



Literature’s Lyceum: Lessons for Contemporary Life in the *Catcher in the Rye* and *the Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Noted social commentator Mark Bauerlein has provided an important critique of youth culture in the contemporary Western world. In this work, I situate Bauerlein’s critique in the context of English literature, diagnosing the intersection of his thought and the core themes in two classic works of American literature: *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. Re-centering these two works in secondary education can help to address the concerns Bauerlein diagnoses. This in turn can contribute to a revival of great literature as a lyceum for contemporary life.

Keywords: American literature, Bauerlein, Hemingway, Online learning, Salinger, Technology.

1. Introduction

In J.D Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, a seventeen-year-old outcast, experiences devastating trauma. His desire to be a magical catcher in the rye derives from this bitter sense of loss. In turn, Holden’s growth only can come through acknowledging and responding to personal pain and by accepting the unconquerable harshness of life. In a similar way, Manolin, the loyal attendant of the sea-scarred Santiago in Hemingway’s masterpiece *The Old Man and the Sea*, matures only through a painful vision of a defeated friend—a friend not merely “destroyed,” but “defeated” by his longing to violate nature’s limits and to fish far beyond his reach—a point not always appreciated by Hemingway’s readers. In both works, pain and the acceptance of cruel limits are the entry points to personal maturity, the paths to genuine adulthood. This lesson—powerfully conveyed in these two classic works of American literature—is, I believe, one young people are especially in need of today, a point I develop in reference to influential social commentator Mark Bauerlein’s writings on the “pull of immaturity” in American culture.¹ Re-centering, therefore, these two great works in high school and college curricula can make literature once more a lyceum for contemporary life—an instructor of needed moral and intellectual virtues in a society that poorly forms her young.

Let’s begin with Holden Caulfield. In *The Cather in the Rye*, Holden’s grief over the death of his little brother Allie inaugurates a period of guilt-driven rage. When recounting Allie’s death, Holden notes how he “slept in the garage...and broke all the goddamn windows.”² His response is violent, with Holden breaking his hand during throes of anger. His rage even leads to his missing the funeral of beloved Allie. Allie’s death shatters Holden’s sense of security, leaving him just as broken as his now-shattered hands. Importantly, the guilt Holden feels from Allie’s death—even as he was powerless to prevent it—fuels his obsession with saving children from falling into the rye of deceit, lies, and pain which, in his eye, is the very stuff of adult life.

Later in the work, Holden recalls visiting the Museum of Natural History, an experience that he greatly enjoyed. He soon realizes the reason he enjoyed the museum was because it represented a world free of change. The fossilized forms forever remain the same. The past, frozen safely in time is, to Holden’s mind, serene: “The best thing...in that museum, was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move.”³ He experiences a desire to live free from the deadly realities of life. Indeed, just as he desires to freeze time, so he desires to freeze children in a position of perfect innocence. The Museum becomes an embodiment of his goal of cultivating a world where no one is hurt, and innocence forever maintained.

Towards the end of the novel, Salinger brings the arresting image of a catcher in an autumn rye field on the edge of a craggy bluff to its full expression. Holden explains this recurring dream to his sister, Phoebe—this dream of standing in a field by the cliff’s edge catching children as they fall. He explicitly states what had now become his life’s purpose: “to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff...I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.”⁴ Holden becomes immersed in a magical desire to avoid the unavoidable. He is now frozen in an emotional trance,

¹ Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 136. See also, Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2022).

² J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: [Little, Brown and Company](#), 2001 [1951]), 49.

³ Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, 158.

⁴ Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, 224-225.

unable to move forward or to process grief. His inability to cope with death leads to his fixation on preventing others from falling into the trauma of the painful world which envelops us all.

As the work progresses, however, it becomes clear to Holden that he cannot escape his troubles through this unattainable desire—this magic escapism—of freezing the innocence of all children. For, ultimately, Mr. Antolini, Holden's former teacher at Elkton Hills, is able to instruct Holden that falling is a part of life, and that running from trauma only fuels the flames of a mysticism that delays true maturation. Holden's idea of "catching" children and preserving their innocence gives to them—and to him—no chance for personal growth. Indeed, Holden, in his refusal of adulthood, falls, just like the children he hopes to save. Holden's only option, Salinger conveys, is the acceptance of the tragic limits of life, not a vain supposition one ever can fully escape them. Holden cannot by conjuring dreams prevent others—or himself—from the inevitability of personal pain. Through this journey of recognition, Salinger communicates the difficulties of confronting our harsh reality, and the necessity of doing so for genuine growth.

A similar theme is developed in *The Old Man and the Sea*, although this point is not always emphasized. Manolin, the attendant of the sea-worn Santiago, is present only in the beginning and end of Hemingway's novel, but his presence is crucial. As with Holden, so with Manolin, pain—a pain that comes from the recognition of cruel limits—is the precondition of true maturity.

The aged Santiago has been cast out by his village and branded as unlucky, having gone so many weeks without a catch. Yet Manolin remains Santiago's steadfast companion, even as his parents forbid him from fishing with him. And so Manolin goes fishing with Santiago every chance he can, in what we can only call a display of childlike devotion.

After Santiago's fruitless fight with the giant marlin—grippingly conveyed in the diamond-sharp prose of Papa Hemingway—Manolin tells the old man that no matter what his father or neighbors think, he will remain by his side and still has much to still learn from his dear friend. He tells Santiago he doesn't care about his so-called bad luck. He and Santiago then plan for future outings. The boy will get everything ready and wait for Santiago to recover. He then reassures his old friend that the fish had not defeated him—an echo of Santiago's earlier remark that "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."⁵

However, in the end, the reality is that Santiago lost his battle with the titan marlin. Such is the cruelty of nature, amplified by the hubris of men. The old man after his battle is possessed of grave regrets, regrets betrayed movingly when he remarks: "I shouldn't have gone out so far."⁶ As S. G. Mohanraj relates, "All his efforts are in vain by his mistake of sailing too far into the sea for which he pays a huge price."⁷ As a number of critics have concluded, the statement, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated," represents bitter irony in Hemingway's novella, as "the plot clearly depicts the defeat of the old man Santiago...the novel is...about the defeat of an old man, beyond all his skills, who went too 'far inside the sea' for fishing. Santiago is defeated in this context and not merely destroyed."⁸

It is, therefore, for this reason that I believe Hemingway writes, "as the boy went out the door and down the worn coral rock road" after tending to his broken friend, "he was crying again." If the old man were undefeated by the massive marlin how could Manolin do anything but rejoice? The reason is that he knows the old man, indeed, is defeated. In turn, as critic Robert Donald Spector relates, the "Hemingway tale" traces "the process of a boy's maturation."⁹ By the end of the work, Manolin "is no longer a boy."¹⁰ We must assume that Manolin, as he cries himself home, thinks—like a man: "yes, he went too far." His manhood is found precisely in the recognition of the tragic limits of life.

In these ways both Salinger and Hemingway remind us of the anonymous quote, "how do you think the first man on Earth felt after discovering that his tears taste like the ocean." Like the first human to taste ocean water, those who think like men know that tears are as elemental as the sea. Only by recognizing this do boys become men.

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."¹¹ So writes the Apostle to the Gentiles; so, too, in their own ways do Salinger and Hemingway. A key to growing up is to let go magic escapism. This lesson is acutely needed today. According to influential social commentator Mark Bauerlein, American youth are suffering from "the pull of immaturity." This takes the form of a neglect of "enduring...conflicts" and tragic issues in search of utopian fantasies born from a "recklessly distracted impatience" with the world as it really is.¹² This impatience births such ideas as a world of total material equality, a world free of all jealousy, hatred and intolerance, and a world indulging each personal impulse and instinct—no matter the cost. This sense of being entitled to demand of the world fundamental change in every aspect creates a correlative self-obsession: a self that can see itself as sovereign over a pliant world can too easily see itself as the center of all reality. Unsurprisingly, "two-thirds of U.S. undergraduates now score above average on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, up 30% since 1982," Bauerlein reports.¹³ Such are the spoils of "the sovereignty of youth."¹⁴

What has caused this irrational escapism and magical sense of personal potency? One key factor, Bauerlein argues, is "the brazen disregard of books and reading."¹⁵ "In the absence of the literature, religion, music, and art that once conveyed the range, depth, tragedy, and complexity of life," too many "young people become susceptible

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Scribner, 2022 [1952]), 102-3.

⁶ Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, 110.

⁷ S. G. Mohanraj, "Man Versus Nature: Ernest Hemingway's Irony in *The Old Man and the Sea*," *Bioscience Biotechnology Research Communications* 14, 8 (2021): 173-77, 177.

⁸ Mohanraj, "Man Versus Nature: Ernest Hemingway's Irony," 177. See also Qi Han, "New Discussion about 'Cannot Be Defeated'—Reading *The Old Man and the Sea* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 3, 12 (2015): 196-199.

⁹ Robert Donald Spector, "Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*," *Explicator* 1, 1 (1953): 72.

¹⁰ Spector, "Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*," 72.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11.

¹² Lee Drutman, "The Dumbest Generation by Mark Bauerlein," *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec 8, 2008 at <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-book5-2008jul05-story.html>.

¹³ Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 192.

¹⁴ Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 223.

¹⁵ Mark Bauerlein, "The New Bibliophobes," *Educational Horizons* 88, 2 (2010): 84-91, 85.

to utopian illusions”—indeed, to “keen and impatient utopianism.”¹⁶ Reading literature that is “rich and serious about human motivation” and the tragic limits of life, in contrast, can free us from such dangerous shallowness and self-conceit.¹⁷

Although Bauerlein assigns substantial blame for this development to technology, emphasizing especially how social media trains young people to look “horizontally”¹⁸ for guidance from their equally puerile peers—the callow leading the callow—the taproot of the contemporary problem, he asserts, rests with the over-indulgent attitude of parents, educators, and other mentors who lack the courage to be “labeled a curmudgeon and a reactionary.”¹⁹ Weak-willed adults are, Bauerlein holds, the root of the poor formation of America’s young.

In contemporary society, the lessons of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Old Man and the Sea* are sorely in need. No doubt other great works can convey their same message. But these two are well-tested—being classic readings of earlier times. They are also short and relatively accessible in their core themes and concepts and so can connect well with a distracted youth population for whom the longer writings of a Tolstoy, Dickens, or many others might prove, for far too many, simply too demanding. Most importantly, they provide to young people a message acutely needed.

Yet, great works of literature can be a lyceum only if instructors dare to assign them.

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¹⁶ Stanley Kurtz, “*The Dumbest Generation Grows Up* Is One Smart Book,” *National Review* (May 19, 2022) at <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/the-dumbest-generation-grows-up-is-one-smart-book/>. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation Grows Up*, 84.

¹⁷ Kurtz, “*Dumbest Generation Grows Up* Is One Smart Book.”

¹⁸ Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 136.

¹⁹ Drutman, “*Dumbest Generation* by Mark Bauerlein.” See Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, chapter 7, “The Beryal of the Mentors,” 163–203 *passim*.