The Price of Deviance: Schoolhouse Gothic in Prep School Literature

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From earliest times, students have regarded school as an inescapable, generally melancholy, dull, repressive, and frequently traumatic experience—to be endured in quiet desperation, resigned indifference, or met with open rebellion—but rarely to be enjoyed or remembered with affection. Given a choice, most would have opted for any thing other than school.

—Abraham Lass and Norma Tassman, Introduction to Going to School (1)

While texts within the preparatory school tradition\(^1\) such as John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace*, Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the lesser-known *Good Times/Bad Times* by James Kirkwood are taught and critically studied as young adult literature, they may also be read as gothic fictions using the Schoolhouse Gothic framework posited by Sherry Truffin. Unlike previous criticism that largely ignored the permeating role of the school itself, such an analysis reveals how these popular texts subvert the didactic role of children’s literature and critique the school’s function in normalizing or socializing students. In American prep school literature, rather than nurturing independent thought and encouraging personal growth, schools enforce conformity and quash individual expression.

Works of school-based fiction, especially those set in preparatory schools, are well studied by authors such as Richard Hawley as Bildungsroman, or coming of age novels, but they have rarely been examined in terms of their gothic sensibilities. Truffin, however, explores contemporary attitudes toward education and the academy by explicitly identifying the gothic functions of the student and teacher in fiction. She provides a new critical framework that allows analysis of school fiction in terms of its gothic qualities by applying Chris Baldick’s definition of the Gothic:

[A] tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of
sickening descent into disintegration. . . . [T]ypically a Gothic tale will invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in on itself). (Baldick xix)

Truffin extends this definition as “Schoolhouse Gothic” where the tyrannies (or curses) of the past manifest as self-perpetuating hierarchies and power inequalities present in educational institutions. Typically, these are conservative forces such as racism, classism, and sexism. Confinement, within Schoolhouse Gothic, is instantiated by physical and intellectual traps such as the physical “incarceration” of the school building, the regimented scheduling of time, the all-seeing gaze of the teacher, conformity of the student body, and inflexible grading systems that separate and categorize individuals. Truffin identifies three types of disintegration to conclude her formulation, all of which involve the vindication of the institution and a loss of individuality: the first possibility is paranoia, or loss of sanity; secondly, violence, involving loss of control or loss of life; and finally monstrosity, wherein the protagonist loses his humanity (7–8). The writings of Michel Foucault, especially concepts of power and the Enlightenment in *Power/Knowledge* and observation and institutionalization in *Discipline and Punish*, permeate Truffin’s conception of the Schoolhouse Gothic.

While other formulations of the Gothic are available to examine these prep school texts, the Schoolhouse Gothic can implicitly incorporate their major themes and necessary elements. For example, Louis Gross explicitly conceptualizes the Gothic as a narrative of *education* with predictable outcomes:

. . . because it is concerned with the acquisition and internalizing of kinds of knowledge, the Gothic finds an appropriate vehicle in the quest narrative or, more specifically, the *Erziehungsroman* or narrative of education. Unlike the more traditional narratives of this kind, however, the Gothic journey offers a darkened world where fear, oppression, and madness are the ways to knowledge and the uncontrolled transformation of one’s character the quest’s epiphany. While the classical quest ends in the regeneration of a decaying world and the integration of the hero into society, the Gothic quest ends in the shattering of the protagonist’s’ [sic] image of his/her social/sexual roles and a legacy of,
at best, numbing unease, or at worst, emotional paralysis and death. (1–2)

Similarly, David Punter’s tri-fold definition that the Gothic is primarily characterized by paranoia, barbarism, and the taboo provides another suitable framework for critical analysis of these works (183–84). In either case, Schoolhouse Gothic parallels these constructions of the Gothic: mental disintegration as paranoia or numbing unease; physical disintegration in death and barbarism; and monstrosity as social dis-integration manifested as paralysis, barbarism, and the breaking of taboos. While such general definitions of the Gothic are useful tools for criticism and analysis, Truffin’s focus on schools and educational systems make her theories particularly appropriate for the study of prep school fictions.

Truffin’s work establishes Schoolhouse Gothic as either a sub-genre of Gothic fiction or as a way of looking at academic fiction in a gothic mode. She applies her definition to a wide variety of authors, styles, and forms, including the novels of Toni Morrison and Flannery O’Connor, the short fiction of Stephen King, and the plays of David Mamet. Educational settings that are explored in her work include informal plantation education, rural schools, contemporary public schools, and universities. These texts are primarily written for and taught to adult audiences and (with the exception of her discussion of King) do not focus on the adolescent years of the protagonists. By analyzing novels specifically directed towards young adult audiences featuring adolescent protagonists, the Schoolhouse Gothic may be naturally extended to the genre of preparatory school fiction. In many ways, this type of school is ideally situated as a test case for Schoolhouse Gothic, in that many of its thematic hallmarks find their epitome in the prep school.

In the preparatory school of the popular imagination, “self-replicating hierarchies” are the norm. Most prep schools are single-sex, and most American prep school fiction focuses on all-male schools. Admission requirements favor legacy students whose parents have been alumni (perhaps for generations), and the cost of tuition precludes lower-income applicants. Even in those fictional prep schools that mention scholarship students, such characters are often marginalized by their elitist and privileged peers. Another conservative force in preparatory schools that imposes itself on the present is the paramount importance of tradition. Rules, rituals, curricula, and loyalties all are based upon adherence to tradition, and neither changing times nor individual needs or aspirations take precedence.
Likewise, the confinements and traps represented by the campuses and social codes of preparatory schools are present to a greater degree than in a public school setting. Most fictional prep schools are located in spatial isolation from society, and those that are set in (typically small) towns are turned inward and function as self-contained communities. This isolation, as well as the Gothic architecture characteristic of these schools, leads to a physical sense of containment that is reinforced by policies, such as curfews, designed to keep students within the campus. Beyond these physical characteristics, the more pervasive traps are of a social nature brought on by the tyrannies discussed above. These include honor codes that predicate virtue upon a fear of punishment, social expectations exacerbated by the single-sex, highly competitive environment, and the cliquishness brought about by social backgrounds, physical proximity, and differing attitudes toward the administration. In their study of American preparatory schools, Peter Cookson and Caroline Hodges Persell use the metaphor of a crucible to describe the culture of these schools:

. . . [S]ince their inception the elite schools have had the responsibility of melting down the refractory material of individualism into the solid metal of elite collectivism. By isolating students from their home world and intervening in their development, it is hoped that they will become soldiers for their class. A good many soldiers, however, also run the risk of becoming prisoners of their class. The total institution is a moral milieu where pressure is placed on individuals to give up significant parts of their selves to forward the interests of the group. (127)

This, then, is an essential irony at the heart of American prep schools which is created by the tension between the academies’ lofty aspirations for their pupils and the characteristic rules, codes, cultures, and pedagogy that effectively thwart those ends by forcing students to abandon their individuality.

This is not to say that public schools are devoid of such agendas of social conformity. As Terrence Deal observes, “public schools are more tightly controlled through command and rule; private schools are more closely knit through implicit mechanisms of social control” (416), later noting that this “primary virtue of private schools can become a constricting vise” (423, emphasis added). Despite the differences in how implicit social codes are enforced, these confinements are where prep schools most closely match the public schools, as many of these
conflicts are simply the result of adolescents achieving self-awareness among their peers in an institutional environment. However, as a test case for Schoolhouse Gothic, preparatory schools occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis public schools because of the ways in which elitism magnifies the inherent power inequalities in our society. Furthermore, the setting of public schools is less confining than that of prep schools because they do not constitute a closed system: students return home at the end of the school day, one’s teachers are not the only authority figures in the students’ lives, etc. In fact, unlike public schools, boarding schools are considered by Erving Goffman to be a “total institution,” which he characterizes as exhibiting the following features:

First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same central authority. Second, each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution. (6)

With its themes of confinement and authority, the concept of total institutions can function as a proxy for defining the ideal setting for gothic plots.

Beyond the setting of the public schools, one may also consider universities and colleges as prospective environments for Schoolhouse Gothic tales. These institutions share with preparatory schools their larger campuses, Gothic architecture, longer histories, and high regard for tradition and ritual. However, certain attributes of institutions of higher education make them less suitable as a test case for Schoolhouse Gothic than prep schools. For example, universities are not total institutions in Goffman’s definition of the term. Additionally, the gothic possibilities of prep schools are enhanced by the unfamiliarity of the experience for most readers. As an academic option not available to the majority, prep schools still carry a mystique that allows them to be fictionalized without suffering in comparison to reality, since the majority of readers will have no first-hand experience with which to question the verisimilitude of the authors’ accounts. In contrast, a
university education has been democratized in America since the end of World War II and the introduction of the G.I. Bill; this familiarity has diminished the university as a locale amenable to the Gothic, which is concerned primarily with the other and the unknown. Finally, college students are at the wrong age for the types of identity crises that face an adolescent protagonist, and issues of self-awareness as well as the place of the individual in society are not as pressing. Wendy Rodabaugh argues that adolescent development and the Gothic share characteristics of emotional extremes, a journey of self-revelation, exploration of the unknown, rebellion against authority figures, and sympathy for outcasts. While she concludes that these parallels make classic works of Gothic literature attractive and engaging for students, it also implies that fiction that deals with themes of adolescent development can be read as gothic texts. Steven Bruhm asserts that we need the contemporary Gothic “because the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us—a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe . . .” (273), the very qualities that Rodabaugh identifies as inherent to the crises of adolescence, and which feature as central themes in children’s literature.

Having shown that the necessary precursor elements of Schoolhouse Gothic (tyrannies of the past, confinement in the present) are manifested in and characteristic of preparatory schools in the popular imagination, are the types of plots that accommodate themselves to this setting predictable? Moreover, in a situation imbued with such a pedagogical paradox, what will happen to characters who assert their individuality in defiance of Goffman’s total institution? If it is possible to apply Schoolhouse Gothic, not as a descriptive definition, but as a rubric or formula, such a setting should inherently engender plots that conclude in paranoia, violence, or monstrosity for the individual who deviates from the status quo. By examining the fictional works that have come to be regarded as the prep school canon, we will examine how closely each hews to the formula of Schoolhouse Gothic, hypothesizing that prep school settings will produce the types of disintegration Truffin proposes.

Despite the wide range of fictional accounts of education and schooling in American literature, there have been few efforts such as Benjamin Whitman’s to produce a bibliography that is exclusively devoted to preparatory or boarding school fiction. However, an informal canon seems to exist, if only in the minds of authors, scholars,
and readers (e.g., Peters 31, Birnbach 59). These genre-defining works include *A Separate Peace*, *The Chocolate War*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Louis Auchincloss’s *Rector of Justin*, and Tom Schulman’s screenplay *Dead Poets Society*. Other lesser-known works such as James Kirkwood’s *Good Times*, *Bad Times*, Dick Wolf’s screenplay *School Ties*, *The Emperor’s Club* (the cinematic adaptation of Ethan Canin’s short story “The Palace Thief”), and Richard Yates’s *A Good School* are also cited in the same contexts. Taken as a whole, these works appear to share several demographic commonalities of place, time period, race, class, religion, and sex—they are set in New England during the mid-twentieth century and their characters are predominantly white, upper-middle-class Christian males. This exclusivity of character types began to be countered in the late twentieth century by the publication of prep school novels that include female protagonists, as well as racial, religious, and sexual minorities. However, these works, along with genre works such as mysteries and horror fiction, have not yet received critical and curricular acceptance as American prep school fiction and are therefore not within the set of works to be considered by this essay. An analysis of *Good Times, Bad Times* is included as a transitional novel moving towards a more inclusive prep school canon.

*A Separate Peace (John Knowles)*

This novel takes place at the Devon School in New Hampshire during the 1942-43 school year, as the country prepares to enter World War II. The action follows the lives of several students, centering around the friendship and rivalry between Gene (the narrator) and his roommate Phineas. During the relatively carefree summer session, Gene suspects that the athletic Phineas is sabotaging his studies out of jealousy. When he realizes that this is a fantasy born of his own envy, he precipitates Phineas’s fall from a tree, breaking his leg, and forcing him to miss the Fall term. After Phineas’s return, the other students conduct a mock trial which forces them both to confront what has happened. Phineas flees from the revelation of Gene’s treachery and re-fractures his limb, eventually dying from complications.

The setting bears many of the classic “gothic” prep school traits. Although the architecture of Devon is Georgian, the descriptions are those of confinement: the buildings approaching the school are first defensive, and then exhausted; the field house is called “The Cage” (4), and the smoking room described as “something like a dungeon”
The trap of competitiveness saturates the students’ interactions, whether in grades, sports records, or student activities. Indeed, the narrator notes that “there were few relationships among us at Devon not based on rivalry” (37). The virtues of conformity and continuity are reinforced through schedules, traditions, and authority, which are felt as a stifling and constraining force by the adolescent students. After hearing the six o’clock bell from the Academy Building, described as “civilized, calm, invincible, and final,” Gene remarks that he “abruptly resented the bell and my West Point stride and hurrying and conforming” (10–11). The mention of West Point alludes to the dual nature of the academy as a place of preparation for, and simultaneously a respite from, the encroaching war that adds its own layer of foreboding to the students’ experiences at Devon.

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A Separate Peace can be read as a tale of escape, as each of the major characters devises his own method of defying the drive to conformity imposed upon him. As Peter Wolfe observes, Knowles’s novels “ask, first, whether a person can detach himself from his background—his society, his tradition, and the primitive energies that shaped his life” (189). Upon returning to Devon fifteen years later, Gene introduces his reminiscence by declaring, “I could see with great clarity the fear I had lived in, which must mean that in the interval I had succeeded in a very important undertaking: I must have made my escape from it” (2). But, contrary to John Crabbe’s assertion (110), even Gene does not survive unscathed. Each of the three major characters succumbs to one of the gothic fates Truffin outlines: Gene loses his humanity, Phineas his life, and their friend “Leper” Lepellier his sanity. Each of their coping mechanisms ultimately fails to carry them safely through their prep school days.

Leper adopts a strategy of individualism based on refusal; in fact, Phineas invents the term “Lepellier Refusal” (3) when Leper declines to involve himself in a game with the other students. His defense against the competition and rivalry endemic to the academy is to cut himself off from social entanglements, refusing to join the Super Suicide Society and jump from a tree, to play Blitzball, to volunteer in helping the war effort by clearing railroad tracks, etc. He retreats to nature and refuses to socialize with his classmates; his deviance is one of passivity and seclusion. Leper therefore surprises everyone, including the reader perhaps, when he is the first of his class to enlist, midterm. His reasoning, however, is that “everything has to evolve or else it perishes” (117), and the war will be a test of his evolutionary fitness. His strategy of isola-
tion and refusal, however, has left him unprepared for the conformity required in the army, and he goes mad and then AWOL. His telegram to Gene states, “I HAVE ESCAPED AND NEED HELP”... after which Gene ponders from what Leper could have escaped (129–31). While Leper may escape from the army, he does not escape Devon. Like every character who is defeated by the conservative forces of the academy environment, he ultimately returns to the school.

Phineas’s strategy is also that of escapism, but he attempts this by subverting and redefining the rules that bind him. “Phineas’s life was ruled by inspiration and anarchy, and so he prized a set of rules. His own, not those imposed on him by other people, such as the faculty of the Devon School” (26). He breaks school records in sports, but refuses to take credit. He subverts the dress code by wearing the school tie as a belt, along with a pink shirt, even though people may think he’s a “fairy” (122). Among the traditions Phineas creates are the Super Suicide Society and its associated rules of membership, the sport of Blitzball (“Everyone played it, I believe a form of it is still popular at Devon” [31]), and the Winter Carnival. While the ostensible leader of the class, Brinker Hadley, is given the epithet “Lawgiver” (122), he is merely an enforcer of the established order; it is Phineas who is truly the rulemaker.

The faculty’s attitude toward Phineas’s defiance is bemused and indulgent. He represents the free-thinking and noble individual whom they applaud, even though their institutional culture cannot adapt to his anarchic worldview. Phineas stands as a progressive force in the novel, attempting to introduce change to the academy, but at a rate that cannot be accommodated, for “everything at Devon slowly changed and slowly harmonized with what had gone before” (4). In contrast, Gene can be seen as the epitome of the conservative nature of the academy, the scholar and passive follower who implicitly believes in the values and traditions of the school. The two systems cannot co-exist; although it is ultimately through his betrayal by Gene that Phineas is brought down, the entire school is complicit in his downfall. This is foreshadowed in a snowball fight in which his classmates “ended the fight in the only way possible; all of us turned on Phineas” (145), and ultimately demonstrated in the student body’s participation in the trial that precipitates Phineas’s fatal accident.

Gene’s struggle for identity is the most subtle. Walter McDonald locates the secret to Gene’s survival in his acquiescence: “Gene survived by making his accommodation to the brutal truth, by bending with the
truth rather than resisting and being broken by it” (35). Though his passivity may ensure his survival, he does not escape his gothic fate of monstrosity. His envy and idolization of Phineas lead him to covet his identity as a means of escape. By losing or abandoning his own identity, he loses that which makes him human. Gene becomes a doppelganger, seeking first to become like Phineas and then to replace him. Their physical similarity is noted at the beginning, and on several occasions their identities textually overlap or are confused. Then, while Phineas is recovering in the infirmary after breaking his leg the first time, Gene transforms himself in their room: “I decided to put on his clothes . . . I was Phineas, Phineas to the life . . . I would never stumble through the confusions of my own character again” (54). He later declared to himself that his purpose from the beginning must have been “to become a part of Phineas” (77). After Phineas returns during winter term as an invalid, he himself participates in Gene’s transformation, training him as an athlete and having Gene complete his homework. During the trial, Brinker mocks Phineas for losing his identity to Gene, asking him to describe the “accident” in his own words, saying, “I know you haven’t got many of your own, use some of Gene’s then” (159). The displacement is complete after Phineas’s death. Gene states that he doesn’t cry at the funeral because he “could not escape a feeling that this was [his] own funeral, and you do not cry in that case” (186). Further, he describes himself as “Phineas-filled” just before avowing that “I never killed anybody and I never developed an intense level of hatred for the enemy. Because my war ended before I ever put on a uniform; I was on active duty all my time at school. I killed my enemy there” (196). Though his enemy is ostensibly fear and self-ignorance, we see that in some sense the progressive Phineas was his enemy as well.

The Chocolate War (Robert Cormier)

In this work, the student body of Trinity School is dominated by a secret society known as the Vigils, who give “assignments” to underclassmen usually involving some act of defiant rebellion against the school. Jerry Renault’s assignment is to refuse to participate in the annual school chocolate sale for ten days, an act which makes him the enemy of the assistant schoolmaster, Brother Leon. Jerry surprises everyone, including himself, when he continues to abstain after the assignment is over, defying both the school and the Vigils. A psychological war of intimidation and exclusion results; Jerry is manipulated ultimately
into participating in a rigged fight, which disintegrates into a riot and leaves him critically injured.

Like Leper Lepellier, “Jerry is inherently passive. His natural instincts are to do nothing” (Campbell 70). As with many of the Vigils’ assignments, his is crafted to be particularly apt to his psychological make-up, turning his instinctive and protective inaction into the very thing that will make him stand out. While others see Jerry as “a little worried, a little unsure of himself . . . kind of bewildered” (82), his inactivity reflects rather a paralysis of indecision. Early in the book he describes himself as a coward, “thinking one thing and saying another, planning one thing and doing another . . .” (5). His initial refusal, though coerced, becomes the first step in erasing an earlier moment of paralysis: when his mother died, “[h]e wanted to bellow at the world, cry out against her death, topple buildings, split the earth open, tear down trees. And he did nothing except lie awake in the dark” (57). Similar language is employed when he tells Brother Leon “No”: “Cities fell. Earth opened. Planets tilted. Stars plummeted” (112). Though a freeing and restorative act for Jerry, his defiance (though ironically characterized as apathy) is equated to disease (147), madness (95), and perversion (168) by the students and instructors.

Jerry does not seem to know why he continues to refuse past the period mandated by the Vigils, though it was perhaps the first time he had made a decision on his own. His lack of self-knowledge is symbolized by a poster with the quotation from T. S. Elliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* that he struggles to understand—“Do I dare disturb the Universe?” “Jerry wasn’t sure of the poster’s meaning. But it had moved him mysteriously. It was traditional at Trinity for everyone to decorate the interior of his locker with a poster. Jerry chose this one”(123). Later, during the campaign of exclusion designed to figuratively nullify Jerry’s existence, he declares, “Do I dare disturb the universe? Yes, I do, I do. I think. Jerry suddenly understood the poster . . .” (186). Likewise, Jerry refers to the poster when ultimately defeated by the system, stating to his best friend, “They tell you to do your thing but they don’t mean it. They don’t want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing, too . . . Don’t disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say” (248).

Despite their seeming opposition to the authority and order imposed upon them by the school administration, the Vigils actually enforce the social codes of the preparatory school. Their society appropriates and exemplifies the tyrannies of the educational system through the
use of ritual, appeal to tradition, respect for seniority, glorification of sport, and most of all through the use of psychological and physical punishment to maintain authority. “His [the Vigils’ secretary’s] notebook was more complete than the school’s files. It contained information, carefully coded, about everyone at Trinity, the kind of stuff that couldn’t be found in official records” (14). In tacit conspiracy with the school administration, the “Vigils kept things under control” (27), or as Goober puts it, “The law of the Vigils was final, everyone at Trinity knew that” (36).

The Vigils’ final triumph over Jerry artfully combines all three of the Schoolhouse Gothic outcomes. After a relentless effort to instill paranoia involving late-night phone calls, vandalism, and theft, Jerry is goaded into fighting the school bully in an old boxing ring dragged out to the football field. Admission tickets to the bout serve as raffle tickets to win Jerry’s unsold chocolates, and also allow the spectators to direct the action in the ring.

In one stroke, Archie [assigner for the Vigils] had forced Renault to show up here, to become part of the chocolate sale, and he also placed Renault at the mercy of the school, the students. The fighters on the platform would have no will of their own. They would have to fight the way the guys in the bleachers directed them. Everybody who bought a ticket—and who could refuse?—had a chance to be involved in the fight, to watch two guys battering each other while they were at a safe distance, with no danger of getting hurt. (230)

When a low blow turns this mechanized boxing into an all-out brawl, Jerry is reduced to becoming the victim and perpetrator of violence, abandoning his dignity and humanity. “A new sickness invaded Jerry, the sickness of knowing what he had become, another animal, another beast, another violent person in a violent world, inflicting damage, not disturbing the universe but damaging it” (242). Thus, as Perry Nodelman observes, “[t]he victim turns into another victimizer” (31). The novel concludes with the passively defiant individual succumbing to the violent power of the mob, illustrating that the preparatory school system cannot tolerate the aberration of a student willing to make decisions on his own.
In 1949, Holden Caulfield recounts from a psychiatric ward his tale of returning home to New York City after being thrown out of Pencey Preparatory School for Boys in Pennsylvania. Knowing he will be sent immediately to yet another school when his parents are informed of his expulsion, Holden remains in the city in an effort to briefly escape the phoniness of prep school culture. When he attempts to explain his reason for leaving to his sister, Holden begins to understand that the insincerity at the school mirrors that of society, precipitating his mental breakdown.

While the majority of the novel’s setting occurs outside of the confines of Pencey Prep, Christopher Brookeman acknowledges the importance of the initial prep school setting and identifies it as the proper origin of Holden’s depression and disillusionment:

By turning Holden into a symptom of general cultural malaise, critics have failed to give attention to the fact that Salinger locates Holden’s story within a very specific social world in which the most significant influence is not some generalized concept of American culture or society, but the codes and practices of a particular instrument of social control—the American prep school. (48)

Brookeman also recognizes that Holden immediately understands the educational paradox that exists at prep schools, illustrated through a magazine advertisement about Pencey Prep’s intention, which claims, “Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men.” Holden’s response is blunt: “They don’t do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn’t know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all” (2).

Holden has the experiential knowledge to make this claim; Pencey is the third preparatory school he has been thrown out of, having become a free-thinker in spite of their educational practices.

Moreover, every description of Pencey Prep given by Holden throughout the novel underscores the idea that “the whole official vision of the school as a cooperative caring family is a mask for an actual ideology of intense competitive struggle between its individual members and factions” (Brookeman 61), and that individuality at institutions such as Pencey is neither admired nor rewarded. He remarks to his friend Sally Hayes that the school is:
“full of phonies, and all you can do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddamn Cadillac some day . . . and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddamn cliques. The guys that are on the basketball team stick together, the Catholics stick together, the goddamn intellectuals stick together, the guys that play bridge stick together. Even the guys that belong to the goddamn Book-of-the-Month club stick together.” (131)

Robert Miltner accurately notes that Holden is trying to convince Sally “that this grouping activity is an affront to the individual who sees through it . . .” but Sally disagrees, maintaining that such groupings are an important part of defining one’s identity (46). To his sister Phoebe, he says, “It [Pencey] was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies,” and “[e]ven the couple of nice teachers on the faculty, they were phonies too” (167–68). While several examples of Holden’s personal interactions during his aimless journey through the city may illuminate his angst regarding conformity, phoniness, and personal interaction, it is through his school anecdotes that we discover the genesis of his madness.

Holden’s school tales concentrate specifically on two related themes, that of indoctrination, where conforming to the status quo is endorsed, and the price of one’s individuality. Lingering in New York, suspended between the tyranny of school and that of his parents, he believes he has escaped the world of phoniness, if only momentarily. To the reader, Holden’s school tales begin as short flashes of memory concerning past schoolmates, stolen gloves, scotch, suitcases, and whistling. However, as he begins to interact with and observe people at hotels and bars in the city he realizes that he has not escaped. This is echoed in the lecture given to him by Mr. Spencer, his history teacher, who endorses the headmaster’s advice that: “[l]ife is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules” (8). Holden’s school stories then transform, becoming lengthier neurotic anecdotes of the horrifying realization that life is as much of a game as school is.

When telling his sister Phoebe about Spencer, in a tantrum of frustration, Holden begins to talk about an elderly Pencey alumnus who returned to the campus and frantically searched for “his goddamn stupid old sad initials” on the bathroom doors in the dormitory. He tells Holden how “when he was at Pencey they were the happiest days of his life,” and according to Holden, was “giving us lots of advice for the future and all” (168–69). For Holden, this act of individual expression
is literally minuscule and meaningless. He begins to see that phoniness extends beyond the walls of Pencey, but his madness prevents him from openly admitting this. Phoebe, however, understands Holden’s madness in a simplistic way, recognizing that it is not just school that frustrates her brother, but the world itself, and cries, “[y]ou don’t like anything that’s happening . . . [y]ou don’t like any schools. You don’t like a million things. You don’t” (169).

This argument leads to another school tale outburst from Holden, as he recounts James Castle, a previous schoolmate who leaps to his death rather than recant the truthful observation that his classmate, Phil Sabile, is conceited. Holden does not discuss the physical violence that James endured from Phil and his six friends, saying, “it’s too repulsive” (170), but vividly describes seeing James’s lifeless body. Miltner’s analysis suggests that James was a major influence on Holden’s character and draws several parallels between the two, noting “Castle functions as an emblem for integrity and truth and exemplifies the price paid by those who adhere to those principles,” and that “James Castle’s death is the lesson that teaches the price of opposing phoniness with the truth” (42–43). In this story, Holden not only sees that expressions of individuality are futile in the face of the majority, but that there is no justice in the individual’s endeavor, either, noting, “[a]ll they did with the guys that were in the room with him was expel them. They didn’t even go to jail” (170).

The last school tale concerns Holden’s classmate Richard Kinsella in Mr. Vinson’s mandatory “Oral Expression” class. As Holden explains, “It’s this course where each boy in class has to get up in class and make a speech. You know. Spontaneous and all. And if the boy digresses at all, you’re suppose to yell ‘Digression!’ at him as fast as you can” (183). Holden describes Vinson’s educational philosophy and classroom practices as “telling you to unify and simplify all the time” (185), demonstrating that there is no room for the individual, only groups. This is best illustrated by how Vinson allows his students to tyrannically dictate the outcome of the class by expressing themselves not as individuals speaking in front of the class but as a group, shouting a single cruel word against the speechmaker safely from their chairs. Again, despite these educational practices, Holden remembers Richard’s speech almost verbatim, being the only one in class who actually listened rather than yelled, telling us that, “[The rest of the class] kept yelling ‘Digression!’ at him the whole time he was making [his speech]” (183). Similar to James Castle, Richard is a victim of the power of groups, conformity,
and the preparatory school’s conservative methods. At no time does Holden mention Vinson intervening in this incident to allow Richard to regain his composure, nor does he encourage the boys to make more constructive criticism. Rather, he simply assigns the grade of “F” to Richard over minor details. Vinson’s educational philosophy epitomizes Schoolhouse Gothic pedagogically. While Brother Leon’s tactic is to mock students’ inability to become individuals when they fail to defend their classmate against Leon’s unwarranted accusations, Vinson almost completely removes himself from the educational process and appears to be entirely indifferent toward his students’ oral expression.

In recounting his school experiences, Holden comes to the realization and eventual acceptance of the fact that he cannot evade institutions that enforce conformity; that the process of socialization will occur outside of prep schools as well as inside them. The mental breakdown that results ironically places him within the confines of yet another institution, a psychiatric ward, with the promise that he will be sent to a new prep school in the fall.

Good Times, Bad Times (James Kirkwood)

The themes of Good Times, Bad Times ill suit it to the high school curriculum, and therefore it has received no literary criticism to date. It is included in this analysis, however, because of its frequent inclusion in the sub-genre, to show the general applicability of Schoolhouse Gothic to all prep school fiction, and as an exploration of the emerging multicultural direction of prep school literature. Peter Kilburn is initially unhappy at Gilford Academy in New Hampshire until Jordan Legier arrives and quickly becomes his best friend. Their headmaster, Mr. Hoyt, regards with suspicion and jealousy what he presumes to be a homosexual relationship between the two, and his brutal discipline contributes to the physically frail Jordan’s demise. This death precipitates Peter’s attempts to escape from the Academy, which are discovered and thwarted by Hoyt, who ultimately assaults him in a psychotic rage before Peter kills him in self-defense.

The novel makes use of the frame (or framework) narrative by casting the majority of the story as a letter from Peter to his attorney from his jail cell while awaiting trial for Hoyt’s murder. The frame narrative serves a writer of the Gothic in several ways. It can distance the author from the unbelievable nature of the tale by putting it into the mouth of the character. Secondly, it can provide credibility by suggesting that
there is documentary evidence to back up the “facts” of the narrative (in this case, the letter of confession). However, the frame story also introduces an element of subjectivity by allowing a first-person—and therefore possibly unreliable—narrator in place of the third-person omniscient narrator that would presume objectivity. This subjectivity allows the reader to be skeptical of the story’s veracity, especially considering that it is recalled from memory—in effect, a lengthy analepsis. A final function of the device in Gothic literature is to reveal the end of the story at the beginning, thus removing some element of suspense (the protagonist will survive), but transferring the tension to the question of how the narrator will arrive at his fate.8

This storyline brings out an often sublimated element of prep school fiction that remains unspoken in other (earlier) works of the genre: the threatening nature of homosexuality in an all-boys school. While all sexuality may serve as an expression of individuality and thus be antithetical to the autocratic nature of total institutions, homosexuality may be perceived by society in general as an example of deviance, and is a type of destabilizing individual expression to which prep schools are particularly vulnerable. Prior prep school fiction may allude to gay relationships by code or implication—which Good Times, Bad Times does as well with sly references to closets and Tea and Sympathy (38, 61)—but the genre typically does not give the issue the prominence it receives in this work, where it functions as both plot motivation and gothic curse. Critics such as David Foster and Richard Dyer have elucidated the similarities between homosexuality and the vampire trope. Foster terms this the “vampire theory of homosexuality,” noting:

Individuals cursed with the love of other men come out at night to lure unsuspecting victims to their gaudy lairs, where they ravish them and initiate them into their perverse form of sexuality. This world is thoroughly corrupt, and raging jealousies and insane desires lead to the sort of violence evidenced in the case at hand. These vampires are the result of a combination of poor genetic stock, an improper moral formation, and a chosen way of life that presents them with the opportunities for corruption and perversion. (21)

In Good Times, Bad Times, homosexuality is given the characteristics of both vampirism and disease, each of which can be transmitted from person to person, can infect individuals and places, and may be viewed as simultaneously intimate and destructive. One character who shyly
propositions his dorm mates is seen by others as pitiable partially because of the supposed etiology of his homosexuality: he was sexually abused by his father, who subsequently abandoned his family to move to Key West with a partner (148). The idea that homosexuality is a communicable disease which is endemic to places is further reinforced during Peter’s first interview with Hoyt, where he is told “[m]ost of them come from good solid New England families and I don’t want them contaminated. You understand what I’m talking about? . . . I imagine you do. Any nasty little adolescent practices you might have picked up along the way in Hollywood” (62). In fact, the decline of the Academy’s reputation and finances is traced back to the fallout from an ill-ended homosexual affair between two students (a senator’s son and the football captain) seven years previous. Supposedly this accounts for the current headmaster’s vehement paranoia about homosexuality, but it becomes clear that it is his own repressed homosexual attractions that drive his desire to eliminate this “taint.”

The main characters interrelate in a triangle of attraction, desire, and jealousy. Peter views his relationship with Jordan as platonic; early in the book he states “[i]f I’m a fanatic about one thing, it’s having one particular best friend that I can really connect with . . . Give me one good close friend any day. I suppose I’m what you’d call monogamous when it comes to friendship” (42). Jordan sees their relationship in similar terms, although he apparently is bisexual, discreetly comforting both a lonely homosexual classmate and a melancholy older restaurant proprietress by sharing his bed with them. He taunts the headmaster, however, by letting him believe that he and Peter are in a physical relationship, and mocks him by acting especially camp or “swishy” when Hoyt is around. Thus, Jordan uses his sexuality to assert his independence from the rules of the school and society. In contrast, Hoyt has deeply sublimated his own homosexual desires to the demands of his job and for the good of the institution. His nearly bipolar reactions to Jordan and Peter, however, indicate the pressure this sacrifice has put him under. Hoyt despises Jordan after being rebuffed when he makes a pass during their initial meeting, and he takes a special interest in Peter, as well. He maneuvers—in Peter’s words, “traps” (92, 105)—him into performing a soliloquy from *Hamlet* that will require numerous private rehearsals. Eventually Hoyt’s constant watchful gaze drives Peter toward paranoia. Showing his intentions most explicitly, Hoyt insists on giving Peter an alcohol rubdown to treat a sprained back. He later returns, inebriated, to repeat the rubdown when he presumes Peter
is asleep, and the massage devolves into a narrowly avoided attempt at sexual violation.

Despite all of this, Peter and Jordan view Hoyt first as an object of pity and only later as a monster. After the rubdown incident, their analysis of Hoyt is that his homosexual longings are a trap, even more so given his position at a boy’s school. “Even worse for him. I mean, for God’s sake, the Rev’s in charge of turning today’s boys into tomorrow’s men! So how long can you keep a little iggy like that bottled up? That’s a bad trip to be on—a long one, too” (235). What they do not foresee is that this trap will ultimately break Hoyt, turning him into a monster. Early in his retelling, Peter quips, “I wasn’t going to prep school in New Hampshire. I was traveling backward into the last century, just crossing over into Transylvania, where, as they say, little did I know what awaited me at the Castle Frankenstein” (34). Even his recounting of the rubdown echoes the seduction/assault scenes from Dracula: “After a while I was awakened by the feeling there was someone in the room with me. I looked to the door, which was open, but I couldn’t see anyone. Then I heard Mr. Hoyt say my name” (209). The association of Hoyt with a vampire is reinforced during the final flight from the Academy when he is described in the following terms: “Standing on the hill higher than me, he looked even taller, and with his coat flapping out behind him, it was like he had wings and could swoop right down on me” (330). The transformation into monstrosity is complete as Hoyt traps Peter in the boathouse: “Oh Jesus—suddenly he was a monster standing there, so tall and gaunt, like a huge stunned crazy giant that had just escaped from a madhouse” (335). In a true Schoolhouse Gothic denouement, none of the main characters escapes: Jordan is felled by the jealous Hoyt, Hoyt succumbs to monstrosity and is killed by Peter, and Peter is confined to jail and must face trial, accused of murdering Hoyt who has purportedly discovered and forbidden his homosexual affair. Therefore, regardless of each character’s success in becoming or remaining an individual within the context of the school, each is ultimately defeated by the “curse” which homosexuality has become in the prep school institution.

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After examining this sample of representative American prep school works it is apparent that this setting is not only conducive to the Schoolhouse Gothic, but uniformly engenders plots that conclude in one or
more of the three types of gothic disintegration: paranoia, violence, or monstrosity. Given that all of the characters are immersed in the same physical and cultural milieu, why are they subject to different fates? If generalizations can be made, it appears that paranoia befalls those who attempt to remove themselves from the school when they recognize that the campus represents a microcosm of the larger society. Those who remain and are most actively defiant against the social pressures of conformity within the total institution come to violent ends. Passive characters compromise their individuality and are ultimately transformed by the prep school into a new, inhuman creation: a doppelganger, a beast, a zombie, or a vampire. In all cases, the characters who suffer these fates are those who recognize the recurring institutional tyrannies which confine them and who attempt to negotiate their identities within the prep school culture.

Given the gothic resolutions of prep school novels, it is apparent that the pedagogical tools that these elite institutions bring to bear ultimately undermine their goals by producing a stultifying atmosphere in which individuality is seen as deviance and conformity to the status quo is rewarded. In prep school literature, the ostensible aim is to prepare the youth of today to become the leaders of tomorrow by encouraging them to achieve not only in academic endeavors, but also in their social, civic, cultural, and moral development. Therefore, an ideal prep school graduate would be an independent thinker, a progressive visionary, a leader, and a person of integrity. However, by stifling initiative and individuality, the prep schools’ conservative methods paradoxically thwart their progressive intentions, reproducing the social order and upholding traditional hierarchies. Ultimately, the American prep school in literature and in the popular imagination occupies an ambiguous position where it is simultaneously revered and feared, creating a compelling gothic setting that remains both attractive and repellant.

Gary McCloskey, though writing about film depictions of prep schools (including adaptations of many of the above works), anticipates the Schoolhouse Gothic and concisely summarizes the prep school paradox:

While the popular film image of life and education in elite boys’ preparatory schools reinforces an impression that entrance into these schools is related to the entrance into the halls of societal power, these same films also convey the image of an institution hostile to individual freedom and personal dignity. These films show people punished, or at least muted, when they exercise
the freedom and voice the theorists presume the people in such schools have. (174)

This, then, is the essential irony of a preparatory education in fiction: schools designed to groom young men to take their place in society as leaders use methods that deny the worth of individuals and generate submissive drones who perpetuate the conservative system that produced them.

Prep school novels will continue to occupy a significant position within the young adult literature canon, due, in part, to their Schoolhouse Gothic underpinnings. These novels explore universal (and Gothic) concepts characteristic of adolescence such as the search for identity, rebellion, and the unknown, and thus have an emotional resonance with adolescent readers. Further, one cannot neglect the adolescent appeal of the exotic, the other. As modern-day preparatory schools evolve and redefine themselves, the prep schools described in these novels grow more remote and mythic from any reader’s actual experience. Lastly, prep schools function as the locus of adolescent fears about authority: dress codes, discipline, imposed rules and schedules . . . while such an exaggerated depiction would risk being read as parody in other institutions, it aligns with the popular conception of a preparatory school.

A gothic reading of school stories can reveal new insights by critiquing or subverting society’s concept of schools and literature. The functions of children’s literature and education intersect in that both serve as a medium for enculturation and socialization of youth. Certainly this is true of children’s literature, as Bette Goldstone asserts:

Children’s literature is a transmitter of cultural values. It is an agent for socialization. Whether this is a conscious or unconscious decision on the part of the author, these books do teach the child about social mores, ethical values, customs, and societal expectations of child and adult behaviors and attitudes. (792)

Several genres intended for children, such as fables or fairy tales, are by nature didactic and necessarily include a moral component; likewise, as Julie Cross points out, children’s literature as a whole is produced or taught with an implicit component of values education, or as she terms it, an “inevitable and inescapable didacticism” (55). In educational theory there exists a parallel concept of the “hidden curriculum.” This non-academic curriculum teaches students the social norms of society, as well as imparting normative and conservative values regarding
the class system, gender roles, socio-political ideologies, and perhaps most importantly, ideas about the role of rules and education. In the case of school stories, these two enculturation processes reinforce one another because these works are simultaneously components of the (non-hidden) educational curriculum and depictions of what school and society “should be.” Works of children’s literature which do not explicitly function in a manner consistent with the didactic and social roles expected of school stories (such as those analyzed in this paper) often are challenged in school libraries and curricula because they supposedly fail to transmit ideologies consistent with the hidden curriculum. Ironically, their plots may serve as warnings against deviating from social norms, since those that do not conform are punished.

Given that school stories serve this role as transmitters of cultural and institutional values of education and society, what novel perspectives does a gothic reading provide? One function of the Gothic is to provide a space for the author or reader to confront societal fears and work through cultural or moral ambiguity. Specifically, in the case of school stories, a gothic reading can address society’s fears as they are played out in the microcosm of its educational institutions. Indeed, exploring this function led Truffin to formulate the Schoolhouse Gothic. The literature of the American prep school magnifies and exemplifies many of the traditional concerns of the Gothic such as a fear of the aristocracy, of inherited power, and of loss of personal liberty and individual identity. As each character pursues the American ideal of independence through individuality, he or she must confront the antithetical American ideal of equality which is institutionally imposed as conformity. Viewing school stories through a gothic lens subverts traditional expectations that schools will produce well-adjusted, educated citizens ready to contribute to society, and allows us to confront our fear that we (or our children) give up a large part of our individuality and conform to a homogenized set of cultural values in order to gain acceptance.

Notes

1The terms independent, private, or boarding school are used nearly synonymously to refer to preparatory schools.

2As Peter Hunt observes about the appeal of school stories, “There is, in the English tradition, the added fascination, one assumes, of class. About 7 per cent of English children attend private schools (a figure which has changed little in a hundred years), yet these are the favoured settings. This suggests that the genre drifted at a quite early stage towards fantasy” (300).
For bibliographies of such works, see Kramer; Saul; R.A. Foster; Tiedt and Tiedt; and Lass and Tasman.

The notable exception, in this case, being School Ties, in which the protagonist David Greene is Jewish. His struggle to hide this fact, coupled with his working-class background, provide the major points of conflict in the movie.

Recent examples of this broadening of the archetypical protagonist in American prep school fiction include Rachel Klein’s The Moth Diaries (female, Jewish), Canaan Parker’s Color of Trees (gay, African-American), and Gillian Roberts’s Amanda Pepper mystery series.

Many authors have noted the concept of the double in A Separate Peace; some view the intertwined development of the characters positively as either a beneficent melding or role reversal, while others see a much more malignant process of a systematic, if unwilled, destruction of Phineas by Gene. Scholars in the first camp include Wolfe, Rosemary Palms, Marvin Mengeling, and James McGavran, while Gordon Sleuthaug, James Mellard, and Eric Tribunella tend toward our more negative interpretation.

Cormier equates sports with violence throughout the novel, which begins with the words “They murdered him” during football practice, and ends with this scheme that combines Trinity’s biggest sports, boxing and football.

This literary device is relatively common in the Gothic, epitomized by Mary Shelley in Frankenstein, but we also see it used in two of our previously examined works: A Separate Peace is recalled fifteen years later by Gene, and The Catcher in the Rye is a prolonged series of flashbacks written by Holden from a psychiatric ward. In The Chocolate War a different type of framing device is used, so that the novel begins and ends with Jerry being violently assaulted on the football field.

Beverly Cleary’s Ramona series can serve as a typical example of the expected outcome of the “defiant” child in school stories: that the child not only learns proper rules of behavior, but conforms to them and successfully transmits them to his or her classmates and siblings. However, some scholars recognize the insidious and dehumanizing nature of this transformation. Angela Sales presents a Foucauldian analysis showing that Ramona is broken by the school and ultimately homogenized, while Linda Benson relates the series directly to the hidden curriculum and the gender roles that Ramona is forced to assume.

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