SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed Journal ; Volume-2, Issue-11, 2020
www.ijoes.in ISSN: 2581-8333**;** Impact Factor: 5.421(SJIF)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

J.D. SALINGER'S CHARACTER PORTRAYAL IN HIS FICTIONAL CREATIONS: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract:
This paper aims at focusing on character portrayal implied by J. D. Salinger in his fictional works. Many critics of American literature tried to peep into the innermost recesses of Salinger's characters to assess salinger's art of characterization. Most of his characters are usually witty and sensitive. They are trapped between two dimensions of the world: love & "squalor." The central problem in most of his fiction is not finding a bridge between these two worlds but bringing some sort of indiscriminate love into the world of squalor: to find a haven where love can triumph and flourish. Some characters such as the young , mixed-up Holden Caulfield , adopt indiscriminate love to aid them in their journey through the world of squalor, while others, such as Seymour Glass, achieve a sort of love , or satori , and are destroyed , in Seymour's case by a bullet through his head. Each of these characters is metropolitan in outlook and situation and is introverted: Their battles are private wars of spirit , not outward conflicts with society The characters' minds struggle to make sense of the dichotomy between love and squalor, often reaching a quiet peace and transcending their situation through a small act. They are also aware of the teenage feelings what they feel in themselves.

Keywords: Adolescence, Alienation, Estrangement, Intelligent, Phony, Rebellious, Sensitive, Religious.

Jerome David Salinger, the author of one of the enduring classics of American literature, *The Catcher in the Rye,* is as famous for his flight from fame as for the one novel and thirteen short fictions that he produced before retreating into "seclusion" in 1953 on the 90-acre New England estate where he died on 27 January, 2010 aged 91. He gave voice to the rejection of materialism and regimentation that attracted the generation growing up in the United States after World War II. *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most widely read and influential postwar novels, and it entered the culture as a statement of youth's view of the complex world. Holden Caulfield, Salinger's petulant, yearning (and arguably manic-

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depressive) young hero was the original angry young man. That he was also a sensitive soul in a cynic's armour only made him more irresistible. James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway had invented disaffected young men too. But Salinger created Caulfield at the very moment that American teenage culture was being born. A whole generation of rebellious youths discharged themselves into one particular rebellious youth.

The characters in J. D. Salinger's fiction pursue a search for identity in a world often hostile to them; their creator has apparently found his own salvation in seclusion. Salinger grew up in New York City, attended private schools, and was publishing short fiction in his early twenties. World War II interrupted his career, and he served in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1945, taking part in the liberation of Dachau and using his linguistic skills to work in wartime counter-intelligence. He also participated in the D day invasion in Normandy, France, in 1944, where he suffered a nervous breakdown. What we read in *Catcher*, is perhaps not so much the moody self-indulgence of 17-year-old Holden Caulfield, but shrieks of desperation from a 31-year-old Salinger, damaged and robbed of his late adolescence and early manhood by the traumas of war.

In the earliest stories of Salinger the reader gets the sense that the hero is justifiably an object of ridicule, like the intellectual fool named Justin Horgenschlag of *Heart of Broken Story* (1941). Salinger introduced the character of a writer – artist Joe for the first time in *Varioni Brothers* (1943). In the character of Joe Varioni, Salinger crystallizes the character who will dominate his later fiction – the misfit hero. Unlike his predecessors, Joe is talented, kind and sensitive. Yet, he stands apart from society because he is docile as well as brilliant. Unequipped for the tough world around him, Joe's submissiveness leads to his downfall. It is apparent to note that what had been funny in *Heart of Broken Story* became no laughing matter in *Varioni Brothers*. Every succeeding story developed the hero's alienation from society. Salinger's wartime stories accentuated the hero's isolation from the good past and the corrupt world. Vincent Caulfied, the hero of the wartime story, *This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise* (1945), is separated from his affectionate family, especially from his lovable brother, Holden, who is 'missing in action'. Vincent is 'drenched to the bone', the bone of loneliness, the bone of silence'. "The soldier's initiation into the terrors of war parallels to the child's initiation into the sordidness of the adult world. What is so horrifying is neither war's physical brutality nor society's overt prejudices but rather the subtle dehumanization, the insidious loneliness and the paralysing

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lovelessness. Thus, each character becomes a war casualty just as the earlier characters were casualties of society".

With the publication of his early postwar stories and *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger became a cult hero as the novel became one of the enduring classics of American literature. Younger readers loved his depictions of their concerns. The novel has sold 60 million copies and remains as compulsively fresh and engrossing to today's teenagers as it was when first published six decades ago--precisely because of that ordinariness, the authentic, rarely heard voice of frustrated, aimless youth struggling to be heard with which the young (and sometimes not so young) can readily identify. Holden Caulfield, the teenage protagonist of the novel, particularly was widely admired. He offers us an interesting perspective on dealing with adolescent issues and adult life through the eyes of a teenager suffering through depression. Depression and the death of his brother Allie play a significant role in Holden's personality, especially his sensitivity to people around him and the emotional response he has in certain situations. He is self conscious of himself, but at the same time strives for independence and individuality - totally alienated from his environment and from society as a whole. Holden does fail to cope with his life and his responsibilities. He desires to preserve his childhood, staying away from the adult world. The world surrounding Holden is barren and dreary. The sixteen- year-old adolescent boy is along among the tired spiritually bankrupt people. He cannot find a place for himself in his life. Holden comes to the view that he is the only sane being among psychopaths and living corpses. His destination is not known to him in this weary world. In a way Holden Caulfield is tragic and funny, innocent and obscene, loving and cruel, clear-sighted yet viewing the world from a warped perspective, an expert in identifying phonies and the greatest phony himself. Of course, how we see Holden depends upon our own point of view. For many young readers of the book, especially in the 1950s and '60s, Holden still represented the true reality— the innocent abroad in a corrupt world. For older readers, he represents the angst of adolescence in its nightmarish extreme. For the ultraconservative, he still remains a threat to the status quo. It is important to realise that Holden's intention of making a new life for himself in the West places him in a tradition of American literature in which young people seek out a better life away from the corruptions of civilization. Such characters seek to realise the American Dream of justice, purity, and self-definition on the country's frontiers, away from cities. Unfortunately, Holden's move westward takes him only to a mental hospital; one wonders

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if this development is cruel irony or, perhaps, a real start on a new life for Holden. Sincerity, honesty, and innocence are the features of the ideal state to which Salinger's characters aspire and whose absence, scarcity, or remoteness causes them such pain.

The characters in Salinger's short stories are in search of spiritual answers that they only occasionally find. The hero in every Salinger story becomes a reflection of a moral code arising out of a cult of innocence, love, alienation and finally redemption. These heroes form a particularly adolescent troupe of spiritual non-conformists, tough minded and fragile, humorous and heart breaking. These moral heroes are forced to compromise their integrity with a pragmatic society. What disaffiliate the heroes are their peculiar off-center vision which sensitise and distort their sense of truth in a false world. Several characteristic themes are evident throughout Salinger's work: the innocence of childhood versus the corruption of adulthood; honesty versus phoniness; estrangement, isolation, and alienation; and the quest for enlightenment and understanding of such fundamental issues as love, suffering, and the problem of evil.

The importance of children to Salinger becomes obvious upon reading even a few of his stories: Sybil in *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, Esmé in *For Esmé—with Love and Squalor*, and Phoebe and several other children in *The Catcher in the Rye* are examples of a certain wise innocence which the older protagonists of the stories seem to have lost and struggle to recapture. It is also noteworthy that many of these children are extremely precocious; indeed, *Franny and Zooey* (1961), as well as *"Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" and "Seymour: An Introduction"* (1963), deals with a whole family of precocious "whiz kids" who have been regular contestants on a radio quiz program called *It's a Wise Child*. The use of precocious children and the title of the program itself reflect Salinger's sense that children possess some kind of innate understanding only rarely and with great difficulty retained in growing up.

The quest for these lost qualities is ultimately a religious quest for Salinger, and his writing relies heavily on terms and concepts taken from a wide variety of religious teachings to describe this quest. Christian references are frequent in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Another religious tradition that is equally important to an understanding of Salinger's work but less familiar to most readers is Zen Buddhism. Zen is a branch of Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes the impossibility of arriving at enlightenment by logical means. For this reason, teachers of Zen make use of paradoxes and riddles

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(called koans) to illustrate the futility of logic as a means of acquiring religious understanding. One of the best known of these koans serves as the epigraph for Salinger's *Nine Stories* (1953): "We know the sound of two hands clapping/ But what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Just as this question has no rational answer, so many of Salinger's stories seem to have no rational explanation—particularly *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, which ends with the unexpected and unexplained suicide of the main character. By using such Zen techniques, Salinger may be adopting the role of a Zen teacher in inviting (or forcing) the reader into a nonrational mode of experiencing the story. If each reader experiences the story in a unique way, it then becomes impossible to establish an agreed-upon "meaning" or "message" for the story, but this may be just what Salinger intended. In Zen, enlightenment can never be imparted to one person by another—each seeker must arrive there on his or her own.

As important as Zen may be as a means toward enlightenment, it makes no attempt to answer the profound questions troubling many of Salinger's characters: how to deal with the problems of evil, suffering, estrangement, and alienation. Esmé is obsessed with "squalor"; Holden is haunted by the inevitability of change and loss. Few of Salinger's characters can speak directly with those to whom they are supposed to be closely related, those whom they are supposed to love. They talk over the telephone, through bathroom doors, or by means of letters, but rarely look one another in the eye; they are afflicted with the essential estrangement and alienation that plagues modern life. The task of Salinger's characters is to overcome these barriers through love, but it is a task infrequently and imperfectly achieved.

The most widely admired of Salinger's writing techniques is his ability to create convincing dialogue, especially for Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden's speech is slangy enough to be believable, yet eloquent enough to make profound and intellectually challenging observations. The novel is a favourite because of its humor, its mordant criticism of American middle-class society and its values, and the skill with which Salinger has captured colloquial speech and vocabulary. The novel, ironically enough, has received some criticism over the years because of its rough language, which Holden cites in order to denounce materialism.

Nine Stories are clearly in the mould of the Chekhov-Hemingway school of dramatic realism--they attempt to compress action into fairly continuous segments of time; reveal character in-scene; and arrange fictional elements to give us the impression of lives stolen

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and submerged within the page. Exposition is rare and the stories, because of that, have a cinematic quality. Salinger's stories have the rich dialogue subtext of Hemingway stories, but the scenic treatment of *Nine Stories* is much more adorned, especially when it comes to character gesture, to the nuances of how a man holds a cigarette or folds a napkin. Salinger stories usually open at the heart of a crisis that is never fully explained.

In 1961 Salinger published in one volume *Franny and Zooey*, the two novellas on which he had been working for almost seven years. Each focuses on a member of the extraordinary Glass family, whose gifted children—Seymour, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walter, Waker, Zooey, and Franny—have each been stars on a radio quiz show. *Franny* recounts a weekend that Franny Glass spends with her Ivy League boyfriend during which she berates him for his smug conventionalism and his preference for academe over art, reason over truth. *Zooey* extend sainger's religious preoccupations in its account of twenty-three-year-old Zooey's debt to the Buddhist teachings of his older brothers Buddy and Seymour.

J. D. Salinger's characters are always extremely sensitive young people who are trapped between two dimensions of the world: 'love' and' 'squalor.' The central problem in most of his fiction is not finding a bridge between these two worlds but bringing some sort of indiscriminate love into the world of squalor: to find a haven where love can triumph and flourish. Some characters, such as the young, mixed- up Holden Caulfield, adopt indiscriminate love to aid them in their journey through the world of squalor, while others, such as Seymour Glass, achieve a sort of perfect love, or satori, and are destroyed, in Seymour's case by a bullet through his head. Each of these characters is metropolitan in outlook and situation and is introverted: Their battles are private wars of spirit, not outward conflicts with society. The characters' minds struggle to make sense of the dichotomy between love and squalor, often reaching a quiet peace and transcending their situation through a small act. Many of Salinger's characters are introduced in abbreviated form in his earlier stories, only to reappear for fuller development later on. Holden Caulfield appears several times (although sometimes called by other names) in stories published before *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Seymour, Walt, and Boo Boo Glass are first introduced in three separate stories published in *Nine Stories*, written well before the Glass family was first presented in its entirety in *Franny and Zooey*. This repetition of characters could be explained as merely the fondness authors often feel for the products of their imaginations or as representing various facets of

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Salinger himself, but their effect is one of further uniting Salinger's work, as if it were one long story composed of a number of distinct but interrelated chapters.

Salinger's last published fiction abandons the conventions of plot and characterization in the interests of theological speculation. It has interested most readers much less than the earlier work, which in its worldly details and its irreverent humor established Salinger's reputation and made possible his distaste for reputations and his reverent retreat from worldliness.

Finally, there are Salinger's frequent and wide-ranging references to religious, philosophical, and literary figures and works: Christ, Buddha, Lao-tzu, Chuang- tzu, Epictetus, Sri Ramakrishna, the *Bhagavadītā*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Fyodor Dostoevski, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Ring Lardner are only a few. Some of these, particularly the religious and philosophical references, may be intended to point to the universality of the quest for enlightenment in which Salinger's characters are engaged. The literary references sometimes seem to be a form of literary criticism put by Salinger into the mouths of his characters, and other times merely examples of the honesty and sincerity for which his characters yearn. It is impossible to say just what expectations Salinger may have had for his audience, because he has never said, but if he had any intention of directing his readers on their own quests for enlightenment, he may have left these references as signposts of a sort. The purpose of the proposed dissertation is to critically analyse the intriguing world of Salinger's characters and at the same time get a peep into the comprehensive soul of their creator who renounced the world his works question, and has thus become one of the major puzzles of late twentieth century American literature.

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