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J. D. Salinger's Characters as Existential Heroes: Encountering 1950s America

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J. D. SALINGER'S CHARACTERS AS EXISTENTIAL HEROES:
ENCOUNTERING 1950s AMERICA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation will analyze Salinger's three main protagonists, Holden Caulfield, Sergeant X, and Seymour Glass, who could not endure the pain of living a spiritual life in America and achieved symbolic or physical death at the end of their stories. It will challenge existential critic William Wiegand, who uses Kierkegaard's concept of "Angst." This dissertation acknowledges Wiegand's use of the concept of "Angst," but it opposes his conclusion because it is not acceptable from an existential perspective. Besides Wiegand, social critics such as James Lundquist and Warren French will be referred to. Moreover, Paul Levine's concept of the "misfit hero" will be related to existentialism and Salinger's three protagonists.

It is the thesis of this dissertation that the self-destructive behaviors of Salinger's three main protagonists cannot simply be explained based on social, economic, and political factors. Instead, the self-destructive behavior of each protagonist can be explained based on the individual choices that each makes.

To conceptualize this study, this dissertation will use existentialism as a theoretical framework because existentialism is foremost an attitude of revolt and it is chiefly rooted in man's perception that he is living in an irrational universe.

An existential perspective will refer to everyday experiences of Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour, their moods, motivations, fears of failure, and unsuccessful attempts to fit into society. To provide the reader with a better understanding of the significance of the self-destructive behaviors of those protagonists, existential concepts such as identity, freedom of choice, anxiety, and the concepts of death and “Bad Faith” will be utilized. These concepts will help explain the significance of the self-destructive behaviors of Holden, Sgt. X and Seymour which are not solely controlled by society. This dissertation is written with the belief that it will provide a multi-dimensional analysis of Salinger’s three main protagonists by utilizing the concepts found in the writings of Heidegger and Sartre, and while referring to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Camus’ existential insights, thereby expanding the range of meaning that American society can find in the works of this prominent American writer.

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Chapter One

SALINGER'S FICTION AND GENERATED CRITICISM

Introduction

J. D. Salinger first gained attention by publishing short stories in the late thirties and forties in magazines like *Story*, *Colliers*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In all he would publish twenty-one short stories in these national magazines. Many critics, however, regarded these stories as raw or unfinished, a bit uneven. In the late forties and early fifties, most of Salinger's short stories found their way into the *New Yorker*. It wasn't until 1951 that he published his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*; this was followed by the publication of *Nine Stories* in 1953.

In the mid-fifties and early sixties, Salinger continued to publish his stories in the *New Yorker*. "Franny" and "Zooney" were collected and published as a book in 1961, followed by "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" and "Seymour: An Introduction," two short stories which were published as a book in 1963. Salinger's final publication, "Hapworth 16, 1924" was published in the *New Yorker* in 1965.

With the publication of only twenty-one short stories, and one full-length novel, Salinger still managed to arouse so much controversy as Salinger and his infamous protagonists. Much of this is due to the fact that he published during an era that in retrospect was intellectually, emotionally and even literarily conservative. The controversy that Salinger raised among critics becomes obvious when one looks at the essays of Warren French and George Steiner. French in his essay "The Age of

Salinger” claims, “certainly, no writer has won a remotely similar place in American affections during the 60s; nor did any single writer largely monopolize readers during an earlier decade” (24).

Not only did Salinger have such an effect on the public and popular critics of his time, he also had a great influence on the literary canon of postwar America. On one hand, other writers were fascinated with Salinger’s works because they could identify with the heroes, and, on the other, most remained very puzzled and perplexed while interpreting what Salinger said and how well he said it.

Contrary to French’s mostly positive point of view, George Steiner, in his 1959 essay “The Salinger Industry” questions the literary value of Salinger’s works. He claims that “the primary reason for the critical attention Salinger received was really the result of too many critical opportunities because American literary criticism had become a vast machine in constant need of raw material” (362).

While Steiner’s dismissive attitude towards Salinger’s critics and his outright dismissal of the proliferation of Salinger criticism as “trivial” is a bit cynical, Steiner’s term “Salinger Industry” reveals the desire of scholars to give Salinger a prominent place in the postwar American literary canon. It is important to note that more than sixty years after the publication of Salinger’s first short story “Young Folks” in 1940 in *Story* magazine, hundreds of articles, reviews, books, and to date some forty-four dissertations have analyzed Salinger’s literary contributions. Salinger continued to be popular among readers as well as critics—as he is today—and one reason for this might be that his personal inscrutability¹ has created a lot of intrigue. However, I maintain that the genius of Salinger lies in the fact that he supplied critics with many puzzles that

are difficult to solve. One of the most perplexing puzzles in Salinger's fiction, one for which no critic has yet to provide a satisfactory answer, relates to why Seymour Glass, one of the three main protagonists in Salinger's literary works, committed suicide. Social critics believe that Seymour committed suicide because of the social restrictions that were imposed on him. They therefore see his suicide as an act of desperation. On the other hand, religious critics believe that Seymour had achieved everything in life he wanted to achieve spiritually and eventually would lose his spirituality if he continued to live in society. Therefore, they maintain that he had no choice but to commit suicide. But in this study I want to stress that Salinger's works defy the application of traditional critical approaches in order to find a satisfactory answer for the demise of his protagonists.

To penetrate the puzzle of Salinger's fiction, this dissertation examines Salinger's most controversial characters, namely Holden Caulfield, Sergeant X, and Seymour Glass, from an existential perspective based on the philosophies of the most prominent existential thinkers, namely Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. This dissertation is the first attempt to examine Salinger's works by utilizing existential concepts from the five philosophers noted above. The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a satisfactory explanation for the self-destructive behaviors of Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour Glass from an existential perspective that will expand the range of meaning that readers can find in the works of this prominent American writer.

When analyzed, the vast amount of Salinger criticism illustrates that critics fall into either a religious or a social camp. Critics that belong to the religious camp, such

as Ebenhard Alsen (Hinduism), Eugene Antonio Dale (Taoism), Sanford and Bernice Goldstein (Zen), and George Panickas (Christianity), have pointed out the religious pluralism in the works of Salinger and present him as a writer who is on a religious quest for the meaning of life, albeit somewhat off track. Moreover, these critics consider Holden Caulfield and Sgt. X restored at the end of their stories, which is recognition of Salinger's fiction as an act of celebration where his protagonists attempt to cure themselves.²

On the other hand, critics such as Paul Levine, Warren French, and James Lundquist regard Salinger as a sociological writer. These critics claim that the main themes in his fiction are "man versus society" and "individuality versus conformity." These critics note that Salinger represents the quest for alternative structures, theories, and systems of society in order to replace the standard—populist—one, which have led to the alienation, despair, and disbelief that haunt his characters. The social critics label Salinger's protagonists as "freaks" or "rebels" and consider Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour destroyed because they could not bear the social pressure and its attendant expectations imposed on them. Levine, French and Lindquist represent a group of critics who purport that Salinger's characters exist in a sociological void. They use as their primary support the fact that these characters are not rounded fictional creations but can be seen as relatively flat, considering their status in contemporary literature. Simply put, they never quite get their environment, their friends and foes, their politics, or their sexual lives all in place. This is why the main dilemma each of these characters faces is how to search for alternative structures that would help them cope with society without losing their place in it.

In his book *Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature*, James E. Miller states, “The problems of a sensitive and prospective adolescent moving painfully to maturity can never be solved by reconstructing society politically or economically” (112). I go a step further and state that neither the religious camp nor the social one can by itself provide adequate explanations as to the demise of Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour. Miller, in fact, seems to call out for an untraditional approach as the key to penetrating into the heart of Salinger’s main puzzle. To this end, I maintain that an Existentialist interpretation of Salinger will at least begin a conversation that will perhaps reconcile the interpretive perspectives of both the religious and social camps while also serving as a fresh and refreshing new perspective on Salinger’s literary canon.

Despite all of the Salinger criticism that can be put into the religious or social camp, there is at least a small vein of criticism that incorporates existential modalities. William Wiegand and Elizabeth Kurian both briefly analyze the influence of existentialism in Salinger’s works.

Wiegand wrote two articles titled “Salinger and Kierkegaard” and “J. D. Salinger: Seventy-Eight Bananas,” which analyze Salinger’s protagonists from an existential perspective. The first article, published in *The Minnesota Review* in 1965, remains the most prominent article in the existential criticism of Salinger’s works. Wiegand uses Kierkegaard’s concept of “Angst,” which one contemporary critic describes as a “profound and deep-seated spiritual condition of insecurity and despair” (Angelean Smith 2), to explain the frustrations and self-destructive behaviors of Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour. Wiegand’s argument proposes that the three male

protagonists were destroyed in the end because the society in which they lived was too restricting for them. However, existential theory rejects this attempt to find factors that control or determine behavior such as economic, social, or political systems that exist in order to explain what people do. An existential perspective does not accept these systems as explanations or excuses for self-destructive behavior. It is part of this dissertation's thesis that the self-destructive behaviors of the three protagonists which leads them to achieve symbolic or physical death cannot simply be explained by the restrictions imposed upon them by society, but they can be explained by the individual choices that each protagonist makes.

Another critic, Elizabeth Kurian, examines the influence of existentialism in Salinger's works in her book *A Religious Response to the Existential Dilemma in the Fiction of J. D. Salinger*. Kurian sees alienation as simply the loss of self. In Salinger this "loss" takes many forms, chiefly the innocence of childhood as the reluctant adolescent undergoes the initiation process into maturity (Holden); and also the loss of love in a world overtaken by petty concerns and small-minded pursuits (Seymour and Sergeant X). The many types of loss, leading to alienation in the end, form the dominant themes in Salinger's fiction.

While embarking on an existential exploration of Salinger, Kurian nonetheless does not outright dismiss Salinger as a religious writer. To her, however, his vision consists of "a multiplicity of "Zen wisdom, Christian piety, Hindu philosophy, and Jewish fraternalism, all of which merge to form Salinger's unique religious vision" (2). She suggests that to Salinger religion is not a matter of externals, of confessions and absolutions, but of individual commitment to something greater than the expectations of

society—to be materially successful, primarily. She points out that Salinger believed that a writer—or more accurately, a good one—had to be committed to “values” on some level, in order for him to effectively represent his individual moral perceptions in fiction (even insomuch as they may amount to amorality), which to Salinger was the essential aspect of post-war writing.

In *Franny and Zooey*, for instance, Salinger represents his belief through Buddy Glass, who says that “an artist’s only concern is to shoot for some kind of perfection, and on his own terms, not on anyone else’s” (199). Kurian echoes this sentiment in her belief that the quest of moral perfection in Salinger’s fiction in fact countermands a conservative society on the verge of veering into one full of sex, violence, and cynicism, which Salinger feared would come to color much contemporary fiction. She maintains that Salinger saw this as, simply put, a cop out. Instead he was determined to give society a moral compass point away from man’s future potential for amorality as a sophisticated stand against society. She believes that Salinger saw the only possible end point of such a move as ultimate rejection of love and spirituality as our lack of an appropriate respect for them is overwhelmed by human progress in the material realm, which ultimately does not depend on a morally progressive world view.³

Kurian, therefore, wants us to regard Salinger’s fiction as supporting an evolving world view, one which may at first have to be compounded of rationalistic and mystical elements. Naturally, the rationalistic is needed because of the need to appeal to reason, while the mystical (which Salinger saw as more important) affirms the ascendancy of romantic individualism as a path toward morality, one which incorporates one’s social concerns and obligations without allowing them to overwhelm

one's life. As quoted in Howard Harper's *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike*, Kurian believes that "Salinger does not deny the reality of the spiritual dimension of human life," but "he does question whether it should take precedence over our responsibilities to other people" (194). This question to Kurian is central to a complete comprehension of Salinger's works. Moreover, a strong reading of his work would admit his response to it, which has been to adopt a stand that integrates the values of both action and contemplation.

Elizabeth Kurian's text, as the title suggests, closely examines the religious and mystical side of Salinger's works and while she uses the phrase "Existential Dilemma" in her title, the book ignores the philosophical corpus of the five existential philosophers that will be examined in this dissertation. Her text falls within the religious camp and does not address the validity of maintaining that Salinger's works can be interpreted against the background of the existential landscape which is the main thesis of this dissertation.

An Explication of Existential Theory

In *Irrational Man* (1958), the existential philosopher William Barrett, an American existential philosopher,⁴ explains that the "central fact of modern history in the West by which we mean the long period from the end of the Middle Ages to the present is unquestionably the decline of religion" (24). Moreover,

The loss of Church was a loss of a whole system of symbols, images, dogmas, and rights which had the psychological validity of immediate experience, and within which the whole psychic life of Western man had

been safely contained. In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this in all its brutal objectivity. But he was bound to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of his spirit [. . .] to lose one's psychic container is to be cast adrift, to become a wanderer upon the face of the earth. Henceforth, in seeking his own human completeness man would have to do for himself what his God had once done for him, unconsciously, by the Church through the medium of its sacramental life. (25)

There are other concerns as well. One is the sense that the familiar world has vanished, that it changes so quickly that one fails to recognize it by the time one becomes mature enough to do so. Another is that the "traditional" frameworks of meaning have been broken. This means that traditional values, once considered absolute and recognized by all, have become skewered. While there are others—all related to loss of something—Barrett puts these at the heart of existentialism, for they generate the ultimate dilemma for man: what should he do with his freedom and responsibility?

To answer this question it is necessary to look more closely at what existentialism asserts about freedom and responsibility with respect to living in modern society. A common assertion within existentialism is that we must create our own "psychic container" in order to put societal truths in an individualistic context. This is important because if we live in a world that we cannot understand as individuals—meaning one that is too full of personal unknowables—the only truths, if any, we may

find cannot be derived from our own actual existence. This existentialist assertion points out the importance of a personal appropriation of the world; in short, it places utmost importance on the value of the subjectivity of truth as the basis of understanding what to do with our freedom (a crucial point in Salinger's fiction). As we live—i.e., exist—day to day, we gain an increased consciousness of life and our innate ability to accumulate experience. This relates to Salinger because he believes that too many people are unaware that we are living in a broken world and therefore do not see the necessity of developing a “psychic container.” Salinger is linked to general existential theory because he shows what happens when people—through his main protagonists—do not fully adopt the attitude of revolt against societal pressure not to develop a psychic container because it distracts from more conventional adult worldly concerns. Salinger, as we will see in the body of this dissertation, suggests (consistently though very subtly) that developing the project of self-modification or self-creation is one way to attempt to conceptualize and convey our experiences in a meaningful way, and perhaps also a means to achieve a more moral philosophical approach to existence itself. In other words, an existentialist is one who at least tries to understand his or her lived experience and from this understanding determine what is of value, what is worth preserving, and what should be avoided and discarded.

A Brief Overview of Soren Kierkegaard's Philosophy

It would be impossible to discuss general existential philosophy without discussing the writings of a key 19th century thinker, Soren Kierkegaard. His work emphasizes both “the loss of Church” as an institution capable of maintaining man's

“psychic container”—indeed, of even convincing him of the necessity of developing one. It also focuses on the subjectivity of truth and how far humanity is from acknowledging its importance. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) (who is arguably the Father of Existentialism) is, according to Robert Solomon, “not only the first Western philosopher to attack the cosmic idealism of Hegel but, more importantly, he laid down the basic principles of the Existential movement which guided the writings of Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre” (69). Solomon, in *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, extends his study of Kierkegaard back to Hegel (1770-1831), who believed there was a divine purpose to the Western World. Solomon notes that Kierkegaard was drawn to Hegel’s notion that the individual could best serve this divine purpose by connecting his personal needs (as expressed through impulses and desires) to the needs of society. Hegel was analytical, this is true, but he was far more conceptual than any other philosopher of his time: to him the very “concept” of the individual as unique being cannot be disassociated from the notion of the individual as a social being. As unique social beings, then, we must each understand that our lives are dictated by a divine plan. Since this is true, we can exist fully—i.e., as God intended by helping society to achieve its divine ends.

Kierkegaard went beyond Hegel by focusing on the problem of people who are not able, or are not willing to be themselves—to simply exist as God had intended them to exist. Whereas Hegel was at least trying to be scientific in introducing a conceptual philosophy, Kierkegaard’s theories are decidedly more unscientific. For instance, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he wrote, “It is one thing to think and another to exist in what has been thought” (228). And later, in his text *The Point of View for My*

Work as an Author: “The movement for my whole activity as an author integrally understood is away from the philosophical, systematic, to the simple, that is, the existential” (132). Kierkegaard lays down the foundation for existential theory by emphasizing the concept of the individual and his responsibility toward subjective thinking: “Only the truth which edifies is the truth for you” (*Either/Or* 227). Another way of looking at this is that nothing is quite true—no belief or idea—unless the individual had appropriated it into himself—e.g., is using it for himself.

In *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845), Kierkegaard argues that we can regain meaning in our life by having the courage to face the unknowable world outside of ourselves through a divine appreciation of it. He asserts that by establishing a personal (meaning individual) relationship with God, we can inhabit both a religious and “authentic” sphere of existence. He further states that the failure to form such a duality leads us to become an “aesthetic person,” which is one who does not believe in God and is futility trying to live each moment to the fullest without putting life in a divine context. This type of person can be accurately characterized as a hedonist, a modern day playboy, who is materialistically and sensually oriented towards life. There are no ethical rules that guide his behavior because he is totally consumed in living for himself. Kierkegaard said, “The aesthetical in a man is that by which he is immediately what he is” (*Either/Or* Vol.2, 150). Kierkegaard maintains that the aesthetic person is not willing to be one’s self and in living each moment to the fullest, at the end of his life he ends up with nothing. His life does not stand as a meaning in the world which comes authentically from him, that is, he has not created his own “essence,” he has not attained

the level of authenticity but, instead, has wasted his life in pursuit of pleasure. (Gene Thibadeau “Kierkegaard’s Concept of the Individual”).

The ethical person is one who believes in God and has responsibilities, such as a marriage, children, membership in a church, and being a significant contributor to society: “The ethical is that whereby he becomes what he becomes” (ibid). But the problem with the ethical person, which is one of the main contributions Kierkegaard gave to Western philosophy, is in his clarification and explication of the difference between “Faith” and “Reason.” Kierkegaard maintains that Faith and Reason are two separate entities, that they have no commonality, and are entirely distinct unto themselves. The reader of this dissertation does not have to have Faith in the fact that he is reading this material because an empirical experiment can prove to him that he is reading these pages. However, when someone says to you, “I love you,” that is when you have to have Faith, because Faith is needed to overcome doubt. Faith enables one to believe in that which is unbelievable and by that Faith the unbelievable becomes believable.

What Kierkegaard is clarifying is that the ethical person never really commits himself to Christ. He attends church on Sunday, which was followed in Danish society during Kierkegaard’s lifetime by a huge Sunday afternoon dinner. The remainder of the week, he does not guide his daily existence thinking about Christ. That is, he reasons himself into a belief in Christ and he characterizes himself as a Christian, but he has no Faith in Christ, he has no passion. Being a Christian is one of the characteristics that define his existence, as membership in a church defines his existence, as his family defines his existence, and as his culture defines his existence. What Kierkegaard notes

about the ethical person is that he never really comes to understand himself because he never makes his most important decision about what he believes in, about his religious beliefs and, therefore, he never really finds himself.

A person goes from the ethical level to the religious level when he realizes that he cannot reason himself into a belief in Christ. The ethical person moves into the religious stage of life when he makes a commitment to Christ, knowing that this commitment is illogical. Kierkegaard has a concept known as the “Leap of Faith” which denotes the individual’s lack of ability to reason himself into a belief in Christ; instead, he must believe in Christ even though this belief is absurd. The absurdity of the belief comes from the Christian Bible in which the son of God comes down to Earth to save mankind. How can God be man? According to Kierkegaard, the ethical person must “appropriate” a belief in Christ without actually believing. The ethical person lives his daily life guided by the model of Christ and constantly thinking how his behavior reflects that model. Kierkegaard maintains that Faith comes to you, that one must earn their Faith in Christ, and that you are not a Christian simply because your parents were Christians. (Gene Thibadeau “Kierkegaard’s Concept of the Individual”).

Kierkegaard’s task as a philosopher was to save Christianity from the modern world. In order to do this, he explicates the three levels of existence mentioned above and in doing so he lays down the basic concepts of the existential movement. The most important concept he contributed to Western philosophy was the concept of the individual. Prior to Kierkegaard, the concept of the individual appears in Western philosophy usually as a description of a particular individual, such as Socrates or Alexander the Great, but it was never written into Western philosophy as a

philosophical concept. Kierkegaard maintains that an individual can be defined as one who has inwardness, earnestness, and responsibility.

Inwardness means that the individual spends some time of every day by himself contemplating his existence. Kierkegaard's inwardness has been frequently compared to the concept of meditation in Zen Buddhism. It is that period of the day in which you talk to yourself about your behavior and your relationships. In Kierkegaardian philosophy, inwardness is necessary in order to develop an inner voice which, while every human being has it, and while it never really becomes extinct, the act of inwardness makes it stronger.

Together with the act of inwardness comes the realization of the concept of earnestness which, for Kierkegaard, is a conscious awareness that every decision that one makes, every relationship one has, and everything one does is important. Earnestness is the realization that one has to be concerned about the quality of his life. The concept of earnestness is appropriated by Nietzsche and Sartre but in different contexts. However, all three philosophers maintain that the existential individual is one who must choose himself, that is, choose the values that the individual wants to bring into the world, choose the kind of life he wants to have, and that, ultimately, the choice is dependent on the person choosing to become an individual.

Of the three characteristics Kierkegaard uses to define the concept of the individual, the most important is the concept of responsibility. Kierkegaard believes the individual is aware that he is responsible for the quality of his life. For example, if I am sitting in my car on Philadelphia Street in Indiana, Pennsylvania waiting for the light to go from red to green and a DUI comes and crashes into the back of my car, then I am

not responsible for the accident but I am responsible for how I respond to the accident. The concept of responsibility is a derivative of the existential concept of “Thrownness.” We are literally thrown into the world as we have no control over our gender, culture, nationality, race, and family conditions. Responsibility means that we always have a choice, that we are not a victim of the social, economic, psychological, and physiological conditions (to name but a few) in which we find ourselves. Responsibility means that we are responsible for developing our own unique individuality and not being a phony but, instead, being ourselves.⁵ Kierkegaard maintains that the awareness of the concept of responsibility is the responsibility of one who becomes an individual, one who makes his own decisions and is aware that his decisions ultimately direct the meaning of his life.

Before leaving Kierkegaard, it is necessary to touch on his “Argument Against Rationality” because of its relevance to the coming chapters on Salinger and the analysis of his three protagonists. The argument against rationality acknowledges that man’s rational capabilities do indeed characterize him as a superior entity in reality. Man can use his rational thought to design an automobile, a building, a missile, and a beautiful city. Kierkegaard maintains, however, that man’s rational gifts are not an aid in coming to the most important decisions in one’s life. Man cannot reason himself into faith; he cannot reason himself into love. Kierkegaard acknowledges that man frequently does attempt to reason himself into faith and love as he also utilizes reason to select a career, but when man does this he loses the passion in his life. As stated previously, the difference between the aesthetic and ethical levels indicates the importance of reason in the ethical, but the highest level of human existence, the

religious level, is acquired not through reason but through faith, a belief in one's self that he is making the right decision. This belief in one's self is not because of his society, his environment, his culture, but because of an intense personal inner belief that this decision is right for him and him alone.

A Brief Overview of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy

In addition to Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is another prominent philosopher who advanced existential theory. Unlike Kierkegaard, who is identified as a "religious" existentialist, Nietzsche is an atheist. This is, of course, very rare in the early history of philosophy.⁶ One of his later texts, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), which is often touted as his most important philosophical works, lays down an atheistic formulation of morality. In this book, Nietzsche delineates the development of man's moral structure in the Western world *without respect to God*. In fact, he goes so far as to argue that the very concept of God was designed to make the strong weaker and the weak stronger, which runs counter to the natural order. While his arguments against the existence of God are not relevant to the thesis of this dissertation, what is useful is his conclusion that because of Christianity, Western man has been estranged from his real nature: he is basically a stranger unto himself. Nietzsche's claim is that it is not natural for man to make himself poorer for any reason, even to help other; it is not natural to turn the other cheek when confronted with violence, or to be meek and humble in the face of a hierarchal social order. Furthermore, he states that because Western man has lived by a "false set of values" for more than two thousand

years, he has not been able to develop the faculties needed for him to understand himself.

Nietzsche's more controversial work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85)—arguably his magnum opus—finalizes his atheism by making the simple but loaded claim that “God is dead.” This claim is one of Nietzsche's most famous and oft-quoted directives. This statement does not mean that Western man no longer believes in God, but rather it does maintain that in the centuries ahead there will be a decline in religion because the advances in science and technology which will make it very difficult, if not impossible, for man to believe in God. The above two philosophical statements, namely, that “man is a stranger unto himself” and that “God is dead” laid the foundation for his wildest (and some claim most controversial) work, *The Will to Power*⁷ in which he talks about the concept of the Übermensch (Overman).⁸

The Übermensch is one who has come to some central decision as to what his life is going to stand for *independently of God*. This person is a superior person in society simply because he has organized the chaos of his passions and given style to his character. Included within the concept of Übermensch is the notion that society does not progress by consensus of agreement but, instead, because of one individual who goes against the beliefs of society at crucial time and thereby fulfills the meaning of his existence by centering his life on his central decision simply to stylize himself.⁹

Nietzsche maintains that the Superior Person has but one enemy—namely, himself.

The Übermensch, therefore, is not a perfect being. Rather, he is constantly aware of his character defects and, as a consequence, constantly attempting to overcome them. What matters in this study is that the Übermensch is not jealous, not envious, and especially

not concerned about the opinions of other people—i.e., society. Instead he has a personal quest to fulfill and a mission to complete, both of which just happen, by circumstance, to make him a powerful human being in society. What separates the Übermensch from the common man is the former's willingness to accept "risk" in his life.

Thus, while the main concept in Kierkegaard's philosophy is the concept of "Faith," the main concept in Nietzsche's philosophy is the concept of risk.¹⁰ Risk is central to his concept of the Übermensch because without it one cannot become an individual and will never be a superior person. Nietzsche maintains the following:

The more creative you are, the more risk you take.

The more risk you take, the more you change.

The more you change, the more you grow.

The more you grow, the more you reach your potential.

The more you reach your potential, the more you live life endlessly¹¹

(Gene Thibadeau "Nietzsche's Concept of the Übermensch").

To take a risk is to believe in yourself, and the more you believe in yourself the more risks you take. Nietzsche uses the phrase "slave mentality" in which man fills up his existence with petty tasks and everyday chores. This "average everyday" is characterized by the fact that it is unreflective in the sense that the everyday man does not question himself about his existence, that is, he does not consider his possibilities. The "average everyday man" does not define himself uniquely, but as part of a public, of society, of a culture. For Nietzsche, this "everyday man" is a manifestation of the average man or man in general and, therefore, according to Nietzschean philosophy an

inauthentic being. The “everyday man” is a good citizen, the average guy, the establishment, and the thrust of Nietzsche’s existentialism is to pry him loose from this social framework and allow him to find his “innermost possibilities,” or his authentic self.

One of the main categories in Nietzsche’s existential philosophy is the concept of “the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence” which states that if you were asked to relive your life all over again exactly in the way in which it occurred you would answer immediately, “YES!, YES!!, YES!!!” What is important in Nietzsche’s doctrine is that the life one has lived would be repeated exactly in the way it occurred and without any alterations or changes. Most of the people who answer this question in the affirmative would nevertheless remark that they would like to be more intelligent or more beautiful or wealthier. Nietzsche’s doctrine states that the relived life has to be lived exactly in the way it occurred without any changes whatsoever and the point that he is making here is that if you have lived existentially, that is, if you have lived making your own decisions you will be willing to live that life over and over again to eternity. Nietzschean scholars view the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence as an affirmation of human existence which reflects Nietzsche’s attitude that human existence is sacred because it gives us the possibility of reaching our authentic selves.

Finally, Nietzsche directs man to live his life as if it were a creation of art, and as the artist takes risks in creating his art then man must take risks to reach his authentic self and thereby attain the status of a superior person. This is critical to this study because it lays a foundation to regarding Salinger’s three main protagonists as heroes. In other words, they are existential heroes.

A Brief Overview of Martin Heidegger's Philosophy

A third influential existential philosopher is Martin Heidegger. Whereas Kierkegaard analyzed the concept of the individual from a religious perspective and Nietzsche analyzed the concept of the individual from a social perspective, Heidegger analyzes the concept of the individual from a psychological perspective.¹² In 1926, at the age of thirty-seven, Heidegger published his most important philosophical work, *Being and Time*, which established his reputation in Europe as one of the major philosophical minds of the twentieth century. By then the world was ready to accept existentialism. Indeed, Heidegger's work marks the beginning of existentialism as a "mainstream" philosophical movement. Heidegger, like Kierkegaard, argues that Hegel's conceptual existence is not sufficient to give us knowledge of what actually exists and what actually does not exist both in our lives—our frame of reference—and in the greater world around us.

In *Being and Time*, we find many of Kierkegaard's central ideas expounded in different terms. For example, Heidegger and Kierkegaard both maintain that the "real self" is ethical, not cognitive: "The real subject is not the cognitive subject . . . the real subject is the ethically existing subject. The only reality that exists for the existing individual is his own ethical reality" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 281).

The central theme in *Being and Time* is the problem of Being¹³. In other words, what does it mean for man to exist in the world? Heidegger creates the concept of Dasein¹⁴ which looks at being in such a way that one has an understanding of Being, that one has an understanding of his own existence in the world. Although we are ourselves, that is a simple logical truth, but we do not know ourselves, that is, we cannot

give an adequate analysis of ourselves. Therefore, it makes no sense to suppose that we know ourselves better than we know the world, and it makes no sense to say that we know about ourselves in a different way than we know about the world. We know ourselves and the world identically because we and the world constitute a single phenomenon. There is no subject distinguishable and therefore separable from the world; there is simply Dasein, Being in the world. Dasein and Being in the world are inseparable; they are the same phenomenon.

However, many people choose themselves by neglect, that is, by simply accepting a given way of life. They face the question of Being but not accurately, and without giving serious consideration to all the alternatives. In other words, all individuals face and provide their answer to the question of “What does it mean for me to be in the world?” but most individuals face the question simply by accepting a given way of life, which Heidegger considers to be an inauthentic existence. The authentic person asks the question (what does it mean for me to be in the world?) and does not suppress it, but recognizes the extent of the choices that his existence offers him. To ask the question of Being, of self identity, is therefore an essential structure of all people and all people do ask this question, but some explicitly and with an honest recognition of their range of answers (authenticity). However, most men simply suppress the question as soon as they recognize it and rely on ready made answers provided by others (inauthentic).

What should an individual recognize when he asks the question, “Who am I?” According to Heidegger, the answer to both of these questions lies in the analysis of specific psychological stages which will give him an insight into the authenticity of his

existence.¹⁵ The psychological stages of guilt, time, and death will be briefly analyzed here because of their relevance to the analysis of Salinger's three protagonists.

Heidegger maintains that each person, at some time in his life, feels guilty about himself. Heidegger is using the concept of guilt different from its usual meaning in language. If a person owes someone money, or he has a written assignment that is overdue, or he treats someone badly, then he feels guilty about it. Heidegger is not using this everyday concept of guilt because there is an object to the guilt, namely, money, written assignment, or the fact that one has treated someone badly. Heidegger is saying that each person at sometime in his life feels guilty about the fact that he is not living the kind of life he should be living! This feeling of guilt has no definitive object but is, instead, a sense of guilt that one is not living up to his potential. He feels that something is wrong with his life but he cannot identify the problem. This feeling of guilt can overcome the individual at a party (What am I doing here?), or walking through a park (Am I wasting my time?), or at night when in bed they say to themselves "What did I accomplish today?" "What was the meaning of this day for me?"

Heidegger maintains that most people ignore this feeling of guilt and dismiss it by paying attention to the petty things in their life. In addition, his main explication of guilt is that "it is a call of your consciousness for you to be that which you are not" (*Being and Time* 300). It is a call for the individual to change his life in some fundamental way. A dog cannot question the quality of his existence although, obviously, a man can make the dog feel guilty. Only man can feel guilty about the quality of his existence, the quality of his life. Guilt, for Heidegger, becomes an *apriori* condition of human consciousness and, according to him, the more we listen to our guilt

the stronger our “inner voice” becomes. That is, the more we listen to our guilt the more authentic our existence becomes and with authenticity the feeling of guilt declines.

Time, more specifically our awareness of time, is for Heidegger a means by which we can judge the quality of our life. In short, how we deal with time reveals to us (and to many of those around us, perhaps) how much meaning and value we have in our everyday existence. Time is crucial as a concept because we all will come to a point when there will be no more time available to us, no more chances to judge the quality of our life. Time is going to run out for every human being through death, which means that we must make the most out of each moment to define our existence. Heidegger understood that it is often the experiential differences that give specific moments greater meaning to us, either through action or contemplation, so that when we are anticipating a vacation, a wedding, or travel to a distant land that we are excited about, the very thought of these things brings new meaning into our life. It is through anticipating these events that we develop a heightened conscious of time. Likewise, the individual who is retired and sickly and cannot take care of his everyday needs has no real meaning in his life and, consequently, feels that time is static and has not differentiation.

A key component of Heidegger’s concept of time involves temporal relativity—e.g., the past, the present, and the future of our present existence. Heidegger calls the past a fact that has exhausted its possibilities, and those who dwell on it have no meaning in life. The authentic individual, on the other hand, is oriented towards the future. Authentic individuals are always thinking of and engaging in projects and formulating goals for the future: these individuals give meaning to the present through

their engagement with the future, and are able to forget about the past. As with Nietzsche, a capacity to accept risk is a characteristic of the authentic individual, for this person sees failure as a thing of the past, soon forgotten.

To Heidegger, then, inauthentic existence is characterized as an obsession with the past and the indictments of our past, which takes away from the present moment and impedes our ability to project into the future and, therefore, form projects and set goals. For Heidegger, we can redeem our past only by looking toward the future, because in the future we can correct the mistakes of our past.

As with the other two major existential philosophers, Death is also one of the central structures of Heidegger's philosophy. In *Being and Time* he devotes a key chapter to the concept of Death. He begins the chapter with the following sentence: "As soon as a human being is born, he is old enough to die right away" (136). Everyone knows that someday they are going to die. When we pass an elderly person on the street, we might think to ourselves that this person is going to die soon, and, depending on our age, we might satisfy ourselves with the idea that we have twenty or thirty years before we are going to die. Heidegger, however, would dismiss this thought as banal. Instead he wants to make "everyday man" realize that death is a possibility at any moment, as indeed it is (and was to the victims of 9/11, for instance, who got up thinking it would be another work day). Heidegger wants us all to live as if we do not have twenty, thirty, or forty years ahead of us. All we have is NOW.

Thus, the concept of death is important in Heidegger's philosophy because it determines the meaning (essence) of each moment of our existence. Prior to death, a person has a choice which can change the meaning of his existence. For example, if

one were an assassin for the mafia and decided to change the meaning of his existence by becoming a missionary or a Red Cross Crisis Aid, then he will bring new values into the world. It is only at the moment of death that the past, present, and future become one; at that moment, the meaning of existence is solidified. The authentic man, as a future-oriented individual, realizes that death is a possibility at any moment; he does not think he has twenty, thirty more years to do something. Rather he does things NOW. Death, in short, motivates him to make his own decisions, even though they are likely to involve risk. He is similarly aware of the values that he brings into this world and conscious, on a daily basis, that he is constructing his own essence through his present actions and future contemplations.

A Brief Overview of Jean-Paul Sartre's Philosophy

The central figure of French existentialism, one who has given the movement both its definitive expression and its name, is Jean-Paul Sartre. This dissertation will focus on Sartre's magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, because it forms the philosophical foundation to his literary works. His literary works in turn represent the main philosophical concepts in *Being and Nothingness*.¹⁶ Sartre believed in a conjunction of literary expression and philosophical reflection, as we see in his first novel *Nausea*, wherein the line separating philosophy and literature is seriously blurred.

Sartre begins *Being and Nothingness* talking about the classical European donut with the hole in the middle. The hole in the middle of the donut is an integral part of the concept of a classical European donut, but the hole is nothing because "nothing" is defined as the absence of something. If I ask one of my students to go into the next

room and tell me what is there, when the student opens the door and there are no chairs or tables or cabinets or chalk etc., then the student will come back and say “There is nothing there!” Sartre uses this analogy of the concept of nothingness to explain the lack of essence built into human existence. There is an essence (meaning) to every object in the world except human existence.¹⁷ Man has no essence or meaning built into his life. Man is required to give meaning to his existence by the choices that he makes. The concept of nothingness is at the very heart of Sartre’s thought. Man must construct his own essence as noted in his popular slogan, “Man makes himself,” that is, man must choose the kind of essence he wants to bring into the world. Man may choose to be inauthentic and blindly follow the dictates of the public and the demands of endless necessities of everyday life. The inauthentic life is the refusal to recognize this responsibility in one’s choices; it is the life of *das Man* who has his alternatives handed to him and his responsibility for these choices are taken away from him. However, the authentic life is the recognition of the responsibility to make choices which will determine our own existence.

The Sartrean concept of nothingness is based on his concept that “existence precedes essence.” Prior to the existential movement, classical philosophy maintained that “essence precedes existence” which means that the idea of the object must come before its existence. That is, if we are going to build a house we ought to have a blueprint (essence) of the house before we actually construct it. If one were to design a chair, the concept of the chair exists in the designer’s mind prior to its existence. Therefore, the classical notion that the meaning of the object comes before its existence is a common-sense perception of reality. Sartre would agree that when we are talking

about chairs or houses that the essence comes before existence; however, he radically rejects that this can be applied to human beings. Man is literally thrown into the world with no control over the conditions (facticity) in which he finds himself. Facticity is man's simply finding himself in a particular situation which is not of his choosing. Facticity—which arises within any one situation—is simply there as given; for example, one's nationality, gender, parents, and physical characteristics. And yet, while we have no control over our facticity, we are nevertheless responsible for perceiving and acting on the possibilities of that facticity.

Our awareness of the possibilities correlates, then, to Sartre's notion of an "Authentic" existence. The consideration of the possibilities of different choices that we can make, and in choosing a particular choice among the possibilities open to us, we become authentic. Sartre states that we must choose ourselves, that we must choose the kind of person we want to be and the kind of life we want to live, and, in choosing, we give direction and meaning to our existence.

"Man is free to choose but he must choose to be free." (*Being and Nothingness* 481) meaning is expressed in another Sartrean slogan, namely, "Freedom without responsibilities is a sham." (ibid). Our freedom is defined by the responsibilities we recognize as peculiar to our own existence. These important ideas, however, are often neglected in American considerations of existentialism. In America, which began to accept existentialism in the early 1950s, the movement was immediately misinterpreted as "hanging cool," "doing your own thing," and "copping out from society." The misinterpretation came from the fact that people believed that if they were free to do whatever they wanted to do, they are free to do nothing. However,

Sartre is in line with his predecessors in maintaining that when we act, we act for all mankind. As previously stated, every object has an idea or a concept or an essence attached to it, such as the concept of “chairness” for a chair, or “houseness” for a house. However, this is not true for us. We have no predetermined essence. Without a predetermined essence, we are literally born without form and must immediately begin defining ourselves through the patterns of our behavior. Hence, every time we are deceitful, we make that a part of the definition of Man (or renew it). Likewise, every time we are altruistic, we make that an indelible part of the definition of Man. The implications of the Sartrean belief “that when we act we act for all mankind” are based on his belief that man does not have a predetermined human nature and, therefore, can live in a world without wars or violence or poverty or discrimination.

The concept of freedom is central to Sartre’s philosophical landscape and as faith is necessary for one to become an individual in Kierkegaard’s philosophy and risk is necessary for one to become an individual in Nietzsche’s philosophy, freedom and the recognition of freedom is necessary for one to become an individual in Sartre’s philosophy. In the early stages of his career, Sartre maintained that we are totally free. But in his middle stage, he recognized that there are two main limitations to our freedom. The first limitation he calls “The Other,” which means other people take away our freedom. Other people make us feel shame and guilt.

The second limitation he calls “Bad Faith,” which is a lack of belief in ourselves to be ourselves. While Sartre does not automatically reject the necessity of playing numerous roles in society as a practical matter—a lawyer must play being lawyerly in order to collect his fee, a professor must play being professorial, etc.—we must always

be on guard for what he calls “Bad Faith.” Bad Faith occurs when we lose control of ourselves and become what we are playing, and thereby allow ourselves to be forced into a role dictated by society. Once in this role—no longer the player—we cancel ourselves out as a free agent of existence. The man in Bad Faith has played lost his sense of self; in essence, he has been betrayed by his theatrical ability into believing that he is nothing but whatever role he is playing. In order to forget what he’s denying within himself, he constantly convinces himself and others that he and his role are in fact identical.

Bad Faith is often the result of one’s not wanting to address one’s freedom of self-definition through acting in the name of all humanity. Instead, one may find it easier to practice a special sort of self deception. However, one should keep in mind that for Sartre, the person chooses Bad Faith just as surely as he chooses any other mode of his existence. Choice can be recognized in honest and lucid awareness or in flight and Bad Faith.

In short, the choice of what to be is ours, as individuals. We can choose to be indecisive. We can even choose not to make a choice, and yet a choice has nonetheless taken place. To Sartre we are constantly in danger of falling into Bad Faith but are not doomed to remain forever there. In many ways Sartre, despite his American aura, is an optimist, as he believes that we can become authentic from any position and can constantly renew our efforts at becoming authentic. Granted, this renewal often has to be a radical conversion through anguish, wrought by our innate dread of the nothingness of human existence, the meaninglessness of it in and of itself—i.e., without our behaviors taken into consideration. According to all of the major existential

philosophers, anguish is the underlying, all-pervasive, universal condition of existence. The very desire to become authentic is a kind of courage involving a full acceptance of our responsibility as formless beings in search of definition.

A Brief Overview of Albert Camus' Philosophy

While anguish is universally explicated in existential thought, alienation was considered to be a universal condition of civilized humans. We all are haunted by the feeling of isolation, of not belonging, of standing alone. Existentialism can be seen as the philosophy devoted to studying the social phenomenon of alienation. As the feeling of being left out of society grew throughout the 20th century, so too did the existentialist tenet that it is natural to be separate from society because the idea of belonging to society was an illusion all along. It is this illusion that informs the literature of Albert.

Mersault, the protagonist, in *The Stranger* is an ordinary man and who possesses mundane tendencies. The course of his life changes forever after the accidental shooting incident on the beach. His whole attitude towards life and people around him change drastically. He no longer wishes to prove his self worth to people. Nor does he care what people think about him. He not only discovers the absurdity of his existence, but he also creatively modifies himself by actively revolting against the nihilism of his society. Camus, an avowed atheist, created characters who also disbelieved in God or were wrestling with the problem of belief.

As Camus points out in his *The myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, “There is one but truly serious problem and that is suicide” (1). Someone who judges that life is not worth living will commit suicide, and those who feel they have found some

meaning to life may be inclined to die or kill to defend that meaning. Camus suggests that suicide amounts to a confession that life is not worth living. He links this confession to what he calls the “feeling of absurdity.” On the whole, we go through life with a sense of meaning and purpose, with a sense that we do things for good and profound reasons. Occasionally, however, we might come to see our daily actions and interactions as dictated primarily by the force of habit. We cease to see ourselves as free agents and come to see ourselves as almost machine-like. From this perspective, all our actions, desires, and reasons seem absurd and pointless. The feeling of absurdity is closely linked to the feeling that life is meaningless.

We generally live with the idea of freedom — that we are free to make our own decisions and to define ourselves by our actions. With this idea of freedom comes the idea that we can give our lives direction and then aim towards certain goals. In doing so, however, we confine ourselves to living toward certain goals — to playing out a certain role. Our actions will be determined by the self-image we create. This idea of freedom is a metaphysical one: it claims that the universe and human nature are such that we can choose our own course. The absurd man is determined to reject everything he cannot know with certainty, and metaphysical freedom is no more certain than a meaning of life. The only freedom that the absurd man can know is the freedom he experiences: the freedom to think and to act as he chooses. By abandoning the idea that he has some role to fulfill, the absurd man attains the freedom of taking each moment of life as it strikes him, free of preconceptions or prejudices.

In his book *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, David Galloway states that an important distinction must be drawn between Camus’s absurd man and the absurd

man in Salinger's fiction. Galloway points out that this distinction is primarily one of consciousness, for Camus's heroes consciously acknowledge the absurdity of their struggle against reality. While the reader is in a position to see the absurdity of Holden's gestures, the reader is never entirely certain that the characters themselves see their own struggle as absurd. Salinger seems to be ascribing a causality to the loneliness and alienation of his characters, implying that their plight is induced by a hostile or at least a morally offensive society. It's worth noting that his protagonists never consider that their fragmentation is caused by personal deficiencies. They are always victims—never agents of their own loss. (85-86).

The problem of life, to Salinger's protagonists, is that it is void of sustaining values. However, this is not entirely the fault of society, as the existential philosophers point out. Rather, their victimhood comes from their general lack any conception of who they are. They have, in other words, not defined themselves. What Salinger is showing is that help for the alienated does not come from outside. His protagonists simply are caught in a paradox: they have not defined themselves, and they cannot accept the results of not having done so. They cannot exist in their present state. Notice, for instance, that his characters seldom seem able—in fact, the possibility never occurs to them—to benefit from their moments of pain by accepting that loneliness may be integral to their humanity. By doing so, they might see that how they bear it and react to that of others would provide a sustaining moral value to life. Salinger's characters are quite aware of what they don't want to be, but their values, for the most part, are negative ones of disapproval. They simply have nothing viable to offer instead—to others, or to themselves. Their alienation is of their own choosing. It takes

the form of their placing themselves outside the community of man because something someone has done has sickened them (Pickering 120).

Salinger's protagonists form two competing visions as a result of their alienation; those of innocence, and those of experience. A central theme in Salinger's fiction becomes their futile attempts to fuse their two visions, even though as readers we realize all along that it cannot be done. Salinger seems to want us to recognize what his characters have become through their inability to come to terms with their own egos and attain some kind of peace with their own existence. We see that they love the abstraction "mankind" but not the individuals within it. Salinger's characters never realize that it is not possible to love the abstraction while at the same time rejecting its real-world components. At best they can only expect temporary abatement. Both Sgt. X, after reading the letter from Esmé (the little girl he'd met in England) and Franny, after being reminded by Zooey of the "fat lady," achieve through gestures of love an integration of sorts and are able to sleep. But this is only temporary. Later they both realize that nothing has changed: the little girl is still far away, and the "fat lady" is just a fat lady, with not literal meaning in Franny's life. In short, Salinger's characters face an unsolvable dilemma: they seek an immersion in humanity while wanting to avoid the human components within it.

Salinger's characters are burdened by another dimension of alienation, one which comes through their realization that they fall short of their idealized conception of what a man should be in their idealized humanity. Their alienation is compounded by the fact that they not only find much of society detestable, but they also find themselves detestable. They detest their own membership into humanity. It is worth

noting that Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour are not politically or socially oriented. They are the quintessential Americans of their time—unengaged and anti-social. They consider themselves as in that category of being who are not being loved while fully accepting that they are also unable to love.

Alienation, as Salinger depicts it, is more complex than the standard existential explication of it, for it is not solely due to man's inability to know himself. As Paul Levine notes, Salinger's is a more American concept. He notes that an even more important factor is that the American society within which Salinger's characters must live denies them the opportunity to be themselves. American society has no place for its own individuals. For these characters to operate successfully in society as they view it Levine believes that they would have to fragment themselves; they would have to repudiate something within them. They don't have a clear idea of just what that is, but they sense that assimilation in a repugnant society requires a personality repugnant to what they ought to be. In this sense, they are outsiders by choice, and they have the honesty to be unwilling to accept what the culture has to offer. In their alienation, these characters do not feel superior, a posture many outsiders sneeringly adopt when thumbing their noses at the society they find contemptible. Their attitude is that anyone who doesn't need an analyst is a vegetable, with the anomalous implication that those people who are fitting into society are really sick. The anomaly is that therapy is sought to enable the individual to fit into society which revolts him. But, in Salinger's case, individuals cannot fit into society, and they are not satisfied to remain outside. As Levine maintains, "Their vision renders the problem insoluble. With it they cannot live in society. Without it they cannot live with themselves. Holden Caulfield becomes the

prototype for the whole family of Salinger protagonists: sensitive, loving, combining a whimsical sense of humor and an overbearing sense of his own misfitness in the world” (94).

The American Existential Experience

In America, the expression of existential concepts and themes during the early part of the twentieth century was primarily in the area of literature and saloon-style conversations. America simply did not have any philosophical texts on par with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In fact, the only major existential philosophical thinker in America during the twentieth century was Paul Tillich, a German-born, American Protestant minister. Tillich is best known for his treatise *The Courage To Be*, which definitely places him within the religious camp of existential theory.

From 1918 to 1939 existentialist concerns could be discerned in the work of major American writers like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright. An effective example of existential theory in Hemingway’s work is to be found in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1926) in which the protagonist experiences anxiety before the perceived nothingness of existence that forces him to seek temporary refuge in the orderliness of a Café. Faulkner’s work also reflects existentialist concerns. Faulkner, who grew up in the Old South, was obsessed with its history of defeat, destruction, and loss. The futility of existing without your own clear sense of self in the world in which traditional values have been swept away informs *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Sanctuary* (1931).

Finally, Wright's work provides another important example of American existential literature. For example, in *Native Son* (1940) Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, becomes existentially aware of the economic and social forces shaping his life and how ill-prepared he is to deal with them. Later, he experiences moments of insight into the possibility of his own non-existence and the implications of human contingency.

After World War II, novelists like Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Walker Percy, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Ken Kersey, Flannery O'Connor and Joseph Heller, among others, portrayed their own sense of anxiety, absurdity, disorientation, and exile with a clear existential focus. For example, Captain Yossarian, the protagonist of Joseph Heller's *Catch – 22*, experiences the world of regimentation, non-authenticity, and inhumanity in the form of the operations of an American bomber squadron stationed in Italy during World War II. Yossarian finds himself trapped in a nightmare of mindless butchery perpetuated by men who have become more like machines than humans, because they are being defined by what's around them instead of what's within them.

Post-war existentialism also found a home in American literary journals. For example, *The Partisan Review* published a variety of sections from Camus and Sartre immediately after the war. And William Barrett published a pamphlet in 1947 titled "What is Existentialism?" In 1951 he published an article in *Commentary* called "What Existentialism Offers Modern Man"; in 1958 he published *Irrational Man*, which has been recognized as a definitive analysis of existential theory.

Besides appearing in the literary journals, existentialism found its way into many guides and pamphlets in America, albeit with a decidedly political bent. An introduction by Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism*, was published in 1948. Like Barrett's *Irrational Man*, which depicts existentialism as a philosophy of crisis, Grene explains the theoretical tenets of existentialism in relation to political realities. Examining existentialist ideas in relation to Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Heidegger, Grene emphasizes dread—and the concealment of it—in the face of historical freedom. The philosophy did not begin with the Resistance, she says, but it was the Resistance that made it popular and compelling. Grene maintains that the life of the underground had brought to light what the inner self-torment of a Kierkegaard had revealed a century earlier: The utter loneliness of each of us in moral crisis and the essential union, almost the identity, of that loneliness and the freedom that we find in it. "Man makes himself, but only in secrecy and solitude—publicity is betrayal or illusion" (96).

Despite these efforts by prominent Americans, when people today talk about Existentialism it is typically Sartre's philosophy they have in mind. In some ways, 21st Century existentialism has reverted back to his emphasis on existence as preceding essence, man's freedom to make choices, and the responsibility that all men have in defining the concept of themselves. Americans today are also drawn to Sartre's politics. As *Being and Nothingness* was published in 1943 at the height of the German occupation of Paris, they focus on how Sartre's philosophy arises from the horrid experience of seeking freedom under the Nazi dictatorship. In *The Republic of Silence*, he gives an unequalled description of the experience:

We were never more free than during the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, beginning with the right to talk. Every day we were insulted to our faces and had to take it in silence. Under one pretext or another, as workers, Jews, or political prisoners, we were deported *en masse*. Everywhere, on billboards, in the newspapers, on the screen, we encountered the revolting and insipid pictures of ourselves that our suppressors wanted us to accept. And because of all this we were free. Because the Nazi venom seeped into our thoughts, every accurate thought was a conquest. Because an all-powerful police tried to force us to hold our tongues, every work took on the value of a declaration of principles. Because we were hunted down, every one of our gestures had the weight of a solemn commitment. The circumstances, atrocious as they often were, finally made it possible for us to live the hectic and impossible existence that is known as the lot of man. (498)

The occupation itself gave Sartre the impetus for his basic thesis that the choices that the French people made during this period of time were authentic because they were face to face with death. As an experience of freedom, their choices stressed both the negative and positive sides of liberty. The negative side was the power of resisting oppression and the positive side was the genuineness of choice and the responsibility of that choice. Consequently, the main concept in Sartre's philosophy is the concept of freedom and his philosophy is designed to make man aware of his power to make free choices.

In the November 21, 2003 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* there is a lengthy article on the renewal of interest in Sartre's work. "A team of scholars, including several American professors, is now finishing the *Dictionnaire Sartrean*, with entries on the thinker's concepts, influences and political alliances" (1). According to Scott McLemee, author of the article, the revival in Sartrean scholarship came on the 20th anniversary of his death in 2000 and the publication of *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century* by Bernard-Henri Levy: "Growing interest in Sartre is by no means an exclusively French phenomenon. Strangely enough, his philosophical writings may now be receiving more scrutiny in the United States than in his native country" (2).

Existentialism and Salinger

In his most comprehensive and acclaimed work *Irrational Man* William Barrett outlines the most frequently themes of existentialism as "(1) the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; (2) the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; and (3) the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal" (56). Barrett's explication forms the general characteristics of existential literature, at least in spirit, as involving a protagonist who must freely choose, in loneliness and anguish, a course of action which leads him towards the authentic life.

Salinger published *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, and during the 1950s and early 1960s it was too early to identify the characteristically existential American authors or bodies of writing. For that generation of writers, it will suffice to note what might be called the "Existential Moment" in literature,¹⁸ namely, those passages in

which the writer touches on some aspect of human experience or treats a particular episode in such a way as to evoke the spirit of the existentialist view of life.

In his book *Humanistic Psychiatry: From Oppression to Choice*, Roy Waldman maintains, “the obstacles and discontinuities that face man on the road to becoming himself are thus difficulties encountered at the level of self, family, and society” (40-41). In such circumstances, when the individual faces so many obstacles, uncertainties and pressures, it is not uncommon for him to reach “the end of his rope.” Since the individual cannot go beyond his circumstances, there is no chance for him to become a complete, independent, self-governing individual. In existentialism such a situation is called the “boundary situation.”¹⁹ Even in the “boundary situation” the individual can make his decision, (for or against himself) but regardless of his decision he must be ready to face the consequences of that decision. “If he decides against himself, he adopts the attitude of his opposition, accepts the guise of some other person, some other ideal, or philosophy, and moves into “nonbeing.” He is not true to himself, so by existential reasoning he is consequently inauthentic.” (Smith 1).

“However, if a man confronting the boundary situation decides for himself, he instead resists the urge to dissolve into nothingness and claims an inheritance of the human freedom found in being, in living, in experiencing life. He operates in spite of any opposition that pushes him to the boundary (and indeed, there are many).” (Smith 1). In doing so, time and time again, he becomes authentic.

Therefore, authenticity in the larger existential sense—incorporating early and later existential thinking—does not refer to a single pattern that is identical for all. Rather it is an individual “becoming,” one which shows a unique search for person.

Literary characters, as explicators, are forced to adopt different types of behavior in their quest for authenticity. Salinger's three main protagonists experience a societal boundary situation erected (by Salinger, ultimately) in order to force them into playing an expected role. In this sense, each character represents a pattern of protest against inauthentic experience. These patterns are significant in that they offer clear case studies which help to explain how and why the existential movement came into being as a literary possibility in America. America, to be sure, is the backdrop against which each pattern evolves. However, as the culture has historically built into its framework levels of "normality," Salinger's characters cannot find authentic selves within the culture's dominant structure.

Some Concluding Remarks

Before we enter into the corpus of this dissertation, it ought to be noted that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus are existential thinkers among many more existential philosophers that have profoundly influenced the existential movement but are not cited or explicated in this dissertation. For example, one could identify the work of Gabriel Marcel, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno or the Israeli philosopher, Martin Buber, who approached existential theory from a Hebrew orientation. But none of these recognized existential philosophers have much relevance to the thesis of this dissertation and their inclusion in this dissertation would make this project unmanageable.

It ought to be further noted that existentialism is not a school in philosophy but, instead, a movement in philosophy. There is a significant difference between the two.

Gill and Sherman state, “Existentialism is neither a system, nor a school, nor a creed. [. . .] Strictly speaking, existentialism is not at all a philosophy in the traditional sense, but a revolt, or a series of revolts, against the supposed attempt of classical metaphysics to reduce human reality to abstract propositional terms and to embrace the individual in an absolute universal system” (4).

A school of philosophy, such as Idealism or Positivism (sometimes referred to as Realism), means that there is agreement among members of that school with regard to the basic beliefs. They have metaphysical and epistemological constants, in other words. A movement in philosophy, on the other hand, indicates that there are problems—or likely, on main problem—that is central to the movement, which operates with the larger context of a particular school. What brings the center thinkers of a school together is an attempt to explicate their perception of the “problem.”²⁰ A movement, then, is more difficult to explicate because different existential philosophers emphasize different aspects of the central problem of Being.²¹

Finally, like most movements in philosophy, existentialism has had to go through a period of popularization and oversimplification—especially in America in the 50s and 60s—during which anyone who could speak knowingly of its themes or vaguely refer to Sartre’s *Nausea* was often doing so to an uninformed audience. As has been detailed above in the brief sub-sections of the central existential philosophers utilized in this dissertation, existentialism is not merely a more extreme form of the literature of doom but, instead, a fully responsible philosophy whose main goal is to restore to man the freedom to determine the meaning and value of his own life.

The particular focus of this study is to examine through literary analysis the actions of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Sgt. X in "For Esmé – With Love and Squalor," and Seymour Glass in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" and *Seymour: An Introduction* as representatives of three American boundary situations. Therefore, spread throughout the next three chapters are the recurrent existential themes of authenticity, alienation, freedom, and death. In Chapter 2, the application of these existential themes to the behavior of Holden Caulfield will be detailed as will the behavior of Sgt. X in Chapter 3 and the behavior of Seymour Glass in Chapter 4. The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation will synthesize the previous chapters in order to understand authenticity within both its general and its more specific contexts; it will also analyze the behavior of the protagonist against the philosophical insights of existentialism in relation to each novel. While it may be argued that Salinger did not write with a specific view of authenticity in mind, it is certain that the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus will provide insights into a better understanding of authenticity as a basis for the study of his characters' development as well as inform the study of philosophical concepts relative to the nature of modern human existence.

Notes for Chapter One

1. The use of this term, inscrutability, is relevant to Salinger because of the mysterious nature of his personal life, living as a recluse, rarely giving interviews and not seeking popularity with the American public.
2. This dissertation is claiming that Seymour's suicide is an act of liberation and not an act of desperation. Why did Holden and Sgt. X not commit suicide? The freedom of choice comes into play here. That is why in this dissertation, Salinger's characters are labeled as heroes: because of the individual choices that each makes. An ordinary individual in society would not be able to choose suicide or the path that Holden and Sgt. X choose as easily as they do.
3. "What is a world view? It is the content of the thoughts of society and the individuals which compose it about the nature and object of the world in which they live and the position and the destiny of mankind and of individual men within it." – Albert Schweitzer 1949.
4. William Barrett, the author of the widely acclaimed work *Irrational Man*, was an editor of *The Partisan Review* and literary critic for *The Atlantic Monthly*. He was professor of philosophy at New York University for more than thirty years and has been recognized as the most important explicator of Existentialism on the American scene.
5. Salinger is arguing for not being a phony and, instead, for being one's self, which will be explored by comparing Salinger and Kierkegaard in the next chapter.
6. Although Heidegger is frequently identified as an atheistic existentialist, it is interesting to note that when he first attended the university he studied to be a Catholic

priest. Consequently, it is more accurate to call Heidegger an agnostic and not an atheist.

7. Nietzsche first speaks of the “*Will to Power*” in *Zarathustra* in the chapter “On Self-Overcoming.” The will to power is conceived of as the will to overcome one’s self.

8. *Mensch* includes women as well as men. At different stages of the text Nietzsche uses the phrase “*A Superior Person.*” Consequently, *the Übermensch*, *the Overman*, and *the Superior Person* are used interchangeably.

9. Socrates, Christ, Florence Nightingale, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are a few examples of Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*. Socrates and Christ were put to death by unjust legal systems for violating religious codes. It is interesting to note that with the exception of Socrates, Christ, Florence Nightingale and Albert Schweitzer, all were assassinated.

10. While the concept of risk is central to the concept of the *Übermensch*, it ought to be noted that for Kierkegaard the concept of faith is central to the Kierkegaardian concept of the individual. Kierkegaard’s individual requires that the individual has faith in themselves which can only be achieved through faith in God.

11. It is interesting to note that Nietzsche uses the word “creative.” He does not state that the richer you are, the more risk you take, or the more political power you have, the more risk you take or the more intelligent you are, the more risk you take. The concept of creativity is one of the defining characteristics of Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*. This will be detailed in following chapters.

12. Generally speaking, the life of a philosopher is not important. What is important is the profundity of his thought and how it has impacted on Western civilization. But it is interesting to note that Heidegger withdrew from German society and lived for more than forty years in the Black Forest constantly examining the concept of “Being” from a psychological perspective. Again, the life of an existential philosopher is important because it is a “lived philosophy” which means that an account of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche’s or Heidegger’s or Sartre’s life is important because it helps the reader to understand their philosophy. However, a detailed analysis of the relationship between their life and their philosophy is outside the focus of this dissertation.

13. “Being” means to be, to exist, and, therefore, it stands for objects in the world, such as a chair, a table, or a house. Heidegger uses the term “Being” to denote man’s existence, the meaning of that individual man’s existence which is, obviously, distinct from the existence of any other human.

14. Dasein is composed of two words in German, “Da” which means there and “Sein” which means being. Therefore, the word “Dasein” means what does it mean for me to be in the world? That is, Heidegger is going to look at himself, so there is a Dasein for Heidegger as there is a Dasein for every human Being.

15. Heidegger recognizes seven psychological stages. This dissertation will explicate three of the psychological stages that are relevant to its thesis.

16. In 1964, Sartre was offered the Nobel Prize in literature which he rejected. He was the first one in the history of the Nobel Prize to reject it which caused an enormous amount of speculation. Sartre had to reject the Nobel Prize as will become evident in

this brief overview. There is no Nobel Prize in philosophy. Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher, was offered the Nobel Prize in literature, which he accepted.

17. Plato (427-347 B.C.) was a great philosopher who stated that every object in the world has a meaning to it which he termed the “essence” of the object. Therefore, there is an essence or meaning to a chair, to a pen, and to a lion. This meaning is fixed.

18. The term “Existential Moment” first appears in Kierkegaard’s work but is agreed to by the remaining existential philosophers cited in this dissertation. Kierkegaard uses this term to signify that moment of awareness in man when he can no longer accept some part of his facticity, some of part of the conditions of his life into which he is thrown into reality.

19. “Boundary situations” and border situations are the same. Roy Waldman uses “boundary situations” instead of “border situations.” Karl Jaspers articulated and elaborated the concept of “border situations,” extreme situations that, if experienced, could intensify one’s sense of personal existence.

20. Some of the existential philosophers reject the notion that they are existential, such as Heidegger who prefers to be identified as an ontological phenomenologist. But this distinction is not germane to this dissertation.

21. “Existence” is now interpreted as an unconscious participation in reality and “Being” refers to a conscious free participation in which the person as such is constituted.

Chapter Two

HOLDEN CAULFIELD AND EXISTENTIAL THEMES

Introduction

In his article “The Catcher Comes of Age,” Adam Moss notes that *The Catcher in the Rye* “became one of those rare books that influence one generation after another, causing each to claim it as its own” (56). Moss estimates that by 1981 the total number of copies of *Catcher* in print was over ten million. It is difficult to determine how many copies of *Catcher* are in print in 2008. However, my research indicates that at Amazon.com, which is one of the leading online retailers, the *Catcher* is ranked number 177 among the Best Seller Book List which is a sign for its ever-growing popularity.

Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, opens the novel by speaking directly to the reader from a sanitarium in Southern California: “I will just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come here taking it easy” (1). Through his narration, we learn that Holden logically sees the world as a threatening place where death is ever present. As a result, he has little patience for superficial values, condemning much of the world as “phony.” But in seeking protection, he only isolates himself and even pursues what he fears. Despite the fact that death is inevitable, Salinger’s protagonists all attempt to shield themselves from this looming threat. Unfortunately, they cannot escape thinking of death. Holden’s sense of isolation serves to set him apart from his environment. He realizes that he is an observer rather than a contributor—as he is

looking back in time—and as such he does not want to take action to change the circumstances. Therefore, he does not define himself through action; there is no development of personality through future contemplation either.

The majority of literary analysis of Salinger's first and only novel views Holden from a social or a religious perspective. Only two scholars connect Holden's behavior to existentialism. While Elizabeth Kurian and William Wiegand note the influence of Kierkegaard on Salinger's thinking, they fail to prove that Holden acts according to certain existential themes and, therefore, can be characterized as an existentialist. This chapter will explain Holden Caulfield within the content of the three core existentialist themes of death, alienation, and authenticity to substantiate the claim that he is an existentialist hero. Holden is an existential hero because he does not blissfully follow the crowd, but makes his own choices and accepts the consequences of those choices. For example, Holden does not attend class, and he does not study or do his homework. He accepts the consequences of failing every subject except English and he does not complain or attempt to justify his behavior.

Two Existential Interpretations of Death

In the process of analyzing the concept of "death," Heidegger writes about the concept of "Dasein" which he derives from two German words, namely "Da" which means "here" and "Sein" which means "Being." Therefore, the word "Dasein" is Heidegger's technical expression for man which literally means "being here" and can be interpreted as "What does it mean for me to be in the world?" Or, from a different perspective, "What does it mean for me to exist?" Dasein is one of the German words

which Heidegger has endowed with a much more complex meaning than it has in ordinary German usage. In a literal translation “Dasein” means no more than “being here” but to capture its meaning, it is more accurate to use either the German “Dasein” or the English word “existence.”

In order to answer the question, “What does it mean for me to exist?” Heidegger focuses on the phenomenon of death and the fact that the meaning of our existence is characterized by its temporality. The term “temporality” in existential theory means, simply put, the span between full adult consciousness and the point, which comes for every human being, when there will be no more time. Dasein (or existence) specifically denotes human existence, and makes explicit the fact that our human existence is only temporary. In addition to the characteristic of temporality, Heidegger believes that one’s future is always “Not-yet.” The idea of a perpetual future—one that is always moments away—may be more important in existential theory than “the past” or “the present” because (since the past has exhausted its possibilities) it is the never-arriving future that adds meaning to the present. The number of goals and projects that we have going on simultaneously determines how much meaning we have in the present. Consequently, Dasein holds all of our unrealized possibilities in the future until death ends its presence in our life. Thus, while we must exist with our past, present, and future, this does not mean that we need to give each equal weight. The future is full of unrealized possibilities; it is, and remains, a variable for which there is no solution. An existentialist may want to see infinite possible explanations for what it means to be a living, existing, individualized self.

Heidegger's analysis of death raises the question as to the possibility of how to grasp Dasein as a whole. Many existential thinkers believe that Dasein can only be fully understood at the moment of death, for it is at this point that the past, present and future become one, and the essence or meaning of Dasein becomes fixed. Although Heidegger originally maintained that Dasein as a whole can only be grasped once our time line of life is completed—that is, at the moment of death—he later changed his philosophical position on death when he introduced the concept of “Being-towards-death.” This is a mode of existence in the world that allows man the “interiorization of death” as a way of living (David Przepukowski 97). An explication of what Heidegger means by “the interiorization of death” will become clear further on in this section.

Like Heidegger, Kierkegaard viewed death as something that motivates the individual to consider the responsibility of ethical decision making in his daily activities. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard notes the difference between what he labels the “External view of death” and the “Subjective view of death”:

Before I pass over to universal history, it seems to me I had better think about this, lest existence mock me, because I had to become so learned and high-fluting that I had forgotten to understand what will sometime happen to me as to every human being – sometime, nay, what I am saying: suppose death were so treacherous as to come tomorrow. (*CUP* 149)

In this passage Kierkegaard views death as a continuous threat to his own personal existence and not as “something in general.” Death is, in other words,

something which represents a lack of understanding of death's ever-present possibility. From the Kierkegaardian perspective, the value of the subjective view of death is that it makes us aware of the importance and value of ethical decisions. Kierkegaard's claim is that the most important reality of man's life is his ethical reality which he interprets as arising from Christ well-known directive: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." (David Przepukowski 118).

Heidegger's view of death is in line with Kierkegaard's view in that Heidegger makes a clear distinction between authentic and inauthentic "Being-Towards-Death." For both existential thinkers, an authentic view of death is an interior possibility of the self or, to use their terminology, a "Subjective view of death." The subjective view of death means that the individual is aware of death at any moment and not as an event that will occur in the distant future. Inauthentic "Being-towards-death," which is Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's external view of death, retreats from this ever-present existential possibility.

Kierkegaard's subjective view of death as an ever-present possibility is in agreement with Heidegger's call for man to become authentic. This call to be authentic results in man's awareness of sin, which is an integral part of Kierkegaardian authenticity. "While the concept of sin is not in Heidegger's analysis of death, both philosophers note the difference between an "owed" and "un-owed" way of accepting death" (David Przepukowski 98). Both also view the authentic way of perceiving death as subjectively recognizing death as a pressing possibility, meaning not something to think is off in the future, maybe ten or more years away. Therefore, the subjective view of death is the "owned" way of accepting it as an everyday possibility, which makes

man authentic. For Kierkegaard, to become an authentic self includes becoming aware of sin and, therefore, aware of our estrangement from God. Kierkegaard maintains that an authentic self can only exist on the religious level and not on the aesthetic or ethical level because the religious level is characterized by a one-to-one relationship between you as a person and God, regardless of your perception of God. That is, Kierkegaard argues against an objective perception of God although he recognizes the need for Christianity to portray God from an objective point of view. But, Kierkegaard goes one step further in that he maintains that the subjective view of God requires man to define to himself what God means to him by his personal perception of God. Kierkegaard believed that the religious level of existence cannot be achieved by joining a congregation, by being active in a church with other people. In *Attack Upon Christendom*, he maintains that the Danish Lutheran church is not “a witness to the truth” (6-7). Kierkegaard’s subjective view of death does not go against the religious establishment but instead enables man to realize his authentic religious level of existence. Kierkegaard broke from the religious establishment only when he asserted that this authentic level can be earned without the support of a church.

Heidegger’s analysis of death and his “Being-towards-death” keeps his theories pinioned on the awareness that all human beings will eventually die. He maintains, “the awareness of death provides an explicit awareness of what it means to be; that is, death provides the possibility of authenticity. It does so by providing meaning for Dasein through the recognition of our finitude” (Przepukowski 99). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger maintains that “the own-most, non-rational possibility is not to be

outripped” (308), which means that from the moment we are born we are old enough to die and that no one can die one’s death for him.

It is in recognizing our finitude and the certainty of death that we run the risk of seeking escape from the ensuing anxiety. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes the possibility of anxiety disrupting the recognition and acceptance of Dasein, noting that “the state of mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein’s own-most individualized Being, is anxiety” (310). And Przepukowski echoes this concept: “The inauthentic ‘they-self’ seeks to retreat from anxiety, and as fallen, retreats from the possibility of its coming death. Inauthentic Dasein fears death as an event – something that will actually happen someday. But such understanding strips death of its meaning. In order for death to be meaningful for Dasein, it must be understood as a present possibility” (100).

Heidegger’s analysis of death asserts that every man not only must realize that death comes in a very real sense—that is, that everyone exists on the verge of death—but that each individual must die alone. Heidegger believed that “the moment of death weaves our scattered life experiences into a complete whole, into a meaningful essence. Therefore to deny death the fulfillment of this task is to leave human life a mere collection of disconnected events and memories” (Introduction to Modern Existentialism 89). One who denies death is destined never to have a complete understanding of the meaning of his life. This does not mean that Heidegger treats death as a friend, but nor did he think we should treat it as an enemy, which leads one to act in stoic heroism toward death. As stated before, for Heidegger death is the sole component in human life that may bring man to the threshold of authentic existence.

Holden's Preoccupation with Death

David Burrows clearly establishes Holden's aversion to a world where the time of one's death is unknown and the obsession with death that characterizes Holden's behavior:

The profoundest level of the book's power lies [. . .] at the level where we sense that there is little of significance in life except the necessity of death, and that the motivation of most religion, philosophy, and art – literature especially – in some way related to man's attempt to understand the fact of death. The death by leukemia of his brother Allie, three years earlier, is Holden's obsessive concern in this book; his fear of growth and change, expressed throughout the novel, is the result of his realization that one grows towards death, and that death is the ultimate change. (107)

From Holden's perspective, family and practically all human interactions are interlaced with death. Even his story-telling is linked to death, which ultimately leads to his preoccupation with death, a sentiment that virtually overpowers the novel. Even before Holden starts his journey towards adulthood, he must first accept the death of his brother Allie and abandon reliving the idolized memories of his years spent with him. Holden (speaking to the reader) says,

He's dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent. His teachers were always writing letters to my mother,

telling her what a pleasure it was having a boy like Allie in their class. And they weren't just shooting the crap. They really meant it. But it wasn't just that he was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody. (38)

Holden misses his brother, because their friendship and closeness guided Holden's life, or so he believes in retrospect. Two years after Allie's death, Holden is still bitter against the world, which is evident in his harshness towards others. Holden has not accepted Allie's death and will not accept that he himself is facing death, which lies at the basis of Holden's behavior—that is, his inability to function in his family life, school life, and social life.

In the beginning of the novel, Holden has to go to New York City to explain to his parents why he has been dismissed from Pencey Preparatory School. However, before doing this, Holden visits Mr. Spencer, his history teacher, to say goodbye. Mr. Spencer lectures Holden on his poor academic performance. He says to Holden, "Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules" (8). Holden escapes Mr. Spencer's lecture by telling him that he has to go to the gym to retrieve his fencing equipment. Once Holden leaves Mr. Spencer, he says to himself, "Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the right side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right – I'll admit to that. But, if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game" (8).

Clearly, Holden is searching for an adult to act as a model for his behavior, but he rejects Mr. Spencer's advice, as he ultimately comes to reject everyone's advice. When Mr. Spencer asks Holden why he flunked out of Elkton Hills, Holden avoids the

question: “I didn’t feel like going into the whole thing with him. He wouldn’t have understood it anyway. It wasn’t up his alley at all” (13). Ironically, even though Holden rejects Mr. Spencer’s advice, his behavior reflects the man’s notion that “life is a game.”

In agreement with Burrows, Gerald Rosen argues that Holden relates to the “life is a game” attitude through his preoccupation with death: “It prevents him from concentrating on those activities like day-to-day school chores which we don’t extraordinarily think of as games but which, in the presence of death, tend to recede toward the unimportance we usually ascribe to games” (549). Holden is not serious about learning or being a conscientious student and explains to the reader that “One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That’s all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Hass that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life” (13-4). Rosen notes Holden’s constant fear of ill-health, aging and death (549) and his recurring search for an adult to help him overcome the loss of his brother. This fear of death is apparent during his trip to New York City, especially while visiting the Museum of Natural History, and his fear of sickness surfaces while visiting his teacher, Mr. Spencer. Holden says, “The minute I walked in, I was sort of sorry I’d come. [. . .] there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled of Vicks Nose drops. It was pretty depressing. I’m not too crazy about sick people anyway” (7). Holden frequently refers to Mr. Spencer as “old Spencer” because he associates this man with “old age and death.” Holden’s preoccupation with death means that he is always

talking to himself about death or relating his reality and situations to the concept of death.

Holden's preoccupation with death is connected to his preoccupation of the world as a cold place because the cemetery that contains Allie's grave is a cold place.

Holden says,

When the weather's nice, my parents go out quite frequently and stick a bunch of flowers on old Allie's grave. I certainly don't enjoy seeing him in that crazy cemetery. It wasn't too bad when the sun was out, but twice – twice we were there when it started to rain. It was awful. It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. You didn't know him. If you'd known him, you'd know what I mean. It's not too bad when the sun's out, but the sun only comes out when it feels like coming out. (155)

Holden associates freezing with Allie's grave and his death. Salinger uses cold imagery to reinforce the point that Holden is freezing himself out of his world because he does not want to advance to the adult stage. On his way down from Thomsen Hills, Holden says, "[I]t was cold as a witch's teat, especially on top of that stupid hill" (4).

As he runs across Route 204, Holden remarks, "It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for – I guess I just felt like it" (5).

Holden associates the cold with disappearing: "It was kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun was out or anything and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road" (5). When ringing Mr. Spencer's doorbell, he thinks "I

was really frozen. My ears were hurting and I could hardly move my fingers at all” (5). Welcoming him, Mrs. Spencer asks him, “Are you frozen to death?” (5).

It is now obvious to Holden that what is frozen, including himself, dies. When in Central Park, he cannot find the lagoon of his childhood, and in the blistering cold weather Holden cries out “Boy, I was shivering like a bastard, and the back of my hair, even though I had my hunting hat on, was sort of full of little chunks of ice” (154). He becomes upset thinking that he may catch pneumonia and die. He imagines his funeral, who would be there, and how his mother and Phoebe would react to his death. His fear of death, while expecting it at any moment, paralyzes Holden and prevents him from growing into adulthood.

Holden is also unable to grow because he is unable to reach out. He struggles to relate to his teachers and develop friendships because humans appear phony and untrustworthy. His lack of interest in his future and his difficulties in forming relationships, as well as his lack of communication with his parents, help us to comprehend why Holden feels so threatened by the world and avoids engaging in searching for his identity. These factors contribute to his psychological distress. The world does not disavow Holden; rather, to protect himself from further pain when interacting with others, he chooses alienation. For instance, when his schoolmate Robert Ackley comes into Holden’s room and declares that Holden’s hat is “a deer shooting hat,” Holden retorts that it is a “people shooting hat” (22).

Holden decides to go into town with Ackley and Mal Bossard, another student, to see a movie. While Holden is waiting for Ackley to get ready, he goes to the window and sees a snow covered landscape that according to David Burrows in “Allie and

Phoebe: Death and Love in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*," satisfies his "desire for some state which is perfect, silent, uncorrupted, aesthetically, and emotionally complete" (111). According to Burrows, "What Holden sees through the window is for him a visual embodiment of what he unconsciously seeks: A state of Being which is distinct from the flux of this world of Becoming with its corruption, violence, noise, decay and death" (111).

Holden's preference for Being over Becoming is clear during his visit to The Museum of Natural History in New York City, because he is in his comfort zone where nothing changes and the exhibits remains the same, "the figures in the glass cases never change: the Eskimo is always catching the same fish and the deer keeps drinking the same water" (Marsha Matthews 86). In the museum, the concepts of time and death are irrelevant. There is a permanency about the museum that provides Holden with comfort because reality does not have to change and Holden does not have to face death. In Mr. Spencer's history class, given the option of writing anything about the Egyptians he was interested in, Holden chose to discuss their secrets of embalming because the Egyptian tombs had a great appeal for him. At first sight, his essay about the embalming process seems innocuous:

Modern science would still like to know what the secret ingredients were that Egyptians used when they wrapped up dead people so that their faces would not rot for innumerable centuries. This interesting riddle is still quite a challenge for modern science in the twentieth century. (11)

However, knowing Holden's fixation with death, "so that their faces would not rot" (11) demonstrates his desire for permanence. "It is significant in a modern day in

which identity is so precarious that individuals at times feel themselves disappearing as does Holden” (Matthews 92). Consequently, this process appeals to Holden because of the preserving element used in it, as a means against the natural dissolution of non-existence. This has clear and stark symbolic meaning, as it suggest that Holder is seeking at least symbolic escape from the reality of non-existence.

In “A Retrospective Look at *Catcher in the Rye*” by Gerald Rosen, Holden’s fear of death is also exemplified in his sole and traumatic sexual encounter, with Sunny, the prostitute. Rosen maintains “Time is the silent partner of death and sex is the passageway through which one is seduced into entering time” (555). Referring to other mentions of sex, Rosen postulates “Thoughts of sex seem to lead Holden to thoughts of death” (555). Elsewhere, Holden describes how the hotel lobby “smells like fifty million dead cigars” (90).

Salinger makes sure that the reader realizes Holden reluctance to partake in a world that he thinks will eventually destroy him as it destroyed his younger brother. As the most important figure in his life, the perfect image of Allie keeps Holden focused on death. The idea of withdrawing himself from society stands at the core of the novel and is the impetus for his persistent death wish. As Marsha Matthews maintains, “The severing of himself from the world” (87) because of his fear of death, alienates him from his classmates, his teachers, and his friends.

Holden is clearly depressed about the utter dissolution he imagines when contemplating his own death and that of Allie. The fear of dissolution occurs on two occasions; both happen while Holder is walking across a road: first, when he is crossing

Route 204 to get to Spencer's house, and later on in the day when he is crossing side streets walking up Fifth Avenue in New York City. He has the feeling of disappearing:

Every time I'd get to the end of the block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, Allie don't let me disappear. Please, Allie, Allie. And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd thank him. (198)

There are more than twenty references to death in the novel, and when Holden talks about war or even his apartment at Pencey Prep he always relates the topic to death. For example, on his way to the Wicker Bar to meet Carl Luce, Holden thinks about war and he declares "I swear if there's ever another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad. I wouldn't object. [. . .] Anyway, I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will" (141). The death theme continues when Holden discusses his dorm at Pencey Prep, the Ossenburger Memorial Wing, named after a wealthy alumnus who became successful in the funeral business, "the kind in which you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks a piece" (16). When Holden wants to go out West, he mentions that "I might come home when I was about thirty-five, I figured, in case somebody got sick and wanted to see me before they died, but that would be the only reason I'd leave my cabin and come back" (205).

Regardless of the situation in which Holden finds himself in the novel, he is constantly thinking about death with one exception, which happens when he observes his young sister Phoebe, on the carousel in the park. "I felt so damn happy all of a

sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all" (213). Here we see Holden (in retrospection, of course) alighting on a key moment in his existence, when he was hyper-aware of the moment itself and all that it contained. His euphoria comes from being distracted, however momentarily, from his obsession with death, as the remember image of his young sister—going around and around—seems to embody the antithesis of morbidity and death.

Holden's preoccupation with the concept of death causes him to relate to his environment strangely, as he is often using death as an escape. David Burrows also stresses the concept of falling and relates this imagery to Holden's death wish. The theme of falling is illustrated frequently throughout the novel. We see, for instance, Holden's physical falls and his classmate James Castle's fall out of the dormitory window. Furthermore, in order to prevent his sister Phoebe and other children from falling, Holden becomes obsessed with being a "catcher in the rye" because by being a catcher in the rye Holden will be able to catch children who will fall off the cliff and lose their innocence. By becoming a catcher in the rye, Holden hopes to be able to catch children before they fall and preserve their innocence which will be lost once they become adults.

Interestingly, Holden's great fear of death leads to moments of resignation. He ambivalently says, "I almost wished I was dead," two times in the novel. The first comes after his fight with Stradlater when they were talking about Stradlater's date with Jane Gallagher. Holden is upset because Stradlater has sexual intentions with Jane, and

Holden's anger contributes toward a physical fight between them. The second comes after the fight with Stradlater when Holden goes to Ackley's room and asks him if he has any cigarettes. Ackley says, "No, I don't as a matter of fact. Listen what the hell was the fight about?" Holden does not answer him: "All I did was, I got up and went over and looked out the window. I felt so lonesome, all of a sudden. I almost wished I was dead" (48).

The incident that fully exposes how Holden's obsession with death readily morphs into the form of a death-wish, follows his beating by Maurice, the pimp for Sunny the prostitute in the Edmont Hotel. He lapses into a fantasy in which he imagines himself shooting Maurice: "But I'd plug him anyway. Six shots right through his fat hairy belly" (104). Instead of shooting Maurice, he says to himself,

What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out of the window. I probably would've done it, too if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory (104).

Holden's reservations about jumping can be associated with the ugly circumstances of James Castle's suicide. Castle is the boy Holden thinks of when asked by Phoebe to name something he likes. Castle refused to repudiate what he had said about another student even after being threatened by that student and six others. His solution instead is to jump out of a window to his death. At the time he does this he is wearing Holden's sweater. As in regards to his brother, Holden is fond of the people around him who are associated with death, and especially suicide. He likes Mr. Antolini, his former English teacher at Elkton Hills who is represented as the wise and

good father, in part due to the fact that it was Mr. Antolini who covered the body of the dead boy with his overcoat, thereby depriving “stupid rubbernecks” from witnessing the scene. What Holden likes about the incident, apart from Mr. Antolini’s considerate act, is that Castle, in not compromising himself, freed himself from the threatening forces around him.

In *The Museum of Natural History*, Holden chats with two young boys about the Egyptian tombs and the embalming process. When going down a narrow hallway to see the mummies, the young boys get scared and run away. Holden is alone and experiences a sense of peace and isolation, which he always thought would be an ideal state since no one could hurt him: “I sort of liked it, in a way. It was so nice and peaceful” (204). When he discovers a “Fuck you” written on the wall, Holden is disturbed and his sense of peace and isolation is short lived. Holden has an epiphany; he becomes aware that his recurrent belief about freezing himself to preserve his identity is wrong and that death and peace are not the same. Holden acknowledges that to stop his identity from developing is a mistake: “You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you’re not looking, somebody’ll sneak up and write ‘Fuck You’ right under your nose” (204).

Death and Authenticity

There is an important relationship between Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, which he translates as ‘Being there,’ and his later concept of ‘Being-towards-death.’ *Dasein* means “what does it mean for me to be in the world?” that is, what is it for me to

exist? There are two interpretations of death from Heidegger's perspective. There is the 'objective' view of death and the 'subjective' view of death and Heidegger maintains that the two views are markedly different. The 'objective' perception of death is that you realize that someday you are going to die and that nobody lives forever. This objective view of death means that death is not imminent and that you have time in front you before death comes to you and that is important for Heidegger because death determines the meaning of your existence. The objective view of death means that you do not think about death and, frequently, get caught up in the goals and problems of your own existence. Death is going to happen to you someday but not now. The problem that Heidegger has with the objective view of death is that we do not take our everyday life seriously and frequently ignore our responsibilities to make our own decisions about the quality of our existence. The subjective view of death means that every single day of your life you realize that death can occur at any moment and there is no necessary reason why we should live another day. Heidegger opts for the subjective view because it makes us conscious of the fact that time is going to run out which will make it impossible for us to change the meaning of our lives.

Once we adopt the subjective view, then we shift Heidegger concept of 'care' from the world to our concern with 'my world.' Once this shift takes place Dasein, which can also be interpreted as our conscience, focuses on our world and the meaning that we want to bring into our world regardless of the political or economic aspects surrounding our existence. Heidegger's concept of 'Being-towards-death' means that we are giving meaning to our existence everyday we live and therefore we become more authentic which means that we make our own decisions. There is much understanding that can go

into the analysis of 'Being-towards-death.' Everyday a person constructs the meaning of their existence which was called by Plato, Heidegger and Sartre the 'essence' of your existence. Heidegger uses the word 'towards' because we never get finished with constructing our essence until the moment of death. At the moment of death our essence is fixed, determined, and permanent. Heidegger wants to emphasize that man cannot come back from death to change the meaning of his existence regardless of how incomplete he is to himself.

The concept of incompleteness, which received more attention from Nietzsche in contrast to Heidegger and Sartre, is according to Nietzsche one of the main reasons why man suffers; he suffers because he realizes how incomplete he is; he suffers because he realizes how he failed himself; he suffers because he realizes that he lived in an inauthentic existence.

The concept of Dasein and the concept of 'Being-towards-death' are indicative only of man's existence because a plant, a tree, a stone or an animal does not have the conscious ability to feel guilty about the quality of their lives. Man can feel guilty about the fact that he is not living the kind of life he should be living. This feeling of guilt is at the basis of Heidegger's concepts of Dasein and 'Being-towards-death;' it is at the basis of Sartre's concepts of 'Being in-Itself' and 'Being-for-Itself.' Sartre's Being-in-Itself means that we treat ourselves as a table or a chair in that we do not recognize in ourselves the ability to be different from what we are. The two most important words are the words "in" and "for." If one says that the car is in the garage or the coat is in the closet then we have a clear idea of the where the car and the coat are located. The importance of the word "for" is that it represents the future or as Heidegger and Sartre

would say “that which is not yet” what both philosophers are attempting to make clear is that man has a future and the more man sees himself in the future, the more meaning he has in the present because the present is determined by the future.

Heidegger’s claim is that one may exist either as an authentic or an inauthentic human being. The inauthentic people are controlled by the ‘they’ of their existence, which means that they are controlled by what other people think, by the rules of society; to the inauthentic individuals, the people in their personal life may convince them to take a certain action or live by certain rules. Heidegger maintains that the “they” of Dasein “makes no choices, gets carried along by nobody, and thus traps itself in inauthenticity. This process can be reversed only if Dasein specifically brings itself back to itself from its lostness in the they” (312). The authentic self or the authentic Dasein never completely separates itself from the ‘they-self,’ from society but it does modify the ‘they-self’ in that it questions the validity of directives from society and might reject certain behavioral norms of society. This then adds to the individual’s authenticity. Heidegger’s “the call of conscience” discloses to Dasein the ‘they-self,’ because “the call of conscience has the character of an appeal to Dasein by calling it to its own most potentiality-for Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of summoning to its own most Being-guilty” (*Being and Time* 314). The main and most important characteristic of human consciousness is the call of our conscience for us to be authentic, to distance ourselves from the “they-self” which surrounds our environment.

In Heidegger’s philosophy of authenticity, the main characteristic of our consciousness is to call us to be authentic, to distance ourselves from our “they-self.” Heidegger notes that it is from our self that this call is made. And it is our self that

constitutes the content of the call and the purpose of the call. As stated by Przepukowski, “The self is the content of the call because the call is about the self and the purpose of the call is to call the self to itself – to its own-most potentiality-for-Being-its-Self” (104). Thus, our consciousness serves to give an imagistic medium we can use to authenticate our “self” against the peer pressure to move toward inauthenticity.

Michael Gelven, in his *Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time* accurately summarizes Heidegger’s concept of authenticity in the following passage:

The self that is called. . . is precisely the self that has been lost in the they-self – and the calling is an attempt to bring that self to leave the company of the they-self. The calling is about the self in the sense that conscience awakens an awareness of the mode of existence in which the self finds itself – authentic or inauthentic. The call is to the self in that it is an appeal to the self to be authentic (163).

Heidegger emphasizes that the rational perception of death is interpreted by man to mean that “everyone must die” while the subjective perception of death means that you, the individual, will die. In war, for instance, soldiers are expected to maintain a rational perception of death: people will die in battle. It is often when a soldier becomes too subjective that he is unable to perform his duties. In civilian life, however, the subjective perception actually helps us; as Heidegger notes, it gives the episodes of our life a certain unity. It keeps our present, as vindicated by a fleeting future full of infinite possibilities, from becoming scattered. The contemplation of one’s own

individual death—our non-existence—alone brings the seriousness of finitude into Dasein, and makes each moment matter.

Holden as an Existentialist

The subjective view of death presented by Kierkegaard and Heidegger is viewed in Existential thought as the way to be and, based on the information in the third section, it is obvious that Holden Caulfield is living a subjective perception of death. The many instances cited in that section are definitely within the category of the Kierkegaardian existential meaning of death and in agreement with Heidegger's concept of "Being-towards-death." Regardless of how you interpret Holden's preoccupation with death, it is nevertheless a fact that Salinger makes Holden's concept of death central to his behavior in the novel.

While a psychological perception of *The Catcher in the Rye* might attribute his constant remarks about death to a phobia about death and disregard the application of Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's philosophy of death, it is, nevertheless, valid to maintain that Holden does indeed exhibit a subjective view of death which correctly places him in the Existential stream of thought. When it comes to the concept of death, which is a core existential theme, Holden Caulfield is an existentialist. However, Holden's status as an existentialist cannot depend on one existential theme but requires that the additional concepts of alienation and authenticity be detailed from an examination of the novel and applied to existential perceptions of these themes.

The Catcher in the Rye begins with Holden standing on a cannon on Thomsen Hills. It is a Saturday in December before Christmas, and Holden is overlooking the

traditional football game between Pencey Prep and Saxton Hall. Although he is ostracized by his friends because he lost the fencing team's equipment, watching the game is not important to Holden where the whole school is present. His detachment from the game represents his rejection of the environment at Pencey Prep. The opening scene not only indicates his rejection of the environment but also illustrates the extent of his alienation from the people around him. Holden has lost faith in Pencey Prep, his third prep school, where the outcome of a football game is more important than any intellectual pursuit. Holden noticed the same snobbery and hypocrisy prevailing at Whooton and Elkton Hills where he had attended school earlier. This overwhelming realization is what makes Holden's loss of faith in the three prep schools he has attended so powerful. He is critical of the type of education imparted at an elitist institution like Pencey Prep, which is only committed to encouraging a pseudo-intellectual smugness in students.

While he is being expelled from Pencey Prep for bad grades, general irresponsibility, and "having failed to apply himself" (4), he is, nevertheless, constantly critical of everything at Pencey, even the advertisements for the school that he encounters in magazines:

They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hot shot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place. And underneath the guy on the horse's picture, it always says: "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." Strictly for the birds. They don't do any

damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking at all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably came to Pencey that way. (2)

Holden also has a negative perception of his schoolmates, "Everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddamn cliques. The guys that are on the basketball teams stick together, the Catholics stick together, the goddamn intellectuals stick together. Even the guys that belong to the Book of the Month Club stick together" (108).

People that are alienated from their society lack the ability to express themselves and are conscious of the fact that other people do not listen to them or care about what they say. When Holden visits Mr. Spencer, his old history teacher, he tries to explain why he failed four subjects at Pencey Prep and was able to pass English. However, in the middle of his explanation, Holden suddenly realizes that Spencer "was not listening. He hardly ever listened to you when you said something" (10). Even though Mr. Spencer has good intentions, Holden is still unable to communicate with him effectively. This is because "it was just that we were too much on opposite sides of the pole, that's all" (15).

It is not until Holden and Stradlater, his roommate at Pencey, have a conversation about Jane Gallagher that Holden becomes aware of the fact that "Stradlater wasn't hardly listening. He was combing his gorgeous locks. He started parting his hair all over again. It took him about an hour to comb his hair" (32). Being upset about Stradlater's date with Jane Gallagher Holden goes to Edmund Hotel where he has the acquaintance of three girls who are visiting New York. At the hotel's ballroom, he

invites Bernice, the blonde girl, to dance with him and says to her “You really can dance. You oughta be a pro. I mean it. I danced with a pro once, and you’re twice as good as she was. Did you ever hear of Marco and Miranda?” Holden’s dance partner says, “What?” Holden realizes that “She wasn’t even listening to me. She was looking all around the place” (71).

Holden’s frustration with the fact that Spencer, Stradlater, and Bernice were not listening to what he said increases his alienation from people in his life. Holden was verbally dismissed by Spencer, Bernice, and Stradlater. However, Holden never confronted the people he was talking to with the fact that they were not listening. Holden does not have to be told that they are not listening because he knows it intuitively. People do not listen to Holden because he is alienated from their world. The reason why people are alienated from Holden is because Holden alienates himself from people, such as his parents, whom he is afraid to talk to and repeatedly avoids meeting them. An example of his behavior is when he visits Phoebe at his parents’ house and he rushes into the closet when his parents suddenly come home. Holden is alienated from every character in the novel with whom he is associated with the exception of Phoebe. If Holden were connected with reality and the person he was talking to was not listening to him, then it would be not inappropriate for him to ask for them to pay attention. Holden never does this. He passively accepts that what he is saying is not important. Holden does care for children and believes that adults are phony. Holden does not want to become an adult because he does not want to be a phony and live his life unconscious of death. For Holden Allie’s death is a constant reminder of the concept of death for Holden. Holden’s daily interactions as well as

thoughts are overshadowed by the concept of death. The reason why Holden behaves the way in which he does at Pencey Prep – failing all of his courses except English, no real friends except for Phoebe, and his negative attitude towards life – he has an existential belief that an individual’s existence will mean nothing at the moment of death. Holden illustrates “life is a useless passion” attitude when it comes to education – he neither applies himself nor does he care about the consequences of being a drop-out.

In Salinger’s works alienation of individual is the foremost existential theme. Similarly for Sartre, “who occupies a specific place in the history of existentialism, representing a stage where self-estrangement had reached its highest possible degree, that is to say, where the pressure of the group had become so great that the individual was forced to live in self-estrangement as a natural state of affairs” (*Introduction to Modern Existentialism* 111) it will not be wrong to state that alienation is prevalent and high-ranking when compared to his other philosophical concepts. Sartre lived during a time when boundary situations were an every day occurrence, when the French people faced the Nazi occupation of Paris during World War II. The existential philosophers – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus—were all alienated from their environments and the societies in which they lived. Alienation, a concept which has been extensively analyzed in the works of authors in all canons, and which is the central concept in *The Catcher in the Rye* is that quality “in which characters lack the ability to express themselves and seek to be reunited with the community from which they are separated” (Brucoli 61).

This definition of alienation by Matthew Bruccoli is not exactly characteristic of Holden's behavior because he does attempt to express himself in his interpersonal relationships with his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, and his classmates, although he is not successful. Moreover, the main impression that the reader gets after finishing *The Catcher in the Rye* is that Holden has no intention of applying himself in school and become a successful student or try to repair his relations with the people around him. The people whom Holden met or called in New York are nothing but "phonies" for Holden and he does not want to develop meaningful and fulling relationships with them. One of the distinct impressions that the reader gets while reading the chapters on his New York City experiences is that Holden is extremely lonely which is the main ingredient for the concept of alienation. Holden cuts himself off from his family life, from his prep school environment, and from his classmates because of his anti-social behavior. As Matthew Bruccoli accurately states, "Holden's inability to communicate with the adult world adds distance to his separation and emphasizes his ever-growing conviction that he does not want to join it. Loneliness is always a component of alienation, and Holden is lonely" (63). Based on the numerous incidences in the novel, it will be fairly accurate to say that Holden is not able to communicate effectively with Spencer, Antolini, Stradlater, Ackley, Sunny the prostitute, Maurice the pimp, the Taxi cab driver and every character in the novel with the sole exception of his sister Phoebe. Holden fails miserably in his attempts to establish relationships, and his frequent failures to have successful relationships make him consider isolating himself, running away to remote woods where he will not have to communicate with people because he wants to become a "deaf-mute" (198).

It is the recognition of Holden's extreme alienation from his environment which acts as a firm foundation for the judgment that he has met the requirements necessary for being characterized as existentially alienated. Although it has been previously noted that the philosophical doctrines of the existential philosophers noted in this dissertation differ significantly and therefore there is no unanimity of agreement among them, there is universal agreement that existentialism is a movement in philosophy which can only be accurately explicated by its existential themes. Holden Caulfield fits nicely into the existential themes of death and alienation and Holden's fit is strong, well-documented and widely recognized.

There is nothing more Holden detests than being a phony; consequently he begins to search for authenticity. According to Charles Kaplan, Holden exhibits frustration and aggravation against certain kinds of phoniness such as, "hypocrisy, ignorance, indifference, [and] moral corruption" (36). Holden equates inauthenticity with insensitivity, lack of caring and absence of love, all things he cannot tolerate. As pointed out by Richard Gill and Ernest Sherman, "an authentic individual constantly strives to attain self awareness and, rather than keeping to safe and customary paths inherently alien to him, chooses to realize his own true self" (20). It is not known when exactly the concept of authenticity was introduced into the existential canon. However, it was developed by Heidegger and Sartre, both of whom put it into works of philosophy. The concept of authenticity is defined by Sartre, as "the courage whereby man consents to bear the burdens of freedom" (Scott 177). For both Heidegger and Sartre, the inauthentic person seeks to enter the world of things so that he can exist in much the same way as a table or a chair exists. That is, they give up their responsibility

to find their true self and, instead, they have a mundane existence and are molded into the social norms of society. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre believe that the term “Das Man” illustrates the inauthentic person who hinders authenticity they do not make decisions, don’t individualistic values of and do not have a conception of themselves. For the inauthentic person the concept of “Das Man” forms the fundamental conception of himself “Das Man” and based on his false conception he judges himself by the anonymous leveling standards of “Das Man.” A person who is inauthentic bases his existence on commonly agreed upon conceptions and standards. Moreover, he is in denial to accept his choice of one among a number of alternative modes of existence. According to Nathan Scott an authentic person has a “lucid and truthful awareness of the situation, in bearing the responsibilities and risks which the situation demands, in taking it upon oneself with pride or humility, some-times with horror and hatred” (Nathan Scott 179).

When talking about authenticity in Heidegger calls our attention to one fundamental fact that is, authenticity is an ideal to be achieved it is impossible for the status of authenticity naturally. Angelean Smith very observantly states “Although authenticity is the goal that Heidegger stresses, most people strive against it in that their fundamental motivation is to refuse to recognize themselves for what they are and, instead, become involved in self-forgetful preoccupations and endless chores: endless in the sense of without ultimate purpose” (3).

Holden does not accept the Das Man attitude that is prevalent at the three prep schools from which he has been dismissed. While his behavior can be traced to his fear to leave the world of the child and enter into the world of the adult, Holden is acting

with an understanding of who he is and not blindly following the behavior of his peers and roommates. According to Stradlater, Holden does not do one thing right, that is, according to the behavior that is accepted at Pencey Prep. It cannot be claimed that Holden's actions are influenced and decided by his environment. Instead, his behavior is governed by his standards and what understanding he has of himself. When he sees Phoebe on the carousel, Holden experiences an epiphany and realizes that he cannot protect Phoebe from having unique life experiences. Holden acknowledges that although his motivations were authentic, noble and naïve, a change of world view and a change of self is inevitable.

Holden's struggle with authenticity is not completely decided in the novel and at the end of the novel when Holden is being questioned by the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist asks him what he is going to do in the future, Holden responds, "I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don't. I think I am, but how do I know?" (213). Holden recognizes his freedom of choice once he leaves the sanitarium.

Throughout the novel, there are instances of inconsistency in Holden's behavior in which he deviates from his preoccupation with death and his strong behavioral characteristics of alienation. These instances impress the reader with their marked inconsistency in Holden's actions that radically change the reader's opinion and evaluation of Holden as a person. We know that Holden does not care what people think about him, that he does not try to have his teachers at Pencey Prep respect him for his academic achievements or his brilliance. Why then would Holden care about hurting the feelings of Mrs. Morrow when he is on the train and tells her that her son is

a wonderful guy who is a positive addition to the student body at Pencey Prep? When he talks to himself the reader learns Holden's true feelings of Mrs. Morrow's son, Ernest who he characterizes as "doubtless the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey, in the whole crumby history of the school. He was always going down the corridor, after he'd had a shower, snapping his soggy old wet towel at people's asses. That's exactly the kind of a guy he was" (54). Why would Holden care about Mrs. Morrow's feelings when he does not care about the feelings of his classmates, parents, teachers, and people he meets in everyday life? His behavior on the train with Mrs. Morrow may appear not to make any sense. However, while Holden does not care about all the phonies around him, he does recognize in a mother's love an authentic moment. She is exhibiting an authentic existential behavior.

There are other inconsistencies in Holden's behavior such as his respect and admiration for the nuns and to whom he provides a \$10 contribution, his tolerance for Ackley's disgusting behavior in picking his nose when talking to someone and Holden's willingness to act as a friend for Ackley—which are not easily explained and challenge the perception of Holden as an inconsiderate, insensitive sixteen year-old boy who does not care about himself, his parents, and his classmates. Holden is in a distinct boundary situation in that he has rejected his parents and his teachers who are generally perceived to be significant others in the life of a teenager. As Stradlater says forcibly "You don't do one damn thing the way you're supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing" (41). Salinger sagaciously puts that statement in the beginning of the novel to clarify the reader's perception of Holden as a misfit. But misfits do not act the way Holden acted with the nuns, Mrs. Morrow and Ackley.

Holden's behavior in these incidences can be interpreted as a move from his misfit classification to a potentially authentic position because, as Heidegger frequently notes, "a pure authentic position is not immediately attainable but, instead, must be worked towards step by step. The move from inauthentic to authentic requires a resolution of the will and is only gradually achievable" (David Przepukowski 150). One could argue that Holden's behavior in these incidences and in additional incidences when he shows sensitivity for the feelings of other people such as, his sensitivity to the prostitute Sunny and his sensitivity to the behavior of James Castle indicates that Holden is changing from a misfit to a sensitive, caring teenager that is more in line with the behavior of his brother Allie. An authentic state of Being is not a permanent state or a fixed state once it is achieved. Heidegger makes it quite clear that authenticity of Being is the true meaning of Dasein; however, this so-called true meaning can be lost, which pushes one toward an inauthentic state of Being. Similar to Kierkegaard's concept of faith where the individual on the religious level of existence falls into the lower ethical level of existence and similar to Nietzsche's concept of risk where the superior person or the *Übermensch* fails to take risks and loses the *Übermensch* classification, both Heidegger and Sartre recognize that the concept of authentic Dasein can be lost and a state of "fallenness" can exist. Heidegger himself cannot lay down the contents of an authentic Dasein because he cannot prescribe the contents of authenticity which is beyond the role of a philosopher. Although Holden's preoccupation with death and his noteworthy behavior in the alienation mode are in agreement with existential themes examined by all existential theorists, it can be argued that Holden is searching for authenticity and that his behavioral incidences are moving

him gradually to a state of responsibility, a state of sensitivity, and a state of authenticity.

The first objective of this dissertation is to argue that Holden is an existentialist because it allows for a strong reading that helps address the inconsistencies in his behavior. This first objective has been reached in this chapter in that the themes of death, alienation and authenticity are evident in Holden's behavior. The second objective of this dissertation is to prove that Salinger's three protagonists, not just Holden, are, after examination, not just existentialists but existential heroes. The second objective will be detailed in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter Three

SERGEANT X AND EXISTENTIAL THEMES

Introduction

One year before the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, in April 1950, J. D. Salinger published “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” in *The New Yorker*.¹ This short story, which was later included in Salinger’s *Nine Stories* in 1953, is not only his best but also his most autobiographical short story.² Warren G. French, in a review of *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* by Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, notes that the authors have sound reasons for assessing “For Esmé” as “the high point of Salinger’s art” (22). By broad agreement among Salinger’s critics, “‘For Esmé’ which has been reprinted at least six times. . . has also achieved more critical attention than any of his other stories” (Pickering 121).

In her memoir *Dream Catcher*, Salinger’s daughter, Margaret, describes how her father told her, “You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nostrils, no matter how long you live” (55). This sincere confession to her daughter illustrates how traumatic the war experience was for Salinger. We also learn from Salinger’s biographies that he had a nervous breakdown during the war, just like Sergeant X. However, none of the biographies of Salinger give details about the severity of his breakdown. Salinger himself has repeatedly tried to downplay it—in the few interviews he’s given—and there is controversy in the literature about the cause of it, whether it was due to combat fatigue or more conventional causes.

According to Eberhart Alsen, in “New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger’s Sergeant X and Seymour Glass,” Salinger wrote a letter to Ernest Hemingway from Germany in 1945 to tell Hemingway that he had checked himself into a military hospital in Nuremberg. He describes himself as being in “an almost constant state of despondency” (379). Alsen’s claim is that “Salinger had his nervous breakdown in May of 1945, shortly after the end of the war” (380). Many of Salinger’s critics assert that Salinger’s nervous breakdown was a consequence of “combat fatigue,” although Alsen, and many other Salinger scholars, do not believe that this is true. Their reasoning is that Salinger was not an infantry man and, “as a counter intelligence sergeant, he had the task of interviewing prisoners of war and civilians in order to find out information about enemy troop strength, number of tanks, location of heavy artillery, supply depots and so forth” (380).

There is another explanation for Salinger’s breakdown as well. In addition to providing information about troop strength and the number of tanks, he was one of the first American Army personnel to enter the concentration camps. We know from Margaret Salinger that this experience had a devastating effect on her father. It is an undeniable fact that war has devastating effects on people and that an individual adjustment after war will naturally take some time. But, the first scene of the short story takes place in 1950, approximately six years after Sgt. X meets Esmé and five years after the end of the war. In this scene, Sgt. X is living with his wife in America. He realizes all along that he has not recovered from his psychological breakdown. John Wenke in “Sergeant X, Esmé, and the Meaning of Words” maintains that “the story does in fact dramatize Sgt. X’s redemption from an emotional and physical breakdown

through the transformative powers of love” (252). The criticism that this short story has received is mostly unanimous and James Bryant outlines such criticism when he asserts, “From everything that I have seen, critics have read ‘For Esmé’ more or less exclusively as the story of a man’s miraculous salvation from the war and squalor by the love of a child; and their appraisals have seemed to depend largely on their emotional response or lack of it, to the love and squalor” (279). Despite the critics’ assessments, it is worth focusing on Salinger’s and Sgt. X’s nervous breakdowns because of their relationship to the importance of boundary situations in existential literature. In the short story, Esmé represents love and Sgt. X’s wartime experiences represent squalor.

This chapter will closely analyze Sergeant X’s behavior and his relationships with Esmé and Sergeant X’s wife and mother-in-law to substantiate the claim that Sergeant X is an existentialist. To collaborate this particular claim, this chapter will emphasize the concepts of alienation, freedom, Bad Faith, and boundary situations from an existential perspective using mainly Jean Paul Sartre’s philosophy. Existentialism is basically a philosophy of crisis and Jean Paul Sartre, who became its most famous and dominant spokesman, explicated its basic concepts from 1948 onwards and brought awareness of the existential movement to the American intellectual landscape.

Sartre’s Freedom of Choice

Besides the concept of death, another concern of existential thought is the concept of freedom. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre stated, “What is at the very heart and center of existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment,

by which every man realizes himself” (47). Kierkegaard believes that the concept of freedom was prevalent in individual’s existence because it freedom gives the individual a choice to choose his level of existence which consequently determines the level of his existence – aesthetic, ethical, or religious – and the values he will bring into the world. It is only by exercising the choice of freedom that the individual is able to make a decision about the level of existence. If man did not have free will, then existence would be determined and existentialism as a philosophy would not exist. According to Robert Solomon, in *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, “Freedom is the recurrent theme in every author who is identified with this movement” (279).

As stated in Chapter One, Heidegger’s definition of the concept of freedom is drawn from the concept of facticity which Heidegger explicates in *Being and Time*. Sartre takes Heidegger’s definition a step further and utilizes it to explain his concept of existential freedom.

For Heidegger, the existential concept of freedom is based on his concept of facticity which comes directly from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and is used by Sartre to define his perception of existential freedom. In Heidegger’s perception, facticity is equal to the concept of thrown-ness which means that the situation that the individual finds himself in is arbitrary. Facticity is the arbitrary facts which shape individual’s particular situation. For example, if a person is born in Turkey, at a certain period in time, with or without parents, in a certain social class, male or female, with specific physical characteristics, then that is that person’s facticity. What both Heidegger and Sartre point out as being important is that we are born into a situation over which we have no control. Sartre maintains that we are free within our situation while, at the

same time, we are restricted by it. All we can do is choose among alternatives within the situation in which we find ourselves; however, we are not free to choose the situation itself. Robert Solomon maintains that “In so far as we are free to choose Sartre tells us that we have *transcendence*; in so far as we are determined by our situation Sartre tells us we have *facticity*” (274). Transcendence means that we can rise above the situation in which we find ourselves. In other words, we are free to construct new values and characteristics which are not in our facticity. The American existential theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, in *A Courage To Be*, stated that “Man is essentially. . . ‘freedom’: freedom not in the sense of indeterminacy but in the sense of being able to determine himself through decisions in the center of his being” (48). Freedom, for Sartre, means one cannot change the situation in which he finds himself. For instance, one cannot change his gender, cannot fundamentally change his physical characteristics (cosmic surgery notwithstanding), but one is always free within this facticity to construct the essence or the meaning of his existence.

Sartre goes a step further by claiming that “a man can do anything he wants to do”; and that “man is always free within his particular situation to confer significance upon that situation” (Solomon 280). This is especially important in narration, when one has the ability to re-assign significance. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Sartre maintains that “Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it” (442). Therefore, the situation determines the freedom inasmuch as the situation puts limitations on one’s freedom.

It is important to understand the distinction between infinite freedom and finite freedom; the applicability of this distinction is clearly stated by Solomon:

This understanding of absolute freedom as freedom within a situation will allow us to appreciate the difference between the bold and obviously false claim that human beings are absolutely free to do what they want and the more reasonable claim (made by Sartre) that human beings are absolutely free to choose their own projects and impose their own interpretations on the situation in which they find themselves (that is in which they are “thrown” or “abandoned”). (281)

Although Sartre’s concept of freedom is basically man’s freedom to choose—and therefore, his freedom of intention—it does not mean that man has freedom of success. This is because external circumstances may hamper his choice and his ability to reach his goals. Man is absolutely free to set goals relevant to his life and his situation, but he is not absolutely free to be successful in achieving those goals. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre states, “Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is” (599). Obviously, external circumstances may interfere with the success of my projects; but, in the beginning of the same text, Sartre claims that my freedom is my awareness “that nothing can compel me to adopt that particular conduct” (38). This statement is derived from Sartre’s concept that “existence precedes essence,” which while implied by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, received much more attention by Sartre who placed it within the core of existential theory.

Plato argued that there are two realms of being: the familiar world of things and people and the pure, ideal world of Forms. For example, there are individual chairs

each with its own peculiarities and imperfections which partake in varying degrees of the “form of the chair” which is how we recognize it as a “chair”. Sartre sees things differently, however. To him there is an essence of chairness that comes before a chair’s existence.

Western philosophers for more than 2000 years have claimed that “essence precedes existence.” However, Sartre would agree that when it comes to chair making his “existence precedes essence” is reversed. Before starting to make a chair, every carpenter has an idea of the chair in his head and therefore the essence of the chair – a concept of the thing to be constructed – precedes its existence. But the main concept for Sartrean existentialism is that human beings are different in that they create their own meaning for themselves. In other words, they create the essence of their existence. Man’s existence comes before his essence because Sartre’s claim in *Existentialism is a Humanism* is that “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism” (3). In the same article, Sartre repeats himself when he states, “If man as the existentialist sees him as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (2b). In *Being and Nothingness*, the word “Nothingness” implies that man has no preconceived essence, no preconceived definition, simply because man has the ability to construct his own essence. Again, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre reinforces his notion of nothingness: “If existence really precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him” (3). Man is free to construct the meaning of his existence; this led Sartre to claim that man is

not pre-determined and therefore does not have a fixed human nature. Man is free to create himself and the meaning of his essence in the world.

The factual nature of freedom was stressed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* because he believed that freedom was simply a fundamental fact of man's existence as a conscious, self-creative and self-creating being. Being fully conscious means that man is able to start afresh each time he makes another choice; he is free, in other words, from his past mistakes. His freedom may remain a pure and undiluted state throughout his entire life, if he so wills it. (Gene Thibadeau "Sartre's Concept of the Individual). This is not easy, however, for even Sartre admits that the choices that one makes means that man cannot return to the same starting point again. Sartre understands that his freedom is as unpolluted at one end of the series of actions as it was at the other. Even if man were absolutely free at the beginning of his life, each subsequent decision would serve to further limit him and circumscribe his freedom. The essence which a particular man has created for himself through choice and the actions cannot simply be discarded by him for a fresh start. They follow and haunt him throughout his life. In Sartre's own terminology, "each decision of a For-itself has created or engaged him to the world in tangible ways and the For-itself cannot pretend otherwise" (18).

Sartre makes a clear distinction between In-itself and For-itself. In itself refers to objects in the world such as a house, a car, a TV, a knife, or a hammer. The meaning or the essence of the object is built into the object itself and can be understood just by looking at the object. That is, the object reveals its essence to me. The For-itself stands for human consciousness and is only applicable to human beings. The essence of a human being is not determined until the moment of death. The word "For" in Sartre's

term “For-itself” signifies our understanding that we have a future; however, unlike an object in the world, we can continually determine our essence or meaning of existence. A chair, in other words, cannot make choices that change what it is or what it does in the world. In Sartre’s later philosophy, the cumulative effect of past decisions cannot be ignored, not even by the existential man.

Sartre’s theory of freedom rests upon two basic assumptions. The first is that man’s choice is autonomous; the second is that autonomy of choice is the true meaning of freedom. Wilfrid Desan, in *The Tragic Final: An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, states, “The autonomy of man’s choice is not in fact independent of external conditions. Choice, even for Sartre, must always be made with respect to a given amount of data and the data is usually determined by factors other than man’s own freedom” (170). Since choice is not unlimited, the freedom which is expressed by means of choices is not unlimited either. Dependence on things that are outside of one’s own powers—for example, what is around him when he is making his choices—is not in the meaning of the word autonomy. Hence, man’s choice cannot be said to be truly autonomous at all, for it is impossible to remain independent of some external realities, such as political oppression or severe illness.

That said, it is possible that man is more free and responsible than he typically wishes to admit. Sartre deserves credit for making us aware of this fact, and for describing its consequences in life. For Sartre, the concept of freedom formed the core of Being-for-itself’s fundamental structure. From this structure, Sartre created such related ideas as bad faith, authenticity, and situations.

Sartre's Concept of Bad Faith

The key concept in Sartre's analysis of freedom is the concept of Bad Faith. Bad Faith occurs when the individual ignores his freedom of choice and he refuses to carry the burden of making a decision about a particular situation. Sartre claims that an individual can find himself exercising Bad Faith because he is tempted and pressured by the implications of freedom as well as the societal demands and he states "man prefers to mask this obligation by imagining himself not as a being that ceaselessly creates new significations, but as a fixed essence" (qtd. in Alberes, 62). From a Sartrean perspective, while trying to fulfill the demands of society, a person becomes the job that he performs. In other words, a waiter is just a waiter, a teacher is just a teacher, and the person who exercises bad faith fails to realize that he has potential other than becoming something other than a waiter or a teacher. Petty tasks and concerns shape the mundane existence of the individual. Man who exercises Bad Faith is so obsessed with satisfying the role imposed on him by society that he convinces people around him and himself that his role and identity are identical.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that at the root of bad faith lies the restrictive demands of society because it forces the individuals to fit into certain modes which dictate the way an individual should act. Furthermore, it turns individual into a kind of robot where the individual can carry out a particular function only. Society pressures man to remain within the confines of his role which helps to explain why so many live in a state of Bad Faith. Bad Faith is not a mere accident and something that just happens to certain people; Bad Faith is a permanent possibility for all human beings.

In other words, Bad Faith can be described as being in self-deception about one's own possibilities. When talking about Bad Faith, it should be noted that the individual can choose to Bad Faith as much as he can choose the other levels of existence, whether it is aesthetical, ethical or religious. It takes a higher level of awareness, as illustrated in Salinger's characters, for an individual to recognize the choices that he has. Sartre argues, "We can choose ourselves as indecisive, fleeing, and the like, as well as heroic; but in each instance, a choice has taken place (*Being and Nothingness* 472).

At any time or situation there is an ever present danger that man will in Bad Faith. However, it should be noted that Bad Faith is not a continuous and dooming occurrence for the individual. The individual can get out of Bad Faith when he comes to a realization that he has potential and when he is ready to make decision that will give a new meaning to his life.

Even though man makes persistent efforts to capture authentic existence, there is never a warranty that he will achieve this goal. Nonetheless, this should not stop him from trying. According to Robert Olson, in *An Introduction to Existentialism*, "the authentic man for Sartre is the person who undergoes a radical conversion through anguish and who assumes his freedom" (139). The existentialists reject the notion of a complete and fully satisfying life because life is characterized by irreparable losses, frustration, insecurity, and painful striving. As noted previously, the existential philosophers differ significantly in "the relative ranking of the values which they say accompany a deliberate espousal of anguish and suffering" (17). Existentialists agree that "existentialist values intensify consciousness, arouse the passions, and commit the

individual to a course of action which will engage his total energies” (18). This, thus, is yet another way of looking at authenticity. In other words, an authentic man is not afraid to act on impulse. According to Temple Kingston, the authentic man “is not only the man often referred to as the man of action; the authentic man is willing not merely to act, but to act without what would normally be termed a satisfactory justification for these actions” (181). The authentic man has a self-perception and based on this perception he does not justify his actions to the people around him. Furthermore, he is aware of the fact that once he has made a decision he is ready to face the consequences of his particular decision.

Authenticity is achieved through “a self-conscious choice in the face of anguish, through acting in the world of contingent and modal realities” (McBride 375). The authentic man, therefore, must form a stable base within himself to address a shifting exteriority. Authenticity, then, requires individual is courage and “a clarity of vision. It is the successful outcome of the debate of the individual with whatever is opposed to his integrity” (Levi 426). The authentic man clearly does not seek to escape from the peer pressures around him, nor does he ever shirk from the outcomes of his choices.

According to James Collins in *The Existentialists*, the authentic man is the man who makes choices with near-perfect lucidity and with a full acceptance of the responsibilities following the actions he makes based on his choices (83). The authentic man is in a very real sense a converted man who

is awakened to his human condition and has assumed it; plunges into the world, but does not lose himself in the world; he accepts total responsibility and engages himself fully, and always maintains a

separation from himself which constitutes his personal actions, so that they have value and give value. (Blackham 147)

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes a clear distinction between the concepts of transcendence and facticity: “man is what he is not and is not what he is” (70). This means that by being always conscious of his future and always future oriented, man can transcend his present status.

At the same time, man is not what he is in the sense that what he is now is not the meaning of his existence. (This, as stated previously, can only be determined at the moment of death.) Because man has a consciousness, which Sartre refers to as “the For-Itself,” he can transcend his present condition and choose to give a new meaning or essence to his existence. To exist in facticity evokes Bad Faith because such an existence does not allow one to recognize his future. Remember: it is the recognition of one’s future makes man free to choose and gives him transcendence. (Gene Thibadeau “Sartre and the Meaning of Existence”).

In “For Esmé,” Sgt. X has the ability to transcend his situation, his 1945 nervous breakdown in Germany, which means that he has the ability to create a future different than the last four years that he spent in the Army. War, in other words, forces its participants to become past-oriented instead of future-oriented. Looking at Sgt. X as “an existentialist” reveals a man struggling against a difficult outer reality that prevents him from undertaking the existential path toward self-definition.

Sergeant X as an Existentialist

The concept of Bad Faith is illustrated in the very first scene of the short story. In this scene Sergeant X informs the reader that he has received a wedding invitation from Esmé, the English girl he'd met in April 1944 during World War II: "I received an invitation to a wedding that will take place in England on April 18th. It happens to be a wedding I'd give a lot to be able to get to, and when the invitation first arrived I thought it might be just possible for me to make the trip abroad, by plane, expenses be hanged" (87). Esmé is important to Sgt. X and he wants to go to the wedding. Despite his eagerness, Sgt. X cannot act forcefully in this situation. Because Bad Faith is the lack of belief in ourselves to be ourselves and because Bad Faith occurs when we let other people make decisions for us, Sgt. X acts in Bad Faith when he does not tell his wife that he wants to go to the wedding. Instead, he is submissive with his wife, whom he describes as "a breathtakingly levelheaded girl" (87) and complies with her wishes by making a trivial excuse for not going to the wedding: "I'd completely forgotten that my mother-in-law is looking forward to spending the last two weeks in April with us. I really don't get to see Mother Grencher terribly often, and she is not getting any younger" (87). Sgt. X's wife is indifferent to his needs and the importance of Esmé in his life. She is insensitive and controlling towards her husband.

Salinger also makes it evident that, besides acting in Bad Faith in his decision not to go to Esmé's wedding, Sgt. X is alienated from his wife and his mother-in-law at home. Alienation, of course, is another crucial existentialist concept. John Wenke maintains that Sgt. X's inability to tell his wife exactly how he feels "marks a continuation of the 'stale letters' that Sgt. X received during the war" (253). During the

war, Sgt. X's wife would send him letters in which she complains about the service at a restaurant they frequented together; while he is under fire and dealing with horrid conditions, she directs him to send her cashmere yarn. Wenke develops this line of thought further: "Reports on the service at Schrafft's and requests for cashmere yarn, like the prohibition against attending the wedding, extend selfish interest, while, at the same time, they evidence little concern for the narrator's needs" (253).

Richard Rupp in *Celebration in Post-War American Fiction, 1945-1967*

maintains that "Life in the present is at best tolerable for Sergeant X. Though the story begins in 1950 with Esmé's wedding announcement, the clue to X's problem is his condescending description of his wife. At the same time, he romanticizes his communion with Esmé. 'For Esmé' demonstrates no evidence of a livable present" (121).

In the second scene of the short story, set during April 1944, Sgt. X is stationed in Devon, England for three weeks of pre-invasion intelligence training. This experience is characterized by his alienation from his fellow enlisted men. Most of his personal time is filled by writing letters back home. X experiences the constant "uncomradely scratching of many fountain pens on many sheets of V-mail paper" (88). According to Sgt. X, "there wasn't one good mixer" (88) in the sixty men that comprised his unit. The men do not socialize with each other. Sgt. X also notes that he writes his letters back home to his wife sitting near the pool table, which he never uses. Sgt. X almost seems like a pseudo-soldier in that he takes rather lightly his military duties. For example, he remarks that he packs his "canvas gas-mask container full of

books” (instead of leaving the gas mask container empty) even though he realizes that “if the enemy ever did use gas I’d never get the damn thing on in time” (88).

On the afternoon when the unit is being transferred to the London area, Sgt. X takes a walk in the rain through the small English town of Devon. Then he wanders into choir practice in a church. There he watches a thirteen-year-old girl singing more beautifully than the others; this girl has “an exquisite forehead and blasé eyes” (90). Later she enters the public tea room where Sgt. X is sitting. She joins him. This is how we are introduced to Esmé, who is precocious and quite clearly knows it. “The next thing I knew, the young lady was standing, with enviable poise, beside my table” (92). She says, “I purely came over because I thought you looked extremely lonely. You have an extremely sensitive face” (95). Sgt. X asks Esmé if she would care to join him for a cup of tea at his table and Esmé responds “Perhaps for just a fraction of a moment” (92). Sgt. X learns that Esmé and her five-year-old brother Charles are war orphans, since their father was killed fighting in North Africa. Moreover, their mother is deceased. Sgt. X notes, “I had been feeling lonely [...] I was very glad that she’d come over” (95). Esmé then talks about her mother and her father while her aunt, who had entered the tea room with her, sits at another table. During their brief conversation, Esmé tells Sgt. X, “You seem quite intelligent for an American” (94). Sgt. X replies “that was a pretty snobbish thing to say” (94); this causes Esmé to blush and, as Sgt. X puts it, she begins to confer “the social poise I’d been missing” (94).

John Pickering in *J.D. Salinger: Portraits of Alienation*, maintains that

The conversation in the tea shop is masterfully done; the tone is one of warm restraint, apt for the communication between two people who had

not known each other before but who in their loneliness (he, a soldier going to war; she a daughter whose father was killed in the war) need to talk with someone. (124)

At the very beginning of their conversation, Esmé asks Sgt. X, “How were you employed before entering the Army?” (99). Sgt. X replies, “I like to think of myself as a professional short-story writer” (99). When Esmé learns that Sgt. X is a professional writer who will soon be involved in military action, she asks him if he would “write a story exclusively for me sometime. I am an avid reader” (100). Sgt. X agrees to write a story for Esmé, who then says “I am extremely interested in squalor” (100). Before they leave each other, Esmé says, “You’re quite sure you won’t forget to write that story for me?” (103). Sgt. X says that “there is absolutely no chance that I’d forget” (103). Esmé nods and says, “Make it extremely squalid and moving. Are you at all acquainted with squalor?” (103). Sgt. X says that “I am getting better acquainted with it in one form or another, all the time, and that I’d do my best to come up to her specifications” (103). This promise to Esmé to write a story especially for her about his wartime experiences is codified by the title “For Esmé.”

During the conversation in the public tea room, Sgt. X notices that Esmé is wearing an “enormous-faced, chronographic-looking wristwatch” (100). It is too big for her thin wrist; he asks her if the watch had belonged to her father. He sees that Esmé “Looked down at her wrist solemnly”; she then says “Yes, it did. He gave it to me just before Charles and I were evacuated” (100). It is evident to Sgt. X that the watch she wears is very important to her. Esmé has to go back to sit with her aunt and asks Sgt. X, “Do you think you will be coming here again in the immediate future? We

come here every Saturday, after choir practice” (101). Sgt. X responds that he is “pretty sure I won’t be able to make it again” (101). While saying goodbye and shaking hands, Esmé says, “I hope you return from the war with all your faculties intact” (103).

The third and final scene of “For Esmé” takes place in Gaufurt, Bavaria, during May 1945 (this is shortly after the end of the war). Salinger tells us that Sgt. X “was a young man who had not come through the war with all his faculties intact, and for more than an hour he had been triple reading paragraphs and now he was doing it to the sentences” (104). In “New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger’s Sergeant X and Seymour Glass,” Eberhart Alsen states that Salinger’s “regiment was involved in some of the bloodiest battles of World War II, from the D-Day invasion through the battles of Cherbourg, Mortain, and the Hurtgen Forest, all the way to the Battle of the Bulge” (380). Alsen identifies Colonel Gerden Johnson as a battalion commander in Salinger’s regiment and the author of *The History of the Twelfth Infantry Regiment in World War II*. Colonel Johnson reports that “during the Battle of Mortain in Northern France, the carnage was so frightful that there were many cases of combat fatigue even among our older men” (Johnson 163). However, the battle of Mortain occurred during July of 1944, whereas Salinger’s breakdown occurred in May of 1945. Many scholars take this to mean that Salinger’s breakdown was likely not due to the stress of combat, but instead “it was due to what he witnessed at the concentration camp that he mentioned to his daughter” (Alsen 381). Although Alsen has a meaningful argument to exclude combat experience as the main causal factor in Salinger’s breakdown, the majority of Salinger scholars view his hospital stay as a combination of his experiences behind the lines of battle in which he viewed “the carnage that was so frightful”

(Johnson 163), and his entry into the labor camps where the ground was covered with emaciated corpses.

According to Alsen and Col. Johnson, the concentration camp that Sgt. Salinger entered was near the village of Hurtingen, Bavaria. It was liberated on April 27, 1945. Sgt. Salinger was given a jeep and a driver to enable him to be one of the first American soldiers to enter the many concentration camps that were discovered in Bavaria. The camp that Sgt. Salinger entered was one of eleven in the Hurtingen area; it had a total prisoner population of more than twenty-two thousand. These were mostly Jewish slave laborers from countries that had been occupied by the Nazis. According to Alsen, “The SS guards evacuated some three thousand prisoners by train and killed all those who were too old or sick to travel” (382). Lt. Colonel Edward Seiller, in his *12th Armored Division and the Liberation of Death Camps*, maintains that “when one of our infantry battalions approached . . . someone at the camp (presumably the SS guards), herded the inmates into the barracks, nailed the door shut and set the barracks on fire” (382). It is probable that the American troops “knew they were near a camp because of the sickening odor of burning bodies” (Bradstreet 118) which Salinger remembers most clearly in entering the camp.

The reason why Sgt. X is an existentialist is not only because of his alienation from his wife, his mother-in-law, his fellow soldiers in Devon and, most important of all, from his own sanity. The reason why Sgt. X is an existentialist is because, in addition to alienation in all three scenes of the short story, Sgt. X also exhibits Bad Faith in the first section of the short story and Sartre’s freedom of choice in the third section. He ultimately has the strength of character to overcome his mental

disarrangement in that he has faced a boundary situation as explicated by Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both philosophers believed that most people face some crisis situations in their lives over which they have limited or no control and how they react to this situation determines the degree to which they become authentic.

It is late at night in Gaufurt, Bavaria when Sgt X, “opened his eyes, he found himself squinting at a small, unopened package wrapped in green paper [. . .]. He saw that it had been readdressed several times. He could make out, on just one side of the package, at least three of his old A.P.O. numbers” (112). Sgt. X opens the green envelope, which contains a letter from Esmé. This is the first letter he has received from her, and reading it makes him recall their meeting in the tea room in Devon. Esmé’s letter and the gift of her father’s watch, which is included with the letter, “spring from Esmé’s deep desire to express love” (Wenke 257). Esmé provides Sgt. X with the most important possession in her life—that is, her dead father’s watch. She writes, “I am taking the liberty of enclosing my wrist-watch which you may keep in your possession for the duration of the conflict. I am quite certain that you will use it to greater advantage in these difficult days than I ever can and that you will accept it as a lucky talisman” (113). The phrase “for the duration of the conflict” used by Esmé makes the reader believe that there might be a future meeting between Esmé and Sgt. X after the war and the wedding invitation that Esmé sends Sgt. X certainly presents the opportunity to do so. However, Salinger never lets the two characters meet again after their first meeting.

In the short story, Salinger informs the reader that “it was a long time before X could set the note aside, let alone lift Esmé’s father’s wristwatch out of the box” (114).

Sgt. X sits in his room late at night in Gaufurt having read Esmé's letter. Suddenly he feels sleepy. Sgt. X, having read the letter, believes that he has experienced Esmé's love for him "which begins his cure by inducing sleep" (Wenke 257). Wenke notes that one of the problems that Sgt. X experiences during his nervous breakdown in Bavaria is his inability to sleep. The ability to sleep is the beginning of Sgt. X's curing himself.

The love of Esmé for Sgt. X enables him to improve his faculties and heal from what he has witnessed during World War II. Sgt. X is not depicted as a callous enlisted man but as an enlisted man who is sensitive to the frightful experiences he has encountered. The story ends with the following sentence: "You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he always stands a chance of again becoming a man with all of his fac—with all of his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact" (114). In the second scene of the short story, when Sgt. X is with Esmé in the tea room, the last thing she wishes him is to return from the war with his faculties intact. Because the first scene of the short story occurs five years after the end of World War II, and because Sgt. X is no longer triple-reading paragraphs and sentences, it may be that he is seriously searching for a way to effectively deal with his reality, which would put him on an existential path toward self-definition away from the battlefield. Sgt. X's reading of the letter from Esmé in the green envelope is the beginning of his cure. However, he never quite finds the end of it.

Notes for Chapter Three

1. Salinger's short story "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" was originally published in *the New Yorker*, and was later included in *Nine Stories*. The references used in this work are from the *Nine Stories*. (Salinger, Jerome David. *Nine Stories*. New York: Little Brown, 1953).
2. "During the early 1940s, like many Americans at the time, Salinger seemed to be swept up by extreme support of the war effort. He wrote several stories including "Personal Notes on an Infantryman" and "The Hang of It" that dealt in an innocent and noble tone with the subject of war. Salinger seemed to have a fascination with the heroic and romantic side of war, which came out in these early stories. "A Boy in France," which was published in March of 1945, represented a dramatic shift in the way Salinger addressed war in his fiction. The cruel fighting Salinger had seen so much of had obviously changed the way he thought and wrote about war and the military. His romantic view of the two had been destroyed by the abject reality of what he had seen – death, pain, destruction" (Alexander 105). "For Esmé" is the only story in which Salinger talks about war experiences in the portrayal of Sgt. X.

Chapter Four

SEYMOUR GLASS AND EXISTENTIAL THEMES

Introduction

Seymour Glass makes his first and only physical appearance in Salinger's literary works in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish,"¹ (1948) which is a short story divided into three separate scenes and, most importantly, in the last scene Seymour Glass commits suicide. It is not the intention of this dissertation to explore the different meanings of the Seymour Glass stories except for "Bananafish" and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* (1955) because the purpose this chapter is to prove that Seymour exhibits existential behavior that would justify classifying him as an existentialist. The Seymour Glass of "Bananafish" and *Carpenters* is different from the Seymour Glass of "Zooney," "Seymour: An Introduction," and "Hapworth 16, 1924" simply because Seymour comes into the context of the stories after his suicide in "Bananafish" through the conversation of his siblings. According to John Pickering, "Seymour is either a prominent figure or his spirit is there shaping important themes" (251) in the Seymour Glass stories.

While *Carpenters* explains Seymour's life when he was in the Army and before he met Muriel, *Bananafish* occurs after six years of marriage to Muriel when they are vacationing in Miami on a second honeymoon. *Carpenters* is explained to the reader by Seymour's younger Brother Buddy although the prominent figure in the conversation between Buddy and Muriel's family is Seymour Glass. What is important in the two

stories, “Bananafish” and *Carpenters* are the themes of alienation, loneliness, and the absurdity of life, which are dominant characteristics of the protagonist, Seymour Glass, who was in the Air Force during World War II and in 1945 had a nervous breakdown.

An explication of the contents of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* will be detailed in the next two sections which is followed by an analysis of Albert Camus’ “Concept of the Absurd.” The fifth and final section will concentrate on explaining why Seymour Glass is an existentialist.

“A Perfect Day For Bananafish”

“Bananafish” “describes the last few hours in the life of Seymour Glass and is a brief, impersonally told, and slightly obscure work” (Wiegand 254). In the first scene of the story which is mainly composed of a telephone conversation between Seymour’s wife Muriel and his mother-in-law Mrs. Fedder. It is evident to the reader from the conversation that Mrs. Fedder is critical of Seymour and afraid for her daughter, Muriel, because she considers Seymour to be dangerous to the welfare of Muriel. Simply stated, Mrs. Fedder ignores what Muriel says and constantly asks Muriel to describe Seymour’s behavior.

“Who drove?”

“*He* did,” said the girl. “And don’t get excited. He drove very nicely. I was amazed.”

“He drove? Muriel, you gave me your word of—”

“Mother,” the girl interrupted, “I just told you. He drove *very* nicely. Under fifty the whole way, as a matter of fact.”

“Did he try any of that funny business with the trees?”

“I *said* he drove very nicely, Mother. Now, Please. I asked him to stay close to the white line, and all, and he knew what I meant, and he did.

He was even trying not to look at the trees – you could tell.” (5)

During Muriel’s conversation with her mother, Salinger does not go into detail as to the “funny business” that Seymour did with the trees. One of the frequent criticisms of Salinger’s works is that he does not provide enough information to answer the questions of his literary critics although during the telephone talk between Muriel and her mother, the reader is informed that Seymour, while driving the car, was constantly looking at trees and not the road in front of him. At the end of their conversation, the mother says, “Muriel, I’m only going to ask you once more – are you really alright?” and the daughter answers “Yes, Mother. For the ninetieth time” (9). Muriel’s parents are constantly pressuring Muriel to convince Seymour to see a psychiatrist, because questioning his mental health and behavior. There is a severe lack of understanding between Muriel and her mother, and, as the story unfolds, Salinger clearly shows that Seymour and Muriel put up with each other without real understanding and affection. Mrs. Fedder informs Muriel that her father has contacted a psychiatrist who is a friend of the family because they are concerned about Seymour’s actions:

“Muriel. Now, listen to me.”

"I'm listening."

"Your father talked to Dr. Sivetski."

"Oh?" said the girl.

"He told him everything. At least, he said he did--you know your father. The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda--everything."

"Well?" said the girl.

"Well. In the first place, he said it was a perfect crime the Army released him from the hospital--my word of honor. He very definitely told your father there's a chance--a very great chance, he said--that Seymour may completely lose control of himself. My word of honor." (6)

In the conversation between Muriel and her mother, the mother is constantly interrupting Muriel and not letting her finish her sentences. This is characteristic of a dominant personality that does not share experience and reality between two human beings, but only sees herself in isolation—i.e., away from other people. Because man understands himself in relationship to other people, Muriel has actually no idea as to the quality of Seymour Glass which reflects her alienation from her husband and parents. Muriel is focused on material reality and is ignorant of a lack of understanding of Seymour. Alienation is one of the main concepts of existential theory, as previously detailed with regard to Holden and Sgt. X, and is evident in the alienation between Seymour and his wife, and mother-in-law.

Because they are vacationing in Miami at a resort on the beach, Salinger details the relationship between Seymour and a young girl, Sybil, who provides him with someone to talk to because she views him as a mature, male adult as illustrated by the way in which she refers to him as "See More Glass." The dialogue between Seymour

and Sybil is not only entertaining and real, but also it provides an excellent contrast to the conversation between Muriel and her mother. Seymour can be himself with Sybil which means that he does not want to talk to adults or to be with them, but only wants to be talk to the young girl Sybil. Like Holden and Phoebe, Sgt. X and Esmé, Seymour can only relate to Sybil. In “J. D. Salinger: Development of the Misfit Hero,” Paul Levine states that “Salinger juxtaposes the delightful conversation Seymour has with the little girl on the beach with his complete inability to communicate with any of the adults around him” (94).

It is on the beach that Salinger structures the interaction between Seymour and Sybil and when Sybil comes to Seymour she says, “Are you going in the water, see more glass?” Seymour explains that he has been waiting for her. In the middle of their conversation, Seymour “suddenly got to his feet. He looked at the ocean.” “Sybil” he said, “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll see if we can catch a bananafish” (13). Seymour and Sybil go into the water and as they enter into the water Seymour says,

“You just keep your eyes open for any bananafish. This is a perfect day for bananafish”

“I don’t see any,” Sybil said.

“That’s understandable. Their habits are very peculiar...They lead a very tragic life...You know what they do, Sybil?”

She shook her head.

“Well, they 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 that they're so fat that they can't get out of the hole again. Can't fit through the door."

... "What happens to them?"

... "Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die."

"Why?" asked Sybil.

"Well, they get banana fever. It is a terrible disease." (16)

Why does Salinger have Seymour explain to Sybil the story of the bananafish? According to James Finn Cotter in "A Source for Seymour's Suicide: Rilke's *Voices* and Salinger's *Nine Stories*" Seymour interprets a bananafish as being similar to human existence at the hotel resort because it becomes so heavily loaded with bananas that it cannot get out of the hole. The adults at the hotel eat constantly and destroy their human figure; they enter into a gluttony stage of existence. As stated by James Cotter, "Once humans reach adulthood, they represent the bananafish after its descent into the hole: gluttonous, trapped in a hole, unable to swim free and experience the joy of the open sea" (88). Seymour recognizes that humans are capable of being bananafish, even himself, even Sybil and Muriel. One of the many reasons why Seymour talks to Sybil is because she is innocent and there is within her, at her stage of existence, a certain purity of spirit which Seymour admires. However, during their conversation on the beach, Sybil tells Seymour that if Sharon Lipschutz tries to sit next to him when he is playing the piano at night in the ocean room bar that "Next time, push her off" (Bananafish, 13). Sharon Lipschutz is a three and a half year old young girl, who is innocent and pure and sits next to Seymour on the piano chair which makes Sybil jealous. Sybil's directive to

Seymour to get rid of her alerts Seymour to Sybil's jealousy and possessiveness.

Seymour recognizes that she will grow up and be like Muriel and, while young children are more open and honest, they eventually get to be adults and when in adulthood they enter into a materialistic existence and do not care about anybody but themselves. Like Holden and Sergeant X, Seymour is completely nauseous with the phoniness of the people around him. As explicitly stated by James Cotter, people who have materialistic orientation "get too much sun, drink too much, spend too much time on the phone and go out shopping" in the midst of their vacation (Cotter 86), and lead a kind of *la dolce vita* life style.

Seymour is the only one on the beach who does not want to sun bathe and, therefore, he dresses himself in his bathrobe which is a peculiar behavior, but, understandable, because he does not get drunk in the bar instead seeks out genuine conversation with Sybil. Seymour is self-controlled which is internal motivation because "he will not let life get into his blood as he lives consistently in his head and not in his body and can 'See More' than anyone else in the story" (Cotter 87). Seymour "can see more" because he is intellectually and spiritually at a higher awareness than people who are around him and the fact that he is not understood by others, frustrates him. In accordance with this situation, James Cotter states, "Seymour does not want anymore of his nauseating existence" and "the phony life only makes him vomit" (88). Seymour does not view himself as a bananafish and does not want to destroy his bodily figure by eating too much. According to William Wiegand in "J. D. Salinger: Seventy-Eight Bananas," "the Perfect Day" is the day when the bananafish is able to end all of his suffering by killing himself" (256). If, Wiegand is accurate in his analysis that the

bananafish can indeed end “his suffering by killing himself” then this solution is not a panacea for the majority of people who live like a bananafish and have no problem with it. Instead, according to Gary Lane when in “Seymour’s Suicide Again: A New Reading of J. D. Salinger’s ‘A Perfect Day for Bananafish’ “maintains that Muriel “is bored with her mother and her life, baffled and bored with her husband, and complacently, single-minded unconcerned with everyone” (321). According to Lane, the telephone conversation that Muriel has with her mother, motivates to Lane to label Muriel as “basically corrupt, with the mind of a child, who believes that Seymour is confusing, crude and dangerously near the brink of mental imbalance” (Lane 321). But Sybil sees a different Seymour Glass with her charming naivety and guiltless behavior. Seymour rejects a materialistic life and seeks instead an intellectual and spiritual life in contrast to Muriel’s materialistic preferences and non-intellectual endeavors. With the incident about Sharon Lipschutz, the reader becomes aware of the fact that Sybil will grow up to be a controlling, materialistic person, even at the age of five, Sybil tries to control who spends time with Seymour although they have known each other for a short period of time. Consequently, Seymour knows that once Sybil reaches adulthood her innocence will disappear.

The third section of the story contains Seymour’s “good-bye” to Sybil, the elevator scene and the suicide scene. When Seymour enters the “sub-main floor of the hotel, which management directed the bathers to use” (17) and gets into an elevator with “a woman with zinc salve on her nose” (17). During the ride up to the fifth floor, Seymour says to the woman, “I see you’re looking at my feet.” “I beg your pardon?” was the woman’s response, and Seymour says, “I said I see you’re looking at my feet.”

The woman's reply, as she turned to face the doors of the elevator, was "I beg your pardon. I happened to be looking at the floor." "If you want to look at my feet, say so," says Seymour and adds a judgment: "But don't be a God-damned sneak about it." The woman says to the operator of the elevator, "Let me out here, please." The woman exits from the elevator and Seymour says loudly to himself, "I have two normal feet and I can't see the slightest God-damned reason why anybody should stare at them" (18). Seymour interprets the woman in the elevator as focusing on his feet because she is afraid to look at him as a person which means for Seymour that she is a phony, and "phonies," according to Seymour's perspective, must be corrected which is what he does. Seymour does not want adult people to be staring at him because he thinks that all adults are phony. To his very end, Seymour is uncompromising in that he is not willing to become a phony. Very few people are able to communicate with Seymour and that his "recent unconventional behavior has begun to set him well apart from most people so that he is quite alone spiritually and intellectually" (Demler 21). Seymour prefers to spend time with young, innocent children and, like Holden and Sgt. X they are all females who have yet to lose their innocence. But, unlike Holden and his genuine relationship with Phoebe, and Sgt. X and his relationship with Esmé, Seymour becomes totally depressed because he realizes that Sybil is a young Muriel in that life is filled with bananafish. Seymour exits the elevator and goes back to his room and commits suicide because he cannot find in his life genuine, real people who are not phonies. That is why Seymour "aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple" (18). This is the last sentence in the short story.

In the suicide scene Salinger pretends that Muriel does not exist because he refers to her as “the girl” instead of using her name and thereby identifying her which has been interpreted by some critics as Seymour’s intentionally to commit suicide. Samuel L. Bellman in “New Light on Seymour’s Suicide” maintains that Seymour is “unable to tolerate the everyday sensations of his tiresome, post-war life and has simply lost his mind” (348). Bellman is allowed to state that Seymour has “simply lost his mind” but that judgment fails to take into consideration how a brilliant, 19 year-old Columbia University Ph.D., can think about and believe that suicide is a solution. The emphasis ought not to be on Seymour’s suicide but, rather, on the conditions of his existence which necessitated him to think that suicide was the only solution. Most people are cognitive enough to realize that suicide is not a solution. But, one of the prominent protagonists in Salinger’s literary corpus chooses to accept this as a solution. David Galloway, in *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction*, states Seymour’s suicide is not “merely a rejection of this world of crass superficiality, but it is also – and more significantly—a rejection of the mystical life itself” (150). Bellman and Galloway are two of more than a dozen literary critics of Salinger’s work that have offered a reason for Seymour’s suicide. In reviewing the literature on Salinger, a common criticism is that Salinger does not give enough information or description of the characters in his short stories on which to make a judgment. In “Bananafish,” Salinger does not make clear the reason as to why Seymour commits suicide; it is up to the reader. However, “Bananafish” is explained in detail in *Carpenters*, which holds the answers to questions about Seymour’s behavior. It is necessary to examine *Carpenters* in order to more effectively explain and understand Seymour.

Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters

Salinger published, in his main outlet for his short stories, *The New Yorker* magazine, “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters” in 1955. Although Seymour is the main topic of conversation in this short story, Seymour is not physically present because Buddy, who is two years younger than Seymour, describes to the reader the events that occurred during Seymour’s 1942 marriage to Muriel³. Wiegand notes that without “Carpenters,” Seymour’s suicide “appears motivated chiefly by Seymour’s inability to put up with his bourgeois wife” (254). As previously noted, there are other motivations for Seymour’s act of suicide which are disclosed during the narrative of “Carpenters.” No one in Seymour’s family is informed about his wedding except Boo Boo, his elder sister, who writes a letter to Buddy and urges him to go to the wedding. In her letter she gives her impression of Muriel when she writes: “She is a zero in my opinion, but terrific-looking” (8). She also writes “The point is, Seymour is getting married – Yes, married, so please pay attention. I can’t be there. [. . .] you’ve got to get to the wedding. I’ll never forgive you if you don’t” (8-9). No relative of Seymour is present at the wedding except Buddy. Seymour never shows up at all. At 4:20pm Muriel is led out of the house, crying and leaning for support on her relatives. Even though the wedding did not take place, the guests at the wedding are instructed to drive to Mrs. Fedder’s apartment (and there are limousines outside of the house waiting for them anyway). Not knowing anybody in the wedding, Buddy gets into the last limousine available which contains Mrs. Silsburn, one of Muriel’s aunts, the Matron of Honor—“a hefty girl of about twenty-four or –five, in a pink satin dress” with “a distinctly athletic ethos about her”—her husband referred to as Lieutenant—and an elderly gentleman. Mrs.

Silburn and the Matron of Honor are having a heated conversation, and the topic of this conversation is Seymour. They suddenly realize that they do not know who Buddy is, Mrs. Silburn tells Buddy to identify himself and Matron of Honor says Matron of Honor who says, “You’d better not say you are a friend of the groom. I’d like to get my hands on him for about two minutes. Just two minutes that’s all” (19). At this point of the conversation, Buddy still has not identified himself and quietly listens unsympathetic and angry comments made by the Matron of Honor about Seymour:

But what man in his right mind, the night before he’s supposed to get married, keeps his fiancée up all night blabbing to her all about how he’s too happy to get married and that she’ll have to postpone the wedding till he feels steadier or he won’t be able to come to it? Then when his fiancée told him like a child that everything’s been arranged and planned out for months, that her father’s gone to incredible expense and trouble and all to have a reception and everything like that, and that her relatives and friends are coming from all over the country—then after she explains all that he says to her he’s terribly sorry but he can’t get married till he feels less happy or some crazy thing! Use your head now, if you don’t mind. Does that sound like somebody normal? Does that sound like somebody in their right mind? Or does that sound like somebody that should be stuck in some booby hatch? (39)

In the course of discussion which dominated by the Matron of Honor, the reader is informed that Seymour was a fifteen year old freshman at Columbia University who obtained his Ph.D. at the age of nineteen, spoke several languages, is a professor and

participated for six years in a radio show called *It's a Wise Child* with a pseudo-name "Billy Black." The Matron of Honor confronts Buddy, and he admits that he is Seymour's brother. The elderly gentleman and the Matron of Honor's husband hardly participate in the conversation between the Matron of Honor and Buddy. The group decides to leave the car and walk to Buddy and Seymour's apartment, which is nearby.

While in the apartment, Buddy finds and partially reads Seymour's diary which explains to Buddy why Seymour never showed up at the wedding. Seymour wrote, "I really called to ask her, to beg her for the last time to just go off alone with me and get married. I am too keyed up to be with people. I feel as though I am about to be born" (90). For most people wedding is a joyous occasion that is shared by friends and family. But, unlike most people, Seymour wants to share this joyous event only with Muriel and elope which illustrates the extent of his alienation.

After a call to Mrs. Fedder's house, the guests in Buddy's apartment are informed that Seymour and Muriel have eloped. Guests leave the apartment, but Buddy stays behind because he wants to go and finish reading Seymour's diary which gives him information about how Seymour felt about Muriel:

Oh, God, I'm so happy with her. If only she could be happy with me. I amuse her at times, and [. . .] she gets a vast satisfaction out of telling her friends that she's engaged to the Billy Black who was on "It's a Wise Child" for years. And I think she feels a mixed maternal and sexual drive in my general direction. But on the whole I don't make her really happy. Oh, God, help me. My one terrible consolation is that my beloved has an undying, basically undeviating love for the institution of

marriage itself. She has a primal urge to play house permanently. Her marital goals are so absurd and touching. [. . .] She wants to shop for curtains. She wants to shop for maternity clothes. She wants to get out of her mother's house [. . .] She wants children – good-looking children, with her features, not mine. (72)

Seymour does not interpret the above description of Muriel as a representation of her materialistic nature. Instead, Seymour realizes that Muriel is in some ways more human and normal than he because she does not constantly analyze her feelings and actions and instead simply follows her natural emotions and impulses. Seymour is attracted to Muriel because he is able to see her simplicity and naturalness as very positive qualities. Also important, he realizes that he himself seriously lacks these qualities, and greatly needs them. Based on his views about marriage, it can be stated that Seymour is attempting to fit into society by having a wife and children, and also by becoming aware of his societal responsibilities.

Marriage partners are to serve each other. Elevate, help, teach, strengthen each other, but above all, serve. Raise their children honorably, lovingly, and with detachment. A child is a guest in the house, to be loved and respected – never possessed, since he belongs to God. How wonderful, how sane, how beautifully difficult, and therefore true. The joy of responsibility for the first time in my life. (91)

However, after Seymour has lived with Muriel for six years, from 1942 to 1948, in “Bananafish,” he realizes that life with Muriel, which is chiefly based on materialistic needs, will not satisfy his spirituality. Seymour does make one last effort to include

himself into Muriel's world by agreeing, after prompting by Muriel and her mother, to go through psychoanalysis and, therefore, better understand his behavior. However, according to Eleanor Demler in *The Modern Identity Quest: Five Alienated Heroes of J. D. Salinger*, Seymour "eventually realizes that Muriel is a false guide in his search for identity and leads him on a path to darkness with no resurrection to be had other than his immobilization in the memories of his beloved brothers and sisters" (24).

Similarly, James Lunquist perceives Seymour's suicide "as a result of him acting out of desperation against his quest for love with Muriel" (85). There is a parallelism here among Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour because all three protagonists are influenced by the genuineness and child-like characteristics of Phoebe, Esmé, Sybil, and Muriel.

Camus' Concept of the Absurd

The concept of alienation is a common denominator between existential theorists, although it should be remembered that besides alienation, all of the philosophers that are analyzed in this dissertation in this dissertation have at least one concept that is fundamental to their philosophy. For Camus that primary concept is the concept of the Absurd. Camus views alienation coming from the fact that the world itself is absurd. Camus defines his notion of the concept of the Absurd in "The Myth of Sisyphus," as a feeling "which is at the origin of action and thought, a definite emotion, although confused and indeterminate, present yet distant" (24). The concept of the absurdity of life is relatively new in the history of man because the Greeks do not consider life and the experiences of life to be absurd. Nor did Western man believe that life was absurd when Western man believed in God, a God that gave meaning to his

existence and promised after death eternal existence. Camus' concept of the absurd is partially accounted for the fact that he is an atheist and, therefore, what meaning does life have for man? Camus maintains that the feeling that life is absurd can occur "at the corner of the street or in a restaurant's revolving doors but this experience is extremely personal and impossible to communicate" (Robert de Luppé 2). Camus stresses an awareness of the mechanical aspects of life in that everyday one must brush their teeth, and the next day, and the days after the next day. If one were to brush their teeth and that would mean that one would never have to brush their teeth again, and then this act would stand for something (Gene Thibadeau "Camus' Concept of the Absurd").

The question of "What is the purpose of my striving to give meaning to my life if at the moment of death everything goes to nothing?" is at the core of Camus' thinking. Camus, like Sartre, does not believe in life after death. In fact, he views the very notion of an after-life as a religious argument to control the masses. Like Heidegger, Camus identifies time and the use of time as a critical ingredient in man's development of the meaning of his existence. Furthermore, he believes that there always comes a moment when we must come to terms with time:

We live with the future in mind: "tomorrow", "later on", "when you have a job", "you will understand when you're older."

These inconsistencies are extraordinary, for, after all, the affair depends on death. But a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. [. . .] he places himself with respect to time. [. . .] He belongs to time and, from the horror that takes hold of him, he recognizes time as his worst enemy. (Robert de Luppé 3).

Heidegger, through his philosophy, and Camus through his literary works place special emphasis on the concept of time because Camus believes that “this rebellion of the flesh is the absurd” (3). We all know that we are going to die someday, we just don’t know when. In that sense, Heidegger and Camus view time as the enemy of human beings because human beings do not have a high awareness of the fact that time someday will run out and death will become inevitable.

Camus was not concerned with the concepts of metaphysics, the concepts of philosophy, or the concepts of ethical theory. He was concerned with everyday life and in his literary works placed emphasis on everyday experiences, the life that was lived and was not approached through scholastic philosophy. There is in Sartrean philosophy different modes of existence, Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself, Being-for-Others, and Being-in-the-World. Camus approached his literary genius within Sartre’s concept of Being in the World, but, not from a philosophical perspective. Instead, he looked at the “givens” of life as they appeared to the people that surrounded him in the poorest section of Algiers—that is, “the greatest mass of human beings” (Bree 135). When he spoke of the world, unlike Sartre, he meant the concrete, physical world. From Camus’ perspective, the common world meant his common homeland. The others who also inhabit this world share common traits. They share certain common needs and the most pressing need was, from Camus’ perception, “the need, however elementary, to introduce some kind of conceptional order into their existence; and the need to communicate with other men through art and friendship” (Bree 135).

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Sartre pushed logic behind the lived experience of human existence in order to view the world as absurd. He believes that logic eliminates

“all judgments of value in order to substitute judgments of fact” (Bree 135). However, Camus argued that to live life makes it inevitable that man makes judgments of value and that certain human acts we view as good or bad or as beautiful or ugly. Camus was an advocate of the notion that human existence in its final analysis is basically absurd. But, he could not ignore that “all judgments of value are substitutes for judgments of facts” (Bree 136). Camus had to recognize that we inevitably make judgments of value. Therefore, the basic contribution in the “absurdist” point of view is that we do, every day, make value judgments, and we live by these value judgments in order to judge. He emphasized in his work that “there are problems that one must live first” (134).

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” the main concept is that metaphysical pessimism does not work because one loses hope for mankind. Therefore, “the absurd is more closely related to common sense than one thinks” (134). Camus advocates common sense against the excesses of logic. This advocacy, from the very beginning of his creative writing, pushed him in a different direction than Sartre. Camus maintained that the world is not only absurd but, is, simply irrational: man’s craving for rationality and understanding is at the heart of Camus’ concept of absurdity. While he wanted to have and searched for a perfectly rational and understandable world, his final analysis was, “I wish that everything be explained to me or nothing” (Sisyphus 44).

He made this claim in a moment of revolt against the world in which he lived and, at the same time, as a frustrated rationalist. While recognizing that reason can determine the limits of human existence, he possessed admirable courage and honesty for living as a consciousness in life’s absurdity. He resisted the temptations of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and even Jaspers who had viewed the failure of reason as a triumph of

faith. In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” the absurdity of human existence is maintained because man cannot understand the notion of God and, therefore, Camus rejects the concept of religious existentialism. Human life must have a meaning in order to be more effectively lived. But, every human experience should require us to accept reality; therefore, while Camus accepted the concept of the absurd he discarded the concept of suicide. “One of the few coherent philosophical positions is revolt,” he said, “because this revolt gives to life its grandeur” (Bree 77-78). The grandeur exists only “for a courageous man in his intelligent interaction with a reality that he cannot understand” (Stern 215).

As a postscript, Camus maintained that “If the world were totally understandable, we would not have any art” (Stern 216). Camus did not want to live with illusions. Therefore, he revealed himself as a brother of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, “who blesses all events of life, the good and the bad ones, pouring his courage and his pride in an unconditional love of destiny” (Stern 216). Camus literary corpus is focused on human experiences, man’s place in the world, and other fundamental moral considerations. He maintained that the human search for order and clarity will necessarily be futile and that man’s search will encounter, as a result of the search, a sense of the absurd. In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” “Camus was the knight of thought without fear and without reproach, capable of living without illusions and of affirming an existence recognized as absurd” (Stern 216). He was clearly against the mood of his times, which Karl Jaspers had described in his *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* as “the world as it is ought not to be and [. . .] the world as it ought to be is non-existent. . . . Accordingly, existence is

meaningless” (244). Camus believed that the temptation to commit suicide is a consequence of this realization and man’s experience of the absurd.

Seymour as an Existentialist

The reader is introduced to Salinger’s Seymour Glass in “Bananafish,” which takes place in 1948 in a Miami resort after Muriel and Seymour have been married for six years. In his diary, which was written during 1942, Seymour professes his love for Muriel and his “one terrible consolation is that my beloved has an undying, basically undeviating love for the institution of marriage itself” (72). As revealed in his diary, Seymour views Muriel as being more in touch with people and basic human needs and his attraction to Muriel is based on this judgment. She lives life as “felt” and gives Seymour an added dimension with her world of emotions and feelings which acts as a counterbalance to Seymour, the genius. However, after six years of marriage Seymour prefers the company of Sybil and psychologically resents Muriel’s basic drive toward materialism and non intellectual conversation. At this time in his life, Seymour cannot relate to people outside of his immediate family—the Seymour Glass family. Seymour is stifled by Muriel’s limitations and while he married Muriel to provide him with strength to overcome his alienated existence he becomes aware that Muriel cannot guide him in his search for self identity. According to Eleanor Demler, in *The Modern Identity Quest: Five Alienated Heroes of J. D. Salinger*, the reader is “not told whether the war or Muriel has in fact accelerated his alienation, or whether he has naturally evolved into a point where his alienation is intolerable.” In addition, his unconventional

behavior in the wedding scene and in the elevator with the woman who has zinc salve on her nose further alienates him from adult society.

Seymour's failure with his identity quest fits nicely into existential literature where specific existential theorists have overwhelmingly rejected traditional values. Contrary to literary critics, existentialists reject the notion of a complete and satisfying life. Instead, they maintain that human nature is marked by irreparable losses and that frustration, insecurity, and painful strivings are characteristics of human existence. The existentialists deny that man desires "happiness" or "well-being" not only because such terms as "happiness" and "well-being" are not clearly defined although "these terms are used somewhat more specifically to denote a state of peace, harmony, proportion, calm, serenity, or contentment achieved from worldly concerns. The existentialists are not denying that the state of "happiness" or "well-being" is a desirable state" (Olson 16). But they stress that it should not be the focal point of one's endeavors; one does not toil in order to be happy or content. There are, in short, higher values. What the existentialists are maintaining is that "the most worthy and only realizable human values are those generated by a life of frustration, insecurity and painful striving" (Olson 16). The existentialists, then, are acutely aware of the tragedy inherent in the human condition; their task is to liberate man from the frustrations of everyday life and, instead, place the focus on a life that is characterized by passion and intensity. It can be argued that the ordinary man wants to live a life of security and enjoyment of worldly goods, free from anguish, suffering, and strife. The existentialists place the emphasis on man's acts of free choice, individual self assertion, personal love, or creative work,

and the point to be made is that these lived experiences are impossible without anguish, suffering, and risk.

William Wiegand, in his “Seventy-eight Bananas,” maintains that “Seymour, a bananafish himself, has become so glutted with sensation that he cannot swim out into society again” (125). This statement is obviously true once the reader understands Seymour’s behavior in the elevator scene, his not showing up for the wedding, and his act of suicide. Ihab Hassan maintains that “the taste of life’s corruption is so strong in the mouth of Seymour Glass, and the burden of self-alienation, even from his wife, Muriel, is so heavy that suicide seems to him the only cleansing act possible” (267). Seymour is definitely in a state of alienation and does not recognize his Sartrean freedom to choose another existence. Camus’ concept of the absurd does not allow him to *prima-facie* accept the concept of suicide because all existentialists, beginning with Kierkegaard, advocate that man lives life with passion and that the passion allows man to overcome the anguish and suffering. Seymour’s struggle to find meaning in his existence and his awareness of absurdity—that his life has to stand for something – which is at the core of existential theory would place Seymour within the existential camp.

Notes for Chapter Four

1. The references used in this chapter are from the *Nine Stories*. (Salinger, Jerome David. *Nine Stories*. New York: Little Brown, 1953).
2. The references used in this chapter are from *Raise High the Roofbeam Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. (Salinger, Jerome David. New York: Little Brown, 1963).
3. The Glass Children are Seymour, the eldest, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walt and Waker – twins, Franny and Zooey.

Chapter Five

SALINGER'S EXISTENTIAL HEROES

Introduction

Nina Baym, the editor of *The Norton Anthology*, when summarizing the literary developments in American literature states the following:

Throughout the 1950s and early into the 1960s, social critics perceived a stable conformity to American life, a dedication to an increasingly materialistic standard of living, whose ethical merit was ensured by continuity with the pre-war world – a continuity that proved to be delusory” (Norton Vol. 2, 1776).

Based on Baym’s definition, it is not wrong to state that in his fiction Salinger provides a dichotomy with, on one hand, characters such as Holden’s brother D. B., whom Holden calls “a prostitute” because he decided to write for Hollywood instead of pursuing his creative talents in writing; Sgt. X’s wife and mother-in-law are also included in this category as being “phonies” because they are totally materialistically oriented; finally, Seymour’s wife Muriel and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Fedder are, based on Salinger’s two short stories, “Bananafish” and “Carpenters,” totally materialistic and fail to see the necessary spiritual side of people. All these characters have strong materialistic selves and behave according to agreed social norms. On the other hand are Salinger’s three main protagonists, Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour, whose spiritual selves are dominant, and behave unconventionally; as a result, they are labeled as “freaks” or

“outsiders.” As stated by William Wiegand, “The important question in Salinger is why these intelligent, highly sensitive, affectionate beings fight curious, grueling battles, leaderless and causeless, in a world they never made” (253). There are two important messages that Salinger gives: first, it is very difficult to lead a spiritual life in a world that is materialistically oriented; second, yes, you did not make the world you live in, but you have to exist in that world and what you make of yourself is totally up to you. This dissertation labels Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour as “heroes” for their continuous efforts in leading their misfit lives.

F. H. Heinemann, in his brilliant explication of existential theory *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, notes that “The existentialists truly reveal the predicament of man at a time when the moral law has lost its Divine Sanction and when the individual, unable to fall back on any accepted standard of values, has to make his own solitary decisions” (177). The concept of man making “his solitary decisions” is a part of Paul Levine and William Wiegand’s definition of an existential hero and lies at the center of Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective truth. Prior to World War I, Gordon Bigelow in his “A Primer of Existentialism” notes that there was a common belief among intellectuals and philosophers of Western Europe that reason and science would provide uninterrupted human progress. Furthermore, it was believed that each generation will enable humanity to move forward by building on the knowledge acquired from the previous generations. However, this was not the case. As stated by Bigelow, “Their vision of a continuous upward spiral of Progress that cracked open like a melon on the rock of World War I...died in that sickening and unimaginable butchery” (175).

After the devastating experiences of World War I, Great Depression and World War II, the loss of idealism and the optimistic vision was inevitable. In his autobiographical notes, Salinger talks about experiencing the horror of World War II in the European Theatre and how he became aware of the slaughter of millions of Jews by the Nazis. He describes it as having left him with a meaningful understanding of evil in the world. “But only with the atomic bomb did this become an unbearable terror, a threat of instant annihilation which confronted all men, even those most insulated by the thick crust of material goods and services” (Bigelow 173). The unspeakable horror and drastic changes in living conditions forced people to live:

at ever higher levels of abstraction, have collectivized individual man out of existence, have driven God from the Heavens, or what is the same thing, from the hearts of men. The existentialists are convinced that modern man lives in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other men, from his own true self (173).

While all four conditions are important, from an existential perspective, self alienation or an unauthentic existence is of most importance and the stress on authenticity is a unique existential emphasis. The secondary characters in the works of Salinger cited in this dissertation exist in a self alienated mode which is dominated by their social and materialistic nature. Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour experience frustration and disappointment in interaction with their perspective secondary characters. Both Seymour and Buddy are striving toward authenticity and can act as a model and guide for each other but Seymour’s relationship to Muriel and her mother forces him to seek

the company of Sybil. Phoebe, Esmé, and Sybil provide Salinger's three protagonists with sensitivity and simplicity.

The last sections of chapters two, three, and four concentrated on proving that Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour Glass can be labeled as existentialists because their behaviors are accurately described based on existential themes including Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's concept of death, Sartre's concept of freedom of choice and bad faith, and all five of the existential philosophers' interpretations of the concept of alienation. This fifth and last chapter of the dissertation will focus on proving that Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour Glass, in addition to being labeled existentialists, are, in fact, "existential heroes."

The next section analyzes Paul Levine's and William Wiegand's perceptions as to what constitutes an existential hero and argues that the contemporary notion of "hero" has changed significantly in contrast to traditional perceptions of what makes a hero. This is followed by a description of Kierkegaard's concept of subjective truth, a concept which acts as a motivation for Salinger's three protagonists, and a concept without which the three protagonists could not be labeled as heroes. The final section, "The Existential Connection," answers the questions "What is existentialism?" and "How does it help man to face contemporary problems?" Contrary to the opinions of others, existentialism is alive and a vital movement in Western intellectual societies in that it is a call for man to face today's problems which will help to reaffirm the relevance of this research project.

Paul Levine's Hero

Paul Levine in "J. D. Salinger: The Development of the Misfit Hero" maintains that Salinger's later fiction is dominated by "the misfit hero." Levine defines "misfit hero," using Holden and Seymour as examples, as one that "can never be accepted by, or accept, society. His vision – like his impaired sense of taste – renders his problem insoluble. With it he cannot live in society; without it he cannot live with himself" (94). For example, after the elevator scene in "Bananafish," Seymour returns to his room and gives a final glance at his wife, which includes an "echo of a relationship that has failed for him," a glance that "confirms the hopelessness of his moral plight; for to love as a man is merely to remind oneself of the limitations of that love [. . .] there is little, really, for Seymour to lose [. . .] and [so he] fires a bullet through his right temple" (Lane 325). Seymour cannot communicate with the adult world and live in that world on its own terms, and that is what contributes to his suicide.

Levine does not substitute the word "existential" for his "misfit," but all existentially oriented people are to varying degrees "misfits" in society. This fact of alienation in which the individual exists is normal and predictable. The degree to which Salinger's protagonists are misfits is the degree to which they are alienated from their society. It is a commonality of the human condition to accept a degree of alienation in the individual's relationship to society, but the acute alienation of Holden and Seymour is one of the common denominators that the existentialists emphasize: it is accurate to talk about Holden and Seymour as alienated from society.

Some of the existential theorists detailed in this dissertation such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre were, during their lifetimes, alienated

from their societies. When the Bishop of Copenhagen died, Kierkegaard wrote critical letters in the newspaper objecting to the obituary statement that the Bishop had lived a life like Christ. As a result of these letters, he was alienated from that society.

Nietzsche, after his early retirement as a professor at the University of Bern, became a recluse and lived a lonely existence traveling throughout Germany and Italy. Heidegger accepted the Rectorship of Freiburg University in 1933 but became disillusioned with the National Socialists which caused him to resign the Rectorship the following year. Furthermore, "In English-speaking countries, his political associations with Nazism were for some time an obstacle against a careful examination of his thought" (Collins 169). Heidegger's professorship at Freiburg continued until 1945 when he moved to the Black Forest until his death in 1976. Sartre was the first person to reject a Nobel Prize, and, in the process of doing that, he embarrassed and alienated himself from French culture. Sartre was viewed as a misfit in French society: he never married, used his philosophical position at the university for political reasons, and, at the age of seventy, moved in with a seventeen year-old French girl. He was a misfit from one perspective but he was also a hero from another; he was conscious of giving meaning to his existence. Consequently, when he died in 1980, fifty thousand Parisians marched down the Champs Ellysees as a tribute to his memory.

Not all heroes are misfits and not all misfits are heroes. Levine recognizes this when, in focusing on Holden and Seymour, he states, "In this sense, Salinger's misfit who is a hero is really a hero who is a misfit: a misfit in society because he refuses to adjust and a misfit in the private world because he is too much a product of his Western culture to follow Zen" (97). William Wiegand, in his "J.D. Salinger: Seventy-Eight

Bananas,” also refers to Salinger’s protagonists as heroes: “This is essentially the vision of his heroes – of Holden Caulfield, Seymour Glass [. . .] and the rest” (253). Actually, in his almost eight-page article, Levine mentions the word “hero” thirty-seven times but neither Levine nor Wiegand provide a definition in their articles as to the meaning of “Salinger’s heroes” nor do they go into a descriptive analysis as to the characteristics of Salinger’s heroes.

The American Heritage Dictionary provides four definitions of the word “hero,” citing mythology and legend, a war hero, heroes with special achievements, such as a hero in medicine, and “The principal male character in a novel, poem or dramatic presentation” (608). Levine and Wiegand are justified on the basis of this fourth definition to characterize Salinger’s protagonists as heroes. But, in this research project, this definition is insufficient to justify labeling Salinger’s protagonists as heroes.

Levine views Salinger’s “misfits” as heroes because they have not been able to reconcile their unique vision with their ability to communicate in society. Holden and Seymour are attempting to liberate themselves from the banalities of life by not pursuing wealth, a nice car, a beautiful house, and a “la dolce vita” life style. Obviously, Holden and Seymour are misfits who were clearly portrayed by Salinger’s literary genius. What do they have in common? They never stop trying to define themselves in society and every time they fail, they try again. They are heroes because they make their own choices, because they keep trying even though their choices fail them, and because they refuse to compromise.

Wiegand makes a distinction between a non-conformist who is threatened by the forces within society and “the Salinger hero” who significantly contributes to the conflict that exists between him and society. For example, Holden’s memory of the death of his brother Allie motivates him not to care about his relationships with people with the one exception of Phoebe. His constant awareness of death is termed by Wiegand as a “spiritual illness,” which causes his alienation from society and is not caused by a confrontation with it. “Although the non-conformist hero is constantly threatened by external forces in society which seeks to inhibit and to destroy him” (Wiegand 253), this is not true for Holden. Holden does not flunk out of Pencey because he is not able to meet the unreasonable demands placed on him. Rather, he flunks out because he does not pay attention in class and does not want to get involved in the process of learning. Learning is not a priority for Holden if it is going to lead to nothing. Holden is responsible for his alienation from his classmates at Pencey, his teachers, his parents, and his previous classmates at the two private schools that he attended prior to coming to Pencey because of his “spiritual illness,” which is his preoccupation with death.

Why do Salinger’s protagonists want to liberate themselves from the banalities of suburban society in the New York City area? Salinger’s characters are aware of the fact that death is stalking them. They have, in fact, a horrible awareness of death, which is crippling them. They realize that being alive and giving meaning to their existence overshadows the particulars such as success, fame, and money. They do not have the same criteria for judging success as society does because life for them is finite. For Holden and Seymour, the ultimate end is death in that there is no distinction between

someone who is rich and famous or someone who is a street bum. They are heroes because they want to give meaning to their existence and in the pursuit of doing so, they view themselves as having to go against society.

Rosette C. Lamont published “The Hero in Spite of Himself,” in the *Yale French Studies* in 1962, eleven years after the publication of *The Catcher of the Rye*, when Salinger’s fame was at his highest point. Lamont argues that the concept of the “hero” has changed considerably from traditional concepts. She states,

If we examine the works of contemporary writers, we are struck with the shift which has occurred in the image of the hero. The traditional concept no longer applies to our times. In the past the hero was the shining example of society. Whether he was myth turned to reality, or reality become myth, he was the man or woman who has been able to battle past personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forces. (73)

The traditional hero represented society with the task of guiding that society “towards values shared by all, but best represented in one” (73). However, in contemporary times, with the threat of the destruction of humanity, “the hero cannot, indeed must not, represent his society” (73). The male or female hero instead of representing society is a rebel or an outcast from society (such as Holden and Seymour) and the degree to which they are a rebel or misfit is equal to the degree to which they influence society. Passive resistance to society, such as in the cases of Holden and Seymour, is substituted for traditional feats of courage because contemporary society has experienced two World Wars, concentration camps, ethnic genocide, and revolutions that have completely

destroyed its legitimacy. The traditional super hero is significantly different from Salinger's heroes in that his heroes exhibit everyday human flaws and can be labeled as reclusive, alienated and lonely. Salinger's heroes do have flaws and failings that they sometimes conquer as in the case of Sgt. X but not in the cases of Holden and Seymour. Salinger's flawed heroes are facing the same types of problems that the everyday person is facing. They are not the typical hero type when viewed from the perspective of their defects. Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour make mistakes and are just average people that face boundary situations. Sgt. X works his way out his boundary situation, in Gaufurt, Bavaria as evidenced from the first section of the short story which occurs six years later. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the reader is not provided information about Holden's future, and, obviously, Seymour's suicide, which is not explained, means that Seymour does not have a future.

While it is accurate to state that Holden and Seymour are alienated from their respective societies, this is also true for Sgt. X. Prior to his psychological problems in the third section of the short story, when his face is twitching and he is triple reading the sentences, Sgt. X's behavior shows that he is alienated from his wife and mother-in-law in both the first and second sections of the short story and that he is alienated from the other men in his unit (he never plays pool with them) during the second section of the story while he is experiencing military training. In the first section, it is obvious that Sgt. X is acting in bad faith with his wife because he does not explain to her his need to go to Esmé's wedding. In the third section, he is alienated from himself because of his horrific wartime experiences, being the first one into the concentration camps and witnessing the gruesome scenes of bodies lying on the ground. It is in Germany in 1944

that Sgt. X faces a boundary situation which he, nevertheless, successfully deals with after receiving the letter from Esmé. Sgt. X's need is explained to the reader in the last section of the story when he opens the box and reads the letter, and he reaches down to the gift of her father's watch. The title "For Esmé – With Love and Squalor" means that he has a non-sexual, platonic love for Esmé and that part of his human condition enables him to begin the cure of psychological disorientation by allowing him to sleep.

The title informs the reader that Sgt. X has this feeling of love and connectiveness to Esmé, represented by the word "squalor," which stands for war and death. Yes, he has capitulated to his wife and his mother-in-law, and he is alienated from them in the second section of the story when he complains about the quality of his wife's letters and how boring and difficult it is for him to read them. But his love for Esmé as a human being enables him to sleep, which is the beginning of his cure.

Like Holden and Seymour, Sgt. X is a misfit who has psychological problems although the source of his psychological problems is not to be found in his relationship to society. All three protagonists (like Salinger), received psychological treatment: Holden, when he is in California, Sgt. X while he is stationed in Germany and Seymour while he is in the Army prior to meeting Muriel. In "For Esmé," the first section of the short story takes place in 1950, six years after Sgt. X's mental breakdown in Germany, and it is obvious that Sgt. X has faced his boundary situation and is able to logically deal with his reality although he does continue to exist in bad faith with his family.

During the war, Sgt. X's wife and mother-in-law do not show any concern for him. The mother-in-law has the audacity to ask Sgt. X to send her some yarn. Feeling abandoned and rejected, Sgt. X is depressed. For Sgt. X, Esmé's letter and her father's

watch are invaluable. Not only do the letter and the watch give Sgt. X a glimmer of hope that he yearns for, but they also illustrate the fact that someone indeed cares for him even though Sgt. X and Esmé have only spent twenty or thirty minutes together a year ago and have never seen each other since. Therefore, the question we need to ask is not why Sgt. X gives in to his wife and mother-in-law. The question that we ought to ask is, “What would have happened to Sgt. X if he had not received the letter and the watch?”

Kierkegaard's Concept of Subjective Truth

Although it might seem inappropriate to talk about Kierkegaard at this late stage in the development of this dissertation, that perception is not accurate. Kierkegaard is characterized as the “father of existentialism” and the reason for this title is not that he wants to save Christianity (which, of course, he is trying to do) but because he was the first one to talk about the concept of the individual, and he did this through his intense effort on the concept of subjective truth. Kierkegaard was the first Western thinker to pinpoint the concept of subjective truth. While an understanding of existential theory is necessary for the development of this dissertation, it is equally important to understand that Kierkegaard’s concept of subjective truth is central to his concept of the individual. The message of existentialism, in contrast to other philosophical schools of thought and movements, is actually quite straightforward and direct. The main message is that every human being, as an individual, is responsible for what he does, responsible for who he is, responsible for the way he faces and deals with the world, and ultimately responsible for the way the world is. If one believes that human existence should be a

quest for values, reasons, and purposes accompanied by passion and governed by individual responsibility, then that person is in agreement with the values expounded by existential philosophers.

The central themes of existential thought are the significance of the individual, the importance of passion in everyday life, the real irrational aspects of human existence, and the importance of subjective truth, death, and authentic existence. To talk about subjective truth is for most people to talk about the merely personal or psychological aspects of their existence. Kierkegaard's concept of subjectivity can best be understood in his distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Subjective truth for Kierkegaard is confined to the boundaries of the realm of uncertainty, that is, instances where there is no way of getting an objective answer to the question you are asking, such as "Is there a God?" If we limit subjective truth to the realm of uncertainty, then a subjective truth does not run directly opposed to the notion of an objective truth. Subjective truth does not correspond to reality nor can it be proven in a scientific way. But, it does refer to something that we might call a commitment.

Subjective truth for Kierkegaard requires making a commitment and, in addition, what is most central to his thought is "the leap of faith" – which is to decide to believe in something or to participate in something or to live in a certain kind of way. The passion that accompanies the belief or the commitment to live in a certain way is what makes it subjective. The decision cannot be decided objectively. For example, to believe in God or to select a particular religion are not objective decisions because there are no proofs for God's existence. Kierkegaard would maintain that we are not talking about an exception to the laws of science, but instead, we are talking about a realm in

which scientific explanation does not even exist. When we attempt to prove the existence of God, that belief no longer becomes a matter of faith. It becomes a matter of scientific evidence. What Kierkegaard is saying is that we cannot mix the subjective and objective realms. The subjective realm is based on faith while the objective realm is based on testing reality. Faith is the realm of personal meaning.

One of Kierkegaard's most important insights was the distinction between reason and faith. For example, Kierkegaard maintained that the Christian Bible is not rational. To believe that Christ allowed himself to be nailed to a cross when, being the son of God, he would know about man's existence in the future is thoroughly irrational. But that is exactly Kierkegaard's point, namely, that faith overcomes doubt and that a scientific statement does not require faith. Man needs faith when he has doubts. Kierkegaard maintained that the greater the doubt the greater the faith or, as Nietzsche would say, the greater the risk the greater the faith.

The idea of human existence is absolutely essential to all existential philosophers in that it means that one must take hold of one's life by making personal decisions. It has to do with living a passionate existence and with understanding the drama of life. All of the existential theorists referred to in this study distinguish between authentic and inauthentic existence. Inauthentic existence is usually identified with the herd, the mob, the general run of people who do not make decisions, but, instead, go along with the flow of the crowd or do what they are supposed to do. Heidegger refers to this kind of person as "Das Man." However, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre maintain that you exist because you are passionate about your existence, because you make decisions about your existence, and because

you have in some sense taken hold of your life. This perception of human existence is a distinctively authentic, exciting notion enabling man to create his own essence, his own meaning to his existence. In 1831 Kierkegaard becomes engaged to Regina Olson and later that year he breaks the engagement. Kierkegaard had to look inside of himself and to decide if he wanted to spend his life married with a family or, instead, to write about the status of Christianity in Danish society. He knew he could not do both. He rejected the sensuous life which he viewed as not worth pursuing and opted instead for his perception of the spiritual life in that he wanted to save the original meaning of Christianity. Therefore, he made a decision that changed his life.

Kierkegaard's concept of subjective truth means that you have to come to some central decision as to what your life is going to stand for. He believed that an individual is one who makes this decision as to the meaning and direction of his life, which means that in Kierkegaardian philosophy there is a connection between the concept of the individual, the concept of subjective truth, and the concept of authenticity. In order to become an individual, a person must have a moment of subjective truth which moves them along in the direction of becoming authentic. In the last sentence of one of his most important works, *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard says, "Only the truth which edifies is truth for you" (257) which means that all human truth is subjective. Kierkegaard wanted a value by which he was prepared to live and for which, if necessary, he was willing to die. Kierkegaard said, "Let others complain that this age is wicked, my complaint is that it is wretched, for it lacks passion" (Olson 18).

Holden, Sgt. X and Seymour are alienated from their respective environments based on the evidence of their behavior. Sgt. X is alienated from his wife, his mother-

in-law, and the other men in his unit, but not from Esmé who represents “love” in the title of the short story. Sgt. X does not exercise Sartre’s concept of the freedom of choice and does exhibit Sartre’s concept of Bad Faith by not attending Esmé’s wedding in England. Sgt. X does exhibit, after his military experiences, a “spiritual illness” which is challenged by Esmé’s gift of her father’s watch. Salinger indicates on the final pages of the short story that Sgt. X is in the process of dealing with his psychological dysfunctionality. But, there is no information that indicates to the reader that Sgt. X is going to lead an authentic existence, that he will find fulfillment and some happiness in life. The reader is required to come to a conclusion as to what happens in the future to Sgt. X.

At the end of *The Catcher*, Holden leaves the reader with the same sense of doubt as to what the future will hold for him. At the end of the novel, Holden says the following:

That’s all I’m going to tell you about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how sick I got and all, and what school I’m supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don’t feel like it. I really don’t. That stuff doesn’t interest me too much right now. A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don’t. I think I am, but how do I know? I swear it’s a stupid question.

(216)

In this passage it is evident that Holden does not make a decision, which is critical in existential analysis. One of the main characteristics of the existential movement is that it is an appeal to everyone “to care for their inner life [. . .] for their true self, their authentic existence” (Heinemann 225). Holden frequently uses the word “phony” with regard to the situations and people in his surroundings, which is not an open attitude towards growth and self-awareness. His perception of reality is basically negative, and there is no indication by Salinger that Holden’s life in the future will become authentic.

At one point in the novel, Holden wants to live in the woods by himself, and at another point, he wants to become a deaf mute so he does not have to experience meaningless conversations. The main direction of the meaning and value of the existential philosophers presented in this study is to give your existence more meaning and to have you exercise responsibility for your own actions in relation to other people. “A choice is not authentic because it is made by the Self and of the Self, but because it is the right choice, i.e. it is the choice of the right moral order and of the right action in these particular circumstances, made on the basis of this moral standard” (Heinemann 212).

It is difficult to analyze Salinger’s three protagonists in this dissertation not only because he leaves out more than he includes, not only because he had generated an industry around himself so there are more than ten interpretations as to why Seymour committed suicide and there is no definitive prediction as to where Holden and Sgt. X will eventually find their spiritual and psychological contentment. To add to this difficulty is the attempt to attach it to a movement in philosophy that has its critics and advocates but is basically widely misunderstood. Existential theorists are not only in

agreement on the concept of subjective truth, the concept of the individual, but, more importantly, according to Marjorie Green in her excellent article “Authenticity: An Existential Virtue,” “the stress on authenticity is [. . .] a unique existentialist emphasis – and an important one” (266). There is no concept of authentic individualism in Idealism or Realism or all of the “isms” in the history of Western philosophy except, of course, with existentialism.

The Existential Connection

What is Existentialism? If one were requesting a definition of existentialism then the question cannot be answered because there is no single definition. There are, however, several philosophies with profound differences that can be termed as an existential philosophy. As previously detailed, Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy is different than Nietzsche’s atheistic philosophy and both of them are significantly different from Sartre’s philosophy. The term “Existentialism” does reflect a certain mental attitude, a spiritual movement which is significant in the world today, and it is possible to explain existentialism in three different ways. The first way is by focusing on particular existential philosophers, which has been the approach of this research project as stated in Chapter One. The second approach is to define the political and social situations to which Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus responded, as detailed in Chapter One. The third approach is to change the form of the question from the definition or essence of the movement to the function of the movement¹.

Some of the questions which existential theory attempts to answer arose during the first half of the twentieth century, and by 1950, Sartre brought the movement to the awareness of the Western European mentality. Existentialism attempts to liberate man “from the domination of external forces, of society, of the state, and of dictatorial power” (Heinemann 167). This is why F. H. Heinemann titled his book *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, because existentialism is a philosophy of crisis. It is therefore possible to change the question from “What is existentialism?” to “What is the function of existentialism in the present circumstances?” (167).

One of the primary functions of existentialism is a reevaluation of certain traditional problems and a focus on problems that are lived, directly experienced, suffered and intimately connected with man’s Being. That is, problems which are facing man today and from which we cannot escape. The justification for attempting to prove that Salinger’s protagonists meet the criteria to be characterized as “existential heroes” is that it results in a heightened awareness of the fact that we as individuals are responsible for the quality of the world, the quality of our society, and the quality of our lives. It is imperative to recognize that change will only occur if there is first an awareness that the change can occur. Because an awareness of a goal always comes before its actuality, one of the reasons for the revitalization of existential philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre is that it will encourage and foster an awareness in people of their disenchantment with life.

After the title and dedication pages of *Nine Stories*, Salinger reserves a separate page for the following: “We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping? – A Zen Koan.” Koans are said to reflect the “enlightened

or awakened” state of persons and to shock the minds of other people into an awareness of the concept or situation. “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” You will not hear the sound of one hand clapping. You will hear the sound of clapping only if two hands come together and work in harmony. By using the analogy of two hands clapping, Salinger wants to show that there are two sides to an individual, the spiritual self and the social or materialistic self. Only when the spiritual self and the social/materialistic self of the individual are in harmony will the individual lead a fulfilling life because the selves of the individual are balanced. Characters such as Muriel, Mrs. Fedder, Holden’s brother D. B., and Sgt. X’s wife and mother-in-law are examples of individuals whose social/materialistic selves are in control, and their spiritual selves are ignored. These characters lead mundane lives, and in the daily routine of their lives, they ignore the necessity of a spiritual component. They lack the awareness to realize that something is missing in their lives. Only the spiritual component can fill the void, in which case the people identified above would be more understanding and sympathetic towards Salinger’s misfits.

Unlike the majority of society, Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour have a heightened sense of spirituality. They know that materialistic things and the petty tasks of daily life are trivial. They are trying to liberate themselves from the banalities of life and give their existence a meaning because they know that life is finite. For Salinger’s misfit heroes, having a meaningful existence is the most important goal. Like the majority of characters in Salinger’s works, the three protagonists ask themselves this question: “What does our existence do for us?” In their attempts to answer this question and

thereby define their existence, they become frustrated because they are labeled as freaks or outcasts by the majority of society. They are misunderstood and under appreciated.

When Salinger is using the analogy of “the sound of one hand clapping,” he is trying to show that one form of the individual self is dominant, in most cases the social/materialistic self, and the spiritual component is ignored or overlooked. What Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour are trying to do is to balance the two components, the social/materialistic and spiritual selves, and they fail miserably in their attempts. For them, the spiritual component is the dominant form of existence as personified by Holden, Seymour, and to a much lesser extent Sgt. X with their self fascination with their alienation from society. Holden and Seymour lack the social component, and they know that they cannot fill the void without compromising the spiritual component, which they are not willing to do. This indictment cannot be made against Sgt. X because his boundary situation is caused by his wartime experiences. His relationship to society, as stated previously, illustrates his ability to move up the ranks in the Army and to successfully finish his intelligence training, and although he definitely displays alienated behavior with the significant others in his life, he does have a record of a positive relationship with society and cannot be included within the same category as Holden and Seymour. Salinger’s three protagonists are pained by life as they try to have a balance between the two hands so that they could hear the sound of two hands clapping. All receive psychological treatment in order to recover from their traumatic experiences.

Seymour is, to a certain degree, a different case. Why did Salinger have Seymour commit suicide? Why didn’t Salinger write a different ending such as sending

Seymour off to a deserted place or have him live like a recluse? Salinger could have ended the story in a number of different ways, but he chose suicide. So, what is the significance of this? What message does Salinger want to give? Salinger does not suggest suicide as a solution to man's problems. Seymour's attitude is "I have experienced existence and I still want to kill myself," which makes the act of suicide his own choice, and, hence, a liberating act. Because of the suffering that he has encountered in his lifetime, suicide seems like a rational choice to Seymour. The reader can compare Seymour's happiness and excitement in looking forward to marrying Muriel, as stated in "Carpenters," and that intensity of living with his depressed mood in wanting to leave Muriel six years later as stated in "Bananafish."

Although human beings have a life-long craving for happiness very few people manage to find true happiness. According to existentialists once that state of being is achieved, lasting happiness depends on a man's state of maturity, most of which has been derived from extremely unhappy encounters and experiences. The relationship between happiness and maturity defies the reigning wisdom of the West, that happiness is a product of youth and naturally diminishes with time. Many writers and thinkers seem to present old age as catastrophic, a final bad joke on the false dream of ever being happy. Existentials maintain that unhappy people rarely blame themselves for their condition. There is not one definite road to happiness, but the concept of Being, that is, giving meaning to your existence and creating your own essence, regardless of the path you take, is central to the existential attitude. What the five existential philosophers detailed in this research project have in common is a passion to create meaning in their

lives. This attitude, which is central to the existential movement, is dominant in the Salinger characters primarily considered in this dissertation.

There is significant evidence that Holden wants to give meaning to his existence. As noted at the end of *The Catcher in the Rye* when Holden says “It is such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you are going to do till you do it? The answer is you don’t. I think I am but how do I know? I swear it is a stupid question” (216). Holden does not make a decision on how he is going to behave once he comes out of the sanitarium. Although as stated in the previous material contained in the section on “Kierkegaard’s Concept of Subjective Truth,” it must be repeated that every existential oriented person has to come to some central decision as to what his life is going to stand for. Kierkegaard maintained that the moment of subjective truth is an awareness of one’s possibility and is not a random thought of the many thoughts in human consciousness. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy the individual is educated by his possibilities and if the person is honest with himself towards his possibilities then he will have faith in his possibilities and then have faith in himself to accomplish his possibilities. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy the decision as to the meaning of your existence is not a random thought. A person does not wake up in the morning and decide to become a medical doctor. According to Kierkegaard, a person thinks about going into the medical field, examining his possibilities to achieve a specific goal such as becoming a medical doctor. The moment of subjective truth comes after an extended period of analyzing your possibilities. As noted previously, the most important concept in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is the concept of faith. Faith is the inward certainty of one’s possibilities which makes possible the attainment of the

possible. Faith in your possibilities means, for Kierkegaard, that you can reach your possibilities.

As detailed in Chapter Two, Holden is labeled an existentialist because of his alienated behavior, his preoccupation with death, his Bad Faith in himself, and Sartre's concept of the freedom of choice. His dominant psychological orientation appears to be towards rejection, the concept of phoniness and a negative attitude toward his possibilities. Frederick L Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner in their acclaimed *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* maintain that "The next step for a reader should be to realize that Holden Caulfield is actually a saintly Christian person [. . .] he himself never does a wrong thing [. . .] he sacrifices himself in a constant war against evil" (29). Yes, Holden does want to be a catcher in the rye for young people and save them from falling off the cliff; he does act altruistically when he is with the nuns in the station and gives them ten dollars because he is depressed over the fact that they are eating a meager breakfast. Holden acts altruistically with Sunny, the prostitute, with the repulsive Ackley, and with the mother of a classmate he meets on the train, a classmate he detests but only says positive things about her son, Ernest. Holden worries about the ducks in the winter time in Central Park, he enters into a positive and sensitive conversation with the ugly daughter of the headmaster of Pencey Prep. There are innumerable incidences where Holden is sensitive to the needs of other people which cause Gwynn and Blotner to claim "For Jesus and Holden Caulfield truly love their neighbors, especially the poor in goods, appearance and spirit" (30). The above incidences in *The Catcher in the Rye* are proof that Holden wants to give meaning to his existence because in each incident he has the freedom of choice to act like Stradlater

and Maurice but, instead, acts as one who is not alienated from society, is not dominated by materialistic gain and does bring out his spiritual self to help people. At the end of the novel, Gywn and Blotner draw our attention to the fact that Holden, like Jesus, forgives those that have acted with evil towards him: “About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody” (216). Holden’s sensitivity to other people’s problems characterizes him as an existential hero who suffers alienation from his environment and society while, at the same time, helping people.

The value of relating Salinger’s misfits to existential theory is that it provides a background to better understand and interpret Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour’s behavior. After one becomes aware of the dominating concept of death in Holden’s behavior, which is a valid and well-documented existential theme, it is accurate to describe his behavior from an existential perspective, a perspective which contains the philosophical understanding of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. Consequently, explaining Holden’s behavior within the context of existential theory cements that quality of his existence which explains his irritation with “phony” people, his quest for authenticity, and his alienation from his environment.

It is more difficult, in contrast to Holden, to place Sgt. X into the role of alienation because from a totally social perspective he is comfortable in his society in 1944. Salinger’s “For Esmé” has received immense critical recognition for the way in which Salinger structured the short story: the first scene occurs in 1950 in the United States, the second scene occurs in 1944 in England, and the third scene occurs in 1945

in Germany shortly after the end of the war. It is in the third and last section of the short story that the reader is hooked and cannot stop reading. The main concept in “For Esmé” is not the concept of death as it was for Holden but the concept of love which, from Salinger’s perspective, is a powerful force in the world. The reader does not have to triple read the lines in the first section to realize that Sgt. X is somewhat alienated from his wife and mother-in-law, which means that he is probably alienated from most of the people he works with because Salinger portrays him as a man without close friends. Sgt. X is not close to his jeep driver, not close to any other character in the short story, and has just been released from an Army hospital because of his behavior. When he opens the green box and reads Esmé’s letter and touches her father’s watch, he remembers her last words to him when they parted and then he can sleep. Death and love are the two main concepts in Salinger’s two main protagonists, Holden and Sgt. X.

Obviously an argument can be made that Seymour, although he only appears in one short story, “Bananafish,” is a major protagonist in Salinger’s fiction because the memory of him and the conversations of the main characters in Salinger’s “Glass family saga” centers around Seymour. Seymour commits suicide because he cannot achieve the level of love and attachment with Muriel as explained in “Carpenters” when Buddy reads his diary. The main concept in “Bananafish” is Seymour’s alienation from everyone even, at the end of the story, from Sybil, the young girl Seymour is comfortable talking to on the beach. All of Salinger’s protagonists portray a dominant theme of existentialism, namely, alienation. Salinger’s works have been analyzed extensively from various perspectives, but the uniqueness of this dissertation lies in the fact that it is the first attempt which examines Salinger’s protagonist from the

perspectives of five different existential philosophers. Moreover, contrary to Salinger's critics, this dissertation does not judge Salinger's protagonists based on economic, social, or political factors; rather it judges them on the basis of their individual choices which reflects the foundation of existentialism. The author of this dissertation believes that it will provide a multi-dimensional analysis of Salinger's three main protagonists by utilizing the concepts found in the writings of Heidegger and Sartre, and while referring to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Camus' existential insights, thereby expanding the range of meaning that American society can find in the works of this prominent American writer.

This dissertation labels Holden Caulfield, Sgt. X and Seymour Glass as existential heroes because they illustrate that in a cruel, materialistic society, like the one we live in, it is still possible to choose to search for spirituality. Needless to say, the search will not be easy, but it takes an existential hero to take the unbeaten path and achieve that goal. In their quest for spirituality, Salinger's existential heroes have been labeled as "freaks," "outsiders," and "rebels" but they did not deserve such hard labeling, just because they were idealistic and frustrated. What we need in today's society is to have more people who are caring, sensitive, and who share the same ideals as Salinger's existential heroes. This research project provides a thorough analysis of Salinger's protagonists and only after such analysis Salinger's deep-seated message becomes apparent: It is very difficult to lead a spiritual life, but it is not impossible. Keep trying! What distinguishes Salinger's characters is that we the readers see them as they are engaging on their last attempt to lead a spiritual life—through the very act of narrating their life. Salinger indeed gives us three powerful—and indeed heroic—

protagonists in Holden, Sgt. X, and Seymour, all of whom consequently, and tragically, illustrate the importance of remaining sympathetic to spirituality in a destructive society. They, by consciously narrating their demise, show us that the quest of authenticity does not end with the end of life. It, like literature itself, endures forever.

Notes for Chapter Five

1. F. H. Heinemann in his text “*Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*” states that the definition of existentialism cannot be precisely detailed and to search for a definitive definition is not possible. However, Heinemann believes that an analysis of the function of the existentialist movement, its use in Western society can provide insights into the meaning of the movement.

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