

Vanessa Nguyen

Dr. Warner

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Adolescence and the Loss of Innocence in the Search for Identity

Rationale

The search for identity is a fundamental part of adolescence—a stage that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. For many young adults, this period can be especially challenging as they try to figure out who they are and where they belong in the world. This often forces teens to reevaluate their familial beliefs, social expectations, and personal values. As they embark on their journey to adulthood, young adults may discover that the world is less predictable and more complex than they previously assumed. In a way, teens often live in a bubble during childhood—one that may eventually burst when they venture deeper into the world in search of their identity. As they grow up and face inevitable challenges that force them to rethink their beliefs, what is once a simplistic and naive understanding of the world will evolve into a complex and nuanced worldview.

As a child, I always wanted to grow up. I would look at the older kids at school and wish I could be like them. Now, as an adult, I find it ironic that I long to be a kid again, especially when I am introduced to new challenges. I remember in high school, my friends and I would have the same conversation over and over. We would complain about how difficult life was as teenagers and how much we wished we could be kids again. Back then, our biggest worries were whether we could trade sandwiches at lunch or who could play on the monkey bars first. Reflecting on this, I realize that many young adults also experience similar feelings of loss and

longing for childhood—when life felt simpler and worries were less significant. This revelation has inspired me to explore this topic further in my Unit of Study, as I believe that coming to terms with the loss of innocence is just as crucial as coming to terms with one's identity.

The term “loss of innocence” often carries a negative connotation; however, my Unit of Study does not imply this pessimistic worldview. Instead, I am using this term to denote one's transition from a naive understanding of the world to a more nuanced one, as one discovers the complexities and sometimes awful realities of life. My goal for this Unit of Study is to invite students to reflect on their own journey of searching for identity, while also understanding the inevitability of the loss of innocence in the process of growing up. Using J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* as the centerpiece novel, students will engage with themes such as the struggle with identity, the fear of change, and the loss of innocence. These themes may resonate with students who are grappling with questions about who they are and facing the anxieties of growing up. Reading and analyzing stories about characters who face similar struggles can offer students valuable insights into navigating their personal self-discovery journey, as well as fostering empathy for others who are in similar situations. As students delve into Holden Caulfield's story and his struggle for identity while resisting adulthood, they will gain a better understanding of how the loss of innocence is an inevitable part of growing up, and that the best way to navigate this tremendous change is to not resist it, but learn to embrace it.

Additionally, the theme of losing innocence in the search for identity, as well as the themes in *The Catcher in the Rye*, closely aligns with Chapter 6 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*, which focuses on books about identity, discrimination, and struggles with decisions.

Introducing the Unit

1. To begin the unit, I will have students write a letter addressed to themselves. Students will seal and turn in their letter. At the end of the unit, students will receive their letters back and write a corresponding letter, considering what they wrote at the beginning and what they learn throughout the unit. The minimum word count is 150-200 words. In their letters, students will respond to the following questions:

(a.) When you were younger, what did you think adulthood would be like? How do you feel about it now?

(b.) Do you think there is a point in life where you suddenly “grow up,” or is it a gradual process? Explain.

The purpose of this assignment is to get students thinking about the topics that will be discussed in depth throughout the unit. It also encourages students to reflect on their own ideas and experiences with growing up and adulthood. By beginning the unit with a personal reflection, students are given the opportunity to think deeply—and privately—about how these themes manifest in their own personal lives without the influence of any external factors or opinions.

2. Following this assignment, students will get the chance to work together. As a class, they will create their own definition of the words “identity” and “adulthood.” With both words written in a thought bubble on the board, I will have students write one word that reminds them of identity and adulthood and draw a connecting arrow to the corresponding thought bubble. After every student has written on the board, I will ask them to share the word they wrote and explain why they think that word reflects/represents identity or adulthood. Together as a class, we will

create our own definition of the terms “identity” and “adulthood” using the words written on the board. These definitions will be the ones students will refer to throughout the unit.

The purpose of this activity is for students to not only get the opportunity to share their ideas, but also hear what their peers have to say about these two terms. By working together to create a definition that combines their own ideas with those of their peers, students are able to form a personal connection to the abstract concepts of identity and adulthood. Additionally, this activity encourages participation from every student—whether by writing on the board or sharing out loud—and fosters teamwork/collaboration skills.

3. Continuing the discussion of adulthood and the loss of innocence in the search for identity, I will have students listen to Taylor Swift’s “You’re On Your Own Kid.” This song is about a speaker who longs for love, but as they grow older, they realize that the only person they can truly rely on is themselves. “You’re On Your Own Kid” shows the progression from innocence to experience; the song begins with the speaker as a young teen and ends with them as an adult in present time. Although the song touches on the harsh realities of growing up and losing innocence as one matures into adulthood, the song concludes on a bittersweet yet hopeful note, with the speaker reminding themselves that even though they are alone, they are going to be okay.

*From sprinkler splashes to fireplace ashes
I waited ages to see you there
I search the party of better bodies
Just to learn that you never cared
You’re on your own, kid
You always have been...
Cause there are pages turned with the bridges burned
Everything you lose is a step you take
So make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it
You’ve got no reason to be afraid
You’re on your own, kid (ah)
Yeah, you can face this (ah)*

*You're on your own, kid
You always have been*

After listening to the song, students will read through the lyrics individually and highlight/underline any lines that speak to them. On the other side of the handout, there are three discussion questions that students will be asked to consider as they read through the song. The questions are the following:

- (a.) *How does the speaker in the song feel about their journey to adulthood? Do they seem optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between?*
- (b.) *How does the line "you're on your own" evolve throughout the song? Does it become more empowering or isolating as the speaker transitions from childhood to adulthood?*
- (c.) *Have you ever personally experienced a moment where you realized that you were "on your own?" If so, what did that moment feel like to you?*

With the person sitting beside them, students will share the lines they underlined and explain to their partner why those lines stand out to them. Together as a class, I will go over the three discussion questions and have students share their ideas/answers out loud.

Working Through The Unit

Most of the reading will be done outside of class, so students will be expected to have read the assigned chapters prior to class. In addition to completing the reading, students will be given a theme-tracker chart to fill out as they read, which will be their homework throughout the unit. I will assign one chapter to read each day from Monday to Thursday, two chapters to read over the weekend, and a chart to complete for the entire week. As they work their way through *The Catcher in the Rye*, students will look out for quotes, scenes, or symbols that reflect the novel's recurring themes, such as search for identity, the fear of change, the loss of innocence, alienation and loneliness. As they fill out the chart, students will explain the significance of the

quote, scene, or symbol to both the theme and Holden’s character. The chart will look a little something like this:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Quote/Symbol/Scene</i>	<i>Significance to theme</i>	<i>Significance to character</i>
<i>The Search for Identity</i>	Cite the quote/symbol/scene that best represents this theme	Explain the significance of the quote/symbol/scene to the theme	What does this quote/symbol/scene reveal about Holden?

In addition to completing the reading and chart, students will come to class prepared to discuss the novel with their peers. Every class, I will alternate between either having students discuss in groups or lead full class discussions in which students will share their charts, as well as their thoughts on the reading. A few discussion questions to get students thinking about the novel can include:

(a.) How do Holden’s actions, such as leaving Pencey Prep and running away to New York, reflect his struggle with the loss of innocence? Does he want to preserve his innocence, or is he rebelling against adulthood?

(b.) In what ways does Holden’s desire to protect the innocence of children reflect his own anxieties about growing up and finding his identity?

(c.) What are three items that you think belong in The Catcher in the Rye’s brown bag? Explain your choices.

These questions will guide students through class discussions of the novel and serve as journal prompts for them to answer. Every class will end with students responding to the discussion question of the day in their journal independently. Students can pull ideas from the class discussion or their peers to help them answer the prompt. This, along with the theme-tracker chart, is designed to help students better understand the novel and its recurring themes, while also improving their close reading skills. The Brown Bag prompt is especially

effective, as the novel is filled with key symbols, such as Holden's red cap, the ducks in central park, the museum, and the catcher in the rye. This prompt encourages students to pay close attention to these symbols as they read, knowing they can place them in the bag to answer the prompt.

Ending The Unit

Near the end of the unit, students will receive their letters back. They will read through what their past self wrote and reflect on whether their ideas or feelings on adulthood and growing up have changed since the beginning of the unit. Students will then write a response to their past self. This assignment is open-ended with no specific prompt or word count; students can respond in any way they choose. However, for any students who feel stuck, I will provide a few guiding questions:

(a.) Reflect on the themes we have discussed, particularly the loss of innocence and the search for identity. Are there any new insights you have gained throughout this unit that challenge or deepen your understanding of these themes? How do these themes manifest in your own life?

(b.) Consider the novel and the character of Holden. Are there any moments in the novel that make you think differently about your own life and identity? Any moments that resonate with you? What about Holden? Can you relate to him in any way?

For the summative assessment, I will assign an essay. The purpose of this essay is to test students' knowledge and understanding of the novel's themes and their ability to draw specific examples from the text. The essay's word count is 500 to 750 words. The prompt I will assign is as follows:

Throughout The Catcher in the Rye, Holden is reluctant to accept the inevitability of growing up and the loss of innocence that comes with it. In your essay, argue whether or not you believe

Holden's struggle is a universal experience for young adults. How does the novel suggest that growing up is difficult yet unavoidable? Provide specific examples and quotes from the novel to support your argument.

Beyond The Text

The theme of losing innocence in the search for identity is not only found in canonical texts, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, but also in many works of young adult literature. This theme spans various genres, which demonstrates its universality. I have curated a list of both contemporary fiction and fantasy young adult novels that explore themes of identity, the loss of innocence, and the challenges of growing up that can offer teens comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles.

Contemporary Fiction

1. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: This novel follows a girl named Melinda, who loses both her voice and sense of identity after she is raped at a party during summer break. Experiencing this traumatic event causes Melinda to fall into a state of despair, guilt, and shame. She begins her freshman year having lost all of her friends and struggles to cope with the trauma she experienced. Throughout the novel, Melinda finds the courage to reclaim her voice and rebuild her identity.
2. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena: This novel tells the story of a troubled teenager named Miguel. After causing a tragedy that lands him in a group home, Miguel struggles to come to terms with his guilt and regret. He meets two other boys who persuade him to escape the group home and flee to Mexico. Together, the three boys embark on a journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

3. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli: This novel follows a sixteen-year-old boy named Simon, who is secretly gay and struggling to come out to his family and friends. He finds comfort in exchanging anonymous emails with another closeted gay boy from his high school. However, Simon is forced into a complicated and messy situation when their emails are discovered by another classmate. As the story progresses, Simon realizes that the world is more complicated and less accepting than he initially thought.
4. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky: Told through a series of letters, this novel follows a boy named Charlie, who tries to navigate his first year of high school while dealing with the death of his best friend Michael. Over the course of the novel, Charlie uncovers truths about his past, including the sexual abuse he endured from his aunt, which destroys his naive understanding of the world and his family. However, things begin to change for Charlie when two seniors, Patrick and Sam, befriend him. Through their friendship, Patrick and Sam help Charlie heal from his traumatic past.

Fantasy

1. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J.K. Rowling: This novel follows Harry Potter in his third year at Hogwarts. He spends most of the school year living in fear that Sirius Black, an escaped convict who is also his godfather, will kill him. However, after learning the true story behind Sirius' conviction, Harry realizes that the Wizarding World's justice system is incredibly flawed and unjust, shattering his faith in a system that he believed would always protect him.
2. *Clockwork Angel* by Cassandra Clare: Set in 1878 Victorian London, this novel follows a naive, sheltered girl named Tessa Gray, who travels to London in search of her missing

brother. However, as soon as she arrives in London, Tessa is kidnapped by two warlocks, who reveal that she is one of them. This revelation destroys her understanding of the world around her as she discovers an entire hidden realm filled with supernatural beings. As the story progresses, Tessa must learn to navigate this unfamiliar world, while coming to terms with her newfound identity and power.

3. *Once Upon a Broken Heart* by Stephanie Garber: This novel tells the story of Evangeline, an overly trusting sixteen-year-old girl. After recklessly making a deal with a Fate, magical entities known for being manipulative and untrustworthy, Evangeline is thrust into a world filled with betrayal, deception, magic and death. Her transition from an innocent, idealistic girl who longs for love and believes in magic to someone who can now see the dangers of magic reflects her loss of innocence.
4. *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black: This novel follows Jude Duarte, a mortal girl living in a faerie realm known as Elfame. When she was seven, Jude and her twin sister Taryn witnessed the brutal deaths of their parents. Both girls were then taken by the murderer, Madoc, who brought them to Elfame—a realm where humans are despised by fairies. From the moment she arrives in Elfame, Jude is forced to navigate in a world where those around her detest her simply for being human. Witnessing her parents' deaths and being stolen away to live in an unfamiliar world marks her loss of innocence.

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