shakespeare, 32, A1S5, l. 138.

¹³³ Shakespeare, 60, A2S2, ll. 610–611.

¹³⁴ Shakespeare, 59, A2S2, l. 582.

in prayer, unaware that the prince is present. Although Hamlet initially appears motivated to act—“And now I'll do't”—he quickly begins to hesitate and question the implications of this act “That would be scanned.”¹³⁵ Hamlet considers that if Claudius is killed whilst confessing his sins, his soul would go to heaven, an outcome Hamlet deems unjust. Since his uncle murdered Hamlet's father before the latter could confess his sins, his soul resides in purgatory. Therefore, Hamlet hesitates whether executing Claudius in this moment would constitute justice: “and am I then revenged, to take him in the purging of his soul, when he is fit and seasoned for his passage?”¹³⁶ Ultimately, Hamlet decides to postpone Claudius' execution and to wait for a more favourable moment, when he has sinned again, ensuring that his soul will go to hell. These repeated deferrals underscore Hamlet's deep internal conflict and illustrate his inability to commit to decisive action. His justifications for delay—though masked by reasoning—reveal a pattern of evasion rooted in his psychological turmoil and ongoing identity crisis. Hamlet's indecisiveness is also commonly regarded as his tragic flaw and the primary catalyst for his downfall, as well as for the deaths of many other central characters.¹³⁷ However, if this indecisiveness is understood as a symptom of intensified adolescent turmoil rooted in an unresolved identity crisis, then it can be argued that Shakespeare ultimately presents heightened teenage angst as Hamlet's true tragic flaw. In this reading, it is this underlying psychological unrest—rather than indecision alone—that emerges as the fundamental cause of the play's violence and ensuing tragedy.

Hamlet's struggle to resolve his identity crisis is impeded by his lack of social support. As discussed in Chapter One, social support is crucial for healthy identity development, as it provides adolescents with a sense of belongingness, individuality, confidence, security, and constructive feedback. As noted above, Hamlet lacks parental

¹³⁵ Shakespeare, 85, A3S3, ll. 74–75.

¹³⁶ Shakespeare, 85, A3S3, ll. 84–86.

¹³⁷ Shakespeare, lxiv.

support. In addition, he is an only child with few close friends around him, leaving him socially isolated. Though Guildenstern and Rosencrantz visit Elsinore, Hamlet does not feel supported by them. Aware that they are spying on him for Claudius, Hamlet cannot trust them. He recognises that their continuous inquiries into his well-being are motivated by their intention to collect information for the king and, consequently, feels betrayed by them.¹³⁸ Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia also deteriorates. She was instructed by her father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes, to distance herself from Hamlet. As the dutiful daughter and sister that she is, she complies. Horatio remains the only consistent source of support in Hamlet's life. Horatio is not following Claudius' directives, expresses genuine concern for his friend, and is the only one in whom the prince can confide. However, despite Horatio's support, his presence provides insufficient stability for Hamlet, and the prince's psychological state continues to deteriorate.

The paucity of high-quality relationships in Hamlet's life hinders his ability to discuss his angst with a confidant and receive the support needed to process his traumatic experiences. Hamlet is deeply frustrated by the lack of people around him in which he can confide, which adds to his depression: "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."¹³⁹ Desperate to talk to someone, he attempts to voice some of his grievances to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, despite knowing that they are spying on him. However, rather than engaging with Hamlet's desolate feelings, Rosencrantz quickly shifts the conversation to the players that are on their way to the castle.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, Hamlet seeks to mend his relationship with his mother. During their confrontation in the Queen's private chamber, he implores Gertrude to redeem herself by rejecting Claudius, confides in her about feigning

¹³⁸ Shakespeare, 80–81, A3S2, ll. 358–380.

¹³⁹ Shakespeare, 15, A1S2, l. 158.

¹⁴⁰ Shakespeare, 52, A2S2, l. 377.

madness, and requests that she keep this secret from Claudius.¹⁴¹ These acts demonstrate that, despite his earlier denunciations of Gertrude and women in general, he still desires a close relationship with his mother, along with her support.

The absence of “frequent and positive contact with other people and stable, reliable relationships,”¹⁴² also prevents Hamlet from experiencing a sense of belonging, which is essential for a coherent social identity.¹⁴³ Moreover, Hamlet lacks supportive interactions with loved ones that grant him the security needed to explore and establish his identity. Instead of receiving encouragement or acceptance, Hamlet receives external pressures to conform to a certain identity. He does not have the autonomy to define his identity within his altered family dynamic. As mentioned above, he is constantly urged to regard Claudius as his father, with little consideration for Hamlet’s preferences regarding the matter.

In addition, Hamlet is pressured to assume the identity of the avenging son. After his father’s ghost reveals the truth about his death and implores Hamlet to seek revenge, Hamlet becomes acutely burdened by the expectation to avenge his father’s death. Although some scholars, such as W. W. Greg, have argued that the Ghost is merely a manifestation of Hamlet’s disturbed psyche and therefore not a real entity,¹⁴⁴ the prevailing scholarly consensus maintains that the Ghost is indeed real. This view is largely supported by the fact that multiple other characters—who are portrayed as more mentally stable than Hamlet—also see the Ghost and recognise him as the late King Hamlet, thereby affirming his objective presence within the play.¹⁴⁵ This thesis therefore adopts the position that the Ghost is a real presence within the play, and interprets his influence on Hamlet as an expression of paternal

¹⁴¹ Shakespeare, 91–93, A3S4, ll. 140–197.

¹⁴² Koepke, “Dynamics of Identity Development and Separation,” 74.

¹⁴³ Social identity entails an individual’s self-definition that is derived from their sense of belonging and their integration within broader social and cultural systems. (Koepke, 71).

¹⁴⁴ W. W. Greg, (1917).

¹⁴⁵ Brett E. Murphy, “Sulphurous and Tormenting Flames: Understanding the Ghost in Hamlet: Essay,” *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 26, no. 1 (2014): 118.

authority. When, two scenes after his first encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet has yet to act, he articulates his growing frustration and self-reproach in a soliloquy:

HAMLET: Yet I,
 a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
 like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 and can say nothing.
 ...
 O, vengeance!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 that I, the son of a dear father murdered,
 prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
 and fall a-cursing like a very drab.¹⁴⁶

Hamlet is aware of the social norm of sons avenging their fathers, a norm that is reinforced by figures such as prince Fortinbras who decisively seeks to reclaim the land his father lost, thereby defending his father's honour. Hamlet, aware of such examples, understands that failing to avenge his father would render him a disappointing and cowardly son. This pressure to act along with his already low self-esteem provoke his frustrations and self-loathing when he fails to avenge his father. These negative feelings are reinforced by his father's ghost in Act 3, when he reminds his son that he has yet to fulfil his obligation,¹⁴⁷ further discouraging Hamlet from abandoning his duty to kill Claudius.

Despite his aversion to the identity of the cowardly son, Hamlet remains reluctant to kill his uncle. To exact revenge would entail assuming a new identity—the identity of a killer and an avenger—which conflicts with his personality but would align with the societal expectations associated with his gender role. Hamlet is not inherently violent, a trait made evident by how others describe him. Multiple characters refer to him as “sweet,”¹⁴⁸ a quality otherwise reserved for the female characters in the play—Ophelia and Gertrude. In contrast,

¹⁴⁶ Shakespeare, 59, A2S2, ll. 577–598.

¹⁴⁷ Shakespeare, 90, A3S4, ll. 111–112.

¹⁴⁸ Shakespeare, 13, A1S2, l. 86; 19, A1S3, l. 8; 69, A3S2, l. 55; 89, A3S4, l. 97; 133, A5S2, l. 91; 143, A5S2, l. 359.

male characters like Laertes never receive this label, suggesting that “sweet” carries feminine, non-aggressive connotations. Hamlet himself also describes his nature as “pigeon-livered,”¹⁴⁹ an expression denoting timidity or cowardice.¹⁵⁰ Though Hamlet displays moments of hostility to others, they are predominantly verbal rather than physical. For instance, while he is verbally cruel to Ophelia, he never physically harms her. Moreover, whenever Hamlet does kill someone, he tends to be indirect or unintentional. He stabs Polonius with his sword through the arras behind which the councillor is hiding, never facing him directly; he orchestrates the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by sending a letter that orders their execution; and he fatally wounds Laertes with a poisoned blade, unaware that the weapon is tainted. The only instance in which Hamlet intentionally and directly kills is in the final scene of the play, when he slays Claudius. However, this act occurs under extraordinary psychological distress: Hamlet has just witnessed his mother’s death, is aware that Laertes is fatally wounded, and knows that he himself is also dying—all because of his uncle’s doing. Confronted with overwhelming emotional pressure and a rapidly closing window of opportunity, Hamlet finally commits to the act and kills Claudius.

In his struggle to avenge his father, Hamlet strongly contrasts with Laertes, who, upon learning of Polonius’ death, pursues his revenge swiftly and without hesitation. Laertes immediately assembles a crowd and storms the castle to confront the King who he believes to be responsible for his father’s death. He barges into the hall, demanding justice: “Thou vile King, give me my father.”¹⁵¹ Laertes exemplifies the decisive, aggressive masculinity expected of sons, aligning with societal norms in a way Hamlet cannot bring himself to do. Thus, Hamlet finds himself trapped between two identities: the dishonourable, cowardly son, or the violent, vengeful one. Although he feels compelled to adopt the latter, its contradiction

¹⁴⁹ Shakespeare, 59, A2S2, l. 588.

¹⁵⁰ “Pigeon-livered (adj.),” *Oxford English Dictionary*, June, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5978632747>.

¹⁵¹ Shakespeare, 106, A4S5, ll. 115–116.

with his inherent disposition prevents him from doing so. Deprived of social support to help him navigate this internal conflict, Hamlet is paralysed by indecision, leading to a stagnation in his identity formation and the continued presence of his identity confusion.

In response to his existential crisis, Hamlet adopts a negative identity as a coping mechanism. This form of identity construction is also evident in more contemporary portrayals of adolescent angst, such as Holden Caulfield and Tracy Freeland, both of whom similarly construct negative identities in response to emotional turmoil and identity confusion. A negative identity entails that a person identifies “with roles opposing expectations from society and represents a problematic side of a firm sense of identity consisting of negative aspects of the self.”¹⁵² A negative identity “compensates for a lack of identity by providing youth with sense of meaning, purpose, or belongingness; such false (or pseudo) stability of identity is often obtained from extreme/radical beliefs and behaviors characterized by their totalistic nature.”¹⁵³ Hamlet’s disdain for various social practices reflects the development of a negative identity. His rejection of social conventions is evident in his condemnation the Danish custom of carousing, which he claims tarnishes the nation’s reputation and encourages debauchery.¹⁵⁴ He similarly denounces marriage at the start of Act 3, declaring, “I say we will have no more marriage.”¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, he refuses to conform to the traditional mourning conventions, by continuing to grieve past the socially accepted period and critiques the ritualisation of mourning. He states that anyone can perform the ritual, but that this does not necessarily reflect genuine grief, “[f]or they are actions that a man might play.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Shogo Hihara, Kazumi Sugimura, and Moin Syed, “Forming a Negative Identity in Contemporary Society: Shedding Light on the Most Problematic Identity Resolution,” *Identity* (Mahwah, N.J.) 18, no. 4 (2018): 325. doi:10.1080/15283488.2018.1524329.

¹⁵³ Hihara, Sugimura, and Syed, “Forming a Negative Identity in Contemporary Society,” 327.

¹⁵⁴ Shakespeare, 24–25, A1S4, ll. 7–38.

¹⁵⁵ Shakespeare, 66, A3S1, ll. 149–150.

¹⁵⁶ Shakespeare, 13, A1S2, l. 84.

This preoccupation with the distinction between appearance and reality reveals Hamlet's radical insistence on authenticity, which he utilises to further solidify his pseudo identity. A similar intensified focus on authenticity is evident in *The Catcher in the Rye*. However, this emphasis on authenticity is not inherently characteristic of adolescent angst. Rather, it represents one of multiple possible responses to identity confusion. As noted in Chapter One, adolescents may resolve such confusion through various means, including conforming entirely to societal norms or overidentifying with another person, rather than striving for a unique or authentic sense of self—as will be exemplified by Tracy's behaviour in Chapter Four. Hamlet asserts himself as authentic by repeatedly accusing others of deceitfulness positioning himself as morally and emotionally genuine in contrast. In Act 1, for instance, he asserts, "But I have that within which passes show,"¹⁵⁷ implying that unlike those around him, his grief is sincere and not merely performative. Hamlet's obsession with authenticity is further demonstrated by his hostility towards perceived deception. He often becomes enraged when he believes others to be dishonest. He accuses Ophelia—and, by extension, all women—of manipulating their appearance to conceal their true nature: "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance."¹⁵⁸ Likewise, he berates Guildenstern and Rosencrantz for their continuous lying and spying on him for Claudius,¹⁵⁹ and comparing them to "adders fanged."¹⁶⁰ Although they were once his close friends, Hamlet ultimately has them executed, underscoring the extremity of his commitment to authenticity.

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, 13, A1S2, l. 85.

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, 66, A3S1, ll. 145–148.

¹⁵⁹ Shakespeare, 81, A3S2, ll. 371–380.

¹⁶⁰ Shakespeare, 93, A3S4, l. 204.

Through these behaviours, Hamlet reveals a self-conception grounded not in alignment with societal norms, but in a radical, oppositional identity. This identity emerges as a consequence of intense identity confusion, provoked by the abrupt and destabilising events of his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage. The absence of parental support during this formative period further intensifies Hamlet's crisis, leaving him without the necessary guidance to navigate the tension between his inherent nature and the societal expectations of masculinity and filial duty. Moreover, emotional neglect impeded the development of emotional regulation skills, exacerbating Hamlet's inner turmoil and teen angst. As a result, Hamlet displays heightened emotional distress, including low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation. Hamlet's psychological struggles align with the results of contemporary research on adolescent responses to parental neglect and identity confusion, rendering the Danish prince a relevant and relatable adolescent figure for modern audiences. Moreover, many definitive traits of Hamlet's teen angst—particularly his emotional volatility, negative identity, and experiences of neglect—are echoed in the characters of Holden Caulfield and Tracy Freeland, which the following two chapters examine in detail.

CHAPTER THREE

A Problem of Nerves and Phonics: Teenage Angst in *The Catcher in the Rye*

J.D. Salinger's psychological novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is narrated in the first person. The novel recounts four days in the life of seventeen-year-old Holden Caulfield, leading up to a psychological breakdown for which he is, at the time of narration, receiving treatment in a psychiatric institution. Holden is widely regarded as an unreliable narrator due to his limited understanding of the world, narrative inconsistencies, and the impact of his mental health struggles on his narration, all of which cast doubt on the objectivity of his account.¹⁶¹ Additionally, he frequently exaggerates and is selective in what he chooses to disclose, making it sometimes difficult for readers to determine the accuracy of events or the true nature of other characters. Nevertheless, Holden's voice is often praised for its authenticity. His informal, conversational narrative style—resembling spoken language—“is the guarantee of his spontaneity and authenticity.”¹⁶² Despite his unreliability, Holden's narration offers a genuine representation of his emotional and psychological state, granting readers a valuable insight into the inner world of a troubled teenager.

Holden's account of his struggles and breakdown begins on the Saturday preceding Christmas break, shortly after Holden has been expelled from Pencey Prep, an elite boarding school, for failing four out of five classes. Unwilling to face his parents immediately, he spends several days wandering New York City, attempting to connect with others while reflecting on his family, society, and the transition to adulthood. As the story unfolds, Holden's mental state steadily deteriorates. Though Salinger had originally intended the

¹⁶¹ Alexander Classen, “‘I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.’ Authenticity and Unreliable Narration in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*,” *ISEK* 7, no. 2 (2017): 45–55.

¹⁶² Classen, 45.

novel for an adult audience,¹⁶³ *The Catcher in the Rye* found particular resonance with adolescents, largely due to its themes of teenage alienation, emotional turmoil, and rebellion. Scholars have explored *The Catcher in the Rye* through various critical lenses—including trauma theory, masculinity studies, and queer theory—but the specific theme of teenage angst, despite its centrality to the novel, has received comparatively little critical attention. For instance, Stephen Bickmore and Kate Youngblood describe the novel as a work that “encapsulated teenage angst”¹⁶⁴ and acknowledge that Holden grapples with “adolescent struggles,”¹⁶⁵ yet do not provide a detailed analysis of how this angst is depicted. Similarly, while Sarah Graham’s introductory book on *The Catcher in the Rye* offers useful context, it also does not focus extensively on this theme.¹⁶⁶

Since its publication, the novel has remained both immensely popular and controversial, particularly in the United States.¹⁶⁷ It has frequently been challenged or banned on the grounds of vulgar language, depictions of promiscuity and substance use, and its perceived promotion of teenage rebellion against mainstream American values.¹⁶⁸ Holden’s rejection of what he deems “phony” and his refusal to conform to ideological prescribed standards of living have contributed to his status as an enduring symbol of adolescent rebellion and counterculture.¹⁶⁹ However, this characterisation of Holden as a rebellious icon may be misguided. His behaviour is less a deliberate act of defiance and more a manifestation of profound emotional distress and intensified adolescent angst. Rather than a principled

¹⁶³ Sarah Graham, *J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 18.

¹⁶⁴ Steven T. Bickmore and Kate Youngblood, “‘It’s The Catcher in the Rye... He Said It Was the Kind of Book You Made Your Own’: Finding Holden in Contemporary YA Literature,” *English in Education* 48, no. 3 (2014): 250. doi:10.1111/eie.12049.

¹⁶⁵ Bickmore and Youngblood, 253

¹⁶⁶ Graham, *J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*.

¹⁶⁷ Graham, 17

¹⁶⁸ Graham, 17–18.

¹⁶⁹ Benjamin Priest, “The Catcher in the Rye and the Ill Member of the Group: Holden Caulfield and Adolescent Development,” *Psychodynamic Practice* 22, no. 3 (2016): 209–210. doi:10.1080/14753634.2016.1198273.

stance against societal norms in favour of personal convictions, Holden's actions reflect a psychological struggle rooted in unresolved trauma and a disrupted process of identity formation—exacerbated by the absence of parental guidance and emotional support.

Like Hamlet, Holden lacks parental support. His parents are largely absent figures in his life, indicated by how little Holden discusses them in contrast to his siblings. Where Holden talks about Phoebe, D.B. and Allie at length, his parents remain “figures who seem to exist only in the background,”¹⁷⁰ revealing that they occupy a marginal role in his everyday life. Holden rarely recalls direct interactions with his parents. This absence is further reinforced by his observations about life at Pencey Prep, his last boarding school:

WE ALWAYS HAD the same meal on Saturday nights at Pencey. It was supposed to be a big deal, because they gave you steak. I'll bet a thousand bucks the reason they did that was because a lot of guys' parents came up to school on Sunday, and old Thurmer probably figured everybody's mother would ask their darling boy what he had for dinner last night, and he'd say, 'Steak.'¹⁷¹

Holden's comment that “a lot of guys' parents” visit on Sundays clearly implies that this is a routine practice for many students, but not necessarily for him. Significantly, the imagined scenario he constructs involves a generic mother asking her son about his meal, rather than his own parents engaging in such an exchange. The hypothetical nature of the interaction, coupled with Holden's decision to frame it as someone else's experience, points to his own lack of familiarity with such parental involvement. This suggests that his parents do not regularly visit him, reinforcing the notion that they are distant, both emotionally and physically, from his adolescent life. His mother also chose to send him new ice skates by mail, as opposed to delivering them in person, further exemplifying a distant form of care. The only occasion Holden recalls them coming to Pencey Prep is for a meeting with the headmaster regarding his academic performance.¹⁷² Even during his stay in the facility from

¹⁷⁰ Priest, “The Catcher in the Rye and the ill member of the group,” 219.

¹⁷¹ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 40.

¹⁷² Salinger, 6.

which he narrates his story, his parents are notably absent. In contrast to his parents, his brother D.B. visits weekly and will be driving Holden home once he is released. While the geographical distance—Holden being treated near Hollywood and his parents residing in New York—may partially explain their absence, the decision to seek treatment so far from home indicates that his parents had not prioritised emotional support.

This dynamic is further reinforced by Holden's relationship with older brother D.B., who often assumes parental responsibilities. Holden recalls numerous memories of D.B. taking him and his siblings to the movies, theatre, or the park, but offers no similar recollections involving his parents. Holden also mentions emotionally significant conversations that he had with D.B., such as learning about Allie's funeral,¹⁷³ a moment that might traditionally involve parental support. At the novel's outset, Holden explains that he will only recount the events leading up to his breakdown, stating: "I mean that's all I told D.B. about, and he's my brother and all."¹⁷⁴ Although this justification does not necessarily suggest that Holden only spoke to D.B. about "this madman stuff,"¹⁷⁵ it does indicate that, at the least, his conversation with D.B. carries the most significance.

Despite their emotional unavailability, Holden's parents are not entirely indifferent to their children's well-being and generally demonstrate a degree of concern. His parents regularly visit Allie's grave, and his mother shows concern for Phoebe during their brief interaction—asking if Phoebe is warm enough, how her day was, and reprimanding her for smoking and staying up late.¹⁷⁶ These moments reflect traditional maternal behaviours, suggesting that his mother's neglect of Holden does not stem from a lack of love. Rather, it seems to stem from emotional limitations that hinder her ability to provide adequate

¹⁷³ Salinger, 171.

¹⁷⁴ Salinger, 3.

¹⁷⁵ Salinger, 3.

¹⁷⁶ Salinger, 195–196.

emotional support. Holden reveals that his mother still carries unresolved grief over her son's death: "She hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died."¹⁷⁷ Since Allie's death, she has been dealing with a lot of anxiety: "She's nervous as hell. Half the time she's up all night smoking cigarettes."¹⁷⁸ Holden also describes her as someone who becomes hysterical quickly, is prone to headaches, and does not enjoy going out, revealing her fragile mental state. Her ongoing distress appears to render her emotionally unavailable to Holden, particularly when he is experiencing his own emotional crisis. Holden expresses concern over her reaction to his expulsion from Pencey Prep, indicating that he perceives her as too emotionally unstable to support him.¹⁷⁹ His mother's ability to function more authoritatively with Phoebe—who does not present the same emotional demands as Holden—further supports the notion that her neglect of Holden stems from emotional incapacity rather than indifference to the well-being of her children.

While it is possible that Holden's perception of his mother is inaccurate and that she possesses the emotional stability necessary to support him, this possibility is ultimately inconsequential. What matters is Holden's belief that she is emotionally unavailable, a perception that shapes his reluctance to seek her support and his overall sense of emotional isolation. Psychological research emphasises that perceived support is as critical as actual support; individuals who believe that support is available to them are more likely to feel secure in facing challenges and more inclined to seek help when needed.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, even if Holden's mother is, in fact, emotionally capable, her failure to communicate this effectively has left Holden feeling unsupported and unable to rely on her during times of distress.

¹⁷⁷ Salinger, 120.

¹⁷⁸ Salinger, 175.

¹⁷⁹ Salinger, 120.

¹⁸⁰ Kang et al, (2024); Mooney et al, (2007).

Holden's father, while similarly distant, is neither entirely disengaged. When Holden meets with his former English teacher, Mr Antolini, he learns that his father had met with Antolini to discuss Holden's well-being. Mr. Antolini mentions that Holden's father is "terribly concerned" about his son.¹⁸¹ This suggests that his father prefers to address his son's issues indirectly, perhaps due to the discomfort experienced in confronting Holden's problems directly or a lack of emotional competence to engage with his son more openly. His professional obligations as a corporate lawyer also contribute to his absence; his need to travel for work—he misses Phoebe's performance in a school play due to a trip to California—is treated as routine by both Holden and Phoebe.¹⁸² During the 1950s, it was culturally normative for fathers to be frequently absent from the home due to work obligations. In the typical American nuclear family of the era, men were expected to serve as the sole breadwinners, which necessitated full-time employment and often limited their involvement in domestic and family life.¹⁸³ However, this societal expectation did not negate the importance of paternal presence in the emotional and psychological development of their children. Consequently, while this paternal conduct was widely accepted, it nonetheless could have harmful implications for family dynamics and child development.

As a result of his parents' emotional distance, Holden lacks a close relationship with them. Although he generally maintains a respectful and sympathetic view of his parents, he also voices some frustrations about them: "my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all—I'm not saying that—but they're also touchy as hell."¹⁸⁴ He even expresses sympathy for some of his parents' behaviour: "I'm a goddam

¹⁸¹ Salinger, 205.

¹⁸² Salinger, 179.

¹⁸³ Jürgen Martschukat, "Fatherhood in World War II and the Cold War, 1940–1960," in *American Fatherhood*, 182–199 (NYU Press, 2019), 189.

¹⁸⁴ Salinger, 3.

spendthrift at heart. What I don't spend, I lose. ... It drives my parents crazy. You can't blame them."¹⁸⁵ However, Holden also struggles with his parents' inattentiveness towards him, evidenced by his sensitivity to parental neglect in his observations of other adults' behaviour. He sharply criticises a woman at the movies for crying over a film, which makes her seem "kindhearted as hell," yet refusing to take her child to the bathroom, comparing her to a "goddam wolf"¹⁸⁶ for doing so. In similar manner, he observes a family walking in front of him: "He and his wife were just walking along, talking, not paying any attention to their kid."¹⁸⁷ These moments underscore his acute awareness of parental inattentiveness and self-centredness, as well as his personal frustration regarding his parents' lack of attention and recognition of his emotional needs. This frustration is further emphasised by the recurring hypothetical scenarios that Holden imagines, in which his mother expresses concern or grief for him. He imagines her begging him not to leave home to live in a cabin in the woods,¹⁸⁸ and wondering what to do with all his possessions if he were to die.¹⁸⁹ Through these imagined moments of motherly concern, Salinger reflects Holden's longing for emotional support and attentiveness from his parents, particularly from his mother, that he does not receive in reality.

His desire for parental support and affection is further demonstrated when Holden risks encountering his parents by sneaking into their apartment to visit Phoebe. Believing he might have pneumonia, he wants to see his sister one last time in case he dies. When Phoebe tells him that their parents are out at a party, Holden's initial reaction is not relief but anxiety; he is eager to know when they will return and keeps pressing Phoebe for the answer, even

¹⁸⁵ Salinger, 119.

¹⁸⁶ Salinger, 155.

¹⁸⁷ Salinger, 128

¹⁸⁸ Salinger, 225.

¹⁸⁹ Salinger, 171.

though she wants to talk about the movie she had gone to see.¹⁹⁰ When Phoebe replies “not till very late,” he notes, “I began to relax, sort of... I figured the hell with it. If they did, they did.”¹⁹¹ Although he has repeatedly expressed a desire to avoid them, his lack of relief and sudden indifference suggest disappointment. He proceeds to smoke in his sister’s bedroom—an act that could reveal his presence, as Phoebe is too young to be allowed to smoke—and loses track of time. Then, when his parents return, he insists on leaving immediately, rather than wait until his parents have gone to bed, as per Phoebe’s suggestion, which seems less risky than Holden’s idea. As he sneaks out of the apartment, he remarks: “It was a helluva lot easier getting out of the house than it was getting in, for some reason. For one thing, I didn’t give much of a damn anymore if they caught me. I really didn’t. I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way.”¹⁹² This reveals Holden’s complex emotional conflict: while he outwardly seeks to avoid confrontation with his parents, he simultaneously craves their attention and support. Such ambivalence is a common feature of adolescent development; while adolescence is typically marked by a growing desire for autonomy, increased time spent with peers, and a tendency to challenge parental authority, these developments do not diminish the adolescent’s need for parental support.¹⁹³ Rather, this tension between independence and dependence often generates conflicting emotions in young people as they navigate the transition toward adulthood. This conflict similarly characterises Hamlet’s relationship with Gertrude, as discussed in Chapter Two, and will also be explored in Chapter Four in relation to Tracy’s interactions with her mother.

Holden’s desire for parental support is also evident from his often futile attempts to seek support elsewhere. Though D.B. once filled this role, Holden has grown somewhat

¹⁹⁰ Salinger, 180.

¹⁹¹ Salinger, 180.

¹⁹² Salinger, 199.

¹⁹³ Laursen and Collins, (2009).

disillusioned with him after his brother moved to Hollywood: “Now he’s out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, residing in Hollywood prevented D.B. from frequently visiting Holden due to the distance, leaving Holden still in need of a parental figure. Holden had a positive relationship with his history teacher at Pencey Prep, Mr Spencer, whom he frequently visited at home on weekends. When Holden visits Spencer one last time to say goodbye before leaving the school, the teacher attempts to lecture him on his academic shortcomings and encourages him to think about his future, but Holden quickly becomes defensive and dismisses the conversation, believing Spencer incapable of understanding him: “He really was [trying to help], too. You could see that. But it was just that we were too much on opposite sides of the pole.”¹⁹⁵ In New York, Holden meets with Carl Luce, his former student mentor at one of his previous schools, but Luce quickly grows annoyed with Holden’s immaturity and drunken behaviour and only offers a half-heartedly suggestion to get psychoanalysed before leaving.

Holden’s final attempt at finding a surrogate for parental support comes in the form of a late-night visit to Mr Antolini, his former English teacher. He likes Antolini because “[h]e was a pretty young guy,”¹⁹⁶ and he shares Holden’s disapproval of D.B. moving to Hollywood.¹⁹⁷ Holden also recalls that Antolini was the only adult who approached the body of a fellow student who had committed suicide, for which Holden respects him. In contrast to the earlier attempts at guidance, Antolini’s advice urging Holden to apply himself to his education appears to resonate with the teenager at this moment, even though his exhaustion prevents him from fully comprehending the meaning of it.¹⁹⁸ However, this initially promising encounter ends abruptly when Holden, who had gone to sleep on Antolini’s couch,

¹⁹⁴ Salinger, 4.

¹⁹⁵ Salinger, 18.

¹⁹⁶ Salinger, 192.

¹⁹⁷ Salinger, 200.

¹⁹⁸ Salinger, 208–209.

awakens to find his former teacher stroking his head. Interpreting the gesture as a sexual advance, Holden leaves in a panic, thereby severing the potential for a meaningful adult connection. The true nature Antolini's intentions remains ambiguous and unresolved. Holden later acknowledges that he may have misjudged the situation and briefly considers returning,¹⁹⁹ which casts doubt on the certainty of his initial interpretation. Nevertheless, this moment irreparably undermines Holden's trust in Antolini. Alexander Classen has suggested that Holden's extreme reaction may point to a history of sexual trauma, which could also explain his pervasive discomfort with sex throughout the novel.²⁰⁰ However, this reading does not preclude the possibility that Antolini's behaviour was, in fact, inappropriate. Ultimately, Holden opts not to return to his former teacher, and with this, the last potential adult figure capable of offering emotional support and developmental guidance is eliminated. As a result, Holden remains without the parental or surrogate support necessary for navigating his psychological distress and progressing toward emotional maturity.

Holden's inability to connect with a parental figure may initially appear to stem from the so-called "generational gap," a phenomenon that gained prominence during the 1950s.²⁰¹ During this era, society observed a growing cultural divide between the older and the younger generation. Many young people rejected the often more conservative values upheld by their parents, seeking greater personal freedom and autonomy. While generational conflict was not unique to the 1950s, this era witnessed an unprecedented number of youths distancing themselves from their parents' norms entirely and constructing their own distinct cultural identity as a form of resistance and self-expression. This rejection of established values and the active creation of alternative norms by teenagers were also central to the moral panic over

¹⁹⁹ Salinger, 214–215.

²⁰⁰ Classen, (2017).

²⁰¹ Michelle Desjardins, "Counterculture: The Generational Gap and Reaction to the 1950s," *American Studies Forum* 3 (2016): 1–14.

juvenile delinquency discussed in Chapter One. The emerging generational divergence also laid the groundwork for the countercultural movements of the 1960s. Holden's recurring disillusionment with the adults around him, such as Mr Spencer and Mr Antolini, may at first appear to align with these broader generational tensions, which makes him a harbinger of youth rebellion counterculture for many. However, Holden's rejection extends beyond a mere critique of adult conservatism. His disillusionment is rooted in a more pervasive denunciation of everything that he perceives as "phoniness," in both adults and peers alike, which, for him, does not only refer to anything insincere—such as feigned politeness due to social conventions—but encompasses everything that adheres too closely to social conventions, such as the movies and attending college. As such, Holden is similarly disillusioned with his peers, "You ought to go to a boys' school sometime. Try it sometime ... It's full of phonies."²⁰² Thus, Holden's alienation from adults is not indicative of participation in a broader youth movement but rather reflects a profound and individualised rejection of society in general. This rejection is not necessarily representative of adolescent behaviour in general, yet Holden is not entirely unique in this regard either. As outlined in Chapters One and Two, some adolescents respond to profound identity confusion by rejecting social norms and adopting a negative identity. In this context, Holden's behaviour aligns with patterns commonly associated with the archetype of the troubled teenager.

Holden's narration highlights his neglect through exhibiting several internal and external behaviours typical of neglected adolescents. As mentioned in the previous chapter, insufficient parental support and guidance can hinder the development of effective emotional regulation skills, which can cause low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.²⁰³ Holden's low self-esteem manifests in his repeated negative self-comparisons and self-deprecating remarks.

²⁰² Salinger, 145.

²⁰³ Di Giunta et al, (2022).

After praising the intelligence of his siblings, he states: “I’m the only dumb one in the family.”²⁰⁴ He also calls himself “illiterate”²⁰⁵ despite being an avid reader and having a talent for writing compositions. Holden’s diminished sense of self is further demonstrated by his discomfort with receiving kindness. He admits that “[a]lmost every time somebody gives me a present, it ends up making me sad.”²⁰⁶ He also finds it is depressing “when somebody says ‘please’ to you,”²⁰⁷ and he feels embarrassed when people thank him,²⁰⁸ revealing a deep-seated belief that he is undeserving of kindness or affection. Like Hamlet, Holden’s low self-esteem—also caused by parental neglect—has left him vulnerable to depression. Throughout the novel, Holden repeatedly confesses to feeling depressed and expresses suicidal ideation on multiple occasions: “Every time I thought about it, I felt like jumping out the window.”²⁰⁹ He also consistently refers to a profound sense of loneliness, which predominantly drives his actions. His decision to leave Pencey Prep, for example, is motivated by the emotional toll of remaining there, as he explains that it made him feel “too sad and lonesome.”²¹⁰ Most of Holden’s anxiety pertains to typical adolescent concerns: “fear of growing up, of moving forward, of becoming an adult,” but Holden also experiences “fear of illness and death,” due to his brother’s passing.²¹¹ Without the emotional support needed to manage these feelings effectively, Holden’s anxieties have manifest physically in the form of nervous habits, such as excessive smoking, “lighting matches,”²¹² and repetitively “turning the cold water on and off.”²¹³

²⁰⁴ Salinger, 75.

²⁰⁵ Salinger, 21.

²⁰⁶ Salinger, 58.

²⁰⁷ Salinger, 232.

²⁰⁸ Salinger, 123.

²⁰⁹ Salinger, 55.

²¹⁰ Salinger, 58.

²¹¹ Theodore J. Jacobs, “On the Adolescent Neurosis,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2007): 505. doi:10.1002/j.2167-4086.2007.tb00265.x.

²¹² Salinger, 144.

²¹³ Salinger, 31.

Although developmental psychology had advanced significantly since the Early Modern period and more closely resembled contemporary psychological frameworks by the 1950s, Holden's behaviour would still have been interpreted somewhat differently at that time than it would be through the lens of present-day psychological understanding. In the 1950s, anxiety was considered the most commonly treated psychological condition, largely due to its broad and loosely defined nature at the time.²¹⁴ A wide range of "psychic, somatic, and interpersonal problems "were diagnosed as "a problem of "nerves."²¹⁵ Anxiety was also not a well-differentiated diagnosis; distinctions such as social anxiety, panic disorder, or generalised anxiety disorder had not yet been formally established. As such, the causes of anxiety were often vaguely defined and attributed to generalised psychosocial stressors, particularly those related to work, family, or the increasing pace of modern life.²¹⁶ Depression, by contrast, was often regarded as a relatively rare disorder. It was frequently interpreted not as a distinct mental illness, but rather as a symptom or byproduct of anxiety. As a result, individuals presenting with depressive symptoms were often treated for anxiety, commonly through the prescription of tranquilisers.²¹⁷ In this context, Holden's depression symptoms would likely have been recognised by readers as anxiety-related brought on by his environment, and the deeper psychological causes, such as Holden's unresolved grief over Allie may have been overlooked.

Although Holden frequently refers to feeling depressed or being affected by depressing experiences, it is unlikely that Salinger here wanted his protagonist to identify himself as suffering from depression. Rather, Holden likely conceptualises his emotional distress as anxiety, as suggested by Salinger's choice of words when describing Holden's

²¹⁴ Allan V. Horwitz, "How an Age of Anxiety Became an Age of Depression," *The Milbank Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2010): 113. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0009.2010.00591.x.

²¹⁵ Horwitz, 113.

²¹⁶ Horwitz, 114.

²¹⁷ Horwitz 115.

mental state: “my nerves were shot.”²¹⁸ Holden often alludes to feeling nervous or anxious; however, some of these expressions may in fact represent symptoms of depression that he misinterprets as anxiety. This is particularly evident in moments when he does not specify the source of his nervousness, yet simultaneously displays behaviours commonly associated with depression. For example, just before leaving his family’s apartment, Holden states that he feels extremely nervous and subsequently begins to cry²¹⁹—a response more typically linked to sadness than anxiety. Such episodes prove difficult in distinguishing whether Holden is experiencing anxiety, depression, or a combination of both in these moments. Nonetheless, precisely diagnosing Holden’s mental health struggles in each moment is not the central focus of this thesis. Rather, what is of significance is that Salinger clearly employs Holden’s characterisation to explore the complexities of adolescent angst.

Holden’s externalised behaviour includes substance abuse and antisocial behaviour.²²⁰ Unable to regulate his emotions and without a parental figure to turn to, Holden frequently resorts to alcohol as a coping mechanism—a strategy also prominently employed by Tracy in *Thirteen*, which will be examined in the following chapter. Although underage and therefore unable to legally procure alcohol, Holden still seeks it out regularly as a means to manage his psychological distress: “The more I thought about my gloves and my yellowness, the more depressed I got, and I decided, while I was walking and all, to stop off and have a drink somewhere.”²²¹ Holden’s lack of emotional regulation also leads him to lash out at others. When Phoebe tries to join her brother in running away, Holden reacts with anger and yells at

²¹⁸ Salinger, 58.

²¹⁹ Salinger, 197–198.

²²⁰ As discussed in Chapters One and Three, there was a moral panic among American adults in the 1950s surrounding juvenile delinquency which largely centred around conduct such as antisocial behaviour and substance abuse. It is because of these behaviours, along with behaviours such as Holden’s academic failures and his interaction with a sexworker, that adults feared that the book might exert a corrupting influence on young readers. Although the intensity of the 1950s moral panic about juvenile delinquency dissipated and shifted over time, the novel continues to be regarded by some as a potentially corrupting influence for youth.

²²¹ Salinger, 100.

her.²²² A similar interaction occurs on Holden's date with Sally. When Sally rejects his impulsive proposal to run away together and expresses her desire to lead a more conventional—or "phony"—life, Holden quickly becomes disillusioned and agitated: "I was getting depressed as hell again."²²³ His emotional response is to lash out at Sally: "You give me a royal pain in the ass, if you want to know the truth,"²²⁴ causing Sally to cry. Additionally, Holden often engages in provocative behaviour, as a maladaptive method to manage his inner turmoil. When his roommate Stradlater returns from a date with a girl Holden knows from his childhood, Holden is consumed with anxiety over the possibility that they had sex.²²⁵ When Stradlater refuses to tell him, Holden deals with his anxiety by pestering and insulting him before ultimately attempting to punch his roommate. Holden only stops when Stradlater punches him in the face, knocking him to the ground and giving him a nosebleed. These episodes highlight Holden's difficulty in processing and expressing his adolescent angst in constructive ways, due to the absence of parental support which not only perpetuates his psychological anguish but also contributes to self-destructive behaviours and strained interpersonal relationships.

The absence of parental support has also significantly hindered Holden's identity development.²²⁶ In particular, the lack of emotional guidance and involvement from his parents has prevented him from processing the trauma of his brother Allie's death. Holden's lingering grief over his brother remains his greatest obstacle to achieving identity synthesis and successfully navigating the transition into adulthood. Allie, who was two years younger than Holden, passed away of leukaemia when Holden was thirteen, which deeply traumatised

²²² Salinger, 227.

²²³ Salinger, 147.

²²⁴ Salinger, 148.

²²⁵ Salinger, 47–51.

²²⁶ For more information on the importance and effects of parental support on identity formation, see Branje, "Adolescent identity development in context," page 3.

him. The night Allie died, Holden was so overwhelmed by grief that he “broke all the windows in the garage.”²²⁷ His parents were even considering psychoanalysis, but they never followed through with this. Unable to come to terms with his brother’s death, Holden often reflects on Allie and pretends to talk to him when he is feeling depressed.²²⁸ He also stopped visiting Allie’s grave, as this experience proved unbearable:

... my parents go out quite frequently and stick a bunch of flowers on old Allie’s grave. I went with them a couple of times, but I cut it out. In the first place, I certainly don’t enjoy seeing him in that crazy cemetery. Surrounded by dead guys and tombstones and all. ... That’s what nearly drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner—everybody except Allie. I couldn’t stand it. I know it’s only his body and all that’s in the cemetery, and his soul’s in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn’t stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn’t there.²²⁹

At the time of Allie’s death, Holden was still in the early stage of adolescence²³⁰ and, consequently, had only just started to explore his identity and therefore predominantly experiencing identity confusion.²³¹ This process was interrupted by the traumatic loss of his brother, as traumatic events that occur during this developmental phase formation can impede the process by introducing challenges that take precedence over self-exploration:

Traumatic events contemporaneous with efforts at identity formation will likely disrupt the process by introducing challenges having greater immediacy than making identity-related decisions, thus distracting from and delaying identity formation. Personal priorities will almost certainly be directed at recovery from the direct effects of the trauma, whatever those effects may be given the nature of the trauma itself. These effects may include displacement of living arrangements, physical injury, and/or psychological harm including PTSD. Of particular concern will be potential weakening of the adolescent’s/emerging adult’s foundation with respect to the psychological qualities established during prior developmental stages. To the extent that such a foundation is undermined by a traumatic event (decompensation), it will likely be necessary to restore a positive foundation before success in identity

²²⁷ Salinger, 44.

²²⁸ Salinger, 110.

²²⁹ Salinger, 172.

²³⁰ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 3.

²³¹ Annabel Bogaerts et al, “Identity Synthesis and Confusion in Early to Late Adolescents: Age Trends, Gender Differences, and Associations with Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal of Adolescence* 87, no. 1 (2021): 108. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.01.006.

formation can be achieved. The result will likely be still further delay in establishing personally meaningful identity-related roles, goals, values, beliefs, and behaviors.²³²

Prior to Allie's death, Holden had begun exploring the new developmental stage he was entering, evidenced by a memory in which he wanted to exclude Allie from an activity with a friend because "he [Allie] was a child."²³³ Holden, "on the threshold of adolescence"²³⁴ sought to differentiate himself from his younger brother in an attempt to embrace and establish his own growing maturity. Following his brother's death, Holden became trapped in a state of arrested development, as dealing with this trauma took priority over any further efforts to further develop his identity. This disruption is particularly evident in Holden's response to the act of visiting Allie's grave. He describes his anguish at witnessing others leave the cemetery to resume their lives while Allie remains behind—"I couldn't stand it." His distress reflects a deeper inability to comprehend how others can move forward after losing a loved one, mirroring his own emotional stagnation and unresolved grief. Benjamin Priest notes that although Holden does attempt to engage in typical adolescent activities—such as visiting nightclubs, drinking, socialising with women, and seeking intimacy—"he never seems to know why he does any of these things and they bring him no developmental satisfaction."²³⁵ The trauma of losing Allie thereby exacerbates Holden's teenage angst, as the absence of meaningful identity exploration prevents his emotional maturation and consequently causes his alienation from his peers. Holden admits, "I act quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, I act like I'm about thirteen. ... Everybody says that, especially my father,"²³⁶ revealing that he

²³² Alan S. Waterman, "Now what do I do?": Toward a conceptual understanding of the effects of traumatic events on identity functioning, *Journal of Adolescence* 79: 65.

²³³ Salinger, 110.

²³⁴ Priest, "The Catcher in the Rye and the ill member of the group," 218.

²³⁵ Priest, 215.

²³⁶ Salinger, 11–12.

remains emotionally stuck at the age he was when Allie died, a consequence of inadequate support to process his trauma.

As Holden's identity formation has been arrested, he experiences significant identity confusion. His confusion is evidenced by his lack of direction in life, which is most often revealed in discussions about his aspirations. When asked by his history teacher if he feels any concerns for his future, Holden initially replies with what he assumes is the expected answer: "Oh, I feel some concern for my future, all right. Sure. Sure, I do," before admitting his true feelings: "But not too much, I guess."²³⁷ Similarly, Phoebe inquires about his future career aspirations, Holden cannot provide a concrete answer, instead offering his unrealistic fantasy of becoming the "catcher in the rye."²³⁸ Holden's lack of direction is also noted by others; Mrs. Hayes, for instance, describes him as "wild" and as having "no direction in life."²³⁹ Salinger's use of the term "wild" also reflects how Holden's deviation from conventional American expectations—such as pursuing a defined career path—was commonly interpreted by mainstream society during this period as unruly behaviour and a sign of juvenile delinquency. While a career does not define a person's identity in full, it does often reflect important aspects of identity, such as one's passions, values, and priorities—for instance, whether one values financial security over personal fulfilment, or vice versa. Furthermore, identity confusion is also characterised by a lack of commitment and direction in key areas of life, such as career.²⁴⁰ Therefore, Holden's inability to envision a professional path suggests a deeper uncertainty about who he is and what he ultimately wants from life.

Holden's inability to commit to school or any long-term goals further underscores his lack of direction. He fails to see the point of education and has subsequently flunked out of

²³⁷ Salinger, 17.

²³⁸ Salinger, 191.

²³⁹ Salinger, 67.

²⁴⁰ Sugimura et al, (2023).

three different schools since Allie's death. Dropping out of school was relatively common in the early 1950s, with approximately 50% of high school students leaving before graduation, the majority of whom came from low-income families.²⁴¹ One of the primary motivations for early school departure among low-income adolescents was the need to enter the workforce—either to contribute to their family's financial support or to adhere to “the folkways of the group.”²⁴² With an income, adolescents could participate in the same commercialised forms of recreation as their peers. Adolescents from affluent backgrounds are more likely to discontinue their education due to factors such as dissatisfaction with school and teaching methods, learning difficulties, or unstable home environments.²⁴³ Holden's aversion to school and his lack of motivation therefore are not unusual for the time. However, unlike many of his peers with similar attitudes, Holden does not actually drop out. Despite his disinterest for academic life, he continues to attend to each boarding school his parents enrol him in and makes no deliberate effort to terminate his education. This pattern reflects his inability to make definitive choices. Holden's lack of academic engagement stems not only from disillusionment but also from a deeper indecisiveness: committing to his studies would require taking decisive action such as choosing subjects or a college, while dropping out would likewise necessitate concrete action, such as seeking employment and committing to a career path. In both cases, decision-making is required, and Holden's persistent lack of direction in life prevents him from pursuing either alternative with purpose.

Holden's indecisiveness extends to more aspects of his life. When Holden arrives in New York, he spends twenty minutes in a phone booth trying to think of someone to call and

²⁴¹ R. A. Tesseneer and L. M. Tesseneer, “Review of the Literature of School Dropouts,” *NASSP Bulletin* 42, no. 238 (1958): 141–143. doi:10.1177/019263655804223826.

²⁴² Tesseneer and Tesseneer, 145.

²⁴³ Tesseneer and Tesseneer, 146–149.

It should be noted that these factors are not exclusive to affluent youth and are also prevalent among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

then coming up with excuse not to call them. Ultimately, he “couldn’t think of anybody to call up,”²⁴⁴ and ended up calling no one. Holden also spends hours aimlessly wandering in the city: “I got a cab outside the hotel, but I didn’t have the faintest damn idea where I was going.”²⁴⁵ ... “I started walking over toward Broadway, just for the hell of it.”²⁴⁶ These moments of indecision and purposeless movement underscore Holden’s profound lack of direction, symbolising a broader existential disorientation stemming from his unresolved identity crisis.

In an effort to resolve his prolonged identity confusion, Holden has adopted a negative identity, similar to Hamlet. Holden constructs his identity around radical morals and ideologies revolving around authenticity. Holden’s notion of authenticity should be distinguished from the accounts put forth by prominent existential thinkers of the 1950s. Existentialist theories about authenticity revolve around the individual’s responsibility to take control of their own life, accept accountability for their actions, and demonstrate the courage to live in accordance with self-determined moral values and principles as opposed to passively conforming to societal norms.²⁴⁷ In contrast to these existential notions of authenticity, Holden’s conception appears to be a simplistic and largely unjustified rejection of society. He is intensely preoccupied with identifying and condemning anything he perceives as “phony,” yet he never articulates a coherent set of values or moral principles to validate his aversion, suggesting that he does not reject societal norms in accordance with self-developed convictions. Moreover, this rejection is inconsistent; despite his criticisms, Holden often engages in the very behaviours he condemns. He dismisses movies as phony, criticises his brother D.B. for working in the film industry, and even claims to have turned

²⁴⁴ Salinger, 66.

²⁴⁵ Salinger, 119.

²⁴⁶ Salinger, 127.

²⁴⁷ Marjorie Grene, “Authenticity: An Existential Virtue,” *Ethics* 62, no. 4 (1952): 266–274. doi:10.1086/290847.

down a role in a “movie short”²⁴⁸ because it would compromise his authenticity.

Nevertheless, he continues to attend movies regularly. Similarly, although he refers to Sally Hayes as “the queen of the phonies,” he still invites her on a date. These inconsistencies indicate a reluctance to fully commit to his purported ideals and that Holden’s rejection of societal norms is not an expression of a genuine, internally coherent belief system but rather a defensive posture to obscure his unresolved identity crisis.

Holden’s refusal to accept responsibility for his life further differentiates his notion of authenticity to the existential definition. He often externalises blame, portraying himself as a passive victim of circumstance rather than an agent of his own decisions. For instance, he typically frames his expulsions as something that happened to him—he was “given the ax” or “kicked out”—rather than the consequence of his own inaction. This evasion is particularly evident in a conversation with Phoebe. When she directly asks, “Oh, why did you do it?”²⁴⁹—holding him accountable for his expulsion—Holden immediately reframes the question as, “She meant why did I get the ax again,”²⁵⁰ thereby shifting the focus from agency to victimhood. He then further avoids responsibility by claiming that the school was intolerable and full of phonies, “It was one of the worst schools I ever went to,”²⁵¹ thereby implying that his expulsion was an inevitable outcome due to external factors rather than a consequence of his own actions. Holden also exhibits an unwillingness to take control of his future. Rather than making concrete plans, he fantasises about withdrawing entirely from society and living in isolation.²⁵² This fantasy reflects a desire to escape from the responsibilities and commitments of adult life, rather than assuming them. Ultimately, Holden’s version of authenticity fails to align with existential ideals grounded in self-awareness, choice, and

²⁴⁸ Salinger, 86.

²⁴⁹ Salinger, 184–185.

²⁵⁰ Salinger, 185.

²⁵¹ Salinger, 185.

²⁵² Salinger, 218.

responsibility. His rejection of anything associated with societal norms functions less as a principled stance and more as a justification for his own pervasive disinterest and identity confusion. By labelling all forms of social conformity and identity formation as “phony,” Holden positions himself as allegedly authentic in contrast to others, without establishing a substantive identity of his own. While the blanket rejection of mainstream culture as inauthentic is not universally characteristic of adolescent identity struggles, the complete rejection of social norms as a means of crafting a pseudo-identity is a common strategy among adolescents experiencing significant identity confusion, as noted in Chapter Two.²⁵³

This pseudo identity of authenticity therefore functions as a coping mechanism for Holden’s ongoing identity confusion, offering him a semblance of a purpose to counterbalance his existential uncertainty. Holden demonstrates his reliance on his pseudo identity to impose stability and coherence onto his life through his reluctance to admit to lacking a sense of self. When Phoebe accuses him of not liking anything, Holden instantly rejects this characterisation and insists that he does: “Yes I do. Yes I do. Sure I do. Don’t say that. Why the hell would you say that?”²⁵⁴ After a little arguing, Phoebe wants Holden to prove her wrong by telling her “something you’d like to be. Like a scientist. Or a lawyer or something.”²⁵⁵ As mentioned above, Holden is unable to provide her with a concrete answer and initially attempts to validate his disinterest in Phoebe’s suggestions:

‘I couldn’t be a scientist. I’m no good in science.’ ‘Well, a lawyer—like Daddy and all.’ ‘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. ... 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 because you did it because what you really wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and

²⁵³ Hihara, Sugimura, and Syed, (2018).

²⁵⁴ Salinger, 187.

²⁵⁵ Salinger, 190.

everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is, you wouldn't.'²⁵⁶

Not wanting to admit to his confusion and lack of direction, Holden utilises his negative identity as authenticity purist to justify his disinterest of any conventional career options. When this response is not enough to satisfy Phoebe, he tells her his fantasy about being the catcher in the rye as a final attempt to prove that he does like something.

To further secure his pseudo identity, Holden frequently makes presumptive judgments about others, so he can classify them as phony. For instance, he observes other audience members during the interval of a play: "You never saw so many phonies in all your life, everybody smoking their ears off and talking about the play so that everybody could hear and know how sharp they were."²⁵⁷ Holden assumes that everyone is feigning their interest to show off their intellect and does not consider the possibility that they might actually enjoy the play. This assumption allows him to preserve his pseudo self; if the audience were genuinely interested in the play, he would be unable to dismiss them as phony, thereby undermining his claim of authenticity and exposing his struggle with identity formation.

Holden's extreme dedication to authenticity is demonstrated by how his strong convictions cause him to alienate himself from people. Holden frequently mentions feeling "lonesome" and continuously tries to connect with people by trying to arrange meetings with several people and striking up conversations with strangers. However, his obsession with identifying phoniness in others and separating himself from this prevents him from fostering meaningful relationships. He distances himself from D.B. because of his brother's "phony" career in Hollywood. When Holden arrives in New York and feels like calling someone, he dismisses D.B. as an option because "D.B. was in Hollywood."²⁵⁸ This fact alone is cause

²⁵⁶ Salinger, 190.

²⁵⁷ Salinger, 140.

²⁵⁸ Salinger, 66.

enough for Holden not to call his brother. Similarly, his date with Sally exposes the destructive impact of his fixation on phoniness. During the date, Holden struggles to enjoy himself due to Sally's constant phony behaviour. When Sally encounters an acquaintance, Holden describes the experience as followed: "It was the phoniest conversation you ever heard in your life. ... I was all set to puke when it was time to go sit down again. I really was. And then, when the next act was over, they continued their goddam boring conversation."²⁵⁹ At the end of the play, he states that he "sort of hated old Sally by the time we got in the cab."²⁶⁰ As mentioned above, Holden lashes out at Sally at the end of their date because of his inability to accept Sally's more traditional outlook on life, thereby ruining their relationship. Later that evening, when Holden calls her in a drunken state, Sally is not interested in talking to him. She tries to get rid of him and eventually hangs up on him.²⁶¹ His obsession with phoniness repeatedly causes him to alienate himself from people despite his desire to connect with people. Ultimately, his negative identity might provide Holden with a sense of self, but it keeps him socially isolated, which prevents him from getting the social support he craves.

In essence, Holden's heightened distress can primarily be attributed to his unresolved grief over Allie's death, coupled with a lack of parental guidance on how to process these feelings. This emotional turmoil hinders his developmental progress, resulting in a significant identity crisis. Holden's inability to develop a sense of self leaves him indecisive and drifting aimlessly through life. In an attempt to moderate his identity confusion, he constructs a negative identity, centred around a distorted idea of authenticity. However, this pseudo-identity only exacerbates his alienation, preventing him from finding an alternative source of social support to his parents. Deprived of any meaningful social support and lacking

²⁵⁹ Salinger, 142.

²⁶⁰ Salinger, 142.

²⁶¹ Salinger, 167.

emotional regulation skills, Holden's narration exhibits signs of low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation—common traits among neglected adolescents according to academic scholarship. As such, Holden, like Hamlet, remains a relevant depiction of teenage angst for present-day audiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

Consumerism Without a Cause: Contemporary Teenage Angst in *Thirteen*

The independent film *Thirteen*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2003 and has received critical acclaim.²⁶² The narrative follows thirteen-year-old Tracy Freeland, who lives in Los Angeles with her mother Melanie—a recovering alcoholic and divorced single parent—and her older brother Mason. Tracy is introduced as a quiet seventh grader who spends her free time writing poetry and doing homework. Her life begins to shift when she befriends the popular and charismatic Evie Zamora, who is in the grade above her. The two quickly become very close friends and Tracy begins to emulate Evie, resulting in her becoming increasingly involved in high-risk activities such as substance use, sexual experimentation, and theft. *Thirteen* has received several accolades, including the Silver Leopard Award at the Locarno Film Festival and the Dramatic Directing Award at Sundance, and has been widely praised for its raw and realistic portrayal of adolescent turmoil and the contemporary complexities of adolescent identity formation; it has also been critiqued by some scholars for severely exaggerating teenage delinquency.²⁶³ With themes such as teenage rebellion, youth crime, and substance abuse, *Thirteen* aligns with the tradition of juvenile delinquency films, as outlined in Chapter One.²⁶⁴ However, in contrast to the films of the 1950s—which emerged in response to a widespread moral panic concerning the perceived moral decline of youth—*Thirteen* sought to raise awareness about the realities of contemporary adolescent delinquency. Rather than reinforcing societal fears,

²⁶² Pennick, (2023); Aguilar, (2023); Papamicheal, (2003).

²⁶³ Kathleen Rowe, “Film As Cultural Antidote: Thirteen and the Maternal Melodrama.” *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 4 (2006): 454. doi:10.1080/14680770600989889.

²⁶⁴ Ashmore, “Bad Boys, Reform School Girls, and Teenage Werewolves: The Juvenile Delinquency Film in Postwar America.”

the film aimed to inform the audience about adolescents' struggles, particularly in light of the fact that many adults underestimated the severity or complexity of these issues and believed there was little cause for concern.²⁶⁵ The screenplay was co-authored by Catherine Hardwicke and Nikki Reed—who was thirteen at the time and portrays Evie in the film.²⁶⁶ The script is loosely based on Reed's own experiences, lending authenticity to its depiction of a troubled teenager's life. The film resonated with audiences globally and continues to do so more than two decades after its release. At its core, *Thirteen* explores the challenges faced by adolescents, particular young women, growing up in a consumer-driven culture, particularly in the absence of the consistent parental guidance and emotional support needed to navigate this environment safely.

At the outset of the film, Tracy appears to share a generally positive and affectionate relationship with her mother, Melanie. In an early scene, Melanie is able to soothe Tracy's irritation through physical affection by gently stroking her hair. Tracy visibly relaxes and leans into the gesture, expressing closeness by saying, "I can't be mad at you when you do that."²⁶⁷ Furthermore, Tracy seeks to share a poem she wrote with her mother—a melancholic piece that hints at Tracy's underlying emotional distress.²⁶⁸ When Melanie promises to discuss Tracy's poem after her Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting, Tracy smiles and agrees. However, this initially positive bond begins to deteriorate quickly, primarily due to Tracy experiencing parental neglect, as her mother struggles to act on her good intentions.

Melanie's neglect does not stem from a lack of affection for her children. In fact, she deeply cares for Tracy and Mason, which is best illustrated by her assertion to Tracy near the

²⁶⁵ Rachel Wallace, "When Teenage Angst Went Mainstream," *Vogue*, August 16, 2024. <https://www.vogue.com/article/when-teenage-angst-went-mainstream-thirteen-cut-emo>.

²⁶⁶ Wallace, "When Teenage Angst Went Mainstream."

²⁶⁷ *Thirteen*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke (2003; Twentieth Century Fox, 2004), DVD. 00:05:40.

²⁶⁸ *Thirteen*, 00:05:42.

end of the film: “I love you and your brother more than anything in the world.”²⁶⁹ Instead, Melanie’s neglect is primarily caused by the challenges and constraints she faces as a single parent in a low-income household. Single-parent households resulting from divorce are a prevalent phenomenon in many contemporary Western societies.²⁷⁰ Adolescents raised in such households are at a heightened risk of receiving insufficient emotional support, affection, and guidance, as the presence of only one caregiver reduces the availability of these resources.²⁷¹ Consequently, single parents may place “higher demands on [their] children’s self reliance,”²⁷² while simultaneously providing reduced levels of “parental monitoring.”²⁷³ Moreover, these household frequently experience financial struggles, which “limits options for leisure time activities and investments in education, but can also bring about strains in the family system that undermine parenting.”²⁷⁴ These challenges may prompt adolescents to seek autonomy and emotional detachment from their family at an earlier age than usual. Melanie’s situation is illustrative of this pattern.

Melanie supports her family by working as a home-based hairdresser. Her ex-husband, Travis, is inconsistent with his child support, often forcing Melanie to work long hours, including some evenings, which limits the time and energy she can devote to her children. Even when Melanie is not working, much of her time is often occupied with running errands, grocery-shopping, or attending AA meetings, further limiting her availability to be present for her children. A deleted scene from the film reveals an instance in which Tracy is left alone until late at night while Melanie attends an AA meeting.²⁷⁵ This

²⁶⁹ *Thirteen*, 01:31:28.

²⁷⁰ Sabine Walper and Katharina Beckh, “Adolescents’ Development in High-Conflict and Separated Families: Evidence from a German Longitudinal Study,” in *Families Count*, 238–70 (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 238.

²⁷¹ Walper and Beckh, 240.

²⁷² Walper and Beckh, 241.

²⁷³ Walper and Beckh, 241.

²⁷⁴ Walper and Beckh, 240.

²⁷⁵ “Gifts from Dad,” available as a “Deleted Scenes” feature under “Special Features” on the DVD *Thirteen*.

reveals that after spending the entire afternoon working, Melanie was absent for the remainder of the evening as well, resulting in minimal interaction with Tracy that day—an occurrence portrayed as routine. This lack of parental supervision results in Tracy frequently being left unattended at home, providing her with opportunities to engage in problematic behaviour, such as smoking her mother's cigarettes and leaving the house to visit Melrose Avenue²⁷⁶ without permission. It is reasonable to leave teenagers at home unsupervised on occasion; both Tracy and Mason are generally capable of managing themselves for short periods. However, Melanie's frequent unavailability prevents her from exercising the consistent behavioural oversight and discipline that Tracy requires—a need previously outlined in Chapter One.²⁷⁷ Due to Melanie's numerous commitments and limited time, she relies on Tracy and her brother Mason to manage some responsibilities independently and even assist her at times. Mason, for instance, is often tasked with helping his mother take care of Tracy, such as reminding Tracy to clean her room or locating her when she is out past dark. Tracy is expected to babysit Kayla, the young daughter of Melanie's friend Birdie, while Melanie and Birdie attend AA meetings together. This occurs even when it is inconvenient for Tracy to do so, such as when she has a school project to work on, adding to her frustrations about her home life and her mother's neglect of her needs.²⁷⁸

Melanie also fails to provide a stable home for Tracy. The Freeland household becomes increasingly chaotic as Melanie allows others to impose upon their living space. She allows her boyfriend, Brady, to move back in following his return from a stay at a halfway house, where he had been residing due to a relapse in his cocaine addiction. Tracy is infuriated by his presence, because she does not want him back in her life. When she finds Brady's clothes in the dryer, a sign that he is back, Tracy expresses her outrage by yelling at

²⁷⁶ Melrose Avenue is a famous shopping and entertainment street in Los Angeles.

²⁷⁷ Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger, (2005).

²⁷⁸ *Thirteen*, 00:07:13.

her mother and throwing the clothes at her in a fit of rage.²⁷⁹ At that moment, Melanie is occupied with one of her hair salon clients and therefore unable to attend to Tracy, who begins to hyperventilate and shows visible signs of emotional distress. In addition to Brady, Melanie permits Birdie and Kayla to move in as well, after they lose their home. Tracy reacts to this development with a sarcastic remark, “Why not open a hotel, mom? You know, you should get paid for all this,”²⁸⁰ and later refers to the additional occupants as “freeloaders,”²⁸¹ further underscoring her resentment. This resentment is justifiable, as it arises from Tracy’s growing frustration with Melanie’s emotional neglect; the presence of these additional individuals further diminishes Melanie’s capacity to meet her daughter’s psychological and emotional needs.

While Melanie’s decision to house Birdie and Kayla can be interpreted as an act of altruism and loyalty, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding her ability to prioritise her parental responsibilities. Accommodating two additional individuals imposes further economic strain on the household, given Melanie’s limited financial means. It also exacerbates the already existing chaos and instability brought into the household by Brady and Evie.²⁸² Moreover, Melanie’s time and emotional availability for Tracy are already severely limited, and the arrival of Birdie and Kayla further diminishes her capacity to address her daughter’s escalating emotional and behavioural challenges. Prior to their arrival, Melanie, Tracy, and Mason were engaged in a heated argument concerning Tracy’s increasingly difficult and troublesome behaviour. This confrontation is abruptly ended when Birdie and Kayla arrive, especially as Kayla begins to cry due to overhearing the argument. As a result, the family’s attention shifts entirely to the new guests—Brady and Mason assist

²⁷⁹ *Thirteen*, 00:30:30.

²⁸⁰ *Thirteen*, 00:53:35.

²⁸¹ *Thirteen*, 01:13:33.

²⁸² Karlyn, “Film as Cultural Antidote,” 460.

Birdie with her belongings, while Melanie consoles Kayla—leaving the original family conflict unresolved. Melanie attempts to connect with Tracy and have a private conversation with her after Tracy leaves the room upset, but the presence of Evie and Kayla—who are jumping on the bed—makes meaningful communication between mother and daughter nearly impossible. Consequently, Tracy experiences emotional neglect as her mother’s compulsive generosity and tendency to prioritise the needs of others come at the expense of her daughter’s need for a stable, secure home environment and consistent parental engagement.

Melanie’s inability to prioritise her family’s needs is mainly due to her difficulty with establishing appropriate boundaries. Birdie and Kayla’s arrival is abrupt and uninvited—Birdie does not ask for permission, but instead assumes her friend will accommodate her, saying, “I’d thought we’d crash here for a couple of days, just until my check comes in,”²⁸³ while moving her belongings into the living room. Birdie’s conduct suggests that she is unaccustomed to Melanie denying her help, whether due to inconvenience or other considerations. Melanie responds to Birdie’s announcement with a subdued agreement, replying, “Yeah, sure, just for a couple of days,” and never mentions that the timing is inconvenient due to ongoing family problems. Her response reflects a persistent difficulty in setting personal boundaries and an inclination to prioritise the needs of others, even when doing so compromises her capacity to attend to the pressing needs of her own family. This demeanour also allows Tracy and Evie to manipulate Melanie into letting Evie move in with them. They tell Melanie that Evie has been abused by her uncle, knowing that this will make Melanie unlikely to send Evie home. In a rare private moment between mother and daughter, Melanie confronts Tracy about this: “Why did you put me on the spot with that poor little girl? I can’t reject someone like that to her face,” to which Tracy responds knowingly, “I

²⁸³ *Thirteen*, 00:53:19.

know, Mom.”²⁸⁴ This exchange reveals that Tracy feels compelled to manipulate her mother in order to have her needs met. When she does not resort to manipulation, her needs often go unfulfilled, largely due to Melanie’s struggles with boundary-setting and the other previously mentioned factors.

As noted above, Melanie fails to provide firmness and behavioural control for Tracy due to often being absent or being otherwise occupied. However, even when Melanie is present and available, she still fails to effectively encourage prosocial behaviour in Tracy through enforcing clear behavioural rules and expectations. Her occasional attempts to assert parental authority are often undermined by her inability to remain firm in the face of confrontation. For instance, after Tracy created a disruptive scene upon discovering Brady’s clothes in the dryer—an incident that unfolds in front of one of Melanie’s clients—Melanie initially responds with apparent authority. After her client has left, she approaches Tracy’s room, knocks firmly, and states, “Tracy Louise Freeland, conference time, now! You do not pull a scene like that in front of a client.”²⁸⁵ However, her assertiveness quickly dissipates once she is confronted by her daughter in person. Tracy yanks the door open and curtly says, “I’m on the phone.” When Melanie instructs her to end the call, Tracy replies, “It’s Dad. He’s with the baby,” a statement that effectively ends her mother’s assertiveness. Tracy’s confident posture and tone during this exchange suggests she is well-aware of the emotional leverage this statement gives her and her readiness to manipulate the situation to her advantage. Melanie, unable to respond, falls silent, allowing Tracy to close the door on her without consequence. The matter is subsequently dropped and never addressed again. This interaction illustrates Melanie’s inability to enforce behavioural control and highlights a broader pattern of ineffective parenting.

²⁸⁴ *Thirteen*, 01:14:07.

²⁸⁵ *Thirteen*, 00:31:38.

While it is developmentally normative for adolescents to challenge boundaries in their pursuit of autonomy, a consistent failure by parents to intervene can significantly increase the risk of behavioural escalation.²⁸⁶ Tracy's persistent defiance and manipulation, therefore, may not only be interpreted as the result of a lack of behavioural regulation but also as a symptom of unmet emotional needs. Excessive rebellion in adolescents is often indicative of neglect, as such behaviours can emerge from attempts to fulfil their needs through alternative—and potentially harmful—means. Consequently, Tracy's oppositional and manipulative behaviour can be understood as a direct result of Melanie's failure to provide consistent parental structure and emotional support.

Melanie also demonstrates a tendency to avoid conflict and turn a blind eye to problematic behaviour. While such avoidance is a common and understandable human response, it does not diminish the potentially harmful consequences for Tracy when Melanie fails to address or intervene in her daughter's self-destructive actions. While Melanie may not be fully aware of the extent of Tracy's misconduct, she is not entirely oblivious to it either. In the film's concluding scene, Tracy exposes her mother's denial when she states, "You knew what was going on with all those clothes and shit,"²⁸⁷ referring to all the new clothes and accessories that Tracy had acquired over the past few months. Melanie responds, "I didn't know it went that far," confirming that she was indeed aware of Tracy's illicit activities on some level, but she chose not to intervene or acknowledge it. This selective denial extends to Tracy's substance use as well. In one scene, Tracy returns home visibly intoxicated, requiring physical support from Evie to maintain her balance and interacts with Melanie and Brady in a manner that clearly indicates she is under the influence of a substance.²⁸⁸ Despite the clear

²⁸⁶ Morgan Brooks Conway and Paul Vermette, "Lessons for Middle School Teachers from the Film *Thirteen*," *Middle School Journal* 38, no. 2 (2006): 40. doi:10.1080/00940771.2006.11461572.

²⁸⁷ *Thirteen*, 01:29:44.

²⁸⁸ *Thirteen*, 00:23:07.

signs of drug use, Melanie does not confront or even comment on Tracy's condition. Tracy also fails to hide her excessive drinking from her family, as it is apparent to Mason who explicitly voices his concerns to his mother, exclaiming, "she's always fucking drinking!"²⁸⁹ However, Melanie never addresses Tracy's drinking nor takes any intervening action. This lack of response may be attributed to Melanie's own struggles with alcohol, as confronting Tracy's behaviour might evoke uncomfortable confrontations with her own past and failures. Avoidance of conflict and other uncomfortable confrontations can be psychologically understandable. Melanie's behaviour is not exceptional in this regard; as discussed in Chapter Three, Holden's parents exhibit a similar pattern of avoidance. This tendency is further reflected in the number of parents who chose to avoid viewing the film, as they preferred not to be confronted with the "painful realities unfolding in their midst."²⁹⁰ Nonetheless, Melanie's avoidance remains deeply harmful to Tracy, who is in urgent need of parental intervention and guidance. Melanie's frequent inaction regarding her daughter's conduct further reflects her reluctance to engage in difficult confrontations and her inability to enforce behavioural rules, contributing to Tracy's escalating behavioural issues.

Tracy's father, Travis, is largely absent from her life. He has a new family and a new job and rarely has time for Tracy. His frequent cancellations and rescheduling of planned visits leave Tracy feeling deeply frustrated and rejected. She expresses her feelings of paternal rejection in an outburst to Melanie: "He's our fucking father. He's never with us."²⁹¹ Aside from having no time for her, Travis also does not understand what Tracy is going through or needs. In the only scene featuring Travis, he shows up because Melanie reached out to him for support as Tracy's unruly behaviour becomes increasingly unmanageable. He arrives at the house and encounters Melanie on the porch, who tells him: "You have to take

²⁸⁹ *Thirteen*, 00:53:07.

²⁹⁰ Karlyn, "Film as Cultural Antidote," 453–454.

²⁹¹ *Thirteen*, 00:34:38.

her for a while.”²⁹² Travis immediately dismisses the idea, saying he cannot because of work, and then reassures Melanie: “I will talk to her. It’ll be just fine.”²⁹³ He believes that whatever is bothering Tracy can simply be fixed with a conversation, demonstrating he has no clue about the complexity of the situation and Tracy’s needs. When Travis approaches Tracy, she barely acknowledges him, signalling her emotional detachment from him. As he tries to talk to his daughter, his phone keeps going off, interrupting the conversation and frustrating Tracy, “just answer the fucking thing,”²⁹⁴ and demotivating her from talking to her father: “Dad, just go, okay.”²⁹⁵ As Travis prepares to leave again after his brief and vain conversation with Tracy, Mason stands by his car and pleads with him, “She needs help, Dad,” to which Travis replies, “What is the problem? Can someone please just tell me what is the problem? In a nutshell,”²⁹⁶ which underscores the continued lack of awareness regarding the severity and the nature of Tracy’s problems. Instead of attempting to explain, Mason sighs and walks away, revealing his own frustration about his father’s inability to comprehend the situation. Travis’ unavailability and his failure to grasp Tracy’s needs, her problematic behaviours, and the underlying emotional problems she is experiencing render him ineffective as a parental figure to Tracy.

The final potential parental figure in Tracy’s life is Brady. He tries to be a positive presence within the family dynamic by showing dedication to his sobriety, providing support to Melanie, and spending time with Mason. Brady also attempts to bond with Tracy—purchasing a game she wanted and going to the movies with her, Melanie, and Evie. Whenever Tracy directs hostility toward him, he remains patient. During his first dinner with the family after his return from the halfway house, Tracy bluntly asks, “So Brady, how was

²⁹² *Thirteen*, 01:09:24.

²⁹³ *Thirteen*, 01:09:35.

²⁹⁴ *Thirteen*, 01:10:50.

²⁹⁵ *Thirteen*, 01:11:17.

²⁹⁶ *Thirteen*, 01:11:41.

the halfway house?”²⁹⁷ Brady responds calmly and without defensiveness, “The same as the last one, Trace,” demonstrating emotional restraint and allowing Tracy to express his frustration towards him. Despite his efforts, Brady is ultimately unable to serve as a positive parental figure for Tracy. Her rejection of him is unwavering; she is unwilling to offer him a second chance and consistently expresses contempt for him. Tracy’s attitude in this regard parallels Hamlet’s attitude towards his uncle Claudius. Although the exact motivations behind their rejecting of paternal substitutes differ, both Tracy and Hamlet refuse to recognise their stepfathers in any meaningful parental capacity, irrespective of their intentions or behaviour. In both cases, a deeply rooted contempt for an “interloper” obstructs the formation of any genuine relational bond. As a result, Tracy is left without a supportive and emotionally connected parental figure, a condition that significantly contributes to her psychological distress and maladaptive behaviour.

The film presents Tracy as a typical neglected adolescent by portraying her as lacking self-esteem, which is predominantly demonstrated through Tracy’s insecurity. Upon first encountering Evie and her friends at school, Tracy is instantly intimidated by their confidence and their effortless ability to attract the attention of Mason and his friends. She gazes at them in awe before remarking to her friend, Noel, “Shit.”²⁹⁸ In contrast to Tracy—who is bumped into by other students and struggles to capture Mason’s attention—Evie and her peers navigate the complex social environment of a high school with ease and command attention without difficulty. A few days later, Astrid, one of Evie’s friends, mocks Tracy’s appearance, “Nice socks; who let her out of the cabbage patch,”²⁹⁹ which deeply affects Tracy. Upon returning home, she expresses her distress by discarding her socks and telling her mother that

²⁹⁷ *Thirteen*, 00:17:10.

²⁹⁸ *Thirteen*, 00:04:20.

²⁹⁹ *Thirteen*, 00:08:00.

she needs new clothes because she now perceives herself as looking “stupid.”³⁰⁰ The following day, Tracy has altered both her clothing and hairstyle to mirror the appearance of Evie and her social circle. This shift suggests a pronounced insecurity, whereby a single critical comment suffices to prompt Tracy to succumb to peer pressure and instantly abandon a style in which she had previously felt comfortable. Adolescents are generally more susceptible to peer influence than adults, as they are often preoccupied with social conformity and the desire to fit in.³⁰¹ However, research indicates that adolescents who experience neglect—such as Tracy—are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure³⁰² due to diminished self-esteem, which further compromises their ability to assert individual identity in the face of social influence.

Tracy’s lack of confidence is further highlighted when she hesitates to approach Evie and Astrid in a shop. She momentarily pauses to compose herself, revealing her social anxiety. Once Tracy has succeeded in befriending Evie, she shows herself to be very self-conscious about her previous identity. She does not dare be authentic out of fear of being rejected by Evie. She ignores all her old friends, as they do not meet Evie’s standards. When Noel approaches her and Evie outside Tracy’s house, Tracy attempts to ignore her, turning her back to Noel, visibly uncomfortable with the idea of Evie witnessing her association with a former, less socially prestigious friend.

Since Tracy lacks a supportive and available parent, she craves support and intimacy. Moreover, her premature desire for autonomy and emotional detachment from her family heightens her inclination to form a deep and meaningful connection with someone outside of her family.³⁰³ Tracy’s friendship with Evie extends beyond a superficial effort to assimilate

³⁰⁰ *Thirteen*, 00:09:01.

³⁰¹ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 3.

³⁰² Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, and Metzger, “Patterns of Competence,” 53.

³⁰³ Walper and Beckh, (2006).

into the popular crowd; rather it represents an attempt to fulfil unmet emotional needs. Tracy spends nearly all her time with Evie, shares a bed with her, and eventually moves Evie into her home, indicating a desire to create an alternative familial structure. This dynamic offers a critical reflection on the idealised notion of the nuclear family. The “American Dream,” deeply ingrained in U.S. cultural ideology, is traditionally associated with a stable household comprising two parents, children, and home ownership.³⁰⁴ American societal structures are largely built around this model, making it particularly difficult for single parents like Melanie to meet both economic and caregiving demands. Raising a child while earning a sufficient income typically requires the presence of two adults; thus, those outside the nuclear family model often lack adequate systemic support. Melanie receives neither government assistance nor institutional support from Tracy’s school, forcing her to manage all responsibilities alone. As a result, despite her good intentions, Tracy experiences neglect. Tracy’s desire to have Evie move in with her can be interpreted as her trying to find an adequate alternative to the nuclear family concept—one that compensates for the emotional and social support absent in her current home environment. Thus, Tracy seeks Evie’s friendship and wants to move her friend into her house because she seeks to fulfil needs that the conventional nuclear family is presumed to meet but that her single-parent household cannot provide.

This interest in Evie is further emphasised by Tracy’s treatment of Evie’s social group. While Tracy interacts with Evie’s other friends at school, she notably refrains from inviting any of them into her home, underscoring her desire to have an intimate and exclusive bond with Evie. Their friendship is also marked by a high degree of physical closeness. The girls frequently walk with their arms interlocked or holding hands, and they often sit very close to each other. One night when Tracy lies next to Evie in bed, she affectionately

³⁰⁴ Wilcox, (2020).

remarks, “We are so perfect for each other,”³⁰⁵ while Evie holds her and gently strokes her arm. These behaviours reflect the depth of Tracy’s emotional dependency and the comfort she derives from physical intimacy in the absence of stable parental affection.

This dynamic forms a stark contrast to Tracy’s relationship with her mother. Whereas Tracy was initially able to derive comfort from physical contact with Melanie at the start of the film, she increasingly withdraws from her mother’s touch as the film progresses, particularly during moments of conflict. After a fight with Mason, Melanie attempts to console Tracy, but Tracy violently pushes her away, exclaiming: “Mom, don’t touch me!”³⁰⁶ Evie, by contrast, is consistently permitted access to Tracy’s physical space, demonstrating Tracy’s desire to detach from her family by reallocating her primary source of comfort from her parent to her friend.

Tracy also exhibits pronounced anxiety surrounding social rejection and exclusion. She becomes visibly jealous when Evie’s attention is shifting toward others. This is particularly evident in a scene where Evie flirts with Luke, Tracy’s 21-year-old neighbour. Tracy’s discomfort is conveyed through her closed body language—leaning in the doorway with crossed arms and a sullen expression.³⁰⁷ Tracy’s mood is briefly lifted when Evie pulls her over to dance with her, but Tracy’s smile quickly fades again once Evie includes Luke, clearly conveying her aversion for Evie directing her attention towards someone else.

Tracy resorts to self-mutilation as a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to perceived rejection. Self-mutilation, or non-suicidal self-injury, refers to an act “that inflicts injury on one’s own body, causing tissue damage and scarring, without the intent to cause suicide, and for purposes not socially sanctioned.”³⁰⁸ Hence why getting a piercing is not

³⁰⁵ *Thirteen*, 00:48:30.

³⁰⁶ *Thirteen*, 01:01:38.

³⁰⁷ *Thirteen*, 00:49:51.

³⁰⁸ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 189.

considered self-mutilation as this act is socially accepted. Self-mutilation is a particularly prevalent mental health concern among adolescents and most commonly manifested through cutting, which Tracy exhibits. This behaviour is employed as a maladaptive means “to manage their feelings, relieve stress, or experience some feeling when they feel numb.”³⁰⁹ However, some individuals engage in self-mutilation for attention or social acceptance. In Tracy’s case, her cutting is non-suicidal as her injuries are not severe enough to be lethal. Her motivations are unrelated to seeking attention or conforming to peer groups, evidenced by her concealment of her scars beneath long sleeves or wristbands and her refusal to disclose her behaviour to anyone, including Evie. Evie does not appear to engage in self-harm; she often wears revealing clothing and her skin shows no scars. Tracy’s self-injury functions primarily as a means to regulate her emotional state; for instance, when Evie chooses to spend an evening with a boy rather than with her, Tracy retreats to the bathroom to cut herself, attempting to numb the emotional pain caused by Evie’s perceived abandonment.³¹⁰ Tracy’s emotional distress is underscored by her crying. Additionally, Tracy self-harms following Mason’s disclosure that their parents are considering the possibility of her moving in with their father, which she interprets as maternal rejection. When Melanie attempts to comfort her distraught daughter in a later scene, Tracy recoils from her mother’s touch, shoving her away, saying, “Mason said you want me to move in with Dad. You don’t want me,”³¹¹ revealing her internalised hurt. This reaction simultaneously reveals that, despite her consistent efforts throughout the film to distance herself from Melanie and seek emotional connection beyond the family unit, Tracy has an ongoing, albeit conflicted, desire for maternal affection and support—a tension which has also been noted in *Hamlet* and *The Catcher in the Rye* in the previous two chapters. The frantic manner in which Tracy searches for a sharp object in the

³⁰⁹ Muscari, *Child Behavioral and Parenting Challenges*, 190.

³¹⁰ *Thirteen*, 00:38:10–00:40:05.

³¹¹ *Thirteen*, 01:31:34.

third self-harm scene, in contrast to her more composed behaviour during the earlier two scenes, signifies how reliant she has become on self-mutilation as a coping mechanism. Although only three specific instances of cutting are depicted explicitly, the numerous scars on Tracy's arm reveals not only the high frequency with which she engages in this behaviour, but it also suggests recurrent episodes of emotional turmoil driven by feelings of rejection.

The film's *mise-en-scène* underscores the problematic nature of this particular coping mechanism. The scenes of self-injury are all confined to the small, dimly lit bathroom of the household, with nighttime settings enhancing the gloomy atmosphere. The cramped environment symbolises Tracy's sense of emotional entrapment, while the darkness reflects her troubled mental state. Camera angles that look downward during her cutting episodes, coupled with her sitting on the floor, emphasise that she is at a low point emotionally. The recurring fade-outs to black at the end of these scenes symbolise the deepening darkness affecting Tracy's life, visually emphasising the destructive impact of her self-mutilating behaviour.

The film also foregrounds how Tracy's neglect has led to substance abuse, which serves as another maladaptive strategy for coping with emotional dysregulation in addition to her self-harm. In the absence of a stable support system and without the necessary skills to manage her psychological distress, Tracy—like Holden Caulfield—turns to drugs and alcohol as a means of alleviating her negative emotions. This progression is facilitated by the widespread availability of substances within her environment, making such behaviour an accessible and conventional option. As substance use is a part of consumer culture, Tracy is immersed in a milieu where substance use is normalised and available: Tracy is surrounded by adults in recovery, Brooke, Evie's guardian, consumes beer in the afternoon in the presence of Evie and Tracy; Mason regularly smokes pot; and Tracy's surroundings offer easy access to drugs—Luke, her neighbour, has weeds in his home; Tracy can easily obtain

or deal drugs in the nearby park; and Melanie keeps cigarettes in the house. The film begins with Tracy and Evie getting high by huffing from an aerosol can of air freshener—an item likely found within their household or readily purchasable at a store—further highlighting the easy and wide availability of substances. As noted in Chapter One, repeated exposure to specific behaviours or ideas can cause individuals to perceive them as normative, gradually diminishing any initial perception of risk or threat.³¹² Within this context, Tracy’s environment exerts a normalising influence on her understanding of substance use. Despite being surrounded by adults in recovery, she likely underestimates the associated dangers, which have significantly increased the likelihood that Tracy would eventually engage in harmful substance use herself.

Tracy already exhibited a reliance on mood-affecting substances prior to her friendship with Evie. For instance, upon discovering that Evie gave her a fake phone number at school, Tracy reacts with visible frustration—kicking groceries around the kitchen—and subsequently smokes one of Melanie’s cigarettes to regulate her emotions.³¹³ After befriending Evie, Tracy’s substance abuse escalates significantly. Evie not only introduces her to a wider array of drugs and alcohol but also involves her in drug dealing. Tracy initially imitates Evie’s substance use mainly due to her lack of confidence in asserting herself and her desire to secure and sustain Evie’s friendship. When Evie offers Tracy her first high, Tracy exhibits hesitation but ultimately accepts.³¹⁴ However, over time, her drug use shifts from being driven by social acceptance to serving as a means of coping with psychological distress. While some of Tracy’s drug use appears recreational—such as huffing the air freshener—a considerable portion clearly functions as a coping mechanism in moments of emotional distress. For instance, after a heated argument with her mother, and upon

³¹² Ruggeri, “How the Abnormal Gets Normalised.”

³¹³ *Thirteen*, 00:11:30.

³¹⁴ *Thirteen*, 00:21:20.

discovering that her bedroom has been violated by Kayla and the family dog who were sleeping in her bed, Tracy is shown snorting crushed pills.³¹⁵ This behaviour underscores how her emotional pain exacerbates her vulnerability to drug use, particularly given her lack of alternative sources of support or healthier coping strategies in her life.

Tracy's other externalised behaviours include delinquency and aggression. When Mason threatens to disclose that Tracy got her navel pierced, she responds with physical aggression.³¹⁶ She attacks her brother and even brandishes a hockey stick. Similarly, Tracy pushes Melanie away with force on various occasions during moments of conflict. In addition, she often expresses her anger or frustration through actions such as kicking objects or throwing items, demonstrating poor impulse control and difficulty regulating intense emotions.

Tracy's delinquent behaviour includes theft, shoplifting, and drug dealing. Melanie fails to exert sufficient behavioural control or provide the structure necessary to deter her daughter from engaging in these activities, or to prevent Evie's influence in encouraging them. Tracy's initial engagement in delinquency appears to be driven by her desire for social acceptance and emotional closeness with Evie. After witnessing Evie and Astrid shoplift on Melrose Avenue, Tracy steals a woman's wallet to gain their approval.³¹⁷ Over time, however, her criminal behaviour becomes increasingly instrumental—not only as a means of solidifying her bond with Evie and fulfilling her emotional needs, but also to finance and sustain her new lifestyle. Her access to drugs, alcohol, and fashionable clothing becomes dependent on either stealing or acquiring money through other illicit means such as drug dealing. Economic frustration also motivates Tracy's theft. When confronted by Melanie

³¹⁵ *Thirteen*, 01:05:55.

³¹⁶ *Thirteen*, 01:01:16.

³¹⁷ *Thirteen*, 00:14:30.

about her behaviour, Tracy defensively justifies her actions by stating, “It’s not like your broke ass ever has any money to give me,”³¹⁸ revealing her resentment and sense of deprivation about the financial instability within the household. The remark also underscores her internalised belief that participation in consumer culture—particularly through the acquisition of specific products—is necessary for social acceptance.

Aside from parental neglect, Tracy’s interest in Evie is also related to her identity formation. At thirteen, Tracy is at the early stages of adolescence and has yet to develop an identity.³¹⁹ As she begins seventh grade and transitions into a new school environment, she enters a more complex and socially demanding environment that prompts self-exploration and re-evaluation. In this process of identity formation, it is both normative and essential for adolescents to experiment with different more mature personas, as such experimentation is a fundamental aspect of the development of an adult identity.³²⁰ Tracy’s desire to adopt a more mature identity is made evident by her dislike for being perceived as a child. When Melanie affectionately calls Tracy “baby,” Tracy pointedly replies, “I’m not your baby.”³²¹ Personal expression and identity formation in contemporary society is established in part through consumerism.³²² Hardwicke reflects this prominently in the film, by making Tracy’s clothing a main marker of her social status. Astrid attributes an immature identity to Tracy based on her attire. Subsequently, Tracy changes her identity by buying new clothes and discarding all the childish items from her bedroom, symbolically shedding her childhood. In this regard, Tracy’s identity exploration is following the norm.³²³ However, her exploration ultimately

³¹⁸ *Thirteen*, 01:29:17.

³¹⁹ Bogaerts et al, (2021).

³²⁰ Priest, “The Catcher in the Rye and the ill member of the group,” 214–215.

³²¹ *Thirteen*, 00:08:38.

³²² Karlyn, “Film as Cultural Antidote,” 454.

³²³ Karlyn, 454.

unfolds in a problematic manner, as she seeks to explore maturity by adopting Evie's dysfunctional and socially deviant identity.

Despite her popularity, Evie's identity still constitutes as a negative identity. The film serves in part a commentary on "the pressure [on women] to spend money and expend effort in cultivating their physical beauty"³²⁴ in the modern Western consumer culture. Thus, on the surface, Evie and Tracy appear to conform to these societal expectations by putting extra effort in their appearance. However, by taking it to an extreme level, they oppose societal norms. Their attires are overly sexualised, featuring revealing tops, tongue and navel piercings, and thongs exposed above low-rise jeans. Hardwicke visually accentuates these sexualised elements through close-up shots of visible thongs, navel piercings protruding beneath crop tops, and sexually provocative clothing and accessories available in shops along Melrose Avenue that Tracy and Evie regularly visit. Furthermore, the girls often explicitly model their sexualised outfits for others; for instance, in one scene, Tracy asks Melanie "You want me to model my new thong?"³²⁵ while lifting her top slightly to display the garment. In contrast, most female characters outside of Evie's social circle are not depicted wearing such provocative clothing. This contrast is particularly evident in a scene where Evie, Tracy, and Astrid confidently walk through the school wearing sexualised outfits and heavy makeup. They pass two other teenage girls who are dressed more modestly and look on the trio disapprovingly,³²⁶ highlighting the tension between conformity and excess.

Evie's identity is not solely shaped by outward appearance but also by negative behavioural patterns and lifestyle choices. Evie's character is notably associated with manipulative behaviour,³²⁷ excessive substance use, and involvement in criminal activities.

³²⁴ Karlyn, "Film as Cultural Antidote," 456.

³²⁵ *Thirteen*, 01:08:06.

³²⁶ *Thirteen*, 00:26:55.

³²⁷ Karlyn, 461.

Evie is also portrayed as overly promiscuous. During her first overnight stay at Tracy's home, Evie—dressed in a tank top and shorts—performs a seductive dance in front of Mason and sings “move your g-string down south.”³²⁸ She concludes her performative display by lifting her top and flashing her breasts to Mason. This scene is predominantly shot from a frontal perspective, with Mason positioned in the background. Tracy is situated adjacent to Evie in the foreground, thereby emphasising her immediate reaction over Mason's. Tracy's response to her friend's behaviour is expressed explicitly through both nonverbal cues—her visibly repulsed body language—and verbal articulation, exemplified by her exclamation, “Dude, no, that is so gross! That's my brother.”³²⁹ Conversely, Mason remains motionless in the background, halted in his actions (as he was in the process of putting on a T-shirt), and gazes silently at Evie. Following Evie's act of lifting her top, a close-up shot of Mason's face is employed to now accentuate his reaction. While Mason exhibits subtle signs of covert enjoyment, indicated by a slight smile, he predominantly appears intimidated by Evie, as evidenced by the sheepish expression on his face. This starkly contrasts with his typical confident and uninhibited demeanour, particularly in interactions with women, as he is rendered speechless in this context. Moreover, the scene lacks any visual framing that would suggest Mason's sexualised gaze toward Evie, further implying that he is actively not viewing her as an object of sexual desire in this instance. Considering Tracy's evident disgust and Mason's visible discomfort, it is clear that Evie's conduct is not perceived as normative flirtation by either sibling. Evie often engages in such inappropriate flirtatious behaviours with multiple persons, including adult men considerably older than herself. Aside from attempting to seduce Luke, she flirts with Brady³³⁰ and makes advances on the owner of a piercing shop.³³¹ The exact motivations behind Evie's seductive behaviours remain

³²⁸ *Thirteen*, 00:26:18.

³²⁹ *Thirteen*, 00:26:21.

³³⁰ *Thirteen*, 00:25:41.

³³¹ *Thirteen*, 00:27:45.

ambiguous. Although she claims to have experienced physical and sexual abuse—which could explain her conduct as a maladaptive coping mechanism³³²—the veracity of these claims is uncertain, given her propensity for lying. It is plausible that her behaviour is at least in part caused by neglect at home. Evie resides with her cousin Brooke, who—similar to Melanie—is a single caregiver working a low-income job. Consequently, Brooke also lacks the necessary resources to provide the stable environment and parental guidance Evie requires. In comparison to Tracy, Evie appears to experience an even greater degree of instability and parental neglect. Hardwicke communicates this disparity through the contrast between the girls' personal living spaces. Tracy's bedroom is properly furnished, decorated, and filled with personal belongings, reflecting a certain degree of care and investment from Melanie. In contrast, Evie's bedroom is sparsely furnished, minimally decorated, and contains notably less possessions, suggesting a more profound absence of parental involvement and emotional security. This visual contrast underscores the extent of Evie's unmet needs and supports the interpretation that her disruptive and hypersexualised behaviours may serve as maladaptive strategies to cope with or compensate for the neglect she experiences at home.

Evie's and Tracy's behaviour is also subjected to significant criticism from nearly all individuals outside their immediate group of friends, reflecting its deviation from prevailing social norms and expectations. Although Mason initially harbours a crush on Evie, he eventually becomes disenchanted with her after spending more time with her. Toward the conclusion of the film, when Evie attempts to sit on his lap and inquires whether he would like to take photographs of her, Mason rejects her advances with evident disgust, stating, "No Evie, I don't,"³³³ and tries to push her off his lap. As mentioned above, he also criticises

³³² Karlyn, "Film as Cultural Antidote," 462.

³³³ *Thirteen*, 01:16:51.

Tracy's drinking and expresses concern about his sister's behaviour to his father. Tracy's former friends also express disapproval of her transformed appearance and demeanour. Their discomfort is evident when Tracy arrives late to class dressed in her newly adopted, provocative style; they initially stare at her in disbelief before deliberately averting their gaze.³³⁴ Toward the end of the film, their disapproval becomes more explicit as they confront her for neglecting both the group project and their friendship over the preceding months.³³⁵ Their refusal to make eye contact with Tracy during this exchange further underscores their sense of disappointment and estrangement. Melanie becomes increasingly frustrated and distressed by Tracy's behaviour and ultimately seeks support from her sponsor, a friend, and Tracy's father in managing the situation. Additionally, Tracy experiences academic difficulties, with her teachers reprimanding her for her declining performance and tardiness.

Ultimately, Tracy recognises the destructive consequences of her newly adopted identity. Her first realisation occurs when she is frantically concealing bruises on her face—sustained during rough, intoxicated play with Evie—using makeup in the school bathroom.³³⁶ She then stares at her reflection in the mirror, engaging in a prolonged moment of silent self-reflection. The visual composition of the scene is deliberately bleak and desaturated, underscoring the deteriorated state of Tracy's life. Later, while in the car with Melanie and Evie after school, Tracy numbly remarks, "I can't even remember how to spell photographer,"³³⁷ her expression blank and distant. This statement not only reveals her awareness of her academic decline but also a sense of regret over the direction her life has taken. This moment of vulnerability appears to prompt Melanie's decision to send Evie to her own home, rather than continue housing her. When Evie makes a final plea to stay, Tracy,

³³⁴ *Thirteen*, 00:27:04.

³³⁵ *Thirteen*, 01:17:07.

³³⁶ *Thirteen*, 01:18:07.

³³⁷ *Thirteen*, 01:18:39.

albeit hesitantly, aligns herself with her mother, responding, “Evie, I mean, Brooke is back, so...”³³⁸ and shrugs in surrender to her mother’s decision. Moreover, whereas Tracy previously maintained consistent physical closeness to Evie and distanced herself from Melanie, she is now standing next to her mother and opposite Evie—visually symbolising her emerging desire to establish boundaries and create distance from Evie. Although Tracy still follows Evie when she storms off in distress, when she finds Evie crying alone in the backyard, Tracy quietly withdraws and returns inside, rather than offering comfort. This moment decisively signals Tracy’s emotional detachment from Evie and her withdrawal from the intimacy that had previously characterised their relationship. Thus, although adopting Evie’s identity grants Tracy more social recognition at school and is partially rooted in consumerist cultural norms, it ultimately constitutes a negative and self-destructive identity.

Tracy chooses to adopt Evie’s identity due to the absence of alternative role models she considers desirable or worthy of emulation. Research indicates that adolescents are more likely to develop negative identities when there are “few adult figures they considered worthy of emulation but numerous figures they wished never to resemble.”³³⁹ This phenomenon applies to Tracy’s case, as her immediate environment fails to provide desirable, mature role models. Her mother is not a desirable role model, as Melanie is a recovering alcoholic, lacks assertiveness, and struggles to provide financial stability. Similarly, Brady is a recovering addict, who Tracy dismissively refers to as a “loser.” The majority of Melanie’s social circle are also in recovery and likewise fail to represent aspirational identities. Tracy’s father fails to serve as a meaningful role model due to being largely absent from his daughter’s life. Tracy’s former friend group is characterised by social invisibility and immaturity, indicated by them wearing the same juvenile style that initially subjected Tracy to ridicule and rendered

³³⁸ *Thirteen*, 01:20:58

³³⁹ Hihara, Sugimura, and Syed, “Forming a Negative Identity in Contemporary Society Forming a negative identity,” 327.

her invisible. Thus, in the absence of better alternatives, Tracy emulates Evie's identity as a means of navigating her identity crisis, and, subsequently, to forge an intimate connection with her that compensates for the emotional neglect she experiences at home.

In brief, Tracy's profound teen angst mainly stems from parental neglect, which results from the absence of a nuclear family structure as well as Melanie's inability to establish appropriate boundaries and engage in the difficult yet necessary confrontations with her daughter. As a result of parental neglect, Tracy, like Hamlet and Holden, exhibits low self-esteem, rendering her vulnerable to depression and peer pressure. She attempts to cope with these emotional challenges through substance abuse, self-harm, and seeking emotional support from alternative sources outside her home—behavioural patterns that have also been noted in the preceding two chapters. Tracy's search for social support intersects with her ongoing process of identity formation, as she desires to develop a more mature sense of self—an experience common among adolescents. Her identity exploration, largely shaped by consumerist influences, is quickly derailed by the absence of positive role models to emulate and the lack of a guiding parental figure to help her navigate this new phase of life. As is common among youth who lack adequate support and appropriate role models, Tracy adopts a negative identity, modelling herself after Evie and following her friend's lead in navigating adolescence and the pressures of consumerism. Ultimately, *Thirteen* provides a compelling and authentic portrayal of contemporary teenage angst, reflecting themes also evident in much earlier representations of adolescence.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the representation of adolescent angst in works of fiction by analysing three Western fictional works, created in different historical periods and cultural contexts, and representing different artistic media: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an Early Modern tragedy; J.D. Salinger's post-war psychological novel *The Catcher in the Rye*; and Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen*, a contemporary juvenile delinquency film. The primary analytical focus centred on the protagonists' relationships with their parents and other significant parental figures, using the framework of parenting styles as theorised by Baumrind (1966) and later refined by Maccoby and Martin (1983). Notably, the theme of parental neglect emerged as particularly relevant across all three texts. In addition, this study investigated the characters' struggles with identity formation—a crucial developmental task of adolescence according to Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968). These two analytical categories—parental relationships and identity formation—were selected due to their foundational role in adolescent development and their significant influence on the intensity and manifestation of teenage angst, according to academic scholarship.

Despite notable differences in historical and socio-economic contexts—ranging from European late medieval monarchy in *Hamlet*, written in an Early Modern framework, to post-war middle-class America in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and a contemporary, consumer-driven, single-parent household in *Thirteen*—the three protagonists—Hamlet, Holden, and Tracy—demonstrate significant psychological and behavioural parallels. All three endure parental neglect, albeit for different reasons. Hamlet suffers the loss of his father, and his mother is emotionally unavailable. Gertrude's neglect cannot be attributed to Early Modern maternal norms; rather, it more accurately reflects her emotional disengagement and her reluctance to assert parental authority. The only other potential parental figure in Hamlet's life is his uncle

and stepfather, Claudius, whose primary concern is eliminating his stepson as a political threat, rather than providing parental support or guidance. Furthermore, Hamlet's deep-seated resentment toward his uncle prevents the possibility of Claudius assuming a genuine parental or supportive role. Holden Caulfield's experience of neglect can be partly attributed to the prevailing gender and familial norms of post-war America. His father is frequently absent due to work obligations, reflecting the era's common expectation for men to prioritise their professional responsibilities over direct parental involvement. Holden's mother appears to be emotionally unavailable. Although the novel provides only a limited and highly subjective portrayal of her character, the overall narration does suggest a credible likelihood of emotional detachment on her part. Additionally, Holden's older brother D.B., once a supportive figure, has become distant—both physically and emotionally—after moving to Hollywood, a choice Holden sees as a betrayal. Tracy Freeland is raised by her mother, Melanie, a single-parent who, despite her emotional investment in her children, is overburdened by financial and domestic responsibilities. Tracy's father is largely uninvolved, focused instead on his new family and job. Her stepfather, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, is resented and rejected by Tracy, further isolating her from adult support. This parallel between *Hamlet* and *Thirteen* also illustrates that challenges in accepting a stepparent are not unique to contemporary narratives but have an enduring relevance across time periods.

As a consequence of these various forms of parental neglect, all three protagonists exhibit psychological distress. While the specific interpretation of their symptoms would differ according to their historical and cultural contexts, each demonstrates traits that align with what modern psychology would understand as depression, low self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation. It is also because of these psychological characteristics that some contemporary productions of *Hamlet*—such as those discussed in Chapter Two—choose to portray the Danish prince as a teenager, despite the ambiguity surrounding his actual age in the

text. The turmoil experienced by each character propels them toward maladaptive coping strategies: both Hamlet and Holden articulate suicidal ideation, while Tracy engages in self-mutilation. Additionally, Holden and Tracy turn to substance abuse as a means of coping with their emotional pain. Each character also demonstrates a desire to compensate for the emotional support absent in their parental relationships. Holden persistently attempts to connect with others, yet his efforts are undermined by a pattern of self-sabotaging behaviour and social withdrawal. Tracy seeks a supportive surrogate in Evie, a peer who ultimately proves to be a negative influence. While Hamlet does not actively seek a replacement, he frequently laments his profound sense of isolation and his yearning for emotional support. His isolation is exacerbated by Ophelia's abandonment of their relationship and by the betrayal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, leaving Hamlet with no trustworthy confidant other than Horatio. Moreover, all three protagonists exhibit dysregulated and antisocial behaviour, resulting from the absence of consistent enforcement of behavioural boundaries and effective parental discipline.

In terms of identity development, each character faces substantial challenges. Hamlet experiences a sudden and destabilising rupture of his sense of self following the death of his father and the disintegration of his familial structure. His struggle is further complicated by an internal conflict between his personal disposition and prevailing social and gender expectations. Holden's process of identity formation is disrupted by unresolved grief over the death of his younger brother, Allie, which stagnates his development. Tracy, lacking a positive role model, overidentifies with Evie and adopts her self-destructive behaviours. Like Hamlet, Tracy also encounters difficulties in negotiating gender norms, further complicating her identity development.

In all three works of fiction, the protagonist's identity confusion is exacerbated by the absence of meaningful adult guidance. Deprived of the necessary support for healthy and constructive identity exploration, Hamlet, Holden, and Tracy each construct a negative, or pseudo, identity as a defence mechanism—one that centres on the rejection of prevailing social norms and values. Hamlet resists the conventions of Danish court life, including its attitudes toward marriage and mourning. He also adopts a heightened concern for authenticity, often accusing others of hypocrisy and insincerity, positioning himself as morally distinct. Holden embraces an even more radical rejection of societal norms than Hamlet. He considers the adult world as inherently “phony,” distancing himself from conventional practices such as academic achievement, career planning, and social activities. Tracy defies social norms through the adoption of an exaggerated, hyper-feminised and hyper-sexualised persona, shaped by consumerist ideals and enacted through self-destructive behaviour. Her pseudo-identity manifests in delinquent activities, including substance abuse, theft, and premature sexual experiences.

All three characters engage in forms of antisocial behaviour—such as drug use, academic disengagement, and both verbal and physical hostility stemming from emotional dysregulation—that serve to reflect and reinforce their pseudo-identities. Moreover, all three troubled teenagers sustain their constructed identity by enacting social rejection. Hamlet denounces key figures in his life, including Gertrude, Ophelia, and his former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Tracy deliberately distances herself from her former peer group. Holden consistently withdraws from others upon perceiving them as inauthentic, thereby reinforcing his sense of isolation and alienation.

The similarities that have been observed in the portrayal of adolescents and their experiences of angst across the three works suggest a notable continuity in Western fiction, one that transcends both historical periods and narrative mediums. Central to this consistency

are two key factors: the critical role of the parent-child relationship in shaping adolescent development, and the adolescent's intense engagement with identity formation. When difficulties arise in either of these areas, teenage characters are depicted as troubled individuals experiencing heightened psychological distress. Fictional youth represent this distress through exhibiting symptoms such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation. Such characters are also portrayed as adopting a negative identity as a means of coping with or resolving their identity crisis.

In terms of limitations, this analysis focused exclusively on white, cishet characters. While queer interpretations of Holden Caulfield and Hamlet exist, a more comprehensive investigation should include texts that explicitly centre on queer teenagers, as well as adolescents of non-Caucasian ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the inclusion of narratives featuring teenagers with disabilities may offer further insight. The current study was also confined to Western literature and spans only three distinct historical periods. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the literary portrayal of teenage angst, it is crucial to incorporate non-Western texts and works from a broader range of temporal contexts. This would allow for a more critical examination of whether the purportedly universal elements—parental relationships and identity formation—of adolescent angst in fiction extend beyond white, Western, cishet representations.

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