

J. D. Salinger: Writing As Religion

J. D. Salinger's last book, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*, was published in 1963. His last *New Yorker* short story appeared in 1965. Since then, he has published nothing, even as his most famous book, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), continues to sell some 400,000 copies a year. The author of a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* asserted that Salinger "retreated to a New England fortress when he could no longer write." Indeed, many literary critics have interpreted Salinger's self-imposed exile in rural Cornish, New Hampshire, as a sure sign of artistic exhaustion. Here, critic Dennis O'Connor takes a fresh look at Salinger's published works and goes on to suggest that the critics have been wrong to assume Salinger's "exhaustion," and wrong, too, to neglect his diverse religious interests. These religious concerns are, in fact, the key to Salinger's fiction.

by Dennis L. O'Connor

J. D. Salinger is not a typical literary star. He does not appear in *People* magazine, plug himself into the vacant chatter of TV talk shows, write book reviews, ride the lecture circuit, or allow himself to be photographed.

The last time he went public was in a 1974 front-page *New York Times* interview, the first he had granted since 1953. Noting a recent unauthorized attempt to publish some of his early uncollected stories, Salinger said then:

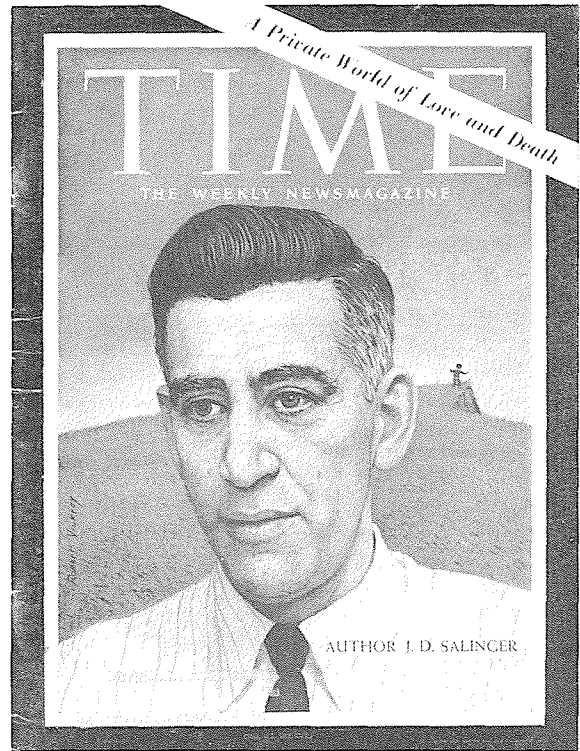
There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It's peaceful. Still. Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to

write. I love to write. But I write for myself and my own pleasure. . . . I pay for this kind of attitude. I'm known as a strange, aloof kind of man. But all I'm doing is trying to protect myself and my work.

Various ridiculed as a "recluse," a self-indulgent narcissist resorting to Greta Garbo-ish ploys to gain attention, Salinger, in fact, approaches writing more as a religion than as a profession.

His professional life quietly challenges the current penchant for conspicuous achievement; his ideas are no less singular. Holden Caulfield,

Despite his self-seclusion, Salinger has a close circle of friends and relatives. In 1955, he married Claire Douglas, a former Radcliffe student. They have two children—Margaret Ann, now 24, and Matthew, 20.



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the hero of *The Catcher in the Rye*, sought simple, genuine communication between people, roundly condemning snobbery, pretense, and intimidation. His championing of spontaneity and openness, especially as found in children, has touched millions of young people during the past three decades.

Whether exploring anti-Semitism in "Down at the Dinghy," sexual exploitation in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," or the evil of total war in "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," Salinger always directs the reader to consider the sacred dignity of human beings. He subtly points us toward spirituality through

a wealth of references to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, and Jewish traditions. It is not a fashionable vision.

Born on New Year's Day, 1919, in New York City of an Irish mother and Jewish father, Jerome David Salinger grew up in Manhattan with his sister Doris, who was eight years older. After flunking out of prep school, he attended Pennsylvania's Valley Forge Military Academy (where he was literary editor of the yearbook before graduating in 1936). Salinger took a course at New York University in 1937, then went to Europe with his father, a prosperous meat importer. Young Salinger

failed to develop a yen for the meat business, but he learned French and German.

Starting Out

He returned to America in 1938. The following year he enrolled in Whit Burnett's short-story course at Columbia; and within two years, he had stories published in *Collier's*, *Esquire*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The *New Yorker* bought one of his Holden Caulfield stories in December 1941 but did not print it until five years later.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, Salinger went overseas in the Counter Intelligence Corps; his proficiency in foreign languages proved useful in ferreting out enemy agents. In 1944, after training at Tiverton in Devonshire (the probable setting of "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor"), he took part in the invasion of Normandy. Despite the war around him, he continued to write, and publish, at an impressive rate.

By January 1948, the *New Yorker* had awarded him a contract and published "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Now back in New York, he published from 1948 to 1953 a steady stream of distinguished stories that established his reputation as a young writer of extraordinary ability.

In July 1951 came *The Catcher in the Rye*. The immediate reaction to the novel, a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, was mixed. "Brilliant," proclaimed one critic; "monotonous and phony," countered another.

After traveling abroad to escape the publicity surrounding the publication of *Catcher*, Salinger returned to New York to continue work on what became his *Nine Stories* (1953).

The first story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," leads us—or rather displaces us—into the world of Seymour Glass. Seymour and his wife are vacationing in Florida. When Seymour teases a young girl about bananafish—a mythical fish that swims "into a hole where there's a lot of bananas" and subsequently dies because it can't fit through the door—he is obliquely describing his marriage. Seymour returns to his hotel, glances at his wife sleeping on the bed, takes out a gun, and blows his brains out.

Salinger's allusions in the story to Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* suggest that Seymour, too, is a poet. They alert the reader to the need to go beneath the surface of the text. The chaos within Seymour, Salinger seems to be saying, only bespeaks the madness surrounding him. By killing himself, Seymour reveals the high price of "seeing more" in our society.

Salinger (at about the same age as Eliot was when he composed *The Waste Land*) is also writing about the desolation of a world war. Eliot's poem and Salinger's story—so polished and assured, so richly allusive, so difficult because of their intentional lack of transitions—seem anything but autobiographical. Yet, paradoxically, their restraint suggests a burden of intense personal

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THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

In a conversation with his little sister, Phoebe, Holden Caulfield describes a fantasy—the novel's central metaphor—and thus his abiding concern with the world's lack of feeling. In retreating to nature and in protecting the innocent children, Holden rejects the "phony" values he sees in adult life:

"You know that song 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye'? I'd like—"

"It's 'If a body meet a body coming through the rye!'" old Phoebe said. "It's a poem. By Robert Burns."

"I know it's a poem by Robert Burns."

She was right, though. It is "If a body meet a body coming through the rye." I didn't know it then, though.

"I thought it was 'If a body catch a body,'" I said. "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—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. 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."

pain and guarded revelation.

In what is probably Salinger's most famous story, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," a lovely, intelligent 13-year-old English girl named Esmé approaches the narrator, an untested American soldier stationed in Devonshire, and joins him for tea. Eager to give and receive affection, Esmé unwittingly reveals the depth of her loneliness and sorrow. The story ends with the narrator reading a touching love letter from Esmé. In it, Esmé's little brother Charles has added "HELLO" ten times and then misspelled his name, "Chales." Charles's "mistake" furthers Salinger's purpose.

Chales, in fact, is a Middle English form of the modern word *chalice*. Esmé's gift—her splendidly stilted

letter, Charles's string of hellos and his revelatory signature, and their father's watch, which she has enclosed—is a many-layered eucharist. It restores the American after war has stripped his nerves.

The original stimulus for Salinger's interest in religion remains obscure. Scholars have failed to uncover any evidence of his involvement with religion during childhood and adolescence. Later, he was to shroud his personal life in secrecy. Yet, the sketchy facts do speak.

In 1938, he attended Ursinus College, then affiliated with the Protestant Evangelical and Reformed Church, for a semester. During the 1940s, he became interested in Buddhism, attending a series of lectures on Zen delivered by D. T.

Suzuki at Columbia. It has also been reported that he studied Advaita Vedantic Hinduism at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York under Swami Nikhilananda before moving to New England in 1953.

In 1961, 10 years after *Catcher* and 8 years after *Nine Stories*, Salinger published *Franny and Zooey*, two Glass family stories that originally appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1955 and 1957.

These related tales recount young Franny Glass's unsuccessful effort to avoid her vocation to be an actress by frantically (Salinger plays on both the hint of frenzy and St. Francis of Assisi in her name) taking refuge in the Jesus Prayer.*

Into Dreamless Sleep

Franny finds herself in an impossible contradiction: An actress who dares not act, a highly sophisticated college woman who wishes to follow the path of renunciation and simplicity but can only manage to have a "tenth-rate nervous breakdown." This convoluted tale ends when Franny's brother Zooey helps her to understand her situation by recalling their brother Seymour's advice to them as children: Act so that everything you do is for Christ. Zooey tells Franny that "the only religious thing you can do, is *act*. Act for God, if you want to—be God's actress, if you want to. What could be prettier?"

This joining of Eastern and West-

ern wisdom* in "Zooey" lifts Franny out of her hysteria and despair and into a higher state of consciousness—dreamless sleep.

A Prose Home Movie

With the publication of "Zooey," Salinger's work became unmistakably experimental. Instead of a tightly constructed short story, "Zooey" is a "prose home movie." The Glasses are vaudevillians and prodigies. Larger than life, they do not fit the norms of realism or naturalism. Salinger steps away from conventional plot toward a self-reflexive spiral more suitable to the portrayal of a spiritual quest.

In 1963, Salinger collected two more Glass stories in *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. The book introduces Buddy Glass's complex relationship with his older brother, Seymour, who, we learn, was a poet, a seer, and a *mukta* (one who, in Advaita Vedantic Hinduism, has achieved spiritual liberation).

Narrated by Buddy and supposedly written by him to reveal Seymour's character, "Seymour" emphasizes Buddy's journey into his own heart. Salinger is concerned here with an author's relation to his reader. As Buddy examines himself in order to understand Seymour, so must a reader examine his inner self to "participate" in (i.e., to gain insight from) the story.

Having abandoned tightly constructed narrative elegance in

*This prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me"—aims at drawing the petitioner into the depths of his own heart in order to find God. Part of the *hesychast* tradition (from the Greek *hesychia*, the quality of stillness or silence), the Jesus Prayer, or the Prayer of the Heart, has its roots in the spiritual practices of the Desert Fathers, a group of 4th-century Middle Eastern and European Christians who sought isolation from secular society and organized religion.

*Throughout the book, Salinger alludes to Rilke, Sappho, the *Mundaka Upanishad* and *Bhagavad Gita* (two crucial Vedantic Hindu texts), Zen Buddhist sages and poets, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, and the *Philokalia* (the great compendium of teachings concerning the Prayer of the Heart), as well as to various works by Stoic philosophers, Christian theologians, and European and American novelists.



Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

In The Catcher in the Rye, 16-year-old Holden Caulfield, having fled boarding school, confides to a Manhattan taxi driver his concern over where the ducks on Central Park's lake go in winter. Salinger, taking his cue from Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, equates the image of the bird with that of the human soul.

"Zooney," Salinger goes even further stylistically in "Hapworth 16, 1924," his last published story (1965). Cast in the form of a letter written from summer camp in Maine, this tale reveals Seymour at age seven, mindful of previous incarnations, present proclivities, and future problems.

Seymour's counselors are concerned, he writes,

that my consuming admiration for God, straight-forward and shapeless, will upset the delightful appercart of my poetry; this is not stupid; there is always a slight, magnificent, utterly worthy risk that I will be a crashing failure from the word go, disappointing all my friends and loved ones, a very sober, rotten possibility

that brings the usual fluid to my eyes as I bring the matter into the open. It would be quite a moving, humorous boon, to be sure, if one knew quite well, every single day of one's splendid current appearance, exactly where one's everlasting duty lies, obvious and concrete.

This extraordinarily frank child, whose precocity would be intolerable if it were not so generously funny, terrible, and self-accepting, sheds some light on the poet and *mukta* who later kills himself. The child Seymour confesses to "personal instability," "excess motion," and a "heritage of sensuality." But Seymour's last gesture, his suicide in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," ul-



NOSE DROPS AND VAPORUB



Despite his deep religious and philosophical themes, Salinger is a master of the evocative detail. In "Zooney," Mrs. Bessie Glass, worried about her children, steals a moment for reflection as she examines the contents of the bathroom's medicine cabinet. What she finds introduces us to the Glass family in 1950s America:

[She] surveyed the congested shelves with the eye—or, rather, the masterly squint—of a dedicated medicine-cabinet gardener. . . . The shelves bore iodine, Mercurochrome, vitamin capsules, dental floss, aspirin, Anacin, Bufferin, Argyrol, Musterole, Ex-Lax, Milk of Magnesia, Sal Hepatica, Aspergum, two Gillette razors, one Schick Injector razor, two tubes of shaving cream, a bent and somewhat torn snapshot of a fat black-and-white cat asleep on a porch railing, three combs, two hair-brushes, a bottle of Wildroot hair ointment, a bottle of Fitch Dandruff Remover, a small, unlabelled box of glycerine suppositories, Vicks Nose Drops, Vicks VapoRub, six bars of castile soap, the stubs of three tickets to a 1946 musical comedy . . . , a tube of depilatory cream, a box of Kleenex, two seashells, an assortment of used-looking emery boards, two jars of cleansing cream, three pairs of scissors, a nail file, an unclouded blue marble . . . , a cream for contracting enlarged pores, a pair of tweezers, the strapless chassis of a girl's or woman's gold wristwatch, a box of bicarbonate of soda, a girl's boarding-school class ring with a chipped onyx stone, a bottle of Stopette—and, inconceivably or no, quite a good deal more.

timately remains impenetrable.*

While people continue to buy and read Salinger's books, critical re-

*Salinger plants other clues to Seymour's personality in "Hapworth." He alludes, for instance, to Irish mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805–65), a fastidious writer who published little of his extensive research. Significantly, Hamilton, like Seymour, was a child prodigy of astonishing linguistic ability. Also like Seymour, he was the equivalent of a full professor at 21, had an extraordinary memory, and a passion for exactitude. Described by contemporaries as delighting "in music, playing with children and reading their fairy tales," Hamilton distinguished himself in mathematical optics. Salinger calls Seymour "our double-lensed burning glass . . . and one full poet." Seymour also resembles Shankara (A.D. 788–820), the Hindu philosopher and mystic who, like Seymour, died at age 31.

sponse has been mixed.* Commentators could react to *Catcher* without having to address its underlying religious dimension, but the later Glass family stories unavoidably raise religious issues. Salinger's critics—notably England's George Steiner and the *New Yorker's* own John Updike—were hostile or unresponsive to his interest in Eastern and Western religions. And the noted New York critic Alfred Kazin contended that Salinger lost "the deepest possibilities of literary art" by his excessive attachment to, and

*Salinger's four published volumes are still in print—in hardcover, from Little, Brown, and in paperback, from Bantam Books.

obsession with, the "cute, narcissistic" Glass family.

The critics' failure to explore the complex aesthetic and spiritual traditions from which Salinger's stories draw their strength is crucial because his religious concerns structure his approach to language, characterization, and humor. As writer Buddy Glass says to his readers, "It's the truth. Please don't simply see it; feel it."

Straight to the Heart

From the time of Emerson, Thoreau, and the transcendentalists, through Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg, and Thomas Merton, a strong religious tradition has flourished among American writers. These authors were captivated by Eastern religions and their notions of the nature of man's spirituality. They integrated these ideas in their criticism of American acquisitiveness and competitiveness.

The dazzling verbal surfaces of Salinger's stories are deceptively colloquial and American. Yet, they lead us to an understanding of an alternative perception of the universe that welcomes all experience as divine gift. This perception is Buddy Glass's revelation that "all we do is move from one little piece of Holy Ground to the next."

Salinger tries to communicate not information but the ability to see; he seeks to change the reader's heart by moving him to see himself in the text. Thus, through "indirect communication," the text gradually changes from an amusement, to a mirror, to a crucible in which the reader literally takes the story to heart so that it consumes and irradiates his everyday interaction with the world at large.

Like Kierkegaard, who insisted on

the reader's inescapable duty to "undo the knot" of life for himself, Salinger adamantly refuses to comment on his writing: "The stuff's all in the stories; there's no use talking about it." His fictions, like the *koans* and paradoxical observations in Zen and Taoist literature, try to lead the reader to reflect on his own spirituality, not only to feel but also to think from the heart, or the core of being where one is in touch with all life.

Salinger, again echoing Kierkegaard, describes—with playful seriousness—who his reader is.

Kierkegaard imagined his "edifying discourses" finally meeting "that individual whom with joy and gratitude I call *my* reader, that individual whom it seeks . . . who is benevolent enough to let himself be found." Likening his book to "an insignificant blossom," Kierkegaard imagined "how the bird whom I call *my* reader, suddenly . . . flew down to it, plucked it off, and took it to himself."

A Gift to the Reader

Salinger consciously builds on this account when he has Buddy Glass describe *his* reader in "Seymour":

I found out a good many years back practically all I need to know about *my* general reader; that is to say, *you*, I'm afraid. You'll deny it up and down, I fear, but I'm really in no position to take your word for it. You're a great bird lover . . . you're someone who took up birds in the first place because they fired your imagination; they fascinated you because 'they seemed of all created beings the nearest to pure spirit' . . . I privately say to you, old friend (unto you, really, I'm afraid), please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: (((()))).

The bird, of course, symbolizes the human soul, the immortal human heart. And those parentheses, which

have blossomed for 20 years, present the key to this story.

As gestures or signals, they resemble prayerful hands holding pure mystery. They resemble stillness, the bull's eye of perfection, the openness of a cave, a womb, a plenitude of referential meaning. Whatever one's personal reactions to this strange bouquet, the parentheses, which expand or contract depending on one's point of view, are meant to penetrate the human heart, to strengthen its relationship with the Divine.

Salinger has spent his entire career since *Catcher* trying to integrate a vision of Eastern and Western holiness with artistic achievement. It is in the Glass family saga that his unique contribution to American letters is most evident.

He has not stopped writing. At age

61, he continues to work daily on the Glass family history—in a concrete-block studio, so it is said, near his secluded house in New Hampshire.

Perhaps some day we will learn more about the relationship between the elder Glasses. Or maybe we will understand Seymour better because we will know more about his twin brothers, Walt and Waker. Perhaps they, like Seymour, kept diaries, and Buddy will share some future Glass chronicles.

In his own way, Salinger is as much a visionary as Emerson or Whitman and as consummate a craftsman as Eliot or Faulkner. No less a judge of American letters than Edmund Wilson said in 1967 that "Salinger really is our greatest living American writer." Thirteen years later, Wilson is still right.

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