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In Spring 1998, Wendi Canon completed this paper for Professor Melissa Kemp’s English II class, which focused on theories of reading books. (English 10002). After attending a lecture on I vs. We theory in North Canton, Canon created this paper, which examines how the theory operates in three different novels.

I Versus We Theory is Hidden Everywhere

Although each author gives him- or herself the goal to write a very unique piece of work, we the readers can see similarities amongst writings stretched over decades. Created characters, settings, and circumstances tend to change from one piece of work to the next, but themes, more often than not, all deal with the same everyday problems. These repeated themes are not by accident. Writers analyze what the public likes to read about. In fact, probably one of the most common themes is the I vs. We theory, which is simply the idea that people can change from being selfish into looking out for the whole group, such as a certain race, family, friends, or age group. Because the theme is so intense, it is usually found in novels, where there is plenty of room to express numerous examples to totally convince the readers that the main character has truly changed. By looking at J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye and John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, we can show how they, too, write about this transition, as does Sam Greenlee in The Spook Who Sat By the Door. Although these three novels were published over the span of three decades with varying cultural groups, they all illustrate the exact same issue.

The Spook Who Sat by the Door by Sam Greenlee shows the I vs. We theory by establishing the problem of one man, Dan Freeman, who is only concerned with his well-being, but unfair treatment of others turns him into a military hero. At first, in chapter two, Freeman concentrates primarily on his acceptance into the CIA. This selfish attitude is still portrayed in chapter five when the Dahomey Queen, a nearby hooker, is used for pleasure purposes only. In this same chapter, Joy, Freeman’s girlfriend, shows up and asks him to quit the CIA. Although he loves her,
he refuses to give up his dream to be the only black employee in the CIA. The transition to the "We" phenomenon occurs in chapter eight when Freeman chooses to leave the CIA and decides to work as a social worker. The pay, as well as his social climbing, takes a fall, but his hunger to help others does an about-face.

A local gang keeps Freeman eager and energetic to fight for all blacks, not just for a few kids. Without even realizing his change, Freeman lives for the children. He truly cares to see them succeed. One of the kids drops out of college, and Freeman tries to persuade him to go back by stating, "Black people are going to have to get like that because whites are never going to share the wealth with us" (127). The same teenager is upset from being teased because he is very light-skinned. Freeman deals with this by telling him, "You're black because you think black, feel black, and act black" (126). Because this gang and the whole black population mean so much to Freeman, he risks his whole life to see the people he cares about receive equal treatment. The giving of such an outstanding commitment creates the I vs. We theory. His personal growth goes from his self-centered goals to a worldwide helping for hundreds. The point that Freeman does not want recognition proves that his heart is in his work for the people that mean the most to him. The idea of I vs. We does not need to be a single-minded man turning into a military hero, but it must show the dramatic comparison. The exact situation occurs in The Catcher in the Rye but in a less modified story line.

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger also stresses the I vs. We issue by concerning itself with young children throughout the novel. Holden Caulfield, a student at Pency Prep School, located in Pennsylvania, transforms from a drunken, flunking out student to a young man who wants to help a young child. In chapter two, Holden goes to beg his history professor to pass him even though he has skipped classes and failed all his tests. He expects everyone to hand him A's. However, Holden is faced with a rude awakening when he flunks out of school and his parents disown him. The one person who keeps Holden from going crazy is his younger sister Allie. Holden misses her so much that he sneaks into his house at night and lets her skip school during the day just to get to see her. She convinces their parents to give Holden another chance, as well as convincing Holden to go back to school.

Holden feels like he owes Allie something for turning his life around. By the end of the novel, one of Allie's friends dies, and she must lean on
her big brother. This is Holden’s big chance to return the favor. He misses a huge party and travels hours just to be able to hold Allie and tell her “I’d just be your catcher in the rye” (173). This line shows the difference in Holden’s attitude. He is willing to give up something that means so very much to him to help another. Throughout the end of the novel, Holden continues to look out for everyone else. One late night, Holden notices this condition and thinks to himself, “The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (188). This quote can be applied to Dan Freeman as well because he, too, was not looking for glory, but was very humble although his accomplishments were extreme.

The Catcher in the Rye proves that when discussing the I vs. We theory, it need not be to organize a military movement as in The Spook Who Sat by the Door, but simply a change of attitude, caring, and giving. The novel does not come out and give too many examples, but it does give an excellent overview of the I vs. We theme. The Grapes of Wrath shares much stronger examples to point out the main idea of I vs. We.

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck emphasizes the I vs. We theory significantly throughout the whole novel by following a poor family who must all work together to get to a new homeland. The thirteen members of the Joad family must move to California because their land is all dried up from a lack of rain. The trip includes long and hardship days. Along the way, the Joads stop to spend the night at a camp. By this time, their food is running low along with many others in the camp. Ma Joad experiences guilt one night at dinner when all the hungry children see her and her family eating stew. The children come from all directions to watch the stew being cooked. Finally, Ma says, “I dunno what to do. I can’t rob the family…” (332). After a little thinking, she then yells, “I’m gonna set this here kettle out, an’ you’ll get a little taste, but it ain’t gonna do you no good” (332). This is just one example of how the Joad family changes from having hardly anything to making it last not just for themselves but for others as well.

The whole point to the I vs. We philosophy is the willingness to give no matter how small the amount is. The I vs. We principle is also shown by all the other migrants. Families had to learn to share with one another for support, food, and shelter. They understood that as long as they stayed tied as one huge group (or family), they could accomplish almost anything. Each other’s support gave them the hope to travel on looking for work, as well as a positive attitude. This can
also be compared to *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* in the fact that the Cobras and Freeman worked together and helped each other out to gain something better for themselves. This book shows how one single family learned to incorporate hundreds of other families to survive. The mass majority of the characters have to change from an "I" person to a "we" person.

All three of these authors write to suggest the I vs. We theory. The story lines and the types of people who are helped are quite different, but the central idea of an individual developing into someone who is more concerned for another's well being is amongst all three novels. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* might have a totally different plot line, but all of these novels are so very closely related. The I vs. We phenomena will continue to show up in our literature because it is well expressed within the public. This common idea can be traced back for years. It does not need to be a military hero or a poor family traveling across the country, but it does need simple characters who decide they want to help others. This theme can be applied to life. If everyone could make this change, many of our worldwide problems could be eliminated.

Works Cited


