Concise Abstraction: J.D. Salinger

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The works of J. D. Salinger have progressed in several ways from his earliest published works. The subject matter has changed in an attempt to meet the purposes of the author, and I believe that these stories or purposes of the author fit into four main groups—the observer, the philosopher, the preacher, and the mystic. None of these groups are of course strongly distinctive one from the other, and this paper will deal as often with the transitions from period to period as with stories that seem to fit snugly into any one slot. Along with this progression of intended purpose can also be seen not only a strengthening of description, but also, a greater amount of abstraction. At first sight, description and abstraction seem to be conflicting ideas; however, Salinger uses his concise description of the exterior in an attempt to give us a better look at the interior of his characters. After the observer period, as the titles suggest, the abstraction continues its ascent while description reaches a tapering off point and shows little further quality change. Quantity of description is what in the later works tries to keep up with the rising abstraction. Perhaps, the reason Salinger feels the need for such strong description is that he realizes that the more abstract and personal his ideas become the stronger is his need to remain in touch with reality.

Looking at the works of the early nineteen forties, Salinger is little more than an uncomcerned observer in his telling of a story. His early works depended strongly on the war and patriotic sentiment for their selling power, as well as on the use of cheap slang and trite surprise endings. They were stories of surface actions and feelings that pictured a situation on only one level. "Personal Notes on an Infantryman" is a typical product of this period and contains pat lines
like, "...commanded by George Eddy, a darn' good man." These early attempts told stories that were sometimes original, but more often not. In these stories which contain little variety, Salinger merely acted as a cheap camera taking black and white pictures of every day life. What description there was in these stories appealed to the eye and not to anything as abstract as the spirit.

In the next group of stories, the war was again the catalyst, but this time it evoked thoughts on the plight of man and opened the eyes of a returning soldier to the lost generation now inhabiting the countries of the world. Salinger not only saw this plight, he felt it. These stories are mediocre accounts of the everyday life of the lost generation. They show the stifling of pure genius, the dilemma of the social fraud, and the detachment of the soldier as a social being. These stories become more original, more abstract, and more descriptive. They no longer depend on surprise endings and trite situations, but on feelings, imagination, and personal description. More and more the stories take on the form of mental wanderings or verbal interaction, rather than story-book settings and trite cliches. Stories like "Both Parties Concerned" where lack of communication and understanding—what will develop into a lack of love—are the focal points dominating this period. Description becomes more personal and precise. In "Both Parties Concerned," Billy doesn't just sit, he is "...sitting in the Louis B. Silverman chair."

The philosopher in Salinger begins showing through in these early stories. We begin to see the Salinger whose social comment is not only powerful but accurate. Stories like "The Varioni Brothers," a story

1J. D. Salinger, "Personal Notes on An Infantryman," Colliers, CX (December 12, 1942), 96.

2J. D. Salinger, "Both Parties Concerned," Saturday Evening Post, CXXVI (February 26, 1944), 14.
of weak-willed genius being crushed by a superior personality, draw a picture as an observer would see it, but look a little deeper, a little harder into the why of the situation as it has developed in society. In a transition story like "The Varioni Brothers" there are still the trite observer's comments like, "Sonny lighted a cigarette, got rid of smoke through thinned lips," sitting next to the more abstracted, more deeply insightful, comments like, "Let's just eat our shrimp salads and leave each other alone."

The philosopher period was a period of the lost generation, when to contemplate death was all of life, and to see society as cheap was typical for the returning soldier whose insights into life had so greatly increased. It was a period when sensitive men viewing the society they returned to, "began to hear the music of the unrecoverable years: the little, unhistorical, pretty good years when all the dead boys in the 12th Regiment had been living and cutting in on other dead boys on lost dance floors: the years when no one who could dance worth a damn had ever heard of Cherbourg or Saint Lo or Hürtgen Forest or Luxembourg." The lost-generation idea is enhanced by the descriptive detail rather than the worked-over exclamation that life is hell. Salinger is becoming subtle. In "Elaine," Salinger describes a young girl who is sensitive and beautiful, but very sheltered and very naive; she is "unaware." "Elaine is not unwilling to go out with boys, but she is unwilling to be confused by unfamiliar, evadable issues." She, too, becomes a quiet, hidden member of the lost-generation. The abstractions increase, as

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3 J. D. Salinger, "The Varioni Brothers," Saturday Evening Post, CCXVI (July 17, 1943), 14.
5 J. D. Salinger, "Stranger," Colliers, CXVI (December 1, 1945), 18.
6 J. D. Salinger, "Elaine," Story, XLII (March), 41.
does Salinger's dependency on certain characters, ideas and social situations, and the philosopher is about to take full bloom in the shape of a teenage boy called Holden Caulfield.

This period is, of course, highlighted by Catcher in the Rye and Nine Stories, both collections of separate stories. These are stories written about the thinkers, those members of our society who are disenchanted with all that they see around them and yet love it anyway. This is the period of deep insight and human feeling, where life is real and touchable, as in "Slight Rebellion Off Madison," when Holden and Sally Hayes "...danced cheek to cheek, and when their faces got sticky from contact, neither of them minded." This is also the period where man's distaste for his plight is strongly brought to light when in "I'm Crazy" Phoebe says to Holden, "But Holden, you don't like anything." What Phoebe doesn't say is that he loves everything. A basic need for a member of the Salinger family, is to accept everything through love. Then, through Catcher in the Rye the reader sees that life is not always clear or concrete, but that man must strive through love to reach his goal. He must not only see society as it is, he must learn to look through the "phoniness" and love what is underneath.

Nine Stories portrays life not as we would like it to be, but as it is or at least as Salinger sees it. These stories are filled with more and more detail and become more and more subtle in their abstractions. What we have is a group of stories about people who live and breathe, are dissatisfied, and either become reconciled or die. Typical of this period is the "Laughing Man" who is indestructible to all but love. In


8 Salinger, "I'm Crazy," Colliers, CXVI (December 22, 1945), 36.
"The Laughing Man," we see a man destroyed by love, but who finally faces reality. "The Laughing Man's last act, before turning his face to the blood-stained ground, was to pull off his mask."9 In "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," the Salinger philosophy is stated simply, "The fact is always obvious much too late, but the most singular difference between happiness and joy is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid."10 This is also the story where a description like "The mouse, I've been sure for years, limps home from the site of the burning ferris wheel with a brand new, airtight plan for killing the cat."11 Smith also makes the statement, after an "experience," that "Everybody is a nun."12 Also, in "Teddy," Teddy says of parents, for that matter all adults, "I mean they don't seem able to love us just the way we are. They don't seem able to love us unless they can keep changing us a little bit. They love their reasons for loving us almost as much as they love us, and most of the time more. It's not so good, that way."13 Basically, here lies the crux of the Salinger philosophy; that love isn't all that it should be, that men wear masks, and yet men are basically pure.

In the latter half of the philosophical period, the Glass family is introduced. The Glasses grow out of a need to express more than just one disenchanted view of life. They fulfill the needs of the intellectual, the social being, the religious mystic, the lover of life, and the seeker of death. Also, in the Glass family, Salinger can now express Salinger as he never has before. Experimentation can be had at the cost of lives since the family is large enough to survive the extremes of the Salinger mind.

9Salinger, Nine Stories (Boston, 1953), p. 73.
10Ibid., p. 135.
11Ibid., p. 159.
12Ibid., p. 164.
13Ibid., p. 187.
We meet the first Glass, Seymour, in "A Perfect Day For Bananafish."

We learn very little about Seymour, except that he has had trouble as a child, and is suspected of having attempted to take his own life. The only insight we get of Seymour is through his story of the bananafish. Bananafish "...swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary-looking fish when they swim in. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas.... Naturally, after they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again. Can't fit through the door. ...They die...they get banana fever. It's a terrible disease."\(^{14}\) The bananafish is, of course, none other than Seymour, who is about to take his own life.

To this point we only see him through the eyes of his wife, a girl whom he calls Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948, and who "...looked as if her phone had been ringing continually ever since she had reached puberty."\(^{15}\) Seymour is a person who is wound up tightly and is seeking some form of release; and just as we know the husband, we know too that the wife is not the person to give this relief. For Seymour has gained too much insight, he has become too full and is now trapped into viewing life as no man is capable of viewing life and surviving. Seymour is also the part of Salinger who has become too full of the mystic life his soul has sought—what to him is freeing and at the same time suicidal for his career.

Salinger's philosophical way continues with the Glass family, as does his subtle description of the specific in an attempt to draw frames around pictures without closing anything in with Glass. "Franny" is the

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 3.
story of quest, the doubting of youth, the search for beauty, and the withdrawal from a world that sickens the perceptive awareness of youth. Franny has accepted the way of the Pilgrim, a way that preaches withdrawal. "...When you first start doing it, you don't even have to have faith in what you're doing.... All you have to have in the beginning is quantity. Then, later on, it becomes quality by itself." Franny's way is not the way of Salinger; her story is inconclusive and basically serves as an introduction to Zooey. "Alone, Franny lay quite still, looking at the ceiling. Her lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move." She is waiting for the Salinger salvation.

"Zooey" opens a gap in the philosophical period and shows glimpses of Salinger as the preacher of a religion all his own that draws heavily from Zen and early Christianity. Buddy Glass, the acknowledged alter ego of Salinger, describes "Zooey" as not really a short story, but a "prose home movie." It is a story for the eye as well as the mind. In Zooey, Salinger's description is effective, strong, and extensive. He again attempts to extend the interior by portraying the exterior. The story contains a long explanatory letter by Buddy seemingly summing up his life and attempts, but he has one line that also shows us Zooey in a clearer light, and allows us to see that Zooey could be the Seymour that will make it. Zooey was "...the only one who was bitter about S.'s suicide and the only one who really forgave him for it. The rest of us...were outwardly unbitter and inwardly unforgiving." Aside from seeing Zooey, here for the first time we see Buddy as the family commentator who writes not to impress but to improve and counsel.

16 Ibid., p. 44.
17 Ibid., p. 68.
In *Zooey*, we go through a lot of family background and learn to know the Glasses as people. We see description and action dominating the ideas of the characters, but the solid stone that *Zooey* places on the Salinger wall of religion is the philosophy of the Fat Lady. *Zooey* recalls how Seymour always had them shine their shoes for the Fat Lady, but none of them ever knew who the Fat Lady was. Franny still doesn't know, and *Zooey* must tell her in a speech that must be taken by the reader as a sermon:

But I'll tell you a terrible secret—Are you listening to me? There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. That includes your Professor Tupper, buddy. And all his goddam cousins by the dozens. There isn't anyone anywhere that isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. Don't you know that? Don't you know that goddam secret yet? And don't you know—listen to me, now—don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy. 18

Thus, Franny's retreat from society is cut off, and she realizes the basic truth of the Salinger religion—one can't save oneself without ceasing to be an individual. To withdraw is not the way to cope with the Professor Tupper of the world, one must accept each individual for the part of Christ within them. To murder self is to live, and if one can't manage to live a life without self in this world, then Seymour has shown us the only other way. Salinger is now ready to improve mankind by destroying self, or committing literary suicide in the attempt.

To many, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* put Salinger out on a limb, and *Seymour an Introduction* put the saw to the limb. They are, however, Salinger in a style not only all his own but very workable in a society of abstractions and side roads. "*Raise High*" is a story in which we see the tight description of Salinger working to portray its effect on the inner man. Salinger is still a preacher, but the

18 Ibid., p. 201-202.
transition to pure spirit or mystic has begun. We see these two aspects of Salinger as they blend together in a section from Seymour's diary, "...he seemed to feel I have a perfection complex of some kind....I agree with him but only in theory. I'll champion indiscrimination till doomsday, on the ground that it leads to health and a kind of very real, enviable happiness. Followed purely, it's the way of the Tao, and undoubtedly the highest way. But for a discriminating man to achieve this, it would mean that he would have to dispossess himself of poetry, go beyond poetry."\(^{19}\) Thus, we are preached at and at the same time the stage is set for a mystic approach.

Raise High takes us to the brink of personal involvement with flashbacks, sidenotes, personal comments, and a dear little man who is unexpectedly silent in a verbal world. This pleasant distraction or abstraction in a hurried story of accusation and explanation is the only thing worth remembering in a story superficially about Seymour. This little man provided the only honorable gift for a mystic's wedding, when he leaves his cigar in Buddy's ashtray. Buddy says the gift should have been sent with "Just the cigar, in a small, nice box. Possibly with a blank sheet of paper enclosed, by way of explanation."\(^{20}\) What better gift for a man who could find Christ curled up in an ashtray, and who needed more than life could offer? "Raise High," too, is merely a climax to the Salinger that had been yearning to break loose as early as 1943 with "The Varioni Brothers," but whose name and fame were not strong enough to support such a venture. But with popularity and assured readers, Salinger, like Seymour, is about to do what he knew all along he had to do—he wrote his heart out.


\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 92.
For "Seymour" to be accepted was not Salinger's major purpose, but for "Seymour" to be read was expedient. Why? Because Salinger believed what he wrote and loved what he wrote. It is "Seymour" that not only preaches, but in the end becomes a mystic's proclamation to the world. "Seymour" begins with a direct address to the reader:

...I look on my old fair-weather friend the general reader as my last deeply contemporary confidant, and I was rather strenuously requested...to try to keep a steady and sober regard for the amenities of such a relationship, be it ever so peculiar or terrible; in my case, he (Seymour) saw it coming on from the first. ...I found out a good many years back practically all I need to know about my general reader; ...You're a great bird-lover.

We, the readers, are bird-lovers because we love that which is "nearest to pure spirit," and Salinger has slowly evolved in his writing from observer, to philosopher, to preacher, and finally to the writer of pure spirit. Again, however, Salinger realizes that to be written and read, although at first sufficient, may not be enough, for as he says, "I happen to know, possibly none better, that an ecstatically happy writing person is often a totally draining type to have around."  

He continues:

In the wake of anything as large and consuming as happiness, he necessarily forfeits the much smaller but, for a writer, always rather exquisite pleasure of appearing on the page serenely sitting on a fence. Worst of all, I think, he's no longer in a position to look after the reader's most immediate want; namely, to see the author get the hell on with his story. ...I fully intend, from time to time, to jump up personally on the reader's back when I see something off the beaten plot line that looks exciting or interesting and worth steering toward....I'll probably continue to point out available exits as we move along, but I'm not sure I'll pretend to put my heart into it again.

Salinger is now off his fence, he is committed and he is happy.

21Ibid., p. 97.
22Ibid., p. 98.
23Ibid., p. 99.
Thus, the guides, if any, have been set; the reader has been warned; and Salinger the man, Salinger the spirit, and Salinger the writer have been irrevocably intertwined for the next one hundred odd pages. Salinger talks about Seymour, the creative man, the creative transient mind of man, who "...gives out terrible cries of pain as if he would wholeheartedly let go both his art and his soul to experience what passes in other people for wellness."\(^{24}\) Seymour is the working creativity, perhaps even the divinity of man, that cries out in situations of stress. Seymour and Buddy are Salinger—Seymour the abstract part that is almost impossible to put on paper, Buddy the part that is striving to physically reach Seymour but must always fall short—just as the invention always falls short of the ideal. Buddy is the descriptive preacher in Salinger that must keep some touch with reality, while Seymour is Salinger's pure spirit that is allowed to fly only periodically. "I say that the true artist-seer, the heavenly feel who can and does produce beauty, is mainly dazzled to death by his own scruples, the blinding shapes and colors of his own sacred human conscience."\(^{25}\) Thus, the creed has been stated, and the Salinger of the mind has attempted to put on paper what only the mind can truly perceive.

Now the tide shifts to the description—or should I say the outline—that is to be drawn of Seymour, the enlightened one, as told by Buddy, the worldly brother, who strives for mystical perfection through the baseness of pen and paper. The mystic is haltingly about to begin.

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 103.

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 105.
mood, I don't dare go anywhere near the shortstory form. It eats up fat little undetached writers like me whole."26 His subject matter is uncommon; therefore, his style must also take unorthodox shapes.

We are again made aware of the inseparability of the Seymour-Buddy combination when Buddy interrupts his story to talk about "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." He says, "...the 'Seymour' who did the walking and talking in that early story, not to mention the shooting, was not Seymour at all but, oddly, someone with a striking resemblance to--alley oop, I'm afraid--myself."27 Where Salinger has failed before to get the spirit on paper, he now tries again. He is attempting to cast the spirituality of men on paper without the physicalness of Buddy smothering his purpose.

Salinger tells us that Seymour—who wrote poetry—attempted a "...sustained search for a form of poetry that was in accord with his own peculiar standards and yet not wholly incompatible, even at first sight, with Miss Overman's taste."28 Miss Overman was the librarian who guided the Glasses' reading in their early years—she, too, was a Fat Lady. "Seymour an Introduction" is then to Salinger what Seymour's poetry was to him—hopefully, something readable at first sight to the little old librarians of this world, and yet compatible with the mystical ideas of Salinger. Just as Salinger cannot simply write a story and forget it, so, too, Seymour "wrote--bled--haiku."29

26Ibid., p. 107.
27Ibid., p. 113.
28Ibid., p. 125.
29Ibid., p. 127.
grows more personal and at the same time abstract, so "the more personal Seymour's poems appear to be, or are, the less revealing the content is of any known details of his actual daily life in this Western world."30

Seymour has written a letter that shows the relationship between the Glass brothers, and again the distinction melts into the mind of Salinger. Seymour says:

Is it so bad that we sometimes sound like each other? The membrane is so thin between us....What bliss it is to be your first reader. It would be straight bliss if I didn't think you valued my opinion more than your own....If only you'd remember before you ever sit down to write that you've been a reader long before you were ever a writer. You simply fix that fact in your mind, then sit very still and ask yourself, as a reader, what piece of writing in all the world Buddy Glass would most want to read if he had his heart's choice. The next step is terrible, but so simple I can hardly believe it as I write it. You just sit down shamelessly and write the thing yourself.31

Salinger needs to convince himself that his goal is possible, for he, like all men, fears the fact that his talent cannot live up to his mind. He fears that in the attempt not only will the talent suffer but the mind may seem small.

Salinger soon, however, again slips from Seymour's advice about writing the heart's choice, to face the major conflict causing the break between Seymour and Buddy; the writer must write to sell and the public often isn't in the market for raw minds. "...What do I want to do? I want it ["Seymour In Introduction"] to get to the magazine, yes; I want to publish it. But that isn't it—I always want to publish.

30Ibid., p. 133.
31Ibid., p. 161.
It has more to do with the way I want to submit it to the magazine.... I want it to get down there without my using either stamps or a manila envelope." Thus, Salinger still clings to his dream that paper can be a chalice for the spirit.

Salinger, in his attempt to write love, cannot lose his sense of apology if failure is the result. He tries to explain, "While I'm with him in the business on the page, I'll be a child and a young boy, too. But always I'll be aware, and so, I believe, will the reader, if rather less partisanly, that a somewhat paunchy and very nearly middle-aged man is running the show." And a middle-aged man is not the closest being to the pure spirit; thus, if the attempt fails it's not the idea that was faulty, it's the medium that is weak. Nothing about Seymour can be basic; Buddy even "elected to use some sort of literary Cubism to present his face." While throughout, he shows the nervousness of his own exploratory venture as when he remarks at an overabundance of quotes, "...(the quotes are unnecessary—for God's sake, relax)." In his attempt at the unknown, Salinger has even become uncertain of his already perfected style of description. He is not sure if his description is capable of portraying the pure spirit without sounding childish.

The one description of Seymour that I wish to go into is his unusual manner of playing curb marbles. In marbles, which Seymour played by looping his marble in an arch to hit his opponent rather than throwing in a straight line, he said, "If you hit him when you aim, it'll just be luck. You'll be glad if you hit his marble...won't

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32 Ibid., p. 164.
33 Ibid., p. 169.
34 Ibid., p. 171.
35 Ibid., p. 182.
you? Won't you be glad? And if you're glad when you hit somebody's marble, then you sort of secretly didn't expect too much to do it. So, there'd have to be some luck in it, there'd have to be slightly quite a lot of accident in it. Thus too, is the paradox in the Salinger approach to writing his story, for to accomplish what he is consciously aiming at must entail a certain amount of accident, and not to aim is seen too often as rambling, since on the written page there seems to be little middle ground—but at least he's trying. What he really needs is mental etching, where the time from mind to paper is not corrupted by the pen. Thus, his greatest fear is intent, the fear that the asides of the mind lose importance when transferred to paper.

All Salinger has to give is the attempts of his mind and the beliefs of his Seymour. And just as Waker, Buddy's brother, gave away his new Davega bicycle to a boy who had never had a new bike, so too, Salinger's Davega bicycle is only good if he can share it with his reader. Intuition is the key to striking out and giving what we have the way it comes to us without trying to make it easy or straight. Once we try too hard we lose, and once we stop giving we stop living.

Thus, we have before us a personal spirit, resulting in a conflict between mind and body. It is, however, the giving of ideas that keeps both alive. Salinger has given us his all, he has professed and confessed, but as he says, "...confessions in themselves are no guarantee that we'll find out whether he once got piqued at his pet hamster and stepped on his head." No, confessions aren't enough, and they weren't enough for Salinger either; he poured more than ink on a page, he poured his life's blood. It was to be savored and studied, but certainly not

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36Ibid., p. 203.

37Ibid., p. 168.
criticized any more than a neighbor's religion is criticized. Once, however, the Salinger writing, which is the spirit, became open to criticism, and the distinction could not be made in the mind of the creator as to whether it was Buddy's or Seymour's part that was degraded, a retreat was inevitable. Salinger has retreated into the catacombs of his mind, to return only when he is again strong enough to bare his naked mind to the lions of the world. But when he returns it won't be as a mere observer or as a philosopher or as a preacher, it will be as a writer of pure spirit. The observer's description will still be strong, the philosopher's insight will still be recognized, and the preacher will still present his mind; but it will be the mystic that combines all these ideas and pours them onto a paper that just might fly by itself.
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