Masculine Competition and Boarding-School Culture in *The Catcher in the Rye*

American audiences have shown a curious knack for misreading icons of literary and popular culture. As biographer James Lincoln Collier notes, Louis Armstrong, the most influential figure in the history of jazz, has frequently been mistaken for a lightweight entertainer who "mugged his way through his songs, talked a little comic jive talk, and occasionally played the trumpet" (3). Gordon Gekko, the amoral villain of Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* films, has become a role model for would-be financial kingpins. Michael Douglas, who won an Academy Award for his first performance as Gekko, "often expresses his astonishment at the many Wall Street males who have sought him out ... to say, 'Man, I want to tell you, you are the biggest reason I got into the business. I watched *Wall Street*, and I wanted to be Gordon Gekko'" (Lewis 128). And somehow, through another process of mass-audience distortion, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) has been tagged as a novel about a young man who despises "phonies." When Salinger died in 2010, references to Holden Caulfield's aversion to insincerity were everywhere. The London *Times* described *The Catcher in the Rye* as an "account of a late adolescent for whom everything is in suspense; he seeks to make contact, but meets only 'phonies' (the book gave this word an added dimension which it has not lost)"

In this big dramatic production that didn't do anyone any good (and was pretty embarrassing, really, if you think about it), thousands upon thousands of phonies across the country mourned the death of author J. D. Salinger, who was 91 years old for crying out loud. "He had a real impact on the literary world and on millions of readers," said hot-shot English professor David Clarke, who is just like the rest of them, and even works at one of those crumby schools that rich people send their kids to so they don't have to look at them for four years. (1) Holden's so-called "war against the phonies" (Pinsker 13) has informed critical discussions of *The Catcher in the Rye* for decades. Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. were among the first to label the wanderings of Salinger's antihero as a "search for the genuine" in a "terrifyingly phony" society (223), and any number of scholars have agreed, including David Castronovo, who recently identified Holden as a character who believes "there is something ... dead and phony and disgusting about the arrangement of things" (57). Part I of this essay argues that these commentators have overstated the significance of Holden's "war." He occasionally complains about insincerity, to be sure, but the *bête noire* that troubles him throughout the novel is masculine success. From his brother D. B. (a Hollywood screenwriter) to a naval officer he meets in a Manhattan nightclub, male characters connected with
wealth and authority drive Salinger's narrator into paroxysms of resentment. Part II suggests that in light of Holden's contempt for successful men his dismal performance at three Eastern prep schools should come as no great surprise. He tries to keep his distance from the materialism and self-importance he associates with "hot-shots," but boarding-school culture circa 1950 offered no refuge from aggressive masculine competition. Holden's attitudes toward "hot-shots" suggest that his prospects at the end of the novel are dimmer than most critics have recognized. A young man of his generation could conceivably avoid the company of "phonies," but how could he disengage himself from America's culture of competition and success?

I

Holden Caulfield begins his indictment of successful men by describing his brother's career as a form of prostitution:

He just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't use to. He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book of short stories, The Secret Goldfish, in case you never heard of him.... Now he's out in Hollywood, D. B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. (1, 2)

These lines introduce a pattern that will repeat time and again—any male character associated with wealth, prestige, or authority will elicit a hostile response from Salinger's antihero. Holden has little to say about his brother's career except that it pays well. In New York, D. B. was a "regular writer," a literary craftsman unconcerned about money and acclaim, but now he has dwindled into a "hot-shot." What kind of work has D. B. done since he "prostituted himself" (80)? Has he written musicals? Westerns? How did he make the transition from short fiction to screenplays? These questions go unaddressed because Holden's attention is riveted to his brother's "dough." Similarly, Holden assumes that there must be something deplorable about the prosperity of Mr. Ossenburger, a funeral-services tycoon: "I lived in the Ossenburger Memorial Wing of the new dorms.... It was named after this guy Ossenburger that went to [Pencey Prep]. He made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pencey. What he did, he started these undertaking parlors all over the country that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece. You should see old Ossenburger. He probably just shoves them in a sack and dumps them in the river" (16). Holden's sardonic wit is in peak form here, but his comments about the services provided by Ossenburger's company are a smokescreen: Holden vilifies the tycoon because he came to Pencey in a "big goddam Cadillac" (16) and gave a speech in which he "[told] us all about what a swell guy he was, what a hot-shot and all" (17).

Holden's remarks about male celebrities are equally caustic. At a nightclub in New York, he is annoyed by the showmanship of a popular musician:

Ernie's a big fat colored guy that plays the piano. He's a terrific snob and he won't hardly even talk to you unless you're a big shot or a celebrity or something.... He had a big damn mirror in front of the piano, with this big spotlight on him, so that everybody could watch his face while
he played.... I'm not too sure what the name of the song was that he was playing when I came
in, but whatever it was, he was really stinking it up.... You should've heard the crowd, though,
when he was finished. You would've puked. They went mad. (80, 84)

Holden pans Ernie's performance, but the real object of this rant is the musician's fame: the mirror, the
spotlight, the applause. Holden thinks of himself as a music aficionado, but he prefers entertainers who
work, like D. B. before he went Hollywood, in obscurity. (Later on, he extols the kettle drummer in the
orchestra at Radio City Music Hall and Estelle Fletcher, a half-forgotten jazz singer.) Between acts at a
Broadway show, Holden finds the sight of a movie star intensely irritating: "Some dopey movie actor was
standing near us, having a cigarette. I don't know his name, but he always plays the part of a guy in a war
movie that gets yellow before it's time to go over the top. He was with some gorgeous blonde, and the two
of them were trying to be very blasé and all, like as if he didn't even know people were looking at him"
(126–127). Even Laurence Olivier's performance in his film adaptation of Hamlet leaves Holden
unimpressed: "I just don't see what's so marvelous about Sir Laurence Olivier, that's all. He has a terrific
voice, and he's a helluva handsome guy, and he's very nice to watch when he's walking or dueling or
something, but he wasn't at all the way D. B. said Hamlet was. He was too much like a goddam general,
instead of a sad, screwed-up type guy" (117).

In the chapters set at Pencey, Holden looks askance at his roommate's reputation as a boarding-school
ladies' man. Ward Stradlater brims with confidence, Holden insists, because he is "madly in love with
himself" (27). He seems dapper because he helps himself to the most stylish items in Holden's closet.
And in brazen violation of Pencey's rules, Stradlater drives his dates around in a car that he borrows
from his basketball coach. "In every school I've gone to," Holden protests, "all the athletic bastards stick
together" (43). In the nightclub episode, Holden mocks Ernie and then takes aim at his audience. He
castigates a young man whose clothes suggest that he may attend an Ivy League university: "On my right
there was this very Joe Yale-looking guy, in a gray flannel suit and one of those flitty-looking Tattersall
vests. All those Ivy League bastards look alike" (85). Then he rails against the machismo of a young naval
officer: "He was one of those guys that think they're being a pansy if they don't break around forty of
your fingers when they shake hands with you. God, I hate that stuff" (86–87). Viewed together, these
passages reveal that successful men exasperate Holden more than the "phonies" who also grate on his
nerves. Most of the characters Holden identifies as "hot-shots" have done nothing in particular to set
him off. D. B. shows sustained concern for his troubled younger brother. Ernie's performance seems to
dazzle everyone in the nightclub except for Holden. The movie actor tries to blend in with the crowd at
the theater. And by overreacting to the sight of an "Ivy League Bastard" in a "flitty-looking" vest, Holden
inadvertently exposes his own belligerence and homophobia. Though Holden passes judgment on male
characters throughout the novel, he seldom mentions their interactions with women. For him, the term
"hot-shot" signifies a man who excels in competition with other men. Accordingly, he becomes agitated
every time he encounters men who are wealthy or successful. As Michael Kimmel points out, this kind of
fixation on masculine competition often plays a central role in American gender politics:

In large part, it's other men who are important to American men; American men define their
masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is
largely a homosocial enactment.... From the early nineteenth century until the present day, much of men's relentless effort to prove their manhood contains this core element of homosociality. From father and boyhood friends to teachers, coworkers, and bosses, the evaluative eyes of other men are always upon us, watching, judging. (7)

Similarly, David Leverenz posits that for many American males the deepest fear is "not fear of women but of being ashamed or humiliated in front of other men, or of being dominated by stronger men" (451).

These observations help to explain why millions of readers have felt a strong affinity with Holden, a character far too privileged to serve as a representative teenager of his or any other time. Salinger's antihero is unorthodox in many ways, but when it comes to his resentment of successful men, and his tacit assumption that he will never join their ranks, Holden has a great deal in common with countless adolescents. When Holden turns his attention to female characters, the tone of his narrative becomes far less abrasive. He describes Selma Thurmer, the daughter of Pencey's headmaster, as "a pretty nice girl ... she didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy her father was" (3). He is charmed by Mrs. Morrow, the mother of a former classmate, even though he loathes her son Ernest. He enjoys sharing a meal with two nuns in Manhattan and also praises his mother, his friend Jane Gallagher, and above all his sister Phoebe. It rarely enters his mind that women or girls may turn out to be "hot-shots"—he unwinds in their company, holding back the rapid-fire sarcasm he employs in conversations with male characters.

As Edwin T. Bowden writes, Holden prefers the company of women because his relationships with them are generally based on affection, not on competition: "The one line of communication for Holden, the one way of establishing contact with others, is that of affection. And Holden is always quick to offer affection as well as to respond to it" (60–61). When Holden denigrates female characters, they are usually guilty of Caulfield's cardinal sin: they admire "hot-shots." In the Edmont Hotel, he seethes after Bernice, a tourist from Seattle, crows about catching a glimpse of Peter Lorre. Similarly, he can hardly contain his irritation when Sally Hayes tells him that a student from Harvard and a cadet from West Point have been "[c]alling her up night and day" (106) and when she pauses to chat with an acquaintance from Andover. The compliments Holden pays to female characters, then, should not be mistaken for a critique of the sexism of his time. He enjoys the company of women and girls for an essentially selfish reason: it temporarily frees him from the company of "hot-shots."

Because Holden disdains successful men, he habitually withdraws from activities that involve masculine competition. He is not expelled from schools because he lacks academic ability. Two of his former teachers, Mr. Antolini and Mr. Hartzell, affirm that he is a talented writer and he reads novels by Thomas Hardy and Isak Dinesen for pleasure. As Antolini points out, Holden fails courses because he makes "absolutely no effort at all" (186). In spite of his keen interest in athletics, Holden is appalled by other characters' competitive impulses. At school, he pokes fun at the rivalry between Pencey and Saxon Hall. In Manhattan, he pities a group of young women when he imagines that they will "probably marry dopey guys ... Guys that get sore and childish as hell if you beat them at golf, or even just some stupid game like ping-pong" (123). And to keep his distance from the sordid business of winning and losing, he
serves as an equipment manager at Pencey instead of trying out for a team. By accentuating Holden's unwillingness to compete, Salinger suggests that his narrator's predicament as a prep-school outsider was inevitable from the start. As David Hicks explains, athletic competition has always been a key component of boarding-school culture: "[Athletics] toughened up the boys and girls, taught them perseverance and courage, and emphasized the need for teamwork and loyalty to others. Games—likely to be the most enduring legacy of these schools—stoked the furnace of ambition and fired the will to excel. All of this physical exertion not only heightened the drama of life, but tempered the character of the athlete who was expected at all times to show grace in victory and equanimity in defeat" (529). Thus, it is not hard to understand why Holden, a character with no discernible "furnace of ambition," "will to excel," or desire to be "toughened up," has struggled to find a niche at the boarding schools he has attended.

When Holden mentions recreational activities he has enjoyed (ballroom dancing, playing with his brother Allie's toy sailboat in Central Park, tossing a football with classmates at Pencey) they invariably have little to do with competition. And in conversations and reveries about the future, he rules out every potential occupation that would require him to compete. The common denominators of the "careers" which do appeal to him—recluse in the forests of New England, deaf-mute auto mechanic, "catcher in the rye"—are silence, solitude, and the absence of masculine competition. More conventional possibilities, such as a legal career like his father's, are out of the question because they would force him to vie with "hot-shots" for wealth and status: "Lawyers are all right ... if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't do that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" (172). The trouble with Holden's desire to keep masculine competition at bay is that he does not live in silence and solitude. Because he lives in the East Seventies and on the campuses of boarding schools, he is perpetually reminded that other characters do not view success the way he does. With the exception of Holden, the Caulfield family is crowded with high-achieving males. Mr. Caulfield's practice is so lucrative that he invests in Broadway shows and takes the family to Maine every summer, where they golf and attend dances at a country club. D. B., as we have seen, is an accomplished, versatile writer. Even Allie showed incipient signs of brilliance. "He was two years younger than I was," Holden explains, "but he was about fifty times as intelligent.... His teachers were always writing letters to my mother, telling her what a pleasure it was having a boy like Allie in their class" (38).

One possible explanation for Holden's jaundiced view of competition is that Salinger wanted *The Catcher in the Rye* to convey, among other things, a teenager's enunciation of concerns like those expressed in David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951), and other studies of America's "social character" published in the early 1950s. These works called attention to unsettling trends in the nation's business culture. Reisman warned that endless competition and status-seeking threatened the autonomy and individuality of office workers. Similarly, Mills posited that one effect of the modern white-collar workplace had been to redefine the "personal traits" of employees as "commodities in the labor market":

https://online.infobase.com/HRC/Search/Print?assetId=485457&assetType=article
In a society of employees, dominated by the marketing mentality, it is inevitable that a personality market should arise. For in the great shift from manual skills to the art of handling, selling, and servicing people, personal or even intimate traits of employees are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become commodities in the labor market. Whenever there is a transfer of control over one individual's personal traits to another for a price, a sale of those traits which affect one's impressions upon others, a personality market arises.... In all work involving the personality market ... one's personality and personal traits become part of the means of production. (182, 225)

Holden would probably not take issue with these findings. After all, he blasts several characters who embody the materialism and conformity lamented by these and other social critics of the era. Holden's disdain for his brother's screenwriting career, for example, seems in step with Mills's admonition about "personality markets" which transfer "control over one individual's personal traits to another for a price." Early in his career, D. B. wrote evocative stories steeped in childhood memories; now he cranks out formulaic screenplays to please his employers in Hollywood studios. Nonetheless, Salinger implies that bereavement, not portentous shifts in the nation's social character, is the main source of Holden's desire to go "where there aren't any 'hot-shots'" (8). As Louis Menand points out, most of Holden's anguish seems to stem from memories of Allie's death: "[Salinger] wasn't trying to expose the spiritual poverty of a conformist culture; he was writing a story about a boy whose little brother had died. Holden, after all, isn't unhappy because he sees that people are phonies; he sees that people are phonies because he is unhappy" (84). Gerald Rosen places this reading in a religious context, asserting that "beneath Holden's quarrel with his culture, there is always his quarrel with God whom Holden can't forgive for killing his brother" (165).

Holden's memories of Allie's death, by the way, may help to explain his hostility toward Pencey's benefactor Mr. Ossenburger. Having endured the loss of a beloved younger sibling, Holden finds the tycoon, who has amassed his millions by providing cut-rate funeral services, unspeakably crass. Allie died as a promising child—he never had the opportunity to attend an exclusive boarding school, play for a varsity team, or launch a career. Thus, the thought of pursuing things denied to his brother fills Holden with shame and he recoils from characters who do not share his misgivings about success.

II

In light of Holden's attitudes vis-à-vis masculine competition, his erratic behavior during the first seven chapters of *The Catcher in the Rye*—the section of the novel set at Pencey Prep in Agerstown, Pennsylvania—is very much in character. Salinger does not provide a complete account of the time Holden spent at the school. The opening chapters focus on incidents which take place after Dr. Thurmer informs Holden that he has been expelled because of his fall-term grades (four Fs and a C). Even Holden's experiences after the meeting with Thurmer are abridged. Salinger limits the Pencey chapters to the hours leading up to Holden's decision to leave the school before the beginning of the winter holidays:
All of a sudden, I decided what I'd really do, I'd get the hell out of Pencey—right that same night and all. I mean not wait till Wednesday or anything. I just didn't want to hang around any more. It made me too sad and lonesome. So what I decided to do, I decided I'd take a room in a hotel in New York ... and just take it easy till Wednesday. Then, on Wednesday, I'd go home all rested up and feeling swell ... I sort of needed a little vacation. My nerves were shot.

Holden's attempt to calm his nerves fails, of course. His "little vacation" leaves him so worn down that he spends several weeks in a sanatorium after he faces his parents and tells them about his latest academic debacle. Even so, Holden's eagerness to leave Pencey ahead of schedule is understandable. He is a dejected figure early in the novel: a 16-year-old going through the motions of boarding-school life even though he, his teachers, and many of his fellow students know he is not going to return after the holidays. Salinger stages several vignettes in which Holden interacts with characters allied with the school, but at the same time he stresses his narrator's isolation. After Holden leaves the school's fencing equipment in a subway car, for instance, he sits alone, "ostracized" by the team: "We'd gone in to New York that morning for this fencing meet with McBurney School. Only, we didn't have the meet. I left all the foils and equipment and stuff on the goddam subway. It wasn't all my fault. I had to keep getting up to look at this map, so we'd know where to get off" (3).

This blunder accentuates Holden's disengagement from Pencey—imagine how trivial a student's duties as manager of a school team must seem after he has been notified of his expulsion. The silence of the disappointed fencers also highlights his status as a prep-school "short-timer." What's the use of chiding an inept manager if the season has ended and he has been expelled?

The football game against Saxon Hall unites the school community, but for Holden it serves as yet another reminder that he is an outsider:

It was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win. I remember around three o'clock that afternoon I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill, right next to this crazy cannon that was in the Revolutionary War and all. You could see the whole field from there, and you could see the two teams bashing each other all over the place. You couldn't see the grandstand too hot, but you could hear them all yelling, deep and terrific on the Pencey side, because practically the whole school except me was there.... (2)

Holden has spent enough time at Pencey to have learned the name of the hill and the provenance of the cannon, yet he seems as removed from his schoolmates as a phantom watching the mortal world go on without him. He tries to appear nonchalant, but his narrative clearly indicates that he felt wounded and lonely the day he left Pencey. On Thomsen Hill, he indulges in a few moments of sentiment, trying to say a proper "good-by" to the school (4). On the way to the home of Mr. Spencer, his history teacher, he becomes so downcast that he feels as though he has become invisible. Holden hopes the visit with Spencer will afford another chance to "feel some kind of good-by," but the teacher disappoints him by holding forth on the subject of his failing grade. "I flunked you in history," Spencer declares, "because
you knew absolutely nothing.... But absolutely nothing. I doubt very much if you opened your textbook even once the whole term. Did you? ... Do you blame me for flunking you, boy?” (10–11, 12).

Holden’s remaining hours at Pencey do nothing at all to lift his spirits. He bickers with his suitemate Robert Ackley. He is overwhelmed by jealousy when he learns that his roommate has a date with Jane Gallagher. He agrees to write a paper for Stradlater, but the composition, a description of Allie’s baseball glove, stirs up his most unbearable memories:

He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946.... I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time and I couldn't do it. (38–39)

As if these tribulations weren't enough, Holden suffers a beating later in the evening after he provokes a fistfight with Stradlater. Even during his last attempt to strike a defiant pose before returning to New York, Holden cannot break free from the despair and humiliation which have dogged him since he received word of his expulsion:

When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying, I don't know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, "Sleep tight, ya morons!" I'll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out. Some stupid guy had thrown peanut shells all over the stairs, and I damn near broke my crazy neck. (52)

Throughout the opening section of the novel, then, Salinger emphasizes that Holden is woefully out of place on the grounds of a private academy. His schoolmates are ambitious: they have come to Pencey to prepare for college, to make their marks as athletes, to compete and succeed. Holden, on the other hand, simply wants to go home, to spend time with the only people capable of understanding the misery he has endured since Allie’s death.

One of the most puzzling features of the Pencey chapters is that Holden makes so few derogatory remarks about the school. Indeed, in several passages he suggests that he was treated reasonably well there. Pencey deserves some credit, after all, for taking a chance on a student with an atrocious academic record. After flunking out of the Whooton School, Holden dropped out of Elkton Hills, ostensibly because he disliked his fellow students and the headmaster: "One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies.... They were coming in the goddam window” (13–14). Holden accuses Pencey of preserving its "very good academic rating" by ruthlessly expelling students at the bottom of every class, but Salinger undercuts this claim. School officials warned Holden repeatedly that he was in danger of flunking out, but he admits that he did nothing to avoid "the ax." And when the time came to notify Holden that he had been expelled, Thurmer sat down with him for an extended
meeting. Holden considers the headmaster's advice worthless—life is "a game," Thurmer insisted, and must be played according to "the rules" (8)—but he also mentions that the meeting lasted for two hours and that Thurmer tried, in his way, to offer useful suggestions. "He was pretty nice about it," Holden recalls. "I mean he didn't hit the ceiling or anything. He just kept talking about Life being a game ..." (8). The headmaster could not have chosen an analogy less apt to motivate Holden, but then again he could not have known that the student on the other side of his desk was determined to shun every form of masculine competition. Joyce Rowe argues that Spencer feigns "fatherly interest" while upbraiding his former student (89), but Holden takes the teacher's claim that he is "trying to help" at face value: "'I'd like to put some sense in that head of yours, boy,' [Spencer said]. 'I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to help you if I can.' He really was, too. You could see that" (14).

Holden is given several opportunities to lay into Pencey, but he passes them up. On a train to New York, Mrs. Morrow asks what he thinks of the school. "Pencey?" he replies. "It's not too bad. It's not paradise or anything, but it's as good as most schools" (55). When one of the nuns praises Pencey, he decides not to contradict her: "'What school do you go to?' she asked me.... I told her Pencey, and she'd heard of it. She said it was a very good school. I let it pass, though" (111). Later, Holden has a similar exchange with a woman who works in the principal's office at his sister's elementary school: "She asked me where I went to school now, and I told her Pencey, and she said Pencey was a very good school. Even if I'd wanted to, I wouldn't have had the strength to straighten her out. Besides, if she thought Pencey was a very good school, let her think it" (202). It's not too bad. Let it pass. Let her think it. These remarks are a long way from Holden's usual conversational style. As we have seen, he seems incapable of "letting it pass" when other characters praise "hot-shots."

When it comes to Pencey, however, he usually keeps his dissatisfaction to himself. I don't mean to suggest that Holden was fond of the school: he obviously considered it irritating and dull. The point I want to emphasize is that the bitter resentment on display when Holden reflects on "hot-shots" rarely informs his remarks about Pencey. Even when he snipes at the school, his objections seem halfhearted. The students pay too much attention to varsity football, divide into "dirty little goddam cliques," and chatter endlessly about "liquor and sex" (131)? The same could be said about thousands of other schools. Pencey's magazine advertisements ("Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men" [2]) are grandiose and misleading? Surely Holden realizes that advertisers have been known to exaggerate the virtues of the commodities they want to sell.

Holden does not bother to criticize Pencey, it seems, because the school is second-rate, not a training ground for "hot-shots." Throughout the novel, Salinger calls attention to Holden's grasp of the difference between the elite and the mediocre. He notices that the fathers of some of his schoolmates look gauche in their "suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes" (14) because his parents take him to Brooks Brothers to shop for his clothes. And after he arrives in Manhattan, he is amused by three tourists from Seattle who expect to find celebrities in the Lavender Room of the Edmont Hotel: "[They] kept looking all around ... as if they expected a flock of goddam movie stars to come in any minute. They probably thought movie stars always hung out in the Lavender Room when they came to New York,
instead of the Stork Club or El Morocco ..." (73). Holden does not explicitly identify Pencey as the "Lavender Room" of prep schools, but his narrative indicates that the school is ordinary at best. Agerstown does not seem to carry anything approaching the preppy cachet of, say, Lawrenceville, New Jersey. Thurmer's platitudes cause him to resemble a run-of-the-mill guidance counselor more than Endicott Peabody of Groton, Lewis Perry of Exeter, and other famous headmasters. It is difficult, moreover, to imagine an elite boarding school rolling out the red carpet for a graduate like Mr. Ossenburger:

The first football game of the year ... we all had to stand up in the grandstand and give him a [cheer] ... Then, the next morning, in chapel, he made a speech that lasted about ten hours. He started off with about fifty corny jokes ... Very big deal. Then he started telling us how he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down on his knees and pray to God. He told us we should always pray to God—talk to him and all— wherever we were. He told us we should think of Jesus as our buddy and all. (16–17)

The setting of the 1992 film *Scent of a Woman* (directed by Martin Brest, screenplay by Bo Goldman) is a boarding-school dystopia—a campus controlled by an arrogant, manipulative headmaster and students who flaunt their wealth to embarrass a working-class schoolmate. Salinger could have placed the opening chapters of *The Catcher in the Rye* in an equally repellent frame, but he envisioned a different kind of school. When parents of the 1950s sent their children to exclusive private academies, teachers like Spencer and classmates like Ackley were surely not what they had in mind. Holden seems indifferent to the school after his departure. In New York, he rarely mentions, or even thinks about, Pencey unless Phoebe, Mr. Antolini, or some other character raises the subject. Something is tormenting Salinger's narrator, but Pencey seems too mundane to be the culprit.

By the close of the novel, Holden reaches an impasse. He is ashamed to find that he is falling behind the "prep school jerks and college jerks" (83) who encircle him. To stop falling behind, he will have to compete at his next school. Competition will require taking on some of the attributes he associates with "hot-shots." This, he fears, will make him feel ashamed. He believes, to put it another way, that the only alternative to the disgrace that accompanies failure is the disgrace that accompanies success. It is absurdly reductive to assume that an adolescent must choose between becoming a Trump or a "catcher in the rye." The overwhelming majority of adults find some kind of middle ground between unbridled materialism and the heroics of a dream figure who rescues imperiled children. Salinger stops short of indicating that Holden has put away his childish views of masculine competition, but late in the novel he suggests that his antihero may have begun to do so. In the episode that gives *The Catcher in the Rye* its title, Holden admits that his vision of the future is "crazy" as soon as he puts it into words:

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff ... That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy. (173)
Holden's reaction to his sister's carousel ride also suggests that he has begun to reappraise his surroundings. As Warren French notes, when Phoebe falls in line with other children attempting to grab the gold ring, Holden watches the spectacle of competition in a calm, nonjudgmental way: "Holden is afraid that Phoebe may fall off the horse, as the kids he dreamed of protecting might fall off the cliff; but he has abandoned his vision of the night before ... and he displays now an acceptance—if never approval—of things as they are on 'a sort of lousy day' ... He does not say anything to Phoebe, but he informs the reader that he cannot do anything to stop her, because 'the thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it and not say anything'" (44). In the novel's closing chapter, moreover, Holden mentions that his parents have arranged for him to attend yet another boarding school in the fall. He ridicules a psychiatrist who asks if he intends to "apply himself" there ("It's such a stupid question ... how do you know what you're going to do until you do it"), but then he adds "I think I am" (213). From another character those words might not mean much, but from Salinger's prep-school outsider, a young man who has absolutely refused to compete, they may indicate that he has broken through the impasse: he understands that he can compromise, a little, without becoming an insufferable "hot-shot."

Holden's attitudes toward successful men suggest that his prospects at the end of the novel are more daunting than most critics have recognized. If his contempt for "phonies" were the main source of his anxieties, those anxieties could be allayed. A young man with his sharp eye for insincerity can readily avoid the "phonies" who cross his path, but how can an American male of his generation keep his distance from the nation's pervasive culture of masculine competition? Unless Holden continues to compromise, making his peace with the "hot-shots" who surround him, he seems to face two alternatives. He can continue to rail against masculine competition or he can choose the path Salinger took two years after he published *The Catcher in the Rye*: find a secluded hideaway and drop out of American society the way a traumatized adolescent drops out of school.

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