

THE SCHOOL OF MARTYRDOM:
CULTURE AND CLASS IN *CATCHER IN THE RYE*

Susan Mizruchi

Even if he had not failed or dropped out of four prep schools, Holden Caulfield would seem extraordinarily cultivated for a seventeen-year old. He appears to have read everything from Shakespeare to Hemingway, and he is as conversant with popular film as he is with the New Testament. Nor is Holden's reading indiscriminate: throughout he displays tastes and judgments worthy of a sophisticated, liberal imagination. Few would deny that *The Catcher in the Rye* is about schooling and schools, their socializing powers and the prospects for resisting them, as seen through the prism of a student protagonist with whom it seems impossible *not to identify*. Yet the question remains as to what kind of schooling the novel is most deeply associated with. *The Catcher in the Rye* might be read, for example, as critiquing the succession of upper-class prep schools that have given up on Holden Caulfield. If he does stand for some pedagogical or social alternative, what might that alternative be? Some critics view Holden Caulfield as a social radical. Others view him as a complainer who seeks acceptance from the people and institutions he criticizes. One analysis compares him to J. Edgar Hoover and the HUAC investigators of Hollywood, emphasizing their shared disdain for the film industry. The debate extends to views of the ending, which conceive Holden alternately as triumphantly anti-institutional or as destined to conform.¹

My claim in this essay is that a significant aspect of Holden Caulfield's schooling has been overlooked, an aspect that is most prophetic for our own time, that is, its radical spirituality. While the novel has been read as a work

of political protest, as a portrait of youthful alienation, and as a record of Salinger's own religious preoccupations, the deep interdependence among these concerns remains uncharted. Nearly everyone has read *The Catcher in the Rye*, but few have read it well. Despite the many critical reviews and essays that have appeared since its publication in 1951, it still merits sustained close analysis. The odyssey of Holden Caulfield, I show in what follows, provides a model of ritual retreat, social liberation, prophesy and violence that is never resolved in the narrative but remains menacing, a volatile fund of adolescent energy. Consider, for example, Holden's remark about war and the atomic bomb, declaring his unsuitability for the military: "it'd drive me crazy if I had to be in the Army...if there's ever another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad...I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented...I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God."² At a time when "Jihad," in the provocative words of the late Anwar Al-Alwaki, is supposedly "becoming as American as apple pie and as British as afternoon tea," it behooves us to attend carefully to the discontent of one of our culture's most popular homegrown martyrs.³

Holden Caulfield's penchant for martyrdom is reinforced throughout the narrative. The question is: Is it ever fully lived down, and if so, what are the mechanisms—social, psychological, familial etc.—for its constraint? And what makes for the oddly consoling reputation of *Catcher* in light of its residual subversiveness? Why is the novel more often recalled for the accessibility of its adolescent angst than for the highly ritualized violence that consistently challenges the status quo? One explanation seems to be that the novel's radicalism is religiously coded, and contemporary readers and critics were not primed to recognize the potential volatility of Holden Caulfield's religious preoccupations. While the complexity of American religious life in the 1950s is undeniable, the popularity of Will Herberg's *Protestant Catholic Jew*, a book that emphasized the affirmative and consensual role of America's major religions, signaled that the times were at odds with Holden Caulfield's radical religiosity.⁴

Yet the tension between spiritual isolation and community, between the authenticity and the commercialization of religious values, is staged right in the novel, which is set around Christmas for a reason. Holden Caulfield, who refers constantly to Christ (countering every blasphemy with a New Testament quotation), observes that, "old Jesus probably would've puked" at Radio City's sham Christmas pageant with "actors carrying crucifixes all over the stage," when "you could tell they could hardly wait to get a cigarette" (137). I believe our own increasingly conflicted religious world can help us to grasp the strangeness of a book we have come to know *too*

well, that has become almost *too familiar*. *The Catcher in the Rye*'s compelling, apparently time-defying portrait of adolescent alienation has become such a cliché to literary critics and historians that few have probed beyond its surface implications. Indeed, one of the most common assumptions among critics seems to be the book's reliable universalism: it is celebrated as the one work that is likely to appeal to present audiences just as it appealed to past ones, to arouse the same responsive loyalty in the critic's teenage son or daughter as it aroused in the critic herself as a teenager—and then to elicit subsequently in young adulthood or middle age, the alienation founded in wisdom. The recognition that Holden Caulfield is flawed, a whiner and hypocrite, is the sign that the reader has matured.⁵

Such assumptions, in my view, tell us more about our own needs than about *The Catcher in the Rye*, and they serve to diminish a novel that deserves more respect. For the most powerful literature, as we know, changes with its readerships; enriched by history, it resists our nostalgia. Hence, my task here, to try to alienate us from a book we know too well and a protagonist with whom we have grown too comfortable over the years. I would be satisfied if my analysis made readers incapable of ever again uttering the phrase, 'Holden Caulfield *c'est moi*.' I set myself this goal in the name of a more complex purpose, the desire to comprehend figures whom we have preferred to view as alien and remote. By exploring in detail the radical religious impulses of an overly familiar figure, Holden Caulfield, I hope to encourage our understanding of a radical extremism that American culture has long tended to provoke.

Modern Asceticism

Holden Caulfield is an ascetic of a high order. This might seem counterintuitive for a Dantesque odyssey set in New York City, featuring seedy hotels, prostitutes, jazz bars, movies, theatres, alcoholic drinks, and the narrator's constant swearing. But if an ascetic is measured in part by what he manages to resist, then Salinger's alter ego is eminently qualified. Like other ascetics, Holden is extremely aware of bodies and the bodily functions he is prepared to renounce. The fingernails of the headmaster's daughter, Holden notes in the Huckleberry Finn cadence that is second-nature, are "all bitten down and bloody-looking"; his history teacher has the grippe; his house smells like Vicks Drops; and he picks his nose. Prep school dorm mates provide a field day for an adolescent with Holden's capacity for disgust. One has mossy teeth and a habit of squeezing his pimples; another is "a secret slob" who dresses to perfection. Holden in contrast is the kind of sixteen-year

old who refrains from throwing a snowball at a freshly snow-covered car because it looks “so nice and white.” Mostly abstaining from sleep or food, he confesses at one point that he is “a very light eater,” which explains why he’s “so damn skinny.” Possessions seem to annoy him, and he has difficulty keeping track of them: “I never care too much when I lose something—it used to drive my mother crazy when I was a kid” (117). Though Holden travels light in material terms, he carries the moral weight of the world, a burden confirmed by his prematurely gray hair.

What he does do is smoke, to such an extent that it assumes symbolic significance. Early on he characterizes himself as “a heavy smoker,” who has been forced to quit in the hospital he inhabits during the novel’s narration (5). As typical of devout smokers, most occasions provide reasons for lighting up, especially moments of stress: Stradlater’s return from a date with Holden’s love interest Jane Gallagher, dissembling with Ernest Morrow’s mother on the train to New York, in the hotel room after the departure of the prostitute, and after his unsuccessful efforts to pray. Later with the nuns at the Grand Central Station sandwich bar, he is “smoking a cigarette” when he says good-by and “by mistake” blows “some smoke in their face,” which mortifies him (147). He so needs to smoke that he joins the dreaded phonies in the theatre lobby, whom he describes as “smoking their ears off” (164).

Holden not only smokes constantly, but he calls attention to it in ways that invite speculation about its spiritual dimensions. Smoke after all is essential to sacrifice. The gods consume it; it is part of what they get from the rite. Smoke purifies and consecrates the ritual ground.⁶ As Derrida has observed, smoking “seems to consist at once of consumption (ingestion) and a purely sumptuary expenditure of which nothing natural remains. But the fact that nothing natural remains does not mean, on the contrary, that nothing symbolic remains. The annihilation of the remainder, as ashes can sometimes testify, recalls a pact and performs the role of memory” that may “partake of offering and of sacrifice.”⁷ Smoking, like the sacrificial rite it portends, is both ominous and sublime. And it is appropriate that smoking is especially emphasized in the narrative’s central encounters, which both feature warnings of Holden’s impending “fall”: his conversations with Phoebe and with Mr. Antolini.

Holden’s response to just about everything Phoebe does is “that kills me.” She responds in kind to the news that Holden has been kicked out of Pencey by repeatedly shrieking, “Daddy’ll kill you!” (214). Their exaggerated rhetoric is underwritten by a deeper melancholy when Phoebe manages to elicit that the only people Holden really admires, Allie Caulfield and James Castle, are dead, and he is unable to imagine a future for himself. Throughout the

discussion, Holden smokes, sneaking cigarettes from his parents when he runs out. He smokes so much that their mother (who is up all night smoking herself, still mourning Allie's death) detects it, and Phoebe has to cover for him by pretending that she has been smoking. The atmosphere at Mr. Antolini's is even smokier, befitting the greater gravity of the conversation. Mr. Antolini notes Holden's excessive smoking, and Mr. Antolini himself, though his alcohol consumption is even more prodigious, "smoked like a fiend" according to Holden (182). He lights up just before launching into his pivotal tirade about Holden's impending fall. "I can very clearly see you," Mr. Antolini predicts, "dying nobly for some highly unworthy cause" (244). Pointing out that many have been "just as troubled morally and spiritually," that he is not the first person in history to be "sickened by human behavior," he reminds Holden "you're a student whether the idea appeals to you or not" (189). Some critics have dismissed Mr. Antolini because he betrays an apparent erotic interest in Holden, who awakens in the middle of the night to find his former teacher by his bedside patting his head. But such dismissals overlook the exceptionality of Mr. Antolini's insights and their consistency with the narrative's deepest assumptions. For Mr. Antolini alone recognizes the spiritual weight of Holden's dissatisfactions and their potential for actualization in violence. He alone bears witness to Holden's penchant for martyrdom.

Everything Holden cares about is spiritualized, and this applies to his central vocation—writing. The first representation of Holden writing is a ghostwritten description of a ghostly script: he completes an assignment for his roommate, about the poems on his brother Allie's fielder's glove. This suggests the memorial cast of the narrative, a work of mourning for Allie Caulfield, as well as its commitment to the gravity and power of the word. Holden is a purist whose views of writing go beyond pleasure or taste. For him, writing is sacred, and he is alert to any signs that it is being taken for granted or its ideals violated. Thus Holden's concern that his brother D. B. is huckstering his own literary promise in Hollywood, and his identification with the young hero of D. B.'s story, who won't allow anyone to see his "secret goldfish" (4). Art requires protection and is ever susceptible to contamination and exploitation.

This preoccupation with artistic purity is typical of the American literary tradition. Holden shares Huckleberry Finn's innocent naturalism, part of a larger idealism that can generate hostility toward the "people who are always ruining things for you," an observation of Holden's that echoes Hemingway's Jake Barnes (114). Holden likewise recalls Nick Carraway in his ambivalent response to the cynicism and decadence he encounters: alternately despair and protest (erasing profane graffiti from revered edifices—Nick from

Gatsby's mansion, Holden from Phoebe's elementary school). Equally typical of an American literary tradition is the way Holden's alienation proves a means of mass seduction, his narrative providing a cultural primer of withdrawal harking back to Thoreau's *Walden* and forward to Jack Kerouac and the Beats.

Holden has equally high standards for popular entertainment. Questioning, "what's so marvelous about Sir Laurence Olivier" in *Hamlet*, he finds him "too much like a goddamn general, instead of a sad screwed-up type guy" (152). Holden's disdain for theatrical contrivance, his complaint that actors "never act like people," might stand as a first principle of the realist method acting that won favor in America during the 1940s and 50s (117). The proximity of the audience in stage acting only seems to aggravate the performers' self-consciousness. Hence, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontane "acted like they knew they were celebrities." Their acting was "*too good*" (126).⁸ Moreover theatre has been irreparably corrupted by commerce as confirmed by the patronage of Holden's father, a corporation lawyer who is "always investing money in shows on Broadway" (107).

There is no end to compromise in the novel's world, but one of the greatest disappointments is Ernie, the jazz piano player, who is "so good he's almost corny" (80). Ernie has forsaken his talent for adulation, setting up a big mirror in front of the piano so the crowd can watch his face while he plays. Noting that people always clap for the wrong things, Holden concludes that if he were a piano player, "he'd play it in the goddamn closet" (110). American culture from high to low is steeped in a commercialism it has become impossible to avoid. Significantly, Holden's reading of women—Sunny the prostitute, Sally Hayes, and Jane Gallagher—parallels his reading of mass culture.⁹ Because he is a virgin, reveres women, and is constitutionally passive, Holden's encounter with Sunny is remarkably tender. He hangs up her dress, worries about her youth, and is unable to consummate their tryst. He can't help being chivalrous and feeling disappointed by her cynicism. The same hypocritical idealism prevails in his responses to Sunny and Ernie: he wants them to resist the cash nexus that is fundamental to their roles as, respectively, prostitute and bar owner. Sally is similarly resigned to her corruption, though she is as dense as she is flirtatious. Sally embodies the feminine mystique: like the celebrities she idolizes, she has succeeded in becoming a commodity for widespread delectation.

Jane Gallagher offers a rare alternative to selling out; in so doing, she warrants acknowledgment as kin. A purist in her own right, someone who has known suffering, and the only person to whom he shows Allie's inscribed fielder's glove, Jane is one of the few who meet Holden's standard of authenticity. Jane's strategy of keeping her kings in the back row when

she plays checkers, that gesture of withholding, and the evidence—the tears she sheds when Holden asks if her stepfather has molested her—that she has suffered, are signs of worthiness.¹⁰ Jane is the type of girl who can't be teased, who takes things seriously, which is the opposite of people at Ernie's where "nobody cared." Indeed, what most offends Holden about Ernie is his violation of the divide between sacred and profane: he behaves as if his performances are "*holy*," and "Nobody's *that* good" (83-84).

This becomes the ultimate distinction between Holden and what he admires: writing, musicianship, good acting, and Jane Gallagher. The deepest culture, in Holden's view, requires depth of feeling and empathy for suffering, which is a kind of holiness. Holden's eyes have been opened by pain, and he is more deeply wounded than has been recognized. It is a sign of the narrative's own profound habit of renunciation, and its ultimate ambiguity, that Holden never encounters Jane Gallagher in all of his wanderings, and readers are thus denied direct access to her. Like Allie and James Castle, she remains a phantom in the tortured memory of Holden Caulfield.

Wounds

The Catcher in the Rye is a bloody book, its hero obsessed with blood and blood letting. Holden picks fights, pounds his fist into glass windows, and fantasizes even more violent confrontations. Such details make the novel's attraction to sociopaths understandable.¹¹ Despite his great empathy and confessions of "yellowness" and pacifism, Holden has a short fuse and tends toward a misanthropy confirmed by the red "people shooting hat" he buys after being ostracized by the fencing team for losing their equipment on the subway (30). Holden taunts his placid muscle-bound roommate until he socks him in the face. Recovering his red hunting hat, Holden inspects himself in the mirror: "you never saw such gore in your life...it partly scared me and it partly fascinated me. All that blood" (59). Robert Ackley, the schoolmate with the pimples, reacts, "Jesus...You're still bleeding for Chrissake," and Holden continues to bleed on the train to New York, noting, "I still had quite a bit of blood on" (69). At the hotel, Holden again deliberately provokes Maurice, the elevator operator who serves as Sunny's pimp, when he shows up at the room demanding more money. Holden describes inciting Maurice to the point when he punches the wind out of him. Holden compares the incident to the fight with his roommate, "only this time I thought I was dying" (135). But the actual punch is inadequate to Holden's pain threshold, so he pretends that Maurice has shot him, his "blood leaking all over the place." As the scene ends, he is expressing his desire to commit suicide by

“jumping out the window.” Holden refrains, he says, because he “didn’t want a bunch of rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory” (136).

This last image alludes directly to the novel’s major ritual incidents: James Castle’s sacrifice by “jump[ing] out the window” and Holden’s breaking of all the glass windows in the garage on the night his brother Allie dies. It is telling that James Castle, a fellow student at Elkton Hills whose name comes just before Holden’s at roll call, is wearing a sweater borrowed from Holden when he dies in a pool of blood and teeth after jumping out the window of his dorm room. He is a sacrificial substitute, who apparently falls so Holden won’t have to. James Castle jumps after uttering truths to bullies, who crowd into his room to torture him: “I won’t even tell you what they did to him—it’s too repulsive—but he *still* wouldn’t take it back” (221). Lying there dead on the stone steps, “nobody would even go near him” Holden recalls, except for Mr. Antolini who “took off his coat and put it over James Castle...he didn’t even give a damn if his coat got all bloody” (227). Like the body of Christ when it is carried from the cross to the sepulcher, James Castle is doubly bound, in Holden’s turtleneck and in the coat Mr. Antolini drapes more loosely about his bloody frame. The garment closest to the body matters most, for it bears “the impressions and signatures of every wound.”¹² The inner garment speaks, as it were, and James Castle’s suffering, inscribed on Holden’s sweater, becomes an emblem of the narrative as a whole.

Allie Caulfield is a child sacrifice, dying of leukemia at age eleven. A left-handed redhead, he is also “the most intelligent” and “nicest” member of the family (50). Holden has a kind of sixth sense about Allie; he is haunted by his dead brother and preoccupied with death. Holden continually imagines he is disappearing, and he contemplates various means of dying and how he will be mourned. His writing samples (for history and English) betray an exclusive interest in the dead—Egyptian burial practices and his dead brother’s glove—and the one Pencey sermon he remembers is delivered by an alumnus who is an undertaker. While the narrative has been recognized as a work of mourning for Allie, none have seen the subtlety and extent of Holden’s grief, and its lasting consequences. For Holden is not merely preoccupied with death; he needs to get close to it, to feel it. On the night of Allie’s death, he tells us he slept in the garage and “broke all the goddamn windows with my fist...my hand still hurts...and I can’t make a real fist any more...[but] I’m not going to be a goddamn surgeon or a violinist or anything *anyway*” (50-51).

The primitive ferocity of Holden’s grief registers a protest of grief’s limits. Holden’s predicament resonates with Emerson’s in “Experience”; “the only thing grief has taught me,” Emerson writes, “is to know how shallow it is.”¹³ Emerson grieves that grief does not leave a wound equivalent to its

emotional force, and then he grieves that even the emotions are fleeting. The fall of man, according to Emerson, is a failure of affect: the default setting of human experience is superficiality. Yet Emerson is an adult, a father, and a public intellectual; instead of slamming his fist through glass windows, he manages to accommodate his predicament through philosophical skepticism.¹⁴ Holden, by contrast, remains unwilling to concede the distance of the dead. His act of self-mutilation defies the border that separates him from his brother, as he seeks a foundational wound. Holden's self-mutilation also prevents his attendance at Allie's funeral, expressing, however inadvertently, his disdain for the community (and its ritual), and his repudiation of his initiation into it. Holden will play no part in the ritualized affirmation of the collectivity: that it has survived the mortal blow suffered prematurely by its member. He implicitly refuses to join society's primitive pantomime of transcendence.¹⁵

The broken glass, which typically ushers in a new stage of social existence or change of status, here confirms the opposite ("I'm not going to be a goddamn surgeon or a violinist or anything *anyway*"). Throughout the novel glass symbolizes a failure to grow or adapt, as in the glass cases at the Museum of Natural History, or the glass mirrors that reflect Ernie's self-satisfied smirk as he performs at his club. While the motto of Frank Norris's eponymous hero "McTeague" is "you can't make small of me," Holden Caulfield's could be "you can't make big of me."¹⁶ From this perspective his fasting appears as both an assault on his rapidly growing body (six inches in one year) and a refusal to thrive. Holden identifies notoriously with children, from his sister Phoebe to her skater friend at the park to the little boy who sings the titular Burns melody, "Comin Thro the Rye," and the only order he is willing to even consider joining is the order of the dead. Displaying an almost cultish susceptibility to suffering, Holden is incapable of denial, of closing out pain.

Thirteen when his brother dies, and sixteen during the novel's events, Holden has been in deep mourning for three years. He is "the man in black," an open wound with an unlimited receptivity to suffering. There is almost no one he doesn't feel sorry for. This includes, among others, the history teacher who has flunked him and lectures him pompously when he comes to say good-bye; an irritating dorm mate; Ernie; a flamboyant girl who once dated his brother; all the girls he has made passes at; and his father and mother coping with his prospective death. What's striking about this list is its indiscriminateness; he feels as strongly for non-intimates as for intimates. Indeed, he shoulders the pain of the world, in a way that is saintly, if not downright Christ-like. Next to Christ, Holden's favorite Bible character is the man from Gerasa. "If you want to know the truth," he says in the

phrasing that invariably introduces significant points, “the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic...that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones. I like him ten times as much as the Disciples, that poor bastard. I used to get in quite a few arguments about it” (99).

The New Testament story to which Salinger alludes here appears in chapter five of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus by the Sea of Galilee with his disciples meets a man “with an unclean spirit,” who “lived among the graves.” The verse continues, “All day and all night he wandered among the graves and through the hills...screaming and cutting himself with stones” (Mark 5:2-5). Jesus asks his name, and the man replies, “my name is Legion because there are so many of us” (5:10). Jesus sends the unclean spirit into a pack of nearby pigs that subsequently rush en masse into a lake and drown, terrifying the bystanders. Then Jesus directs the man from Gerasa, “Go home to your family and friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (5:19-20). The commentary suggests that the man becomes “a witness” to Christ’s salvation, and that his obligation to inform others strengthens his faith. Christ’s uncharacteristic directive, the commentary continues, is explained by the foreign setting, his desire that Gentiles learn of his wonders.

The parable closely parallels Holden’s story. Restless, barely eating or sleeping, the man from Gerasa wanders, his mind consumed with thoughts of the dead. Eager to feel the pain of the world, which he recognizes as “legion,” he cuts himself with stones. His self-exile and invasion by unclean spirits demonstrates that he has become a kind of scapegoat, embodying the corruption he has identified. He is rescued from eternal damnation by the arrival of the Messiah, who finds a surrogate for his suffering in the ultimate taboo animal, a pack of pigs, just as there are surrogates for Holden who pay the ultimate price. Perhaps the most important detail of this passage is the information that Holden has debated the merits of the man from Gerasa with Arthur Childs, which echoes his earlier conversation with Robert Ackley about monasteries, as well as other ruminations about religion and the good life. It is appropriate that Mark, where Christ appears as “both a fierce apocalyptic prophet” preaching the world’s imminent end “and a prophet of the good life “profess[ing] love for his neighbor,” is the New Testament book given pride of place in *Catcher in the Rye*.¹⁷ Christ’s wavering between apocalyptic fervor and generosity of spirit provides an invaluable prophetic perspective on Holden Caulfield. He is “a single figure,” combining “two personae,” as a reviewer of recent scholarship on the gospels has remarked, “one dark, one dreamy...[bearing] a hard doctrine with a humane manner.”¹⁸ Holden’s oscillations between violence and empathy are signs of a man on a spiritual mission.

Spiritual Rebel

Loss, grief, and the spiritual explorations they catalyze, I want to argue in this concluding section, have transformed Holden Caulfield into a rebel. Death has taught him lessons beyond the schools providing a bitter, razor-like insight into prevailing social inequities. Critics of the novel have not fully appreciated Holden's critique because they have overlooked its roots in a deep spiritual malaise and yearning. *Catcher* criticism is filled with laments about the protagonist's hypocrisy and penchant for contradiction.¹⁹ Such laments overlook the inseparability of Holden's response to pain and his sense of injustice: his empathy for personal injury invariably brings him to recognition of its political content. Thus, the "charming" headmaster at Elkton Hills who snubs the lower class parents "drives [him] crazy," as does Sally Hayes's mother, who would only collect for charity if the contributors "kissed her ass" (148). She could only assume the humble task of asking for money if those who gave were prepared to reverse the terms of the exchange through dramatic testimony of her superiority. Mrs. Hayes is distinguished from the nuns with suitcases, whose shabby collection basket and meager rations exemplify their embrace of an alternative way of life. Their simple aspirations and devotion to good works, makes them receptive to Holden's altruism and closer than any other characters to the hermitic or monastic prospect he sometimes imagines for himself.

Holden is seated at the train station sandwich bar when they arrive: "They didn't seem to know what the hell to do with their suitcases, so I gave them a hand. They were these very inexpensive-looking suitcases—the ones that aren't genuine leather or anything. It isn't important, I know, but I hate it when somebody has cheap suitcases" (141). The incident arouses a recollection of his roommate Dick Slagle from Elkton Hills who also had "very inexpensive suitcases," which he kept "under the bed, instead of on the rack, so nobody'd see them standing next to mine. It depressed holy hell out of me, and I kept wanting to throw mine out or something, or even *trade* with him. Mine came from Mark Cross, and they were genuine cowhide and all that crap, and I guess they cost quite a pretty penny" (141). The extended recollection concludes, "it's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs—if yours are really *good* ones and theirs aren't. You think if they're intelligent and all...and have a good sense of humor, that they don't give a damn whose suitcases are better, but they do. They really do. It's one of the reasons why I roomed with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine" (142).

Images of suitcases pervade the novel. They're where Holden keeps the few belongings he cares about: Allie's fielder's glove, a story sent by

Phoebe. They reveal his identity as a Pencey Prep student on the train to New York. And they signify class. There may be no more telling indicator of the Caufields's affluence than the disclosure, in passing, that he had expensive Mark Cross suitcases when he attended Elkton Hills, a different set of suitcases when he attended Wheaton, and Gladstone suitcases at Pencey Prep. Describing his departure from Pencey, Holden mentions the Gladstones three times without ever revealing them as suitcases. Recalling the snobbish understatement of Nick Carraway, who drops casually that he "graduated from New Haven," confident that anyone *who matters* will know he means "Yale," Holden assumes his readers *know* that *Gladstones* are *suitcases*.²⁰ Cultural literacy presumes as much: from the mid-nineteenth century, the Gladstone suitcase symbolized wealth, and was even alluded to in literary works, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), as accouterments of fashionable British travel.²¹

The echo of Nick Carraway's elitism in Holden's perspective here signals his relative unconsciousness of the role of suitcases in illuminating what might be called "the hidden injuries of class."²² What distinguishes him from Nick Carraway, however, is the suppleness of his assumptions and his capacity for deeper levels of class analysis. At a stage of life—late adolescence—when most people simply want to conform and get along, Holden is depressed by these marks of class distinction that shame his roommate, he wishes he could "throw [his] out" or "trade." He recognizes that a class structure that requires him to room with "a stupid bastard" instead of an "intelligent" boy with "a good sense of humor" is abhorrent. In the episode with the nuns, Holden displays profound awareness of their social symbolic meaning. And he notes the continuum between class barriers and religious ones, in confessing how grateful he is that the nuns didn't ask if he was a Catholic: "Catholics are always trying to find out if you're a Catholic... It's just like those suitcases... it's no good for a nice conversation" (113). Social life is endlessly productive of divisions, of class, creed, and kinship, and Holden Caulfield is perpetually aware of how they impair human connection.

The symbolic significance of suitcases reinforces this sense of disconnection and atomization. To the extent that they represent departure, distance, states of tourism or travel that are inevitably disruptive of social ties, the suitcases highlight transient as opposed to strong or lasting human bonds. Whether indicative of modest or privileged economic circumstances, deliberate relocation (the nuns), or aimless movement (Holden), suitcases in *The Catcher in the Rye* are for the most part oppressive. Though J. D. Salinger could not have known about the top-secret "nuclear suitcases" that were first produced by Soviet scientists in the 1960s and 70s, he would certainly have appreciated the irony of a familiar innocuous looking item with the

capacity to “topple not only the Twin Towers but most of lower Manhattan.”²³ Salinger had his own penchant for apocalyptic disenchantment on the order of his protagonist’s. “It’s a big shitty world, and it gets shittier by the minute,” he wrote in a 1983 letter released after his death; “how ready this wretched planet is for the bomb.”²⁴ Perfected and refined in the time since Salinger’s observation, the nuclear suitcases or SADMs (“Special Atomic Demolition Munitions”) have recently become even more miraculously lightweight and unobtrusive, measuring 24 inches by 16 by 8, weighing 24 pounds, and easily activated by cell phone.²⁵

Still, we might take solace in the novel’s final example, which features Phoebe coming to say goodbye to Holden lugging a suitcase he recognizes as his own. The symbolism could not be more pronounced: Phoebe is carrying Holden’s burden. “What the hell ya *got* in there?” he snaps irritably, becoming dizzy and then telling her to “shut up” (266-67). She begs to accompany him into exile, and insists that the suitcase “isn’t heavy.” Confessing, “I was almost all set to hit her,” he grabs “that crazy suitcase” and checks it in the Natural History Museum (267). Holden refuses to share his suitcase-cross with his precious little sister for what he sees is neither reasuring nor remediable.

On the Sunday of his wanderings, Holden notices a family returning from church. The parents, who “looked sort of poor,” (150) appear oblivious to the peril of their little boy walking on the street’s edge singing an idiosyncratic version of the Burns melody, “If a body catch a body coming through the rye.” Holden says that the scene cheers him up, and a subsequent conversation with Phoebe reveals that it has supplied some notion of vocation. If he had a choice, he tells her, he’d like to be “the catcher in the rye” who stands on the edge of a cliff before thousands of kids and prevents them from going over the edge (173). Holden’s fantasy of rescue can be seen as the culmination of his odyssey. It confirms his desire to spare others the suffering he has experienced, and his preference for a world in which people feel indiscriminately obligated to one another, where compassion is instinctive and divisive distinctions minimized. Salinger critics have read Holden’s fantasy as a sign of immaturity: only among children is such harmony even conceivable, and then barely, if at all. Its repudiation is essential to his social integration.

What I would like to suggest is that the ideal world Holden imagines, of mutual obligation, empathy for suffering, and diminished social distinctions, is one we would all readily accept.²⁶ What may surprise and disturb us is that it is perfectly consistent, according to a new study, with some of the most violent forms of youthful disenchantment that have become increasingly

familiar in our own time. In his 2009 book, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*, Eli Berman draws a continuum between fanaticism productive of world-destroying violence, and mere alienation, noting that terrorist groups like the Taliban (which means “students” in Arabic) began as ordinary religious sects devoted to piety and charity. Such groups, he suggests, attract spiritual “rebels,” altruists who seek to help others and are sufficiently youthful and egoistical to believe that they can influence the fate of their community.²⁷ Moreover, the most lethal terrorist organizations are also the most effective at achieving group solidarity, in great part through the interdependence of their violence and their charity work. Their destructive ambitions depend on their organizational roots in community service. While conceding the disturbing ethical implications of his research, Berman urges us not to dismiss the potential insights. As I suggested at the outset, Holden Caulfield can be seen as modeling an adolescent disenchantment that lends itself to homegrown violence. Salinger’s spiritually hungry American adolescent with a penchant for bloodletting has affinities with today’s young martyrs, who often come from privileged backgrounds, and who resent, above all, the callousness and materialism of their peers. Acknowledging those affinities, I believe, represents an important step in helping us to surmount their most destructive consequences. And such acknowledgment, just as importantly, brings us one step closer to the world of mutual obligation imagined by Holden Caulfield at his best.

Coda

J. D. Salinger died on January 27th, 2010 at the age of ninety-one. Once he became a corpse, those who sought to pick at his corpus during his life (unsuccessfully due to his dogged resistance to celebrity) began almost immediately to circle round. The release of Shane Salerno’s 2013 documentary, *Salinger*, with its accompanying book by David Shields, left central questions unanswered: will the new fiction slated for publication beginning in 2015 (listed at the documentary’s end) be up to the standard Salinger set with *Catcher in the Rye* and a handful of stories? Will there be letters and accompanying materials that tell us more about the mind and beliefs of this most reclusive of American authors? And will these materials alter prevailing critical views? The host of interviews in Salerno’s entertaining but unrevealing documentary yielded little that had not been disclosed previously by Salinger’s daughter, Margaret, whose biography of her father remains the best source for knowledge of Salinger’s work and influences.

Margaret Salinger’s *Dream Catcher* describes Salinger’s Jewish upbringing,

including the traumatic news delivered just after his Bar Mitzvah, that his mother was born Irish Catholic and had been “passing” as a Jew since her marriage to Sol Salinger. It highlights Salinger’s enjoyable sojourn with a Jewish family in Vienna, where he was sent to secure an old-country perspective on his father’s meatpacking business. The stay was curtailed by the rise of Hitler, and Salinger was back home by the time Austria fell to the Nazis and the Jewish family dispatched to a concentration camp. The biography details Salinger’s experiences in the U.S. army from 1942 through 1945, dwelling on the grisly “Battle of the Bulge” after which he was hospitalized for battle fatigue. Among the most curious events in this curious life is Sergeant Salinger’s brief marriage to a “low-level official in the Nazi party,” whom he himself had arrested and interrogated.²⁸ According to Salinger’s second wife, the mother of his children, this young German woman “hated Jews as much as he hated Nazis” and the “extremely intense” relationship “did not survive transplanting to America.”²⁹ Salinger’s second marriage was dominated by his cultish attachment to Buddhist sects which emphasized the divinity of husbands and the alternately ennobling and defiling impact of women and sex. For decades hence Salinger’s life was guided by various strains of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian Science and Scientology, as well as by macrobiotics, Eastern medicine, and occasional overtures to rabbis of different orthodoxies.

While much has been written about Salinger’s spirituality, it remains one of the most compelling areas for new criticism on his writings.³⁰ Among the new Salinger works supposedly slated for publication in 2015 is a book that combines stories with accounts of the Vendanta religious philosophy that, among others, captivated Salinger.³¹ And a set of letters in New York’s Morgan library released soon after Salinger’s death yields another tantalizing example of Salinger’s hunger for meaning. Over the ten years he took writing *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger succeeded in Holdenizing himself thoroughly. The diction of these letters to a friend, extending from 1951 through 1990, parallels strikingly that of his teenage alter-ego, while their content confirms the author’s and character’s shared preoccupation with religion, their shared hankering for spiritual intensity. Wandering in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, for instance, Salinger fantasizes a Hasid taking him home for a bowl of matzoh ball soup, seasoned perhaps with grains of belief. More surprising, however, is the presence of a depth of disenchantment with modernity, a longing for another spiritual side, which might be called apocalyptic. What’s noteworthy is that Salinger seems to grow both more discontented and more desperate for spiritual succor as

he ages. And I think we could say the same for the century he marked so powerfully with his memorable novel.

Boston University

NOTES

1. See Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 71-79, 86; Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed," 567-600; and Carol and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," 15-37.
2. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, 140-41.
3. Quoted in Shane and Mekhennet, "Imam's Path."
4. See Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* and Shapiro, "Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*," 258-74.
5. See Jen, "The Catcher in the Rye" and Marcus and Sollors, *New Literary History*.
6. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 26 and Smith, *Lectures on the Religion*, 236-38.
7. Derrida, *Given Time*, 112.
8. For more on this issue see Vineberg, *Method Actors*, Kazan, *Kazan on Directing*, and my *Brando's Smile*.
9. Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman," 188-207.
10. Strauch, "Kings in the Back Row," 5-30.
11. Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed," 571-72.
12. Scarry, *Literature and the Body*, 77.
13. Emerson, "Experience," 256.
14. Cameron, "Representing Grief," 15-41.
15. See Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 446-48; Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, 78; and Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation," 61-72. For more on ritual sacrifice in American culture see my *The Science of Sacrifice*.
16. Norris, *McTeague*, 167.
17. See Gopnick, "What was Jesus Like?," 74-75.
18. *Ibid.*
19. See Edwards, "Holden Caulfield," 554; Whitfield, "Cherished and Cursed," 585-87; Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics," 35; and Baumbach, "Saint as a Young Man," 55-65.
20. Fitzgerald, *Great Gatsby*, 3.
21. "Swain, Adeney, Brigg: 250 Years of British Craftsmanship" and Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*.
22. Sennet and Cobb, *Hidden Injuries of Class*.
23. See Williams, "The Nuclear Suitcases."
24. Salinger's letter is part of a small collection of six letters exhibited at the Morgan Library in New York in the spring of 2010 shortly after Salinger's death. The letters, addressed to his friend, Michael Mitchell, a book designer and artist, cover forty years, beginning on May 22, 1951, and ending on December 22, 1990. The first quotation is from a letter dated October 16, 1966. The quotation about "the bomb" is from December 30, 1983. But the darkness of Salinger's vision is fairly continuous over forty years.
25. See Williams, "Nuclear Suitcases."
26. For Putnam's superb analysis of the role of "obligation" in Levinas, see Putnam,

“Levinas and Judaism,” 33-62.

27. Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*, 4-5. See also Bergen, *The United States of Jihad*.

28. Margaret Ann Salinger, *Dream Catcher*, 71.

29. *Ibid.*, 71.

30. See Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 10-14, Evans, “Alienation, Materialism,” 41-51, and Blazer, “Phony Martyrdom of Saint Me,” 143-56.

31. As of winter 2016, none of these new Salinger works has been released.

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