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SALINGER: The Murky Mirror

by Edward M. Keating

EDWARD M. KEATING is the Editor-in-Chief of RAMPARTS.

SOME TIME AGO a young friend of mine said, with some agitation, that "Salinger exposes the *decadence* of our society." He almost rose from his chair. This statement came rather as a shock, since I had read Salinger casually several years before, and had come to the conclusion that here was a young author of some modest talent whose only work would slowly disappear once its novelty had worn off. My friend's agitation, because of its obvious sincerity, prompted me to re-evaluate Salinger's work to see if there was more to it than I had previously imagined.

In the course of setting about this inquiry, I discovered a number of disconcerting obstacles, obstacles of such proportion that under other circumstances I would have dropped the whole thing and pursued less strenuous exercise. However, it was clear that Salinger and his work were enormously fashionable and, in a certain segment of the literary world, almost completely dominated the scene. If this dominance were a good thing, it should be encouraged; if bad, it should be resisted.

The single most serious obstacle to rational inquiry is the emotional controversy over Salinger and his work. The two camps (there seem to be no others) spend most of their time glowering at each other, and very little time in genuine evaluation. If someone wanders into this melee, he is suspected by everyone until he makes his selection of camps, at which moment he is both damned and praised.

Another difficulty in approaching Salinger's work is that, unless you look carefully, you may pass it by. Those familiar with the slimness of Salinger's work don't appreciate this difficulty, but the stranger, hearing all the fuss, is really

startled to discover that Salinger has published only one short novel (159 pages in the Signet edition) and approximately a dozen short stories. This is not a plea for bulk, but it does prompt one to hesitate before saying too much about so little. Besides, it is a bit hard on writers like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Greene, who have written great bodies of work, to be in serious competition for the public's favor with a skinny little thing that occupies so little of the literary shelf.

And then there is Salinger himself. Not so long ago, two national magazines, scenting something special, decided to do features on him and had to come out with bits of hearsay, pictures of distant houses and trees, and old family snapshots. Salinger has withdrawn. I am not trying to pry into Salinger's private life, but the result of his withdrawal has been to create a mystique, an intriguing wonder at what's really going on in that block cell, day after day. It is the allure of the mysterious. Beside the matter of mystique, there is the practical one of being able to converse with an author on his work. I realize this may cut against the grain with the "new" critics, but common sense tells us that if we can't find an answer to a problem, we should go to the one who posed it.

Then there is the final difficulty. For some time the word has been out about some future summary statement by Salinger, where he will synthesize, clarify, and summarize not only the entire Glass menage, but everything else that is significant. Some voices, almost tremulous, cryptically whisper the word *Summa*. Who in his right mind would want to proceed to a final statement of his own, knowing that sometime, somewhere, he will be confronted by the author's clear

contradiction? It would almost seem better to remain silent and wait, no matter how long the wait might prove to be.

AND YET, Salinger and his work must be looked into, not merely because he is currently fashionable, but because a study is required that transcends pure literary analysis; and this by the very nature of what is presented to us by Salinger. His is not simple entertainment; *The Catcher in the Rye* isn't just a tale of a boy and his adventures to be compared with *Huckleberry Finn*; *Franny and Zooey* cannot be called a conversational piece about spiritual regeneration (or degeneration, as you prefer); "Teddy" isn't just a diverting piece about a loathsome prodigy; "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" cannot be labeled a philosophical and literary *faux pas*. In short, you cannot look at the manifest content of his work and come to a comprehensible conclusion as to its nature and, what is more important, its significance.

Indeed, you must go outside the work itself to find significance. The truth is, Salinger's significance doesn't lie in what he says; it lies in the audience that has claimed him as its literary father.

For a writer to have true significance, he must be able to stand the test of time. A work, though accepted in one day, may be ignored by another generation because it fails to speak to them, to strike some responsive chord. A minor writer has his brief hour and is silent. The great writer strikes a universal chord for all time's hearing, and endures. We still cherish Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, but how many others were there whose works were buried with their authors? For every Racine, every Marlowe, every Tolstoy, history's attic is crammed with the discarded efforts of transient artists whose quip, or barb, or camera shot of the hour has lost its sharpness.

If one thing is certain about Salinger's work, it is that it strikes a responsive chord today; he clearly speaks the language of his generation. This, then, raises the question of whether he will endure beyond the moment. Or will he soon become passé, following the literary fall of men like Sinclair Lewis and Clifford Odets? Whether

Salinger endures depends solely on whether his audience endures. And I repeat my earlier assertion that Salinger's significance doesn't lie in his work, but in his audience. This, then, requires an analysis of his audience, which will lay bare the deep concern that urges a clear evaluation of Salinger's work.

I suppose one of the most oft-repeated comments about our literary times is that people don't read or, if they do, they don't read enough. This is especially true among our young people. Various studies recently made show that the great majority of students don't read anything, but those who do, invariably read Salinger in general, and *The Catcher in the Rye* in particular. 250,000 copies of *Catcher* sell every year and this has been going on for quite a few years.

Interestingly enough, very few adults bother with Salinger, and of those who do work their way through *Catcher* and *Franny and Zooey*, the majority come away bemused over the attention Salinger gets. They are simply bored, essentially because Salinger doesn't speak to them. They recognize, in his work, themselves when they were high school or college kids, but all that has been left behind; there are more important, more immediate demands on their time, to say nothing of their emotional energies.

Salinger's audience is almost exclusively the young reader, with a few retarded adults whose college days have never faded away and who feel a faint nostalgia for—what?

To begin with, the wonderful bull sessions that begin after dinner and wander effortlessly into the early hours of the morning. The tone of these sessions is invariably breathless, dogmatic, colloquial, impulsive, and strongly emotional, regardless of whether the subject is sex or nuclear test bans. The single most noticeable trait of Salinger's writing is that it is written as if taped from a college bull session, most specifically in the Sophomore year when the novelty of being on one's own has worn off and before upper division sophistication sets in. This atonality of Salinger's work is most glaring in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," where Lee, a man frequently described as grayhaired, is in bed with a young woman, and is talking on the phone with her hus-

band. Typical of the dialogue is the following:

Lee: Didn't she (Joanie) leave with you?

Arthur: No. Christ, no. You didn't see her leave at all, then?

Lee: Well, no, as a matter of fact, I didn't, Arthur . . . Actually, as a matter of fact, I didn't see a bloody thing all evening. The minute I got in the door, I got myself involved in one long Jesus of a session with that French poop, Viennese poop—whatever the hell he was . . . What's up? Joanie lost?

Arthur: Oh, Christ. Who knows? I don't know. You know her when she gets all tanked up and rarin' to go. I don't know. She *may* have just— . . .

Lee: Where are you now, Arthur? Home?

Arthur: Yeah. Home. Home sweet home. Christ.

Lee: Well, just try to take it a little—what are ya—drunk, or what?

Arthur: I don't know. How the hell do I know?

Lee: All right, now, listen. Relax, just relax . . . You know the Ellenbogens, for Chrissake. What probably happened . . .

The point is, Salinger can't escape his sophomore inflection. His voice changes only when his perspective is that of a child; then he becomes simple, more direct, and speaks as a child. "The Laughing Man" is a good example of this and is especially effective because horror is seen through the clear eyes of a child.

This talent—I don't think Salinger would be read if he spoke differently—is cardinal to his being accepted. Salinger never talks down to his audience, in sharp contrast to most adults who are trying to reach the Sophomore generation.

NOW THAT SALINGER has his audience, what does he say to them? Almost nothing they haven't read or said or heard a hundred times before.

How many times have we all had the exciting fantasy of running away from home? Or from boarding school? Imagine yourself at sixteen, preparing to run away from old Pency Prep. To heighten the effect, light up a sixteen-year-old's clandestine cigarette; drag deeply, feel the nicotine and tar scorching your virginal lungs, then

plan your adventures. Where will you go? *New York!* The only glamorous setting for your fantasy! The bright lights, the anonymity, the golden opportunities for women, and liquor, and—the possibilities are staggering!

But—and here is the nub of the matter—it is all fantasy. And so are Holden Caulfield's adventures in New York. Characteristically, nothing really happens. The classic vignette of this volitional impotency is the minor incident of Holden's, immediately upon arriving in New York, going to the phone booth to line up some action. He selects five people to call and then by an almost incredible process of rationalization, blocks all action by finding an excuse for not calling them, name by name, excuse by excuse: D. B. was in Hollywood; Phoebe would be in bed and Holden's parents would answer the phone; Jane Gallagher's mother, "but I didn't feel like it;" Sally Hayes, but her mother might answer; Carl Luce, "but I didn't like him much." By his own admission, Holden spent about twenty minutes or so in the phone booth with no results; no action taken or planned.

Holden's stay in New York consists of setting up potentialities for action and then knocking them aside. Disregarding the morality involved, what adult with a prostitute in his lap (who is obviously trying to arouse his sexual passions) would beg off? But what of the sixteen-year-old boy whose aspirations are sexual but whose real life is rigorously sterile, particularly as regards professional sex, to say nothing of the girl he takes to the prom? It is inconceivable that the fantasy could be translated into overt action.

Interestingly enough, when Salinger puts Holden into a scene of potentiality, such as the protracted one with Sally Hayes, he obviates fulfillment by destroying the relationship. Or if he seeks out the one man-boy, Carl Luce, who can give him the intellectual conversation he insists he seeks, he converts this sort of thing into a crushing bore by having Holden inquire repeatedly into the other's sex life. The scene with Antolini is utterly hopeless; the reader knows this man is sinister from the moment the boy enters his apartment. The abortive seduction is mere tautology, though possibly to some, dangerously

titillating.

I suppose the most complete fantasy of the entire story is the one Salinger and Holden enter when Phoebe is mentioned. Again, revert to adolescence and see if it rings true. By way of opposition, in Tarkington's *Seventeen*, William's feelings for Jane were far more genuine, but, then, in those days there was less need for escape into unreality.

This idealization of childhood is a recurrent theme in Salinger's work. Indeed, it is his hallmark. And it is so unreal. As parents we love our children, but in reality, they are human and have wills of their own; they can be cruel, destructive, selfish—in short, they are like us, only younger and not fully formed. Needless to say, they have their delightful virtues as well.

So, why does Salinger idealize them? They are the perfect alternative to the frightful prospect of growing up. A child is free, passive, in the sense that things are done for him, decisions made for him, and so on; the child is not really responsible for what he does; there is always a parent to console him if he is hurt; he is ignorant of the world beyond the immediate encircling womb that is warm, sheltering, and soft to the touch.

But the sixteen-year-old boy is on the verge of adulthood, with all its terrible responsibilities, its hazards, its coldness. The man must act. How much easier to be passive, to return to the womb! Of such stuff is fantasy composed.

LIFE IS INSISTENT, and the boy must enter into manhood, but that doesn't prevent him from yearning for an *idealized* childhood. How much easier it is to escape responsibility, the risks that come with responsibility, the agony of decision, particularly when the adult world is portrayed as phony, treacherous, hopeless.

And here is where Salinger cheats. He creates fantasies to escape into and then prevents a return to "reality" by showing it to be unbearable. If a boy could remain a boy forever, there would be no problem, but the boy *must* go on and Salinger shows him what lies ahead, not just in terms of the external world, but, what is far worse, in terms of what lies ahead for his own interior life. Scan every adult character in all of Salinger's

work. Is there one that isn't seriously deformed in some way? Let's take his work, piece by piece, and examine the adults.

In the *Catcher in the Rye* we have old Spencer and Dr. Thurmer, who are fools and frauds. Mrs. Morrow's cordiality is a blend of simplicity and gullibility, and Holden's condescension is bald. The taxi drivers are crude and belligerent. Faith Cavendish is a pretentious tart, the Seattle triplets are yokels, and Maurice is a pimp serving up a mechanical prostitute. The naive nuns and their Protestant counterparts, the Salvation Army girls, are treated with bland contempt; Holden blows smoke in their faces. Mr. and Mrs. Antolini are scarcely an ideal couple, and by strong implication, Holden's parents are unsympathetic and despotic. What boy would want to associate with a crowd like that? Or become like them in just a few short years?

AND THEN there is *Franny and Zooey*. The only real adult, that is, someone *in loco parentis* to the central characters, is Bessie Glass, carefully outfitted to be a "character"; someone drawn in such a way as to reduce her to the level of her children. She is slovenly, she is dumpy, she smokes on the level and frequency of all Salinger's juvenile characters. She is a contemporary of Zooey's, and not a very bright one at that. The off-stage adults are Seymour, Salinger's ultimate expression of perfection, but he is a suicide. Buddy is contemplating suicide, and the others, Boo Boo, Waker, and Walt (dead) are scarcely defined, at least not enough to be considered characters in the story.

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," we witness Seymour's suicide after a slight, boorish scene with a snob with salve on her nose. Salinger equates Seymour's loveliness with Sybil's naïveté and executes that which is lovely. Seymour is not an adult except in death, the result of an external action taken.

In "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," the cook is petulant and lazy. Mary Jane and Eloise live solely in the past, only to have the idyll shattered by Ramona's intrusion. Ramona, a lost, unattractive child, is the consequence of sexual intercourse, again an action, and is a constant reminder

of the agony of the *now* of life as lived by adults. The story ends on the painful note of Eloise shaking Mary Jane's arm and pleading, "I was a nice girl, wasn't I?"

In "Just Before The War With The Eskimos," there are no adults, only their children, a despicable lot.

"The Laughing Man" contains an adult whom I consider the most horrible of all Salinger's creatures. He binds a group of small boys to him by his attractive manliness and then, over a considerable time, tells them a depraved story. And there is the problem of Mary Hudson, that almost ethereal beauty who remains for a time on the periphery and then disappears, leaving a disturbing mystery behind. Something is wrong; she and the Chief are involved in some adult tragedy that can only baffle and disturb the small boy telling the story.

THE SERVANT, Sandra, and the cleaning woman, Mrs. Snell, who open up "Down At The Dinghy," are not characters. They are Salinger's Greek chorus and expositors before it is revealed that they were the source of Lionel's anguish. Boo Boo's introductory description—"She was a small, almost hipless girl of twenty-five . . ."—and everything that follows prepares for the descent into little Lionel's world, a world, incidentally, that he controls with a firm hand. It is Boo Boo who submits and eventually steps down into the dinghy.

"For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" is pretty much an imitation of "Down At The Dinghy." The children, Esmé and Charles, completely take the play away from the adult, X. He looks to Esmé for his very sanity and Esmé's condescension is patent. Clay is crude, slightly salacious, and constantly harps on X's physical and psychological disintegration.

The adults, the only characters in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" are two adulterers, and a drunken cuckold.

Bobby Agadganian, at the outset of "De Dautier-Smith's Blue Period," is described as "my late ribald stepfather," who turned away from being a "dead stockbroker" and affiliated himself with art. Salinger disposes of the mother by a

convenient, off-stage death, and Bobby and our young friend become roommates. Bobby is painted as being a grand guy and is dead. The only other adults are the oriental pair who are inferior and are either stupid or crooks, the point never being made clear.

"Teddy" contains two infantile and selfish parents. The off-stage intellectuals are bumpkins when compared to Teddy. As usual with Salinger, the adult must come down to the child's level where he can then be dominated by the child. The young man, Nicholson, who talks endlessly with Teddy, is a toady and a fop.

TO SUMMARIZE: adults are either patently deformed or are totally ineffectual, being reduced to creatures dominable by small children. There is *no* exception to this.

And it is precisely here that Salinger cheats. In a literary work, particulars stand for universals. If there are no character variations, the assumption is that there are no exceptions. If Salinger would present a *single* worthwhile adult character, the indictment would fall. But he doesn't. The ultimate effect of his treatment of adults is to portray the adult world as something despicable, to be avoided at all costs. Hence, the need to remain in a perpetual fantasy where the child can manipulate the adult, or the adolescent can revert to an idealized childhood. Salinger offers his reader a third possibility that is even more terrible: the way of death. Death, for Salinger, is the final negation, the ultimate escape.

Another characteristic of Salinger's work is the total estrangement between parent and child. A parent is cold, lacks understanding, or is stupid. A parent who fails to act as a parent, who is more a buddy or a foil is welcome. Bessie Glass is scarcely distinguishable from Zooey except when she takes the part of a mother and tries to get Franny to take some broth, at which point she becomes both stupid and imperceptive. This is not just an idle observation; it goes to the heart of the matter, because Salinger's treatment of the relationship coincides with the opinions of his young readers. This, then, is what the young American thinks of his family. He is alone, he is afraid, he faces a hopeless future, and he seeks

escape. Salinger merely lends respectability to this wish.

In a larger sense, Salinger has given a certain justification for the state of things in our culture. And, by implication, he is telling the young people that it is all right to escape, to rebel against authority, to wander aimlessly in deady dull conversations, to dread what lies ahead, to yearn for childhood, to seek the peace of death. But above all, he glamorizes the avoidance of responsibility.

Literature is not a thing apart. It is an intimate part of reality in that it expresses the reality that is within man. Salinger is not the least bit responsible for the present state of affairs; he has merely exposed the truth in terms of the deepest feelings of America's young people.

And this is why a study of Salinger is so valuable. Today we listen too closely to professional analysts, ranging from statistics to reports of juvenile authorities. Salinger, on the other hand, speaks with the voice of the common man, and the sound and substance are hideous.

These states of mind I have sketched above are actually the states of mind that dominate our rising generation. These states didn't just happen spontaneously. The generation that bred these young people and the generations that bred before them created this mounting stream of conscience that is now threatening our civilization. We live in an age of fear for the future, we feel the wrenching loss of our once-upon-a-time innocence, we rage in bafflement at those who bred our unhappy condition, and we would escape if we could. We seek out the fantasy and pretend that all is well, but fantasies, under the pressure of reality, break down and the pain of returning to reality is doubled.

There is a new religion rising out of the East that threatens everything we hold precious; that finds our present state of decay incapable of effective resistance. And what do we do about it? Nothing. We know what we are against, but do we know what we are for?

Salinger is abundantly clear as to what he is against. Does he offer a solution? Does he say what he is for?

Franny and Zooey presents Salinger's cure for the spiritual sickness of our times. Zooey's con-

cern is over Franny's withdrawal, not her spiritual problem. She can have any religious ideas and techniques as long as she gets with it and remains part of this world.

Franny and Zooey is vintage Salinger. It is an endless conversation piece that wanders off in all directions, its tone is sophomoric breathlessness, made slightly heady by an overdose of cigar smells and cigarette smoke. It ends on a note that is distilled Salinger philosophy: a sentimental mixture of bathos and pantheism. Salinger wants us to share his emotional spirituality, something that is vague, slightly hysterical, romantic, of effortless implementation, culminating in a dreamless, eternal sleep. Franny's first action, after learning that the "Fat Lady Is Christ," was to sweep away the smoking equipment, fall into bed and dissolve into sleep. It was a "deep, dreamless sleep." At this point the story ends, sleep being the universal analogy for death. Religion is Salinger's opiate that dissolves man into a painless, euphoric, eternal evaporation. Again, this is merely an escape from reality, in the present instance, spiritual reality.

BUT THEN, doesn't this really reflect the current state of religious thinking? *Franny and Zooey* is no parody; it is literal, with unnerving accuracy. It is as if a tape had been made of a bull session on religion.

My complaint is not with Salinger, though I personally find his work at times irritating and pretentious. My complaint is with those of us who have led our civilization down this primrose path. We have made Salinger what he is today, the literary father of our children, and if Salinger endures it will be because his audience endures. And the audience is our responsibility.

I would like to see Salinger's work find a haven in history's attic. Though I wish the man well, I can't help hating him for pricking my conscience. The only way to get rid of the pain is to remove the cause, which isn't Salinger. It is ourselves and our values, ourselves and our failings, ourselves and our responsibilities.

And first, in this act of removal, must be the spiritual explorations that will lead us to a rock on which to wage the eternal battle.

Confessions of a San Francisco Snowman

Near Hills
the 16th

old man—

So you saw G- in Boston?

A few hours after I received your letter, he stopped by. Told of seeing you, mentioned nothing of Crow's talk. I must confess this piqued me so I offered to play the tape, but he contended he had had enough of the matter. Besides, he was going to the Lakes for the holiday and it was raining. Apparently this took up all his irritation.

I don't know what he told you about the Alum meeting. He had met Crow a month before and, since Crow's book was out, asked him to speak. Asked to speak, speak Crow did. I've no way of knowing what else you've heard of the affair so I thought I would transcribe the whole thing for you here. Even though the whole thing has no whole.

I frankly think G- was a bit rough on Crow. Perhaps afterwards he had good reason, yet all I did was tape the speech. I think I'll save it for ten years. Right now I don't pout with G- nor do I defend your friend.

Let me give you the thing in order.

Crow looked old. Wasn't he just a year ahead of you? He's paunchy, badly colored and cared for. His teeth are shot. (G- for all his martiniism never looked so bad.) The night he came to speak he brought his wife which fried the bachelor theme. That was covered by their having to leave for St. Louis that night. Being between-the-hotel-and-the-depot kind of thing.

I felt he looked sad. Sad when he looked sad and sad when he looked happy. He propped himself with a nice enough attention but you had the feeling he would have been just as glad if the place were empty.

Everyone was polite about the wife—you can't be much else about wives—and G- was smooth as ever getting the meal out, the meeting on, over and introducing him. No one had seen him for eleven years. How terribly unprepared we were for what we got.

They sat the wife with Klipp (accounting's famous mistake) and Terrazine (the chocolate king), most likely shaking those two mollies no end. Well—let me get on.