Holden is not a mere victim of modern society, but is in some sense a tragic figure. His temporary mental defeat is brought about by a flaw in his own character: a naive refusal to come to terms with the world in which he lives. To regard him, on the other hand, as a pure young man who is martyred in his unavailing struggle against a sordid world of adult phoniness, is to strip him of any real dignity. Such an interpretation makes the novel guilty of idle romanticism. Howells would have called it immoral romanticism because he would have seen it as filled with "idle lies about human nature and the social fabric," areas where we must know the truth if we are to deal "justly with ourselves and with one another."

Salinger himself is reported to have said that he regretted that his novel might be kept out of the reach of children.7 It is hard to guess at the motives behind his remark, but one of them may have been that he was trying to tell young people how difficult it was to move from their world into the world of adults. He may have been trying to warn them against the pitfalls of the transition.


To my mind one of the most penetrating reviews of The Catcher in the Rye was the one which appeared in The Nation in 1951 when the novel first came out:

It reflects something not at all rich and strange but what every sensitive sixteen-year-old since Rousseau has felt, and of course what each one of us is certain he has felt. . . . The Catcher in the Rye [is] a case history of all of us.8

The reviewer was Dr. Ernest Jones, and for the sickness he diagnosed he also prescribed a remedy. His prescription was a line from Auden: "We must love one another or die."

Holden will survive; but first he must learn to love other human beings as well as he loves children. He must acquire a sense of proportion, a sense of humor.9 He must learn compassion for the human, the pompous, the phoney, the perverse; such people are the fellow inhabitants of his world, and behind their pitiful masks are the faces of the children in the rye. In Stekel's phrase, he must learn to live humbly for a cause.

8Sept. 1, 1951, p. 176.
9This observation is E. P. J. Corbett's, "Raise High the Barriers, Censors," America, Jan. 7, 1961, p. 442.

The Movies in the Rye

BERNARD S. OLDSEY

Several good novels—including F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Last Tycoon, Nathanael West's The Day of the Locust, and Budd Schulberg's The Disenchanted—have registered the effect of the movies, Hollywood style, on the American imagination. J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye should be added to this list, since, in addition to its literary merit, it is as much a Hollywood product (that is to say, anti-Hollywood product) as we have had.

The unrecognized fact is that the
movies constitute a major influence on Salinger's novel and play a peculiarly functional part in it. This is particularly true in respect to thematic development and character revelation rather than form. Thematicallly, the novel is intent on exposing the phoniness of life in these United States, the tawdrliness of a Barnum-and-Bailey world remade by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. This antiphoniness theme is developed through a series of related character reactions and revelations—all filtered through the censuring of Holden Caulfield, who is himself not left unmarred in the process. The way individuals react to phoniness—of a dramatic and literary sort too, but especially cinematic—becomes the infallible metric aid by which he assesses character.

Actually, the novel opens and closes on a note of character assessment, with Holden the reluctant and, at the end, unwitting re-assessor. In the very first paragraph, as he begins his story from inside a mental hospital, he exhibits great concern over what is happening to his older brother, D. B., in Hollywood (which is "not too far from this crumby place"). As the author of a "terrific book of short stories," D. B. has been Holden's idol; but the idol is crumbling, may even have crumbled, for D. B. has become a movie writer, or as Holden bluntly puts it: "Now he's out in Hollywood, D. B., being a prostitute."

In the last paragraph of the novel, this concern lingers wonderingly on. And it is easy to understand why: Holden has already lost one brother to death and is extremely reluctant to admit having lost the other to Hollywood. Nevertheless, he must report that on his last visit to the mental hospital, D. B., already equipped with one of those little Jaguars "That can do around two hundred miles an hour," has brought with him a familiar Hollywood opiate: "He drove over last Saturday with this English babe that's in this new picture that he's writing. She was pretty affected, but very good-looking." This may be but a final, weaker echo of the lines with which Holden leads into his story proper: "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me" (p. 4).

Yet it is Holden himself who mentions the movies afterward, and keeps on mentioning them. As a child of his times he is automatically a child of the movies; even his name, one suspects, is an ironic amalgam of the last names of movie stars William Holden and Joan Caulfield. His imagination--à la Mittys'--battens on the movies; his reveries revolve around them; and his narrative depends heavily upon them.

Holden has a habit, for instance, whenever in trouble or "just horsing around," of slipping into a convenient movie role. One of the first times he does this is in watching his roommate shave; he gets bored just sitting there on a washbowl; so, urged on by the acoustics of the "stone" floor, he taps his way into a screen role:

I started imitating one of those guys in the movies. In one of those musicals. I hate the movies like poison, but I get a

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1In form, the book is an extended flashback framed by an introductory paragraph and three short concluding paragraphs, and to some extent it does resemble a movie adaptation script, with built-in camera angles, bare character suggestions, and fast scenic shifts. But of course the long interior ramble by which Holden tells his story not only subtly reveals his character and controls the thematic tone of the book, but also helps distinguish the novel from a movie script.

2For comments on phoniness in drama and literature see The Catcher in the Rye (Boston, 1951), pp. 152-153, 164-165, 182. All references in parentheses are to this edition.

3The plausibility of this conjecture is increased by the fact that these two actors co-starred in the well-known 1947 movie version of Dear Ruth, the story of a juvenile girl who, in writing to a soldier overseas, tries to appear more mature than she actually is.
bang imitating them. Old Stradlater watched me in the mirror. . . “I'm the goddam Governor's son,” I said. I was knocking myself out. . . “He doesn't want me to be a tap dancer. He wants me to go to Oxford. But it's in my goddam blood, tap-dancing,” Old Stradlater laughed. He didn't have too bad a sense of humor. . . . (p. 38)

Holden's favorite role, however, is not musical, but the kind made famous by James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart. He uses it several times, the first for Ackley's benefit: “What I did,” Holden explains, “I pulled the old peak of my hunting hat around to the front, then pulled it way down over my eyes. . . ‘I think I'm going blind,’ I said in this very hoarse voice, ‘Mother darling, everything's getting so dark in here’” (p. 33). He uses it again when slugged by Maurice, the elevator-operating pimp. Though not knocked unconscious (earlier he has informed us, when hit by Stradlater, that “It's pretty hard to knock a guy out, except in the goddam movies”), Holden is rather stunned by the blow to the stomach; his mind slips and he begins to imagine things:

But I'm crazy. I swear to God I am. About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts. Old Maurice had plugged me. . . . I pictured myself coming out of the goddam bathroom, dressed and all, with my automatic in my pocket. . . Then I'd walk down a few floors—holding onto my guts, blood leaking all over the place—and then I'd ring the elevator bell. As soon as old Maurice opened the doors, he'd see me with the automatic in my hand and he'd start screaming. . . . But I'd plug him anyway. . . . Then I'd crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. I pictured her holding a cigarette for me to smoke while I was bleeding and all.

The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I'm not kidding. (pp. 135-136)

Once again Holden resorts to this role—after a dispiriting chat with an acquaintance named Carl Luce, who advises him to see a psychoanalyst and have “the patterns” of his mind clarified. Luce leaves him alone at the bar, and Holden goes on drinking: “When I was really drunk, I started that stupid business with the bullets in my guts again.” The business includes the same ingredients as before—the supporting hand inside the jacket, the dripping blood, the hurried phone call to Jane (p. 195). Certainly by this time one of the patterns of Holden's mind has been clarified. It is a one-reeler starring Holden the wounded.

On numerous other occasions and in various ways Holden sees himself and others in relationship to the movies. For example, one Saturday night he considers going to Agerstown with Ackley and Mal Brossard to see a comedy starring Cary Grant. Eventually they eschew it for hamburgers; and Holden is just as glad, because he has been to the movies before with Ackley and Brossard, who laugh “like hyenas at stuff that wasn't even funny” (p. 48). Another evening, the night he meets Carl Luce, Holden has some time to kill and goes to the movies at Radio City. “It was probably the worst thing I could've done,” he explains apologetically, “but it was near, and I couldn't think of anything else” (p. 177). On this occasion he sees the film version of James Hilton's Random Harvest. Taking two and a quarter pages to outline its implausible, tear-jerking plot, he finishes with a short analysis of the maudlin woman who sits next to him during the performance. She cries throughout the show, but will not allow her suffering child to go to the toilet. “You take somebody that cries their goddam eyes out over phony stuff in the movies,”

Holden concludes, "and nine times out of ten they're mean bastards at heart."

His apologetic explanation for going to Radio City becomes clear when we consider what Holden has said about others on this score earlier. The three girls he dances with in the Lavender Room are all movie struck; their fondest hope, after coming all the way from Seattle, is to see some movie celebrities in New York. Until Holden meets them they have had little success, having caught sight only of Peter Lorre (so at least they claim). To revenge himself on one of them, the heavy-dancing Marty, Holden pretends to have spotted Gary Cooper on the opposite side of the dance floor and makes him disappear before the hopeful Marty can turn in that direction. Later, though, Holden feels sorry for the lot of them, when they announce they have to get up early next day to fulfill their intentions: "If somebody... comes all the way to New York—from Seattle, Washington, for God's sake—and ends up getting up early in the morning to see the goddam first show at Radio City Music Hall, it makes me so depressed I can't stand it. I've bought the whole three of them a hundred drinks if only they hadn't told me that" (p. 98).

Lillian Simmons and Sunny, the youthful whore, also fall victim to Hollywood's attraction. Lillian, an old girl-friend of D. B.'s, simply gushes when Holden informs her D. B. is in Hollywood writing for the movies (p. 113). Holden thinks her one of the biggest—in all respects but one—phonies he has ever met. Sunny is a more complicated case: She claims to be from Hollywood; she thinks Holden resembles this movie actor, Whosis (appeared in "that pitcher with Mel-vine Douglas"); and she confesses to having no other activities (besides those demanded by her profession) except sleeping and going to the movies. She depresses Holden even more than the Lavender Room girls: "She was depressing. Her green dress in the closet and all. And besides, I don't think I could ever do it with somebody that sits in a stupid movie all day long" (p. 125).

Holden considers two other girls—much more important to the novel than either Lillian or Sunny—in terms of the movies; namely, his sister, Phoebe, and the girl he really cares for, Jane Gallagher. Phoebe passes every test. Her innocence is proof against the phoniness of Hollywood. She tends toward foreign films and those with serious themes. She liked seeing The Baker's Wife, with Raimu; and her favorite is The 39 Steps, with Robert Donat. Holden has taken her to the latter at least ten times; she knows it so well that she can put in bits of dialogue and the missing-finger business at just the right places (pp. 88-89). When Holden first sees Phoebe after he has been dropped from Pency, one of the first things she must tell him about is a problem movie, The Doctor: "It's a special movie they had at the Lister Foundation. Just this one day they had it. . ." He tries several times to discuss more immediate problems, but Phoebe rushes on with her rapt summary: "It was all about this doctor in Kentucky and everything that sticks a blanket over this child's face that's a cripple and can't walk. Then they send him to jail and everything. It was excellent" (p. 211).

This summary of The Doctor, with its central problem of euthanasia, underscores Holden's own problem. Like the doctor in the movie, he, too (though by different means), wishes to protect the young from the cruelties and indignities of the world. For their pains, the doctor goes to prison, Holden to a mental hospital.

The movie with the doctor in it also moves us closer to Jane Gallagher's problem. Jane is a strange, intelligent, attractive girl, whose muckle-mouth seems to go "in about fifty different
directions” when she talks. The most peculiar thing about her, however, is that in playing checkers she never takes her kings out of the back row—a fact so significant as to be mentioned at least four times. In spite of these peculiarities, or probably because of them, Holden is very fond of Jane. He feels as protective toward her as toward Phoebe and the kids in the museum and the ducks on the pond. When his roommate, Stradlater, takes her lightly and hints of intimate relations with her, Holden flies into a quixotic rage and absorbs a physical beating in her honor.

Actually, Jane is product of a movie and book. The stage is set for the main treatment of her in chapter eleven, where Holden declares, “I know old Jane like a book,” and again—“I still couldn’t get her off my brain. I knew her like a book” (p. 90). The movie and book in question, which concerns not one but three doctors, is Henry Bellaman’s Kings Row (1940), a well-known novel that was made into a very popular and, in risking censorship, courageous movie in 1942. Kings Row shares with The Catcher in the Rye three notable elements: youthful innocence in a world of adult cruelty, possible confinement in a mental institution, and a muted theme of incest.6

Jane Gallagher, like Cassandra Tower and Louise Gordon of Kings Row, fills the role of the fearful daughter; only in her case incest possibilities are heightened by the fact that she is a stepdaughter. Keeping her kings in the back row has already been interpreted as a fear manifestation by Gwynn and Blotner. But it is necessary to go an inferential step further and fill out the syndrome with incestuous qualification. If evidence for such a step seems at first highly circumstantial, there is additional support in Holden’s account of a certain afternoon when he and Jane come closest to “necking.” As he describes the situation—“It was a Saturday and it was raining like a bastard out, and I was over at her house, on the porch. . . . We were playing checkers. I used to kid her once in a while because she wouldn’t take her kings out of the back row” (p. 101). There follows an explanation about how he dislikes kidding Jane too much because he senses something perhaps over-sensitized in her. “Anyway,” he continues, “I was telling you about that afternoon. . . . It was raining like hell and we were out on her porch, and all of a sudden this booze hound her mother was married to came out on the porch and asked Jane if there were any cigarettes in the house” (p. 102). Holden here provides another analysis of Jane’s stepfather, Cudahy, whom he has already described for Stradlater as an alcoholic playwright who runs “around the goddam house, naked” (p. 42). Then he goes on—“Anyway, old Jane wouldn’t answer him when he asked her if she knew where there was any cigarettes. . . . Finally the guy went inside the house. When he did, I asked Jane what the hell was going on. She wouldn’t even answer me, then” (p. 102).

Jane begins to cry, and one of her tears, a big one, plops right onto the checkerboard. Suddenly Holden finds himself comforting her, kissing her all over, except on the lips: “She sort of wouldn’t let me get to her mouth.” And finally, miraculous to say, they go to “a goddam movie,” with Holden still in the dark as to what has happened between Jane and her stepfather: “I asked her,

6The incest motif of Kings Row was a much discussed topic of the day; for critical commentaries on the handling of the problem in the movie version, see Russell Maloney, “A Good Movie,” The New Yorker (February 7, 1942), p. 56; and Otis Ferguson, “More Sound than Fury,” The New Republic (February 16, 1942), pp. 237-238.

6The Fiction of J. D. Salinger, p. 30.
on the way, if Mr. Cudahy had ever tried to get wise with her. She was pretty young, but she had this terrific figure, and I wouldn't've put it past that Cudahy bastard. She said no, though. I never did find out what the hell was the matter. Some girls you practically never find out what's the matter" (p. 103).

So the incestuous matter with Jane is left about as ambiguous as the homosexual matter with Mr. Antolini; but both contribute to the education of young Caulfield. It is an education which by now includes the matters of the transvestite and the water-squirting perverts at the Edmont Hotel, and the matter of Sunny and her finger-flicking friend, Maurice, as well as the matter of a single word, scrawled everywhere, reducing human relationships to the level of travesty. It is an education, moreover, that makes Holden more determined than ever to be a protector of innocence.

The movies are connected with Holden's protective desire to become a catcher in the rye. The idea comes to him while he watches a small boy walking perilously toward, or on, Broadway. The boy, oblivious to the traffic and crowds around him, sweetly sings what Holden takes to be "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" (p. 150). In contrast to the boys, who cheer him up, there are the mobs of people, who depress him, because "Everybody was on their way to the movies—the Paramount or the Astor or the Strand or the Capitol. . . ." It is by now a familiar form of depression; another pattern of Holden's mind is clarified: "I can understand somebody going to the movies because there's nothing else to do, but when somebody really wants to go . . . then it depresses hell out of me. Especially if I see millions of people standing in one of those long, terrible lines, all the way down the block. . . ." (p. 151).

It is an unpleasant vista of mass man in pursuit of phoniness. Holden—whose favorite phrase is "if you really want to know"—is in revolt against this phoniness. As a Wordsworthian or Rousseauistic version of the little boy lost, Holden represents Romantic innocence in search of continuing truth. He seeks a truth as durable as that figuring with beauty on Keats's Grecian urn ("For ever warm and still to be enjoyed./For ever panting, and for ever young. . . ."). In fact, speaking of the displays at the Museum of Natural History, he produces a modern version of Keats's "Ode," with truth and beauty held in a kinetic bond: "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything stayed right where it was. . . . You could go there a hundred times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deer would still be drinking out of that water hole . . ., and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same basket. The only thing different would be you" (pp. 157-158).

Thus Holden is as anxious to hold onto beauty and truth as he is those children who might fall off a cliff into some abyss of death, or untruth. He explains most of his occupational desire to be a Protector to Phoebe, and he also explains what he does not want to be: he will not be a corporation lawyer, like his father; nor will he even chance being a lawyer who goes around saving "innocent guys' lives" (pp. 223-224). For this too might turn out to be phony, as it often does "in the dirty movies," and Holden must be sure: "How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is you wouldn't." He really suffers from a form of "phobias" and must keep checking himself. Once he almost succumbs when, as a very good golfer, he is asked to appear in a golfing short—"but I changed my mind at the last minute. I figured
that anybody that hates the movies as much as I do, I'd be a phony if I let them stick me in a movie short” (p. 100).

He must be pure to be the catcher in the rye, saving little children who might be rushing to their doom, and living in his own peaceful cabin. There, one of his few visitors would be Phoebe. As for his brother D. B., a proviso is necessary: “. . . I'd let D. B. come out and visit me for a while if he wanted a nice, quiet place for his writing, but he couldn’t write any movies in my cabin, only stories and books. I'd have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn’t stay” (pp. 265-266).

So the boy of sanity, of peace and truth and beauty, lights out for his own rye-covered territory and finds his own retreat, which ironically is “not too far” from Hollywood, as things turn out. There is a certain amount of literary ambiguity implicit in the geographical juxtaposition. Hollywood is not too far from insanity; but, on the other hand, Holden’s “insanity,” or neurosis, or whatever it is that troubles him is not far removed from Hollywood. If someone were to ask him (as Captain Delano does Benito Cereno), “What has cast such a shadow upon you?” Holden might very well answer, “The movies.” In fact, he has already given the equivalent answer with “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies” and “The goddam movies. They can ruin you.”

ON READING ESSAYS ON EXISTENTIALISM AND ZEN BUDDHISM

CONRAD HILBERRY

The intellect, the Zenists say,
Must be embarrassed and perplexed
Until like ancient king unsexed
It pales and gives its reign away.

And Existentialists contend
The head—a hound that bays lost scent
At river’s edge—is impotent
To track belief to a sure end.

And yet these advocates all find
It irresistible to dress
A glimpse, a notion, a long guess
In the upholstery of mind.

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