ODYSSEUS IN A FIELD OF RYE

by John J. Fritscher

Sing a Song of Six Pence
Catcher in the...
J.D. Salinger,
Baked...

The phenomenal romance of J. D. Salinger with the nation's undergraduates is, like his stories, bleak, terrifying, and shocking to many village elders. Yet behind the controversial wooing, there are reasons for the rapport. Bewildered by the complexity of modern life, unsure of youth itself, chagrined by the spectacle of perversity and nuclear menace, the collegiate generation finds Salinger's vernacular style an adequate genre for questioning what seems a senseless world.

Like Scott Fitzgerald, Salinger empathetically expresses the mood of a generation bred in World War Years. His artist's eye and ear speak the language of epic loneliness and adolescent searching. Holden Caulfield, the hero of *The Catcher in the Rye,* is looking for a model better than his elders. He wants to know why he finds the world ignoble and *phony* the while he is painfully aware of his own capacity for love.

Salinger's coupling of this adolescent inability to understand with a general negative approach to reality is the key to his sensational success. He is the oracle of an atomic-bred generation whose psychology is apprehensively tinged with pragmatic nihilism.

Yet in the negative quandary of his stories the intimation lies half submerged that he is attempting to compose a subjective religious odyssey; for the published totality of Salinger's work leaves little doubt that his central theme is indeed religious.

Jerome David Salinger, whether he likes it or not, is, if not an existentialist philosopher, an existential writer. The evidence of this claim is internal to his work and its discovery bears out the fact of his religious intent.

Existentialism as found in Salinger is a philosophy concerned with the existence of the individual as immediately grasped through introspection. Realities external to the character are admitted, but the subjective point of view is more strongly affirmed. The driving motivation of the individual is toward his own destiny of perfection.

Salinger, the existential writer, accepts human existence as a brute fact and his principal characters react with typical nausea whose etiology is expressed in the high incidence among them of alcoholism, insanity, and suicide. For he causes them to seek goals of perfection they know to be naturally impossible of attainment. Yet instead of a purposeless acceptance of this closed, Sartre-like tragedy, his people are obsessively aware that some liberating Force is near, ready to lend purpose and dimension to their lives. And it is the proximity of this very mystery that drives them beyond nausea to destruction; for Salinger, thus far, has tantalizingly withheld *X*, the unknown Force.

SEARCH FOR A

THIRD DIMENSION

Art is not a moral diagnosis. Yet art can be ordained to an end higher than beauty without impairing the latter. This establishes a legitimacy in searching for the unknown quantity in Salinger, especially since the author in his psychological tales carries a lamp, albeit a sometimes dim one, in a moral search extending beyond the transcendentals.

His characters are naturally good, but not in the strict sense supernaturally elevated. They live in the two dimensions of the physical and the psychically natural. And they either have been or will be crippled, if not destroyed, by the world around them since they cling to nothing outside their own existences. Teddy says, "I grew my own body--nobody else did it for me."

Thus standing independent, Salinger's characters experience the tension of every being composite of body and soul. According to the very laws of nature the higher elements must be the activating prindple; the spiritual must prevail to perfect human nature even in the order of humanity. Holden, like the others, is a perfectionist in the natural order; but a human being not endowed with grace cannot arrive at even human perfection and this is the cause of Holden's breakdown.

Salinger has not let his striving two-dimensional perfectionists discover the third dimension of grace. He gives them the drive for perfection, but withholds the uleans. He tells tlle whole truth of half-life, showing the negative reactions, the sickness and perversity, inherently rooted in and progressing from a life without supernatural grace. So far, this is his art. The only "grace" in Salinger is reciprocal human love. Zooey tells the ill Franny that she is "missing out on every single goddam religious action that's going on around this house. You don't even have sense enough to *drink* when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup-which is the only kind of chicken soup that Bessie [their mother] ever brings anybody around this madhouse."

Conversely, if human love is grace, then the opposite of love is hell. In "For Esme--with Love and Squalor," Sergeant X quotes Dostoevski: "What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." Love and unlove are the only moral foci in Salinger's world where the personality is always at grips with problems that are naturally too strong for it.

To readjust the semantics: where Salinger says *human love,* he should say *grace.* Where he says *grace* (three times in *Zooey),* he should say *generosity* as he does not mean or evidence any knowledge of grace in the theological sense.

Salinger has given no supernatural grace because he distrusts admitting a personal God. Teddy is a pantheist, and Franny and Zooey make "Jesus Christ" a philanthropic synonym for "Everyman" or an equivalent chant for "Buddha."

In "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," the artist glimpses a vision of a helpless God, less even than the divine abstraction Teddy experiences in his meditation.

> De Daumier-Smith "...looked into the lighted display window of the orthopedic appliances shop. Then something altogether hideous happened. The thought was forced on me that no matter how coolly or sensibly or gracefully I might one day learn to live my life, I would always at best be a visitor in a garden of enamel urinals and bedpans, with a sightless dummy-deity standing by in a marked-down rupture truss."

Thus do Salinger's half-people see themselves dispossessed of Eden, living in a garden of urinals and bed-pans; feeling like "visitors," knowing they belong elsewhere; finding no answer in Divinity that is aloof and helpless behind plate glass. The natural support of Salinger's apparent panacea, natural love, is insufficient for the perfection they desire. For these essentially good people falter and even fail in the existential situation created both by external forces and internal, warped attitudes and drives. They lack the knowledgeable orientation that comes with the supernatural perspective of grace.

SALINGER'S DARLINGS

With children, Salinger is nearest the third dimension of grace and at times seems near to claiming this true perspective; but preoccupations with the "phony world" (read: "the effects of original sin") keep him imprisoned in the paper bag of the natural world. An instance: "For Esme" is perhaps the kindest of Salinger's stories. Esme, the child-woman, is most nearly the realization of the author's thus-far-vain attempt at a transcendental character. Yet, in the end, her cheap wristwatch, the talisman of Sergeant X's mental salvation is stopped and the soldier has not the courage to pursue the transcendental by winding it.

Perception, the constant catalyst, is at its purest in children whose directness fascinates Salinger so much that his youngsters are among his most vibrant characters Their innocent wisdom is yet walled in goodness, but dismally in Salinger's world there is no permanent wall against the tide of turpitude and its backwash effects. Or, inversely explained, as ten-year-old Teddy prescribes in his antidote to original sin's corruption that increases in children with age: "I'd just make them "omit up every bit of [Eden's] apple their parents and everybody made them take a bite out of."

But in the unsullied moments before society corrupts the purity of their vision, in their appearances throughout his stories, his children are quintessential Salinger; for, basically all his main characters are sensitive children finding response to their sensitivity only in other children. Buddy Glass in *Franny and Zooey* is a projection of Salinger himself. And in one stunning moment in a supermarket a little girl's gloriously untutored, unspoiled remark penetrates the natural complications of Buddy's world. She abstracts a simple core of reality showing that even something as natural and accidentally basic as one's sex becomes of decreasing consideration as nearness to the unknown Factor increases. And Holden's most peaceful joy is realized with his little sister, Phoebe, in the honest communication between the child and the childlike.

THE PARING KNIFE OF HONESTY

The nobility of children finds its apotheosis in the natural nobility of Holden Caulfield who wants to be not less than himself nor to accept what is base.

Plato's common virtue, a rational ordering of conduct inducing man to act in conformity with his nature, consists in fortitude, temperance, and justice; these attributes Salinger finds fully in Holden. Buddy asks, "What was he [Seymour] anyway? A saint? Thankfully it is not my responsibility to answer that one." But in Holden, Salinger has indeed created a naturalistic, two-

dimensional saint.

Esthetically, Holden is at all times keenly sensitive to the very perfection that the creative artist attempts to produce (as are Buddy and Zooey). Humanly, Holden has compassion--his greatest trait-for the nuns, the prostitute, and finally for everyone, even those who hurt him. His sensitive perception is greatest in the naturalized "Mystical Body" of his social consciousness, in the responsibility he feels to a world he does not understand.

> "...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 are running and they don't look where they are going I have to run 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."

Yet in his altruistic responsibility, Holden feels he can find his own perfection in a world that cares little for individual or social salvation. For him this is subjectively enough, although in the objective end he expects little more than an obscenity to be smeared on his tombstone.

Holden, like all the Salingerians, is essentially good; but he lives against an unreal, natural plain, asking questions for which no natural answer suffices. His inability to cope with the two-dimensional world is morbidly and excessively made the object of his personal introspection. Holden does not rise beyond common virtue to the perfect virtue of the supernatural order. He recognizes that he desires perfection, but he is ignorant of the universal order of things. Attacked and unsustained, Holden ends in an asylum when his sainthood crumbles in a muted key.

ONE HAND CLAPPING

How can an author resolve the spiritual conflicts of his characters without destroying his own artistry? The ultimate answer to the question of the great Catholic novel is, perhaps, bound up in an artistic resolution of crises through grace without grace becoming a *deus ex machina.*

Salinger, son of a Jewish father and Scotch-Irish mother, is moving toward some religion. At present, Zen Buddhism is in the offing. As of *Franny and Zooey*, however, he has provided no more than a vague religious answer for any of his characters, forestalling an admission whose truth he suspects: that the simply natural man is an anomaly.

Zooey's philosophizing about religion and Jesus and "Cod's actress snaps Franny out of her "tenth-rate nervous breakdown" and brings her to a nascent state of psychic happiness. But this state Salinger himself has previously shown in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" to be dependent and momentary. Franny and Zooey's brother and mentor, Seymour Glass, had previously arrived at their state of psychic contentment in loving "sunburned" humans simply as humans and in the weak state of this contentment's lack, Seymour committed suicide.

And this is the logical result of the Glass-type detachment ("The only thing that counts in the religious life is detachment.") at this stage of their development. For the only end of their stoic desirelessness is the perfect detachment of suicide. Psychic contentment had not sustained Seymour. And it will not sustain Franny and Zooey who indeed do come quite near to discovering

the *real* emptiness of their natural state.

It is one thing to talk nobly about "being with Cod" and "uncharitable ego" and "the Jesus prayer." And it is quite another to experience the elevation that comes with grace whose very *gratuity* is its essence and beauty. Man cannot reason his way to grace. The most one can do is to dispose himself properly for its reception. For it is a gift pure and simple.

Eventually amid the scenes of negativism Salinger must find a transcendent God who gives gifts. He admits the needful want in all his writings. Zen will undoubtedly be a chapter; but if he insists on a search for ultimate wisdom and religious truth, he can resolve the pilgrimage only Christocentrically.

Perhaps Salinger will have his cake and eat it too. For all his works to date seem to be but chapters in a much broader canvas. *The Catcher in the Rye,* "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," “Teddy," and the others have been tonally satisfactory as initial installments. The tales of the Caulfields have developed into the slowly progressing Glass menagerie. And the witness borne by the insistent references to Franny's book, *The Way of a Pilgrim,* leaves little doubt that she and Zooey are travelers climbing a ladder of development.

But the climb is tortuous and the wandering odyssey long in execution. Salinger plans to say more; Holden observes he *should* say more, but for now “that's all I'm going to tell about." And he adds in reference to future plans, "I mean how do you know what you are going to do until vou *do* it? The answer is, you don't. I think..., but how do I know?"

Salinger gives evidence he indeed knows how he is progressing if not what is his solution. In all these early chapters of the pilgrimage lie seeks that Factor, that dimension in which his Wise Children can perceive more than the physical and psychical. And it will be in rounding the whole story, in resolving artistically the questions he has posed, in bringing his audience into the paradoxically open gnosis of Christianity that Salinger will exchange literary sensation for literary stature. The coming chapters of the odyssey he himself terms his "narrative series" and "long-term project" will be the crucible for the objective literary and moral endurance of his artistry.

