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Hometrees and Roleplaying: How Instability Affects "The Catcher in the Rye's" Holden and "The Flick's" Avery in Their Pursuit of Belonging

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***Avatar* and *Pulp Fiction*: A Visual Representation of the Texts**

Avatar, a film directed by James Cameron that premiered in 2009, follows a paraplegic marine named Jake Sully as he embarks on a unique scientific mission on a stunningly beautiful planet called Pandora to find out more about the native humanoid inhabitants, the Na'vi. The humans are interested in this planet because of the rare unobtanium, which they wish to extract for its monetary value. They wish to know about the Na'vi to pursue a diplomatic solution to retrieve the unobtanium. Since the air of the planet is poisonous, Jake Sully and those accompanying him must plug into hybrid human and Na'vi bodies called avatars. He plugs into his avatar during the day, and then he reports the information he has learned to the military officials and scientists during the night. Through a series of initiations, Jake learns to become one of the Na'vi through his native teacher, Neytiri. Even though he initially experiences and participates in the Na'vi culture only to relay information back to the authorities, he gradually becomes aware of the intrinsic beauty and interconnectivity of their people, under their god of the sublime and magical forest, who is named Eywa. In fact, he starts to identify more with his avatar body than with his real, paraplegic one, noting that reality is becoming more like a dream and dream like reality. In the process, he falls in love with Neytiri and becomes a hero of their culture. Meanwhile, the scientists prove scientifically the interconnectivity Jake has sensed

experientially: the forest is a complex system of neural connections and the Na'vi can tap into those connections to hear the voices of the past and the present. The hub of these connections is their Hometree, which the Na'vi protect as the center of their culture and a touch point to connect with their god. This discovery is exciting, but there is a problem: the largest source of the coveted unobtanium is hidden beneath Hometree and the Na'vi will not leave Hometree to allow the humans to mine it. War is going to break out, and it is time to pick sides. Jake and the scientists boldly stand up against the greedy humans and fight with the Na'vi in their avatar bodies in a show of valor. In the end, Jake's real body dies, and he awakes in his avatar body presumably to live a fulfilling and meaningful life in the world of Pandora with the Na'vi people.

Avatar's story and big budget special effects create an immersive film experience that enable the viewer to vicariously fill a deep human longing to belong. When Jake finds his place and identity in the Na'vi culture, the viewer senses the deep satisfaction of completing a hero's journey and establishing an abiding sense of meaning and purpose. When Jake finds himself enmeshed in a powerful shared story (symbolized by the neural network of the forest, Hometree, and the god Eywa) the viewer can internalize that mysterious sense of transcendence, the overwhelming awe and security of being a part of stable whole worth preserving and defending. In this way, it seems that the world of Pandora, though an alien planet, functions like a human paradise. As Manhola Dargis a film critic from the *New York Times* writes, the movie is "strangely utopian." He continues by saying that "one of the pleasures of the movies is that they transport us, as Neytiri does with Jake, into imaginary realms, into Eden and over the rainbow to Oz."

Although both Holden Caulfield from J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Avery, from Annie Baker's *The Flick* desperately long for the belongingness that *Avatar* represents,

Avery's visceral disgust toward the film reflects a growing suspicion that has been embedded in the American mind since Holden's time in the mid twentieth century—namely the suspicion that the grand narratives and transcendent sources of meaning humans share are nothing more than illusions. When Sam, Avery's older coworker, suggests that *Avatar* might be a great American movie as they sweep up after a movie showing at a local theater, Avery retorts fiercely. After an uncomfortable silence, he provides the reason: "Avatar was basically a video game" (Baker 46). One can impose a number of interpretations on this loaded claim, but the most likely interpretation is that he thinks *Avatar* is a simulation. Just as Jake plugs into an Avatar to find a place and purpose in the world of Pandora, the viewer can only experience the pleasure of the movie if he does not engage with the media in light of his or her lived experience. The meaning that so resonates with the audience is a result of fake images, a fantasy. And American audiences realized this after disengaging from the film, a phenomenon that journalists have referred to as "Avatar Blues." Some audience members got depressed, even suicidal, as they attempted to reengage with a reality that seemed bleak in comparison to James Cameron's world of Pandora (Piazza). In contrast to this fantastical experience, Avery suggests an alternative American classic—*Pulp Fiction*, a 1994 film directed by Quentin Tarantino.

Pulp Fiction presents a worldview very different from *Avatar*—one that is fractured, nonlinear, and unstable. According to film critic Roger Ebert, the story "doubles back on itself, telling several interlocking stories about characters who inhabit a world of crime and intrigue, triple-crosses and loud desperation." Although the film remains a cohesive whole, its multiple concurrent plotlines—each mediated through the subjective perspectives of their narrators—awaken the viewer to an enthralling and disconcerting narrative instability. Even though Vincent (Travolta) is one of the main characters in his own story with Jules (Samuel Jackson), when the

story shifts to Butch (Bruce Willis) he is nothing more than an expendable side character. When Butch encounters Marcellus Wallace (Irving Rhames), he wants to kill him; however, once they find themselves intertwined with another man's story and locked in his basement, they band together against a new common enemy. The constant shifting causes some viewers to react in confusion: "What am I watching? Why is this happening? Wait, who's the good guy again?" As Carew notes, "As the stories turn around, and who they're about changes, audience allegiances constantly shift" (71).

Interestingly enough, the characters in the movie are aware of this shifting. They feel perfectly at ease stepping in and out of roles, often in order to exercise power over one another. They inhabit a fragmented story, and they accept it, drawing all the meaning they can from personal centers of meaning that they do not share with anyone else. They do not find a defining place in a web of connections with others that give their lives a transcendent, stable purpose like Jake. They do not bond over a shared story, mediated by a god like Eywa or in the absence of one. And they are not deeply known (since the only way they interact with one another is through the roles they play). The film does not have a center of meaning because it makes the viewer question its very existence.

It is quite tragic, one may even say nihilistic, but Avery finds this movie to be more true to life. A brief exploration of recent American history might explain why. Starting with Holden's time in the middle of the twentieth century, core doctrines of religious faiths and fundamental philosophical truths have been brought into serious question. The legitimacy of nearly every authority is now questioned, analyzed, and found to be corrupt (often because they are). On issues of great contention, various groups seem to accept their own set of facts to the point where objective "truth" feels like wishful thinking (after all, what if it's all just fake news?).

Technology is rapidly redefining how people connect with one another. Meta-stories of all-powerful, unchanging, just deities are perceived as instruments of power. Instead, those meta-stories are replaced with smaller narratives and counter-narratives, often vying for cultural power. The layers of instability and fragmentation stack.

Consequently, the awareness of such instability can easily affect the relationships that help people reinforce shared narratives and humanness, since others can easily be viewed as sellouts to these rapidly shifting systems. How do I know if someone is being genuine? How do I know they won't betray me? How do I know that this YouTube personality who is "just keepin' it real" isn't just doing so because he gets paid millions of dollars a year to be "authentic"? And therein lies the tension: as others use their identity as a tool to get what they want, as one sees their hypocrisy, it is easy to lose faith in their genuine humanity. In turn, we can begin to question our own humanity as we find ourselves guilty of the same inauthenticity. We define them as nothing more than a phony, and we retreat. Even though many people flock to relationships for security, the underlying anxiety that the other person might not be who they say they are keeps one foot out the door.

The Flick and *The Catcher in the Rye* illuminate the tension between *Avatar* and *Pulp Fiction* by placing the films' core philosophies in contexts and characters that are more true to common experience. Even though Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* follows a teenage prep school dropout wandering New York and *The Flick* features a young, existentially and socially anxious movie buff working as a part of a cleanup crew at a local theater, both of these characters embody the wishes and apparent realities nested in the film's key images and concepts. Similar to the way Jake Sully seeks a place of esteem among the deeply interconnected Na'vi tribe, these two emerging adults grapple to find a place to call home, where they feel

enmeshed in a web of connections with their fellow human beings that imbue their life with meaning and purpose. Just as Jake sees Na'vi tribe's Hometree, they also deeply long for an unchanging center of shared meaning by which they can define themselves and stabilize those relational networks that reinforce their identity and humanness.

However, the kind of world depicted in *Pulp Fiction* complicates the fulfillment of these needs drastically. In their worlds of rapid change, where allegiances shift and people often role-play instead of presenting their authentic selves, Holden and Avery become disillusioned and alienated from the environments and the "phony" people who could restore them. The centers of meaning that functioned for them in the past are revealed to be false, leading to a deep cynicism that they may never find a true unchanging center or a defining place at all. As a result, Holden and Avery resort to unhelpful coping mechanisms: They defend what they know to be false with a flimsy sense of valor. They role-play in order to navigate the complex interactions they are unable to negotiate with their fragmented and elusive identities. And in the end, they are in grave danger of giving up on finding an unchanging center and a defining place completely, as Antolini says, "before they really even got started" (Salinger 244).

A Defining Place

Despite how easy it is to think that identity is a very personal, uninhibited decision, humans define themselves in relation to external realities: places, events, touchstones, memorials, and—most importantly—people. In fact, many sociologists in the vein of Charles Horton Cooley believe that human identities are completely inseparable from society, external realities, and other people. As sociologist Nathan Rousseau writes, quoting Cooley's argument, "society and individuals do not denote separable phenomena, but are simply collective and distributive aspects of the same thing" (86). He continues by summarizing, "A separate

individual is an abstraction unknown to experience…"(87). Human beings need others to recognize their humanity (in general) and their identity (as a subset) for their identity to become "real," for it to become a stable and integrated whole that transcends the day-to-day fluctuations of the human mind's echo chamber. Because of this, Rousseau says, "Human beings possess an inherent tendency to reach out, interact or socialize with those people and objects that surround them" (86). They seek this out in order to help define themselves.

For this reason, it is not surprising that Avery possesses a tendency to seek out where he belongs, a defining place. A simple question can illuminate the importance of his search as an emphasis of Baker's play: Why does he join the theater cleanup crew? For Sam and Rose, the reason is practical and mundane: they simply need a paycheck. However, no theatergoer can say the same for Avery. His father is a semiotics professor, and since he is studying at the university where his father teaches, he does not need the money to pay for school. In addition, it is clear from the text that he suffers from depression as well as social and existential anxiety. Under these circumstances, it would be much easier for him to stay at home, hidden away like a dragon guarding his treasure trove of classic movies, so why does he seek employment?

The most obvious reason one can provide is his love of old-fashioned, 35-millimeter theater projectors (in comparison to the new digital ones). Since the Flick is "the only theater in Worcester County, and one of only eight theaters in the entire state of Massachusetts, that still use a film projector," it would make perfect sense that he would seek to overcome his anxiety and depression to spend his evenings in (or at least close to) a real projection booth (Baker 139). However, this is not the only or most fundamental reason. In Avery's conversation with his therapist, he asks specifically about making friends (Baker 62). In this way, Baker is emphasizing that Avery's joining the theater cleanup crew is an act of courage to connect, an act

that proves his hope that he can still find his place in a larger community. One can almost imagine the counseling session where he makes this decision, slowly gaining the confidence to go for it as his therapist gently nudges him on. After all, movies are his thing, right? He'll get right along with all the fellow film-lovers working there. In fact, this may be an environment where his movie knowledge will gain him respect and esteem. Is it possible that he could receive a promotion as a projectionist and be a leader among them? Thinking in terms of *Avatar*, Avery hopes to live into the story of Jake Sully who, escaping his (metaphorically) handicapped life, found a place among a new people who help define him and imbue his life with meaning and purpose. Of course, being on the cleanup crew is a lot less idyllic than being a clan leader in a humanoid tribe on a foreign planet, but for Avery—whose anxiety and depression probably make it difficult for him to entrust his identity and personal story to any larger structure—this is a small, but crucial step. In fact, I would claim it is a symbolic step for Avery—the theater functioning as a microcosm of the even larger structures that make up Avery's world.

Although many proofs of Avery's key motivation could be given, the most telling one lies in his willingness to participate in the ethically ambiguous employee tradition of "dinner money," where Sam and Rose resell ten percent of the ticket stubs and pocket the additional cash (Baker 31-38). This tradition, which has been passed down from previous employees, is a small and seemingly insignificant bond the Flick employees share. Sam and Rose frame it as a resistance against Steve to manipulate Avery to join them. Rose demonizes Steve so that the three can have a shared enemy by depicting him as an ignorant and selfish man who underpays his employees. In addition, since Avery is black, she even capitalizes on race identity politics, confirming Avery's worry that Steve might be racist. In short, their manipulation succeeds. It succeeds because, for Avery, this tradition is a way for him to belong to this larger group and

story. It is an initiation into their clan, much like Jake Sully had to undergo levels of initiation into the Na'vi tribe. Even though participating deeply upsets his sensitive internal value system and he does not need the money, he agrees, again placing faith in this small tradition as a symbolic gesture.

The idea that these gestures are symbolic of something larger is corroborated by Sam and Avery's favorite game: "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." The theory behind the game is that no actor is more than six degrees of separation from collaborating with Kevin Bacon, and by extension of that theory no actor is six degrees from collaborating with any other actor. In *The Flick,* Sam provides the puzzling combination of actors and Avery connects the two actors in six degrees or less. For example, in act one scene three, Avery connects Jack Nicholson to Dakota Fanning by pointing out that Jack Nicholson plays a role with Tom Cruise in the movie *A Few Good Men,* and Tom Cruise plays a role with Dakota Fanning in *War of the Worlds* (Baker 22-23).

On a personal level, this game is common ground for Sam and Avery. Sam enjoys trying to stump Avery with unlikely actor combinations, and Avery genuinely enjoys showing off his movie trivia skills as he rises to the challenge. However, this game also operates symbolically in a broader sense because of its basis on a sociological theory: the idea that every person on earth can be connected to every other by six degrees of connection (i.e. mutual friends or acquaintances). This sentiment about the astonishing interconnectivity of the human race is so pervasive that a professor of psychology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Dr. Judith Kleinfeld, felt it necessary to review the literature on the subject to discover whether the theory is a strongly-supported sociological fact or, simply, "the academic equivalent of an urban myth" (2). In short, Kleinfeld found that, although not proven false, the six degrees of separation theory

is not as well-supported as people would like to think. Not only did she think the original published findings were based on "scanty" evidence (1), she also found that the truest replications of the experiment were less than successful (and often revealed deep divides, especially between various races and socioeconomic statuses) (1-5). In her own words, she concludes, "Perhaps Milgram [the founder of separation theory] was right that we live in a world with six degrees of separation. Perhaps he had discovered a fundamental and universal truth about the human world. But the evidence was simply not there" (5).

However, for humanities research, it is not nearly as important whether or not this theory is scientifically verifiable but, rather, what about the theory appeals to humans that enables it to persist in the American cultural landscape. Kleinfeld was interested in this as well, and—after questioning others about why they believe in this pervasive myth—observed that many people believed in the theory because it gave them "a sense of security" (6). In one interview, she cited a federal judge as saying, "It's a scary world out there" and "it's good to believe we are all somehow holding hands" (6). It seems that the fundamental purpose behind believing this theory (against evidential odds) is likely a relational one. People strongly desire to believe that each individual is enmeshed in a real and meaningful web of connections with their fellow human beings, one that informs their lives and supports them with systems of meaning.

With this in mind, "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" serves as symbolic representation of the deep longing of the characters in *The Flick* to connect with one another. Like the unlikely actors Avery connects, these three characters come from vastly different walks of life. If they were actors, it is unlikely that they would ever be cast in the same movie. This game seems to be, in a strange way, a source of comfort for all of them that, even if they do not star together in the same (hypothetical and metaphorical) movie, someone with excellent movie trivia skills might

be able to connect them with six degrees. The cultural significance of separation theory helps the theatergoer to see this little theater cleanup crew as a microcosm of larger societal trends. It helps theatergoers see Avery not simply as a contextually situated character but as representative of any emerging adult trying to find a defining place in his or her world.

Now, one can ask a very similar question of Holden: Why did he bother to share his story? As with Avery, the answer is likely found in his desire to connect with someone he perceives to be like himself, to create shared meaning beyond the echo chamber of his own mind. His voice is exceptionally personal because he treats the reader as a kindred soul, one who would field his frequent complaints about the characters and institutions around him with validation and affirmation as well as value what he values. The most concrete evidence of this is his use of various rhetorical devices to reinforce to himself that he is not alone. For instance, Holden frequently uses the second person "you" to draw his reader into the story. At various points in the novel, when he discusses a memory or a person that is meaningful to him, he says that "you," the reader, are there or "you," the reader, would like him or her. In addition, he frequently uses phrases of assurance that he is sincere and telling the truth. As a concise example of both of these devices, Holden writes of his sister: "Old Phoebe. I swear to God you'd like her" (Salinger 89). He uses these devices because he desperately wants to the reader to affirm his perception of the world. He wants to reinforce to himself that there must be someone out there with whom he could share meaning, someone to help him feel less alone.

However, even if this story were told in third person and the psychic distance increased, the reader would still know that he craves a defining place as a fundamental need. Although he affects that he does not care what others think of him, his actions clearly indicate that he possesses, as Cooley would predict, "an inherent tendency to reach out, interact, and socialize."

Despite the fact that he calls most of the characters in the book phonies, most of the book is comprised of Holden seeking conversation. He talks to women he meets at bars, nuns, taxi drivers; he even hires a prostitute at a hotel just to talk to her. In addition, he seeks out potential connections from deep in the past by giving them a "buzz": old friends, friends of old friends, old teachers, old romantic interests, family members, and many others. The reader hopes that one of these friends, teachers, acquaintances, or random strangers will reinitiate Holden back into a web of meaningful human connections, that Holden will once again feel embedded in society. However, although several people come close, Holden spends most of the novel ambling around New York, talking about where the ducks go when the pond freezes over, which—of course—has little to do the with the ducks and everything to do with Holden asking pressing questions: "Who am I in relation to my environment? Where do I fit?"

An Unchanging Center

While forming one's identity in a web of connections with others is crucial, it is not inherently stable unless it is anchored by a shared commitment to something that transcends any of the individual participants. Similar to the way the Na'vi's veneration of Ewya and Hometree as the center of their culture enables the complex network of neural connections of the forest, humans must perceive a center of meaning in their worlds to stabilize their connections with others. This center is noticeable in almost any community. In the scientific community, it may be the belief in science as the core (or even sole) cause of human advancement. In a country, it could be a shared national narrative like the American dream. In a religion, it is—quite clearly—a God or central doctrine. Vishal Mangalwadi, in describing the process of the loss of western civilization's "soul" since the mid- twentieth century, uses an apt metaphor to describe this construct: that of a root note in music. He connects the loss of tonality in preference of

experimenting with atonality as evidence of a civilization that is "losing its center, its soul" (21). In many compositions, the piece ends on the root note, even after venturing far from it. Every musical question has an answer. Even in cases when the composition remains unresolved, the listeners can only appreciate the unresolved quality because they remember the root or tonic note in their mind. As Mangwaldi notes, "it is the tonal center to which all other tones are related" (20).

A center is something that people love and want others to love as well; they perceive it as unchanging; they see it as worth sacrificing for; they define themselves in relationship to it, and they keep coming back to it because it provides humans with a sense of belonging in the world. For these reasons, it should come as no surprise that both Avery and Holden long for this construct because it is deeply human to do so.

Avery, being older and more developmentally sophisticated than Holden, has a well-established and articulated center: the narrative worlds and culture of classic film, especially "real" film on celluloid, which he perceives as being inextricably linked with this culture. He expresses a deep love for film (Baker 13). He defines himself in relation to it, even going so far as to claim that movies are his life, and he expresses significant disappointment when the other characters do not share this passion (Baker 89). Although Avery is anxious in nearly every other type of interaction, whenever he talks about film, his sense of self and agency deepen, as one at home in one's domain. Finally, he is willing to make sacrifices to preserve its integrity. When he finds out that his boss, Steve, might sell the theater to a larger company who will switch to digital film, he says he might have to quit (Baker 111). He even pens a letter of defense to convince Steve not to switch to digital and in act two, scene five reads the carefully articulated argument to Sam (Baker 140-142). Although unable to describe why the letter resonates with

him, Sam recognizes his shared humanity with Avery in this defense, not because he is convinced by the argument, but because he knows intuitively how important it is for humans to find and maintain a center (Baker 142).

Holden, on the other hand, being a bit younger and less developed, has more trouble articulating his center and, therefore, it is slightly more difficult for the reader to detect. Rather, the meandering digressions of his thought suggest that, in a world he perceives to be inauthentic, he is still searching for a true center, a fundamental truth about the world by which he can define himself (whether or not his search is genuine is to be discussed later). Holden's process is similar to how the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk describes the process of reading or writing a novel. Pamuk writes that the main reason humans read and write novels is to discover their centers of meaning, mirroring and feeding into the way humans seek out the meaning of life. Even though they may enter into the reading or writing process unaware of what they are searching for, they know that "each tree in the landscape—each person, object, event, anecdote, image, recollection, bit of information, and leap in time—has been placed there to point to the deeper meaning, the secret center that lies somewhere beneath the surface" (154). Even though Holden is not a novelist, he is investigating his life story like a novelist or novel reader would. In every concrete detail he stumbles upon, in every interaction, in every person he describes, he appears to be seeking out the center to his life.

Holden's readers begin to sense what his center might be, even if Holden is only partially aware of it, because of the people, places, objects, events, and memories that Holden comes to rest upon in his narrative: Allie's (his deceased brother's) baseball glove, little kids meeting their friends, children's notebooks, etc. Since these touchstones are associated with his childhood, the reader slowly recognizes Holden's romanticized childhood as his center. There are certain

touchstones that he keeps returning to, spending more words assuring his audience of their purity, authenticity, and worth. He does this because these touchstones are more concrete assurances that reinforce the real center that, as Pamuk reminds his readers, lies beneath the surface.

One of these touchstones is Holden's memory of Jane Gallagher. He often returns to memories of her when he is depressed or lonesome, reflecting on the pure joy of her presence. He especially wants to convince the audience to love this memory too, specifically inserting the reader into his narrative to do so:

> "We'd get into a goddam movie or something, and right away we'd start holding hands, and we wouldn't quit until the movie was over. And without changing the position or making a big deal out of it. You never even worried, with Jane, whether your hand was sweaty or not. All you knew was, you were happy. You really were." (Salinger 103)

It is obvious that Holden feels comfortable and at home in the world in this memory. He understands himself and where he fits, similar to the way Avery feels his sense of self and agency deepen when he talks about movies.

Another touchstone that he expounds upon is his memory of the Natural History Museum, which he visited almost every Saturday in his childhood. He describes this place with great admiration. Even though he starts by simply describing his experience (the kids he went with, what they would do to annoy the teacher, how everything looked), he eventually begins to home in on what the museum really means to him:

> The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and

> that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving the same blanket. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be *you.* (Salinger 157-158)

From this description, it is clear that what Holden loves most about the museum is its unchanging nature. He portrays his own identity as unstable, and it is clear that he only understands himself in relation to this memory of his childhood. The museum represents for Holden the idea that, even in a world of rapid change, certain elements of the past can be preserved. He can carry them with him into his future to help shape his view of himself and discover where he belongs.

As a testament to the idea of an unchanging center, he makes this final claim to conclude his discussion about the Natural History Museum: "Certain things they should just stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone" (Salinger 158).

Instability and its Effects

However, the instability inherent in Avery's and Holden's personal lives and worlds makes these two longings increasingly difficult to fulfill. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's brother Allie dies, and he does not cope with the loss well. He flunks out of various prep schools, so he never develops a consistent circle of friends or teachers. His other brother D.B. moves out to Hollywood to pursue a career in screenwriting. In *The Flick*, Avery's mother leaves his father because of an old high school sweetheart she reconnected with on Facebook. His best friend at college also transfers to another school by the end of his freshman year.

In addition, they both react negatively to the more recent changes in modes of artistic expression. Holden is disgusted that movies are gaining popularity over books as a storytelling medium. Avery finds it morally repugnant that the world is switching from "real" film to digital. Of course, because of its association with his center (his preference for classic movies from the past), this type of change features more prominently in *The Flick*.

Furthermore, since they are both on the metaphorical edge of adulthood, they have a lot of changes to consider, and they do not have much time to defer making decisions concerning those changes. How are they going to make money? Where are they going to live once they leave home? Should they ever leave home? How will they handle romantic relationships and intimacy? These questions overwhelm them, as they have not yet developed an identity by which they can navigate any of these complex, unstable terrains. Although this is an important factor in *The Flick*, it is especially integral to Holden's character. Since Holden's center is his romanticized childhood, he feels as if the world's rapid change is pushing him over the edge into an adult life he is unprepared for. As suggested by the "edge" terminology, this instability is explored symbolically through the metaphor of falling. As the title of the novel suggests, Holden wants to be the catcher in the rye, keeping an eye on children in perpetual play to ensure they do not fall off the edge into their adult life (Salinger 173). Most importantly, he wants to keep the children naïve of the inherent instability proven by the possibility of falling, the haunting realization that there are cliffs hidden in the underbrush that could interrupt the well-defined games of childhood at any moment.

Finally, in *The Flick*, there is a general narrative instability at work. These characters do not have any pre-defined roles that place their interactions in a set relational structure. Instead, most of the play is comprised of the characters stumbling through interactions to learn how they

can and cannot relate to one another. The repeated elements include breaches of trust, premature self-disclosure, frequent retreats from difficult conversations, and—most notably—long, uncomfortable silences as the characters process what they see and hear along with the audience. The lines of this play do not reflect Baker's careful crafting of a fixed narrative with a fixed meaning, but rather a careful attention to reflect the natural speech patterns humans use in their unstable attempts to construct meaning with others. This act of "reflecting" is reinforced by the stage set up, as the audience faces a stage consisting of rows of movie theater seats from their own theater seats. Avery recognizes this instability as well, and it causes him great distress.

However, this raises the question: why are these two characters so sensitive to these changes? What allows the other characters in both the play and the novel to handle this instability more easily? One likely reason is a personality trait that both of these characters embody: the orderliness aspect of trait conscientiousness, based on the big five personality dimensions as developed by trait theorists. People high in trait orderliness exhibit more judgment over moral transgressions, lower openness to change (associated with conservatism), and more disgust sensitivity (Peterson 21:01). Overall, people high in this trait want to control their environments so they can understand themselves and their worlds in clean and orderly conceptual categories. Both Holden and Avery fit the description precisely. Avery responds to the shift from film to digital as a moral issue. He is "shit-phobic;" that is, he is scared of others' excrement in both a physical and metaphorical sense (Baker 18). In addition, when the characters in the play are discussing the accuracy of their astrology signs, they emphasize that Avery is indeed "quite a bit of a snob and fairly conservative" (Baker 53). In Holden's case, throughout the entirety of the novel, whenever he reacts to his environment negatively, it is almost always in

terms of moral disgust as he pines for the past in which he perceived reality as more simply ordered.

Because of their sensitivity to change, this instability leads to detrimental effects for both Holden and Avery. Firstly, they come to the conclusion that the centers they base their lives on are mere illusions. Avery must face the fact that the whole world is moving on without "real" film and that, like Rose says, everything will be digital in six months (Baker 88). In Holden's case, although he attempts to keep it hidden from his readers and himself, there are indications that he recognizes the falseness of his center in his avoidance of its associated touchstone reminders. For instance, after walking through the park as he reminisces about the Museum of Natural History, he does not go inside once he reaches its doors, saying, "When I got to the museum, I wouldn't have gone inside for a million bucks" (Salinger 159). Furthermore, even though he frequently wishes to call Jane and reconnect with her, he never follows through, telling his readers that he is simply not "in the mood" (Salinger 82). Why does he avoid coming into contact with these touchstones? Firstly, it is because he recognizes they might have changed, the Museum of Natural History may have been renovated since he was a kid, and Jane has certainly grown older; she is not the sweet, innocent, perfect girl he remembers. More importantly, though, he avoids coming into contact with them because seeing them again would ruin the magic of his childhood perceptions. In this way, once again, Holden is acting as a novelist of his own life. Pamuk, who owns a museum based on his novel *The Museum of Innocence*, explains that while real museums can preserve objects, people read and write novels because "novels preserve our encounters with those objects—that is, our perception of them" (136). He wants to preserve their memory uncorrupted so he can continue to reinforce their authenticity and stability.

Secondly, this instability has another detrimental effect on Holden and Avery: they begin to alienate themselves from the environments and people that could help restore them. In Holden's case, he alienates himself from the people, systems, and institutions associated with the adult world. While his critiques of these people and structures are sometimes well founded, he is overly critical in many situations, dismissing them as "phony" for engaging in or enabling necessary adult behavior. For instance, he calls his brother a "prostitute" for moving to Hollywood to write screenplays, but perhaps his brother is just making a responsible, adult decision to find gainful employment (Salinger 4). Holden's old teacher, Antolini, highlights the damning nature of this alienation when he expresses his concern for Holden:

> This fall I think you're riding for—it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn't supply them with. (Salinger 243-244)

Everyone must fall into the instability of adult life. However, since Holden simultaneously feels hopelessly alienated from his environment, he has no people or larger structures to help him find a foothold and is, therefore, in danger of permanent instability.

Avery experiences a similar alienation, especially when Rose and Sam let him take the fall when their new employer finds out about dinner money and thinks Avery is the only thief. In this situation, Sam and Rose switch roles to take advantage of him. Even though in the beginning, they used race identity politics to bond them together against Steve. At the end, they use class identity politics to place Avery in the out-group, since he comes from a fairly well to do

family. They say that, since he does not need the money, he should just take the blame. Not surprisingly, Avery feels betrayed. In response, he quotes Jules's famous Ezekiel 25:17 speech from *Pulp Fiction*, embodying the character to the best of his ability. This speech, which begins "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men," manifests Avery and Jules's shared pessimistic and individualistic worldview onto the events of the play. Later on, when he comes back to retrieve the old film projector, it becomes clear that using *Pulp Fiction* to interpret the events of his life up to this point has alienated him from the people and environments that could help restore him. He says, "clearly I'm putting too much faith in stuff" (Baker 172). Later, he concludes that he should not put so much faith in other people (Baker 174).

These effects put both Holden and Avery in an extremely difficult predicament. They realize that their ways of understanding the world are simplistic. The centers of meaning and identity in their lives have been revealed to be false. However, since they simultaneously lose faith in others and the larger structures that could help them find a new defining place based on a shared commitment to a new, more authentic center, their identities become unstable and fragmented. In this process, they resort to various coping strategies to negotiate their complex, multi-faceted worlds. These coping strategies, like the two fundamental longings (a defining place based on an unchanging center) and the complication (instability and its effects), can be derived from the two films that feature prominently in *The Flick*: *Avatar* and *Pulp Fiction*. They can be framed in three questions that both characters must ask themselves throughout the novel and the play: Do I get into character? Do I defend Hometree? Do I walk the earth forever?

Do I Get into Character?

In *Pulp Fiction,* Jules and Vincent are introduced as they are driving to retrieve their boss Marcellus Wallace's briefcase from some young men who betrayed Marcellus's trust. The lead up to their entry into the young men's apartment highlights how they treat their job like a performance. Before they enter the room, they pause. It is not time for the performance yet. Then, right after Jules concedes to Vincent in an absurd argument about the sexual undertones of foot rubs, Jules says calmly, "Come on, let's get into character" (Tarantino). They manage the transition with ease. When they enter, they embody the roles of loyal and intimidating hit men expertly. Jules uses his role to intimidate the young men and ensure that he and Vincent have the power in every interaction. Because of this, the duo is able to get exactly what they need (the briefcase), while also instilling fear into anyone who might be tempted to double cross them or Marcellus Wallace in the future.

Similarly, Avery and Holden both take on various roles and notice how others take on roles around them. Because Avery's and Holden's worlds change too quickly for them to adapt meaningfully, their identities fragment. However, they still need to find some way to relate with others and external realities to receive the relational and physical resources they need and gain a sense of belonging. As they see others using multiple identities successfully to either manipulate situations for personal gain or as a tool to negotiate external reality, they choose to "get into character" themselves; even though it conflicts with their articulated valuing of authenticity, they see no other alternative.

Holden first reveals that he employs this strategy frequently by admitting his tendency to lie and engage in what he refers to as "horseplay" (Salinger 22). Before he describes a scene with Ackley in which he acts like a child searching for his mother in the dark, he says, "I horse around quite a lot, just to keep from getting bored" (Salinger 29). Then, he makes his role-playing more

explicit in the next scene with his roommate Stradlater, when he describes how he began tap dancing out of boredom. He writes, "I started imitating one of those guys in the movies. In one of those musicals. I hate the movies like poison, but I get a bang out of imitating them. Old Stradlater watched me in the mirror while he was shaving. All I need's an audience. I'm an exhibitionist" (Salinger 38).

Although Holden acts as if he only uses these roles only in jest, in reality he also uses them as a tool to negotiate the complex and multi-faceted world of adulthood. Since he has not yet developed an integrated sense of self by which to navigate adult interactions in a way that others would accept, he resorts to taking on various adult roles to help him. For example, he feigns age, purposely lowering his voice on the phone, to convince Faith Cavendish to get cocktails with him (Salinger 83). He feigns age to convince some older women to dance with him, despite their knowing giggles (Salinger 91-92). He pretends he is a man named Jim Steele when he hires a prostitute, who he ultimately only hires as a conversation partner (Salinger 123). In fact, sometimes he cannot stop once he starts. For example, after stepping into a character he calls "Rudolph Schmidt" to connect with a middle-aged mother on a train, he tries to recover from the deception: "Then I started reading this timetable I had in my pocket. Just to stop lying. Once I get started, I can go on for hours if I feel like it. No kidding. *Hours*" (Salinger 76). He cannot stop because, it is only while presenting an adult self to others that he can entertain the hope that others will affirm that inauthentic self and provide him a meaningful place to belong.

However, as the novel progresses, he becomes more frustrated with his role-playing because the characters he embodies do not enable him to receive the relational resources he needs. He does not find someone who will truly listen to him and affirm his identity. No one initiates him into a meaningful web of connections. Instead, his sense of self becomes

increasingly fragmented, and it is more difficult for him to distinguish his true self from the roles he plays. For instance, when he frantically explains to Sally Hayes his plan to run away with her and live in a cabin in the woods, she is not receptive. As he rambles about the inauthenticity of the world, she does not share or affirm his interpretations. At the end of this interaction, he reflects that he regrets asking and does not know why he asked her to run away with him, while simultaneously acknowledging that he was sincere when he asked: "The terrible part, though, is that I *meant* it when I asked her. That's the terrible part. I swear to God I'm a madman" (Salinger 174).

Although Avery is more aware than Holden of his distaste for roleplaying, he ultimately realizes that he cannot avoid it, because it stems from and leads to a fragmented and elusive sense of self. In fact, when Rose asks Avery why he is depressed, he answers with the following:

> Um. Because everything is horrible? And sad? And the answer to every terrible situation always seems to be like, Be Yourself, but I have no idea what that fucking means. Who's myself? Apparently there's some like amazing awesome person deep down inside of me or something? I have no idea who that guy is. I'm always faking it. And it looks to me like everyone else is faking it too. Like everyone is acting out some like stereotype of like…of like…exactly…who you'd think they'd be. (Baker 99-100)

Like Holden, Avery is not able to create an integrated sense of self by which to respond to his complex environment; he must take on roles to do so. However, in *The Flick*, Rose introduces a new dimension of roleplaying when she asks, "When you were like…when you were going off about how everyone is so fake. Were you faking it then" (Baker 101)? Avery has a difficult time responding. He answers reflectively, "I mean yes and no. It's hard to tell, I guess" (Baker 101).

This exchange demonstrates an important truth: even calling out everyone's roleplaying can be a role in and of itself, a way to avoid the challenging task of developing an integrated identity to negotiate the complex interactions of life.

This role is the one that Holden takes on with those who encounter his narrative. "All I need's an audience," he says, and even as other people fail to listen to and understand him, readers keep reading. In this role, Holden pretends that he is the sole repository of truth in an artificial world. He blames his inability to cope with adulthood on his unwillingness to sacrifice his authenticity like others. In fact, in the narrative world his voice creates, he is the most authentic individual in a world that is cold, unfeeling, and superficial. In some ways, the reader can empathize. The adult world (especially compared to the pure, but simplistic world interpreted through a child's eyes) is often cold, unfeeling, and superficial. However, despite the basic truths he is espousing, his overall persona is gradually revealed as misdirection, a way to avoid discussing his inability to develop an integrated adult self that others will accept and his desperate clinging to his romanticized childhood as a result. As others push him over the edge to face the harsh realities of adulthood, where he cannot imagine a place to belong, he retreats to create a sympathetic character in his reader, one who cannot respond in a way that questions his roleplaying as Rose questions Avery.

How can the reader know Holden's persona is merely a role he is playing? For one, Holden's interpretations of the people in his life and the realities of his environment lack the substance of careful thought. He uses hasty generalizations to dismiss individuals based on single actions. He also uses similar generalizations about human nature to dismiss the entire human race: "Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything" (Salinger 13). Or, as another example, in describing when the bus driver

made him throw out his snowball, he claims, "I *told* him I wasn't going to chuck it at anybody, but he wouldn't believe me. People never believe you" (Salinger 48). He often suggests that he understands "types" or "kinds" of people or things, but rarely goes on to define those "types" or "kinds" in any meaningful way that is useful or transferrable. Even if he partially believes his own interpretations and arguments, they unravel as his narrative unfolds and, therefore, he must continually produce more empty words and arguments to keep the reader and himself from peeking behind the curtain to confirm his persona as another shallow role.

Like Avery, Holden is not concerned with figuring out what is true or most real. The instability of their worlds has gradually caused these two characters to shut down their search for new sources of meaning in new relationships. They have begun to lose faith in that process. Instead of being the only two people searching for a true center and defining place in their worlds of sellouts and fakers, both Holden and Avery ultimately want to defend what they already know, which is the subject of the next section.

Do I Defend Hometree?

In *Avatar*, the Na'vi tribe comes together to defend what they call "Hometree," the center of their community and culture. When the humans come to destroy Hometree in order to extract the precious unobtanium deposit beneath, blind to the tree's intrinsic worth, the Na'vi make the sacrificial choice to defend it at all costs, even though they will likely not stand a chance against the humans' war machinery. They believe in what they know so completely that even if they die, they know that they will have died nobly for something of near infinite value.

Of course, this situation is nested within the fantasy world of *Avatar*; in reality, it is not always so clear what is worth defending at such great costs. As Mr. Antolini addresses what he believes to be the core of Holden's issue, he says, "I don't mean to scare you…but I can very

clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause" (Salinger 244). In many ways, Antolini's caution is applicable to both Holden and Avery, since they are both nobly defending centers that they are coming to know to be false and unsustainable. At first, it may seem preposterous for someone to make great sacrifices for what is known to be false; however, when one considers the predicament in which these two characters find themselves, it becomes clear that they believe their centers are the best, most authentic centers accessible to them. Although they only provide them with a limited view of themselves and their environments, they still help them imagine a subjective world in which they can belong. Since they have begun to lose faith in any larger structure because of the instability they perceive around them, they do not see any other alternative. They defend their centers out of desperation and fear.

Holden's use of this coping strategy is less formal and clear than Avery's defense because, if he tried to defend his romanticized childhood unambiguously, it would become painfully apparent to himself and others that what he values is unworthy of his veneration. However, he still employs this strategy when pressed, often with violence or fierce snaps of unsubstantiated claims. For example, when Stradlater goes on a date with Jane Gallagher, he presses for all the details. When Stradlater refuses to tell him whether or not they had sex, Holden becomes aggressive, tackling him and calling him a moron repeatedly (Salinger 56-59). Just as the Na'vi defend Hometree against the greedy corruption of the humans, Holden seeks to defend his romanticized memory of Jane against the corrupting influence of Stradlater. As another example, when his sister Phoebe presses him to tell her something he likes instead of dwelling on what he hates, he can only produce items associated with childhood. When she presses him further, insinuating that his answers are not substantial enough to move him into his

future by continually saying, "That isn't anything *really*," he responds in fierce defense: "It is so something *really*! Certainly it is! Why the hell isn't it? People never think anything is anything *really*. I'm getting goddam sick of it" (Salinger 223). Instead of explaining to his sister why his answers are substantive, he resorts to overgeneralizations couched in angry, childish language. He doesn't defend his answers well because he cannot. He defends what he knows to be false; he defends out of desperation and fear.

Avery, on the other hand, is older and more developed. His defenses are highly sophisticated, so he has less of a need to hide behind a role or character. However, like Holden, he still defends what he knows to be false. Even though Rose correctly observes that everything is going digital, when Avery finds out that Steve might sell the theater to those who will transition to digital film, he writes a detailed letter defending his position and reads it to Sam for critique. A portion of the letter is rich with insight into Avery's character:

> Film can express things that computers never will. Film is a series of photographs separated by split seconds of darkness. Film is light and shadow and it is the light and shadow that were there on the day you shot the film...Digital movies—I think the phrase digital film is an oxymoron—are actually just millions of tiny dots. These dots, or pixels cannot express the variation in color and texture that film can… Mr. [Steve] Saranac, projecting a thirty-five-millimeter film digitally is like looking at a postcard of the Mona Lisa instead of the Mona Lisa itself. (Baker 140-141)

Upon a technical analysis, Avery is correct: film is more "real" than digital film; it does, as he says, capture "the light and shadow that were there on the day you shot the film." However, ironically, Avery uses "real" film to escape reality. For example, when discussing his issues with

physical intimacy, he admits to Rose, "I always just think: I'd rather be watching a movie" (Baker 93). Although he made this admission in response to a specific situation, it accurately captures his response to many other complex, ambiguous interactions in the play. In this way, he is clinging to film out of desperation and fear. Even though he knows it does not capture reality itself, he believes it captures something closer to reality than anything else the world can offer him, especially in a world he perceives to be full of imposters who, "act out stereotypes of…who you'd think they'd be" (Baker 100). Like the Na'vi defend Hometree against the greedy humans, he chooses to defend "real" film against the larger capitalist system that, in focusing on the financial benefits of progress, does not recognize film's intrinsic worth.

Although the way Holden and Avery "defend Hometree" has a deep resonance with the Na'vi's defense of Hometree in *Avatar*, there is one stark difference: In *Avatar,* the defense unites them with others. However, in Holden and Avery's cases, their defense of what they believe to be most true isolates them. It leads them to, perhaps, lose faith in humanity completely, which is the subject of the next section.

Do I Walk the Earth Forever?

During the last scene of *Pulp Fiction,* Jules and Vincent have a conversation about how they should not have survived a round of bullets shot from point blank range. Jules considers it a miracle, while Vincent calls it a "freak occurrence" (Tarantino). Although Vincent appeals to some sort of objective truth to reach a conclusion they can both agree on, Jules says that he is thinking about this in the wrong way. All that matters, he says, is that he "felt the touch of God" (Tarantino). This use of subjective reasoning makes it impossible for Jules and Vincent to reach any sort of common ground or construct shared meaning from the experience. However, while the debate reaches a standstill, Jules reaches his own resolution. In response to this miracle, he

must “walk the earth” to see where God will place him (Tarantino). He plans to leave his partner behind, and he is unconcerned with the consequences of his choice. When Vincent asks him what he will do if God does not place him anywhere, Jules responds matter-of-factly, “If it takes forever, then I’ll walk forever” (Tarantino).

Of course, walking the earth forever is not as easy as Jules makes it seem, and it certainly is not for Holden. Holden spends most of the novel employing this strategy. In fact, the novel makes it clear that he has been doing this since before the book begins. Holden continually finds himself disgusted and alienated by the people around him, so he leaves to “walk the earth” alone. The first instance of Holden choosing to “walk the earth” is right after he finds out that Stradlater had a date with his beloved Jane Gallagher. He packs up his bags days before the semester ends at Pency and catches a train to New York. When he walks out of his room, he yells as loud as he can down the corridor, partially in tears: “Sleep tight, ya morons” (Salinger 68). As the novel progresses, he wanders New York but fails to find what he needs in the places and people he encounters. In disgust and frustration, he continues to “walk the earth,” eventually coming to conclusion that he might, like Vincent cautioned, never find a place to belong.

This realization has a drastically negative effect on his already elusive sense of self. Once again, as Cooley argues, society and individuals are inseparable; one cannot exist without the other (Rousseau 87). However, since Holden cannot find a way to ground his identity in relationship to society, he is, in a way, being forced to imagine himself as a completely separate individual, which Cooley believes is “an abstraction unknown to experience” (Rousseau 87). As a result, without other humans reinforcing his identity and humanness, he slowly loses a sense of self. In fact, he fears his sense of self will eventually disappear completely. In the beginning of

the book, he says, “After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing” (Salinger 8). By the end of the book, his fear of disappearing makes him frantic:

> Then all of sudden something spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I’d never get to the other side of the street. I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again. (Salinger 256)

He reaches out to the only person he can think of to help him, his dead brother, Allie, continually pleading, “Allie, don’t let me disappear” until he makes it to the other side of the street (Salinger 257). This realization that he might never find a place finds its fruition in a fantasy in which he hitchhikes out west, finds a job pumping gas, lives in a cabin right outside the woods, and pretends to be a deaf-mute so that he will never have to talk to anybody ever again (Salinger 257-258). Since he already feels so alone, even with others, being completely isolated starts to seem like a feasible, or even exciting, option.

Avery goes through a similar process of losing faith in humanity. At first, it happens only in small ways in his verbal retreats. For instance, when Sam suggests that *Avatar* is a great American movie, Avery replies by saying, “If you think that, if you actually think that, I can’t even like…I can’t even like continue to have this conversation” (Baker 45). Soon after, he equates Sam’s position with an argument in favor of killing and torturing babies (Baker 46). Of course, this is an exaggeration, but the underlying sentiment remains: he does not think he can achieve any common ground with Sam. Similar to how Vincent and Jules’s discussion never reaches common ground, Avery and Sam’s discussion never reaches common ground because Avery believes Sam is too different from him to engage in a meaningful or constructive exchange of ideas based on shared assumptions. In a small and symbolic way, Avery abandons

Sam as his potential partner as Jules abandons his long time partner, Vincent. In a small and symbolic way, he chooses to "walk the earth."

He chooses to "walk the earth" most clearly, however, near the end of the play after Sam and Rose allow him to take the blame for the dinner money theft. When he goes to retrieve the old film projector after he is fired, he makes it clear that he will never talk to Sam or Rose again and that he plans to start an "underground basement cinema movement" (Baker 171). In the end, he loses faith in his ability to connect with his coworkers. In fact, it seems he has given up on genuinely deep connections with anyone. He tells Sam, "we were never really friends in the first place…every man for himself, you know?" (Baker 173). And at the very end of the scene, Sam tries to reignite the hope of connection by bringing up their favorite game: "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." He feeds him two actors, Macaulay Culkin and Michael Caine, but this time, instead of being excited and engaged, Avery begins to make the connections between Culkin and Caine begrudgingly and unsmilingly. He sees that the game cannot symbolize any shared genuine connection. Even if the six degrees of separation theory is correct and the social world can be conceptualized as a dense web of connections in which each individual is enmeshed, the game they are playing is based on actors and not real people, so the connections are not real. In much the same way that actors in movies are thrown together in narratives and do not necessarily know each other beyond their roles, Avery realizes that, although life's circumstances have thrown him and his coworkers in a shared narrative, that narrative causes them to take on roles that keep them from truly knowing each other. As he finishes making what he now deems to be entirely artificial connections between Culkin and Caine, he delivers the final line of the whole play: a very sarcastic "Easy" (Baker 176). This seems to suggest that, even though he has largely lost faith in genuine human connection, he can still play the empty games of life he needs to

play—all the while, in his mind, being in danger of always viewing himself as a lone wanderer, like Jules, walking the earth forever.

Conclusion

Studying these two characters in light of *Pulp Fiction* and *Avatar* illuminates fundamental conflicts between deep human longings and lived realities. Humans need to find a defining place in meaningful relationships with others like Jake Sully in the Na'vi tribe. They need to maintain a center like Hometree by which they can understand themselves and stabilize those relationships with others. However, as *Pulp Fiction* reveals, the instability of life frustrates these pursuits to the point of hopelessness. When talking about readers finding the secret center of a novel, Pamuk says that in the process readers come to the conclusion that "neither our mind nor the world actually contains a center" (174). However, Pamuk also recognizes that same longing and lived reality tension when he asserts that all art, education, and tradition "have taught us that there is a center" and that readers "never completely abandon the hope of finding it" (176). It is this tension that both Holden and Avery live in as they are drawn to defend the centers they know are false. It is this hope that both Holden and Avery are in danger of losing as they realize that what they so desperately long for cannot be captured like the light and shadow of film or preserved as if in a glass case at a museum. Without hope in that pursuit, they are left with nothing but empty coping mechanisms that, no matter how deeply human, neither sustain their identities nor stabilize their connections with others.

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