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**The Troubled Young Man**  
**in J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and "For Esmé - with Love and Squalor"**

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## Introduction

Although Jerome David Salinger once was called “everybody’s favorite” by Norman Mailer, there seems to be a dispute among critics about whether J.D. Salinger is a major or only an important minor writer. However, without arguing for or against the truth of any statement, there is no question about the great interest from both critics and readers that Salinger has aroused about his own persona and not the least his work. It indicates that Salinger’s work has, as Howard M. Harper puts it, “touched some of the most sensitive nerves of the contemporary consciousness” (5). This is quite an achievement, considering the relatively small size of Salinger’s production. He has only published one novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which is also his most famous work. In 1953 a collection of short stories, among which most of them had first appeared in *The New Yorker*, were put together in the collection *Nine Stories*. It was followed by the five novellas, “Franny” and “Zooney” (1961), “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” and “Seymour: An Introduction” (1963) and “Hapworth 16, 1924”. There are reports or perhaps wishes that Salinger is still writing in his reclusiveness.

An important reason why Salinger has managed to capture a devoted audience is his ability to create characters that stay with the reader long after the story is finished. According to Henry Anatole Grunwald, Salinger’s characters have the ability to “enter into the reader’s mind and there assume a life of their own” (x). One of these characters is the famous and much discussed Holden Caulfield who almost seems to have taken on a life of his own. As David Galloway claims, “[f]ew heroes of contemporary literature have aroused so much devotion, imitation, or controversy as J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield . . .” (204). Salinger has been said to share his audience’s love for his characters to the degree that he keeps returning to them, not only through writing about the same characters in different stories, but also through the kinship that exists between characters in different stories. Ihab Hassan suggests that this is a salient trait in Salinger’s writing, that he “returns to favored themes and characters with some consistency” (265).

Just like Holden, the characters in Salinger’s fiction are often adolescents and children. The interaction between them is usually of the reverse kind where the child rescues the troubled older person. According to Galloway, Salinger’s “misfit hero can find genuine love only in children” (227). There seems to be a consensus among critics that “the idea of love as

man's salvation" is one of Salinger's major themes, and that the love that might save comes from an innocent child (Galloway 215).

The theme of the troubled young hero who is rescued by the innocent love of a child can be found in both the novel and the short story that have been chosen for this study. *The Catcher in the Rye* and "For Esmé - with Love and Squalor" are both usually considered to be the high points of Salinger's achievement; *The Catcher in the Rye* is nowadays considered to be a minor classic and "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" is referred to as his most important and loved short story. It was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1950 and is part of the collection *Nine Stories*. Although "For Esmé" is a short story, it is suitable to use for a comparative analysis with *The Catcher*. This is due to the complexity of the characters and the focus on the Sergeant and Esmé's meeting as well as its crucial consequences, which gives the story and its characters a depth that makes it comparable to the novel.

It is the argument of this essay that both stories carry the theme of the troubled young man who is saved from his crisis by the love of a little girl. Furthermore it is argued that there are striking similarities between the male protagonists and the two little girls respectively. By being the first-person narrators as well as the protagonists, Holden and the Sergeant are the focus of their own stories. Although the cause of their crises differs - the Sergeant is suffering from the post-war trauma of a war, while Holden seems to be suffering from a more indefinable anguish - they are both sensitive young men who have become disillusioned by society. The two young girls, Phoebe and Esmé, are depicted from the perspective of the male protagonists, and among other character traits they share the same precociousness and ability to reach the protagonist with their love.

This essay consists of two chapters, each dealing with a young man in crisis and the implications of his relationship to a little girl. Each chapter will be structured around an analysis of the young men, their crisis, the meeting with and introduction of the little girls and finally the redemption attained through the girls' love. However, the order of the analysis of the crisis and the meeting differs between the two chapters as a consequence of a difference in order in the stories; Holden is in a crisis when he goes to see Phoebe, while the Sergeant's crisis occurs some time after he has met Esmé. The intention of the order in which the stories appear in the essay is to show the difference in the reaction of the adolescent boy and the mature man to difficulties in life, and perhaps point to the possible development of the boy. The difference in length between the two chapters is not only a consequence of the difference

in length between the novel and the short story, but also depends on a difference in character between the narrators of the stories. Due to its length and the talkative nature of Holden, much more detail is given about the protagonist and the little girl in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Compared to the novel, there is a silence from the protagonist about his background in “For Esmé - with Love and Squalor”, leaving less material to analyze.

Studies similar to this have been carried out previously. By comparing *The Catcher in the Rye* to “Franny” and “Zooney”, Sofia Helgegren argues that the protagonists of the different stories survive a phony society through the love from their siblings (*Phoniness and the Necessity of Love*). In *The Innocent Child* Ylva Grönberg claims that the short stories “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “For Esmé - with Love and Squalor” share the theme of the healing effect of little girls on men who are suffering from a post-war trauma. These studies further support the argument that Salinger is a writer who returns to favored themes, above all his love-theme, and that there is a connection between the characters of his different stories. Galloway sums up the love ethic of Salinger’s work when he writes that “It is . . . through love that Salinger’s hero at last re-enters the world (209)

There was much criticism written on Salinger’s work until 1965 when his last original work was published. With Salinger’s authorial silence, the criticism has declined. The most recent writings concerning Salinger are the memoirs written about him in the late 1990’s by an ex-lover and his daughter. They reflect the unwanted interest in the author himself who has not been interviewed since 1980. However, there exists more recent criticism like the anthology *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, edited by Jack Salzman (1991). Another important work is the collection of essays from different periods of time entitled *J.D Salinger* which is edited by Harold Bloom (1987). This collection shows how Salinger’s fiction has generated praise as well as negative opinions, but always stirred up emotions. Perhaps this explains why *The Catcher in the Rye* reportedly sells around 250,000 copies each year, why many people still read Salinger’s work.

## Chapter 1

### The Abdication of a Catcher

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the seventeen-year-old protagonist Holden Caulfield recollects and reflects about a critical period of three days that he went through about a year back in time. The story is a form of confession that seems to be an attempt to come to terms with what has gone wrong with Holden's life, with the aspiration that he will be able to restart it in a different direction. Although it is a novel where the protagonist and concern of the story is the narrator himself, the saving role of the little sister is an important condition for the hopeful development of the protagonist that the novel ends with.

From a superficial point of view it might be difficult to understand why Holden is deeply unhappy, that is, wherein his problem lies. Belonging to the upper classes of New York, he is not only privileged enough to attend a prep school, but in addition to being materially secure, he also has loving family that he cares for. In spite of this, the fact remains that Holden is going through a crisis. Therefore, in an attempt to look below the neat surface of Holden's life in order to find an explanation to his state of mind, we will focus on a few issues that may be seen as the components that make up Holden's crisis. Before doing so, some insight into the character of Holden Caulfield will be given. It might be helpful to later understand his thoughts and reactions towards the components that make up his crisis.

Holden is full of contradictions which makes him difficult to define. Eleanor Wikborg's question is a good place to start: "Why does H[olden] keep flunking out of schools all the time?"(15). It is obvious that Holden is very intelligent and should have no problem staying in school, but still he fails four of his subjects and is therefore expelled from Pencey Prep. Moreover, Holden is well liked among his peers, it scarcely seems like he is lacking in company, yet he often refers to himself as "lonesome" and "depressed". As much as he welcomes company, he also chooses to be alone; when we first meet him at the beginning of the novel he is watching his school's football game from a distance, "practically the whole school except me was there" (7). It is as if he voluntarily takes the part of an outsider, although he is actually welcomed by the group. As Joyce Rowe puts it, "Holden is not an obvious social outsider or outcast to those he lives among. Well-born and well-favored, his appearance, abilities, and manners make him an insider - he belongs" (91). Nevertheless, Holden is experiencing some sort of isolation, if not of the physical kind then at least of the

mind. Related to Holden's feeling of loneliness is the contradictory way he relates to his classmates and friends: "[y]ou ought to go to a boy school sometime . . . It's full of phonies . . . ." he tells us (118). On the other hand Holden frequently talks about his former classmates with a sense of closeness and warmth and even claims that he "sort of miss[es] them," if he does not see them in a while (168).

This leads us to the last contradictory quality in Holden which is his attitude towards truthfulness. Truth seems to be something that is very important to Holden, something he thinks of a great deal. He never fails in his honesty towards the reader, for example he is always ready to admit his own weaknesses, and anxious not to portray himself as better than he is and this may also be why we find him a believable narrator. He is also very concerned about giving us a fair picture of other characters in the novel, by not only pointing out their flaws but also their strengths. Contradictory to this, Holden is often quite dishonest towards the people around him, he even calls himself "the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life," lying many times when there seems to be no reason to do so (14). Another aspect of this contradiction is the disgust Holden repeatedly expresses towards people he calls "phonies", that is people whom he considers to be hypocrites and false in their behavior towards others, while behaving like this himself at times.

There is nothing strange about having many sides to one's personality, for as human beings we are by definition complex beings. However, in Holden's case there is such a contrast between his character traits that he seems to be torn by his own ambiguity. It is as if it makes him feel that he has no place where he truly belongs. The picture emerges of a boy who is as hard on himself as he is on his surroundings, if not even harder; a boy who is extremely susceptible and sensitive to what happens around him, and tormented by his inability to make sense of the mess that he perceives life to be.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment where Holden's crisis starts; from the time we get to know him he is a troubled adolescent. Therefore it seems more appropriate to view Holden's crisis as a journey where he gradually moves deeper into a state of crisis, and finally reaches a climax after which he seems to be moving out of the crisis. It is a journey that has already begun when we first meet Holden at Pencey Prep, however it is when he leaves the constricted environment of Pencey and goes to New York that he really loses his foothold. In the chaotic world of the city, Holden is left to fend for himself. Being in low spirits to begin with and in a state where he doubts the world around him, he ends up in despair. From the

incidents that Holden gets into along his journey and the stories he tells us from his past, four different issues emerge as the components of his crisis, namely: *death*, *social injustice*, *sexuality*, and *a search for companionship*. Through all these issues runs a fifth component which is *a sense of guilt*, something that Holden seems to be carrying around and which affects the way he reacts towards the four earlier mentioned issues.

Despite his youth, Holden is familiar with death. At the age of sixteen he has already experienced the premature death of two young people, one of them his brother. Throughout the novel Holden keeps returning to different anecdotes involving his younger brother Allie who died of leukemia at nine years of age. Although four years have passed since his brother's death, Allie continues to play a part in Holden's life. By dying at a very young age Allie has become the picture of the ideal person for Holden, someone who is all good and has no fault. Therefore it is difficult for Holden to comprehend and accept his brother's death. It has made him quite disillusioned with a world where so many unworthy people, so many "phonies" are allowed to live. Holden's initial reaction to Allie's death reveals the impact of the loss:

I was only thirteen and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all . . . I don't blame them. I really don't. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist . . . It was a very stupid thing to do, I'll admit it, but I hardly didn't even know I was doing it, and you didn't know Allie. (34)

In the present time of the story, the pain from his brother's death is not as intense anymore but instead it seems to have transformed itself into a sense of guilt. As much as Holden loves his brother, he also compares himself to him. According to Holden, Allie was "about fifty times as intelligent" as Holden, a nice kid who was loved and mourned by everyone (33). Allie was the good son that Holden has failed to be. Holden's guilt towards his dead brother concerns his feelings of self-worth; it shows that Holden does not value himself very highly.

It has been argued that Allie's death is the sole reason to Holden's crisis. However, it is Peter Shaw's opinion that Allie's death "exacerbates rather than constitutes Holden's adolescent crisis," that is argued in this essay (100). As will be shown, there are so many different aspects of his life, so many components that Holden is struggling with, that despite the severity of Allie's death, it seems like a simplification to put it down as the only explanation to why Holden is in a crisis.

Although Allie's death can be perceived as unfair, Holden's second experience of death is definitely a clear case of injustice. When bullied by a group of students in a way that Holden describes as "too repulsive" to even retell, Holden's classmate James Castle committed suicide by jumping out the window rather than giving in to his tormentors (153). For Holden, the fact that the bullies "didn't even go to jail" becomes just another example of the injustice of society (154).

James Castle was basically a stranger to Holden and therefore his death was not a personal loss to Holden like the loss of his brother. Nonetheless, Castle's death left lasting traces within Holden, who gets painfully close to the boy in the moment of his death, and it teaches him about the horrifying and crude reality of death: "there was old James Castle laying right on the stone steps and all. He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody would even go near him" (153). It is the remembrance of this that makes him hesitant when contemplating suicide himself: "I felt like jumping out 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" (94). Castle's act also stirs up feelings of guilt within Holden concerning his inadequacy to act on injustices. Holden perceives Castle's resistance to outer pressure, his choice of death instead of giving up on his principles, as an extreme act of courage. Holden seems amazed by this "skinny little weak-looking guy, with wrists about as big as pencils," who has shown this strength (153). Castle was the kind of person that Holden wishes to be - namely not a coward.

Standing up for one's principles and not being a coward is something that Holden highly values, but which he considers himself failing to do. This is related to the second component to Holden's crisis which is his awareness of the social injustices that exist in society. His despair is enhanced by his awareness of the fact that he himself is not free from guilt.

Throughout the novel Holden tells the reader about his encounters with people he feels have been less-favored than him. Belonging to the rich part of society, he still has an understanding for the situation of people of the lower classes. He knows that life is only a game, "if you get on the side where all the hot-shots are . . . But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing" (7-8). By claiming this Holden does not only show his ability to empathize, but also that he has seen through the ways people justify inequalities in society by saying that those who do not succeed have only themselves to blame since everyone has the same chance to succeed, something Holden

disagrees with. Although the way he expresses his sympathies sometimes becomes a bit comical, as in the case of the two nuns that make him sad because they probably never get to go “anywhere swanky for lunch,” his concern and frustration is still sincere (103).

Holden is frustrated because he can see the problem but feels unable change it. An example of this is Holden’s story about his former roommate Dick Slagle who hid his cheap suitcases because he was ashamed of having them beside Holden’s expensive ones. Feeling like there is no other solution to the problem, Holden opts for a new roommate who belongs to the same class as himself. This becomes a way for Holden to avoid having to deal with the guilt of being “superior” to someone that he actually might have liked better. However, his escape from the problem makes him part of the system that he loathes.

Another aspect of the issue concerning injustices in society is what Shaw calls Holden’s “sympathy with the outcasts in life” (108). These “outcasts” do not necessarily have to belong to the lower classes; they are simply just identified as being different. Holden’s ability to sympathize with these outcasts might have to do with the fact that he considers himself one, although this view is not shared by those around him. Despite his identification, Holden is at times part of the ostracism that occurs at his school: “they had this goddam secret fraternity that I was too yellow not to join. There was this one pimply, boring guy, Robert Ackley that wanted to get in. He kept trying to join, and they wouldn’t let him. Just because he was boring and pimply” (151). At the same time as Holden is disgusted by the way some people are treated, as in the case of Ackley, he recognizes that by failing to defend the outcast he becomes part of the bullying. This realization is what causes him pain. Holden does not sympathize with Ackley whom he refers to as “boring and pimply”, but he has enough insight and sensitivity not to want to hurt anyone, and to wish happiness even for those he does not like.

Another issue that frequently occupies Holden’s mind and which forms the third component of his crisis is his sexuality. Holden has a complicated relationship to sex. He is torn between feelings of his own pure lust, and his fear of becoming like most other boys who he finds unscrupulous when it comes to girls. Holden often refers to unrestrained sexual behavior as “perverty”, and even his sexual fantasies make him feel guilty. To understand Holden’s feelings of guilt about his sexual desires it is important to bear in mind that Holden’s America of the 1940’s was a society much less sexualized than the one we live in today. There was also strong pressure, especially on girls, to stay virgins before marriage. Evidently the

morals of his society have affected how Holden relates to sex while at the same time he is influenced by his peers' true or made up stories about their sexual experiences. Holden's confusion when it comes to sex is exemplified by his relationship to three different girls in the novel: Jane Gallagher, Sally Hayes and the prostitute girl.

In his sensitive and detailed portrayal of Jane, Holden shows his sincere affection for her. Although he never mentions it in those words, this girl is probably his first love: "You never even worried, with Jane, whether your hand was sweaty or not. All you knew was, you were happy. You really were" (72). Holden and Jane have spent a whole summer together and even though they form a close relationship, they never get "*physical* or anything", as Holden puts it (69). However, they do get intimate at one point, but it is as if they both are held back by something. As mentioned earlier, a girl had much to risk by having premarital sex, and moreover it is also possible that Holden makes the common distinction between "good girls" and "bad girls", where girls like Jane belong to the first category; she is a girl whom he respects and therefore someone he cannot sleep with, despite the fact that of all the girls he meets she is the one who he truly cares about. On the other hand with Jane, sex does not seem to be Holden's primary interest: "You don't always have to get too sexy to get to know a girl" is his comment on his relationship with Jane, which not only shows maturity but again indicates that he cares about her on a deeper level (69).

Hence it is clear why Holden is extremely upset when his roommate Stradlater, returning from a date with Jane, indicates that he might have had sex with her. It never becomes clear whether this is true or not, but the very idea not only gets Holden into a fight with Stradlater but also makes him leave Pencey earlier than he needs to, to go to New York. What disturbs Holden is that Stradlater, whom he refers to as a "sexy bastard", could not care less about who Jane is; he does not even bother to learn her name, because unlike Holden he is not in love with her. Furthermore, Holden is scared that the pure and innocent quality about Jane which he loves might have been ruined by Stradlater.

Holden's curiosity and interest in sex is held back in the case of Jane, but is more overtly expressed in his relationship with Sally Hayes. Holden's way of relating to Sally can be described as the complete opposite to how he relates to Jane: it is simple and shallow. Maybe this is why he has less of a problem being physically intimate with this girl: he does not value her in the same way that he values Jane. This makes Holden into somewhat of a hypocrite; it is acceptable for him to be physical with a girl he does not care for, whereas it is wrong when

Stradlater does the same thing with Jane. Holden does not hide the fact that it is not Sally's personality that he is interested in: "She gave me a pain in the ass, but she was very good-looking" (96). However, he seems amazed himself by the effect she has on him, when he actually does not like her as a person. He has difficulties understanding and accepting that he is physically attracted by someone he is not mentally attracted to. His attraction to Sally is what makes him do what he considers to be inexplicable things, for example asking her to run away with him when he knows well that, "She wouldn't have been anybody to go with" (121). Holden does not go further with Sally or anyone else than just "fooling around", and his explanation to this is somewhat paradoxical to his own reasoning: "You know what the trouble with me is? I can never really get sexy . . . with a girl I don't like a lot" (133). It is as if he can only reach a certain point in his physical relationship with girls, as having sex without love is something he is incapable of.

It is interesting that Holden considers his virginity a problem. This has its reasons. Although the society of the 1940's promoted certain morals that did not mean that everyone followed them. Among Holden's peers it is instead sexually active boys like Stradlater and Carl Luce who set the standard for what is considered to be normal or high status for a boy, which is to not be a virgin. Clearly Holden is influenced by this pressure; an indication of this is his accepting the offer to spend the night with a prostitute. In the end Holden ends up never having sex with the prostitute girl. Faced with reality, that is the very young girl-prostitute, it makes him feel "much more depressed than sexy" (86). When preparing for the encounter with her, his thoughts reveal that what he is actually looking for is initiation from someone more experienced: "In a way, that's why I sort of wanted to get some practice in, in case I ever get married. . . . Half the time, if you really want to know the truth, when I'm horsing around with a girl, I have a helluva lot of trouble just *finding* what I'm looking for" (84). With a sincerity that is typical for Holden and expressed in the way that is both touching and comical, he shows that he does not only connect sex with love, but furthermore also considers that the right place for it is in the institution of marriage. Holden judges himself hard because, like everyone else, he is not always strong enough to follow what he believes is right.

The fourth component of Holden's crisis, his desperate search for companionship and understanding, is manifested in the way he is constantly trying to have serious conversations with almost anyone who seems available. Despite Holden's sharp criticism of society, he more than anything longs to belong somewhere. As Michael Cowan points out, "Being entirely

alone is one of his [Holden's] greatest sources of pain. Even his fantasies of escaping west or to the woods involve being with *someone*" (51) Holden has all these thoughts and wonderings he needs to share, but no one seems to be willing to listen, or they just do not really hear him, as in the case of Sally Hayes. When Holden actually tells her, "I'm in a bad shape. I'm in a *lousy* shape," he gets no sympathy (118). Instead of finding someone he can really talk to, he ends up having exactly the "goddam stupid useless conversations" that he wants to get away from (179). The main problem is that Holden seems unable to turn to the people who actually care about him.

A natural place for him to turn to should be his family; in the stream of people that keep coming and going out of Holden's life and mind, his family stands out as the central core of his life and the one thing that offers him some sort of stability. The Caulfield family is very loving, it is a family whose only failure, according to Holden, is himself. Holden's reluctance to meet his parents is not only because he wants to avoid discomfort for himself, but it also comes from a sense of failure towards his parents, especially his mother: "She hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died. She's very nervous. That's another reason why I hated like hell for her to know I got the ax again" (97). Holden knows that it is at home that he will get the love and help he needs, but he does not reach out to his parents because he does not want to cause them more pain. Still it is clear that part of him longs to go home and be relieved of the burden he seems to be carrying around: "I didn't give much of a damn any more if they [his parents] caught me. I really didn't. I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way" (162).

Close to the end of his journey Holden finally seeks out a former teacher of his, Mr. Antolini: "He was about the best teacher I ever had, Mr. Antolini . . . you could kid around with him without losing your respect for him. He was the one that finally picked up that boy that jumped out the window I told you about, James Castle" (157). Holden thinks highly of Mr. Antolini as we can see in the contrast of his feelings towards his History teacher, Mr. Spencer. He does not dislike Mr. Spencer, but pities him, and finds his wisdom about life as a game insincere. Although Mr. Spencer is trying to help Holden he cannot reach him, which is something Mr. Antolini manages to do.

Mr. Antolini sincerely cares about Holden. He does not only offer a roof over his head, but he listens to Holden and talks to him in a fashion that shows much reflection and insight into Holden's character. He can see that Holden is going in a negative direction and "riding for

some kind of terrible, terrible fall” (168). He encourages Holden to continue his education, because through education he will find out that he is “not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. . . . Many, many men have been troubled morally and spiritually as you are now. . . . You’ll learn from them - if you want to” (170). Mr. Antolini is telling Holden that there is a way out of the loneliness he is feeling; he is giving Holden hope.

From the high regard that Holden has for Mr. Antolini and from the fact that he actually listens to what he has to say, it is not difficult to understand why Holden is devastated when he believes that he has been let down by this man. The incident where Holden believes that Mr. Antolini is planning to seduce him makes Holden reconsider everything good he has thought of Mr. Antolini and ironically it makes him feel “confused, frightened, and even sickened” (170). Already in a state of great self doubt and self-dislike, the incident with Mr. Antolini renders him feeling worse than before:

I think I was more depressed than I ever was in my whole life . . . I mean I started thinking that even if he was a flit he certainly’d been very nice to me. I thought how he hadn’t minded when I’d called him up so late, and how he’d told me to come right over if I felt like it . . . and how he was the only guy that’d gone *near* that boy James Castle I told you about when he was dead. (175-176)

Again Holden feels guilty and afraid that he might have acted wrong.

It is at this point of the story that we find the culmination of Holden’s crisis; Holden does not know what to believe anymore, he is lost. Mentally and physically exhausted, alone on the streets of New York and feeling that he no longer has any one to turn to, he arrives at the decision to leave everything behind: “I sat down on this bench. I could hardly get my breath, and I was still sweating like a bastard. I sat there, I guess, for about an hour. Finally, what I decided I’d do, I decided I’d go away. I decided I’d never go home again and I’d never go away to another school again” (178). There is definitely something very typically adolescent in Holden’s decision; at the same time there is no question about his sincerity and that he is having some sort of breakdown. His rescue becomes his inability to leave without saying goodbye to his sister, a meeting that leads to a homecoming instead of a leave-taking for Holden. His return home is not the end of his crisis but the beginning of his healing process.

Only ten years old, Phoebe is a child, but of all the adults that surround Holden it is still the little girl that becomes his savior. The fact that Holden’s savior is a child is something that

has interested critics. Rowe provides the explanation that it is the adults that fail to provide Holden with the “aid, comfort and tutelage in [his] time of need” (89). As we have seen, the adults in Holden’s family, his parents and older brother, are not really accessible to him because of matters of distance and guilt, but remain shadowy figures throughout the novel. However, Holden rejects his teachers Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini who offer him guidance. To find an explanation to why Holden is saved by a child as opposed to an adult, one might instead focus on what it is in the character of children that has a positive effect on Holden, which will explain why he is drawn to them. Children personify the values that Holden cherishes, but cannot find in the adult world and also fails to live up to himself. According to Hassan, it is in children that Holden finds relief from the “phoniness, indifference and vulgarity” of adulthood (273).

According to many critics, it is the innocence of children that has a redeeming influence on Holden. As one of many critics, Anthony Burgess argues that “a sick mind’s redemption through the innocence of a child” is even a recurrent theme in Salinger’s work (299). This innocence that the children possess does not necessarily correspond to a lack of difficult experience, but to them being uncorrupted. This is illustrated in Holden’s meeting with the two brothers in the museum. In the midst of his crisis it is an episode full of comedy:

The one little kid . . . had his pants open. I told him about it. So he buttoned them right up where he was standing talking to me – he didn’t even bother to go behind a post or anything. He killed me. I would’ve laughed, but I was afraid I’d feel like vomiting again, so I didn’t. (182)

Holden is amused and moved by the child’s genuineness and inability to put up a front. So much does he cherish the innocence of children that he above everything wishes to be their “catcher in the rye”, protecting them from harm and ultimately from the corruption of adulthood. However, Holden realizes that “[t]he idea of perpetuating the innocence of childhood” as Galloway calls it, is impossible (208). Even though he rubs out obscenities from the wall of his sister’s school, he knows that he will never be able to remove all the “fuck you” signs in the world. He cannot protect children from adulthood; children must grow up and lose their innocence.

Another aspect about children that attracts Holden to them is that they have no responsibilities; their world consists mostly of play. An example of this is the well-known scene where Holden observes a boy singing and playing in the street. He is poor but still

happy in his play, and completely absorbed by it. The child's unaffected manners and joy has a good influence on Holden's mood: "It made me feel better. It made me feel not so depressed any more" (104). The carefreeness of the childhood scene works as a contrast to how Holden anticipates his adult life to be, a time when he will be:

working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time . . . There's always a dumb horse race, and some dame breaking a bottle over a ship, and some chimpanzee riding a goddam bicycle with pants on. It wouldn't be the same at all.

(119-120)

His lack of responsibility taking, which has resulted in his failure in school, can also be seen as a protest against the adult world that he does not want to participate in.

Holden's interest in and fondness of children, which seems unusual for his age, is explained by the fact that they possess an innocence and lifestyle that he is longing for. The few encounters that Holden has with children become bright spots in his otherwise dark journey and the way his mood changes into a more positive state is a contrast to his otherwise gloomy state of mind. However, his sister is the only child that becomes his savior. Apart from being a child, there is more to Phoebe's personality that explains why she, better than anyone else, can reach Holden. Phoebe becomes the "symbol of sincerity" in the novel which according to Ylva Grönberg is what all Salinger's children-saviors have in common (1).

Although Phoebe personifies the honesty of a child, she is at the same time a precocious child. This means that she lacks the naivety that sometimes comes from expecting the same goodness from other people. This combination of characteristics makes it impossible for Holden to get away with his usual lies. He cannot fool his sister, as he fools others; she immediately knows when he is lying about being expelled from his school. Although she is younger she is more realistic, when Holden tells her about his plan to go away and work on a ranch, she points out the fact that he cannot ride a horse. By preventing Holden from hiding behind his lies, she also makes it possible for him to open up to her without feeling that he needs to protect her from reality. What is also important is that Phoebe responds with the same honesty that she demands and this is where her innocence lies, in her complete lack of hypocrisy, her inability to be anything but honest. This separates her from most people that Holden meets along his journey, a point that has been argued by Howard M. Harper:

"Everyone in the book, except for Holden's little sister Phoebe, is a phony, pretending to be

something he is not” (66).

A crucial difference between the two siblings is that Phoebe is not afraid of confrontations, unlike Holden she does not choose to run away when things are difficult. This fearlessness is expressed not only in an emotional breakout where she scolds and hits Holden, but also in her questioning of what he is doing with his life. When Holden explains why he was miserable at his schools, Phoebe perceptively asks if there is actually *anything* he cares about, a question he finds himself having much difficulty answering. It is Phoebe who points out that liking Allie is not enough because he is dead and gone, and that there is no such thing as a “catcher in the rye”, it is only Holden’s misconception of the Robert Burns poem. Phoebe’s anger and frankness is a stark contrast to the indifference of Sally Hayes when Holden reveals his unhappiness to her. Moreover, it also shows that Phoebe is intelligent enough to challenge her brother, and her accusation “You don’t like *anything* that is happening” rings true both with the reader and Holden (152).

Nevertheless it is the similarities between Holden and Phoebe that bind the siblings close together. This is why Holden does not reject Phoebe despite her tough attitude towards him. On the contrary he is unwilling to leave her and the time he spends with her is his happiest moments in the novel.

Holden feels understood by Phoebe, which is unusual for him to do. Between them the lines of communication, that rarely seem to work between Holden and other characters, are well connected. Like Holden who is a “hot shot” in English, Phoebe shares his gift for language. According to Holden “she writes books all the time” and she matches her brother when it comes to being verbal (61). What is also important is that Holden thinks that Phoebe is a good listener, “She always listens when you tell her something and the funny part is she knows half the time, what the hell you’re talking about” (151). As for the times that she does not understand, he does not mind because “If somebody at least listens, it’s not too bad” (155). By listening to Holden, Phoebe shows that she cares.

The sense of understanding that exists between the siblings might also come from them sharing the same experiences; both of them have lost a brother, and are missing another one. Phoebe’s decision to sleep in D.B.’s bedroom might not only reflect her desire for more space, but also her longing for D.B. Being the only child left in the house, it is possible that Phoebe experiences the same loneliness that Holden feels at his boarding school. A sign of this is not only the five-page letter she sent to Holden, but also her joy in having his company again.

Like no one else, Phoebe has time for Holden. Unlike adults who have other responsibilities, children always have the time. They are never too busy with other things, and usually love to have an adult (which Phoebe probably perceives Holden to be) to talk to. This answers to Holden's need of company. Furthermore, Phoebe does not have an underlying motive for spending time with Holden, unlike the Stradlaters, prostitutes and Sally Hayes of the world who only want Holden for the services of writing, money and entertainment that he can offer. Phoebe will give Holden all the time she has, because to her there is nothing more important than her brother. He has no competition when it comes to his sister.

The final and strongest bond between Holden and Phoebe is their love for each other. It is manifested even before the reader gets to meet Phoebe, in Holden's longing to speak to her and in his description of her as a remarkable girl, "You should see her. You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life" (60). Although the girl we meet later on is far from angelic, but a real person who resembles her brother in the sense she is as merciless as she is kindhearted, she, unlike anyone else, makes him happy. From the moment that he steps into Phoebe's bedroom there is a fundamental change in his mood: "I felt swell for a change. I didn't even feel like I was getting pneumonia or anything any more. I just felt good, for a change" (144). The mere presence of Phoebe brings Holden out of his misery. It is obvious that he has finally gone home not only because his sister is "quite fond of" him and would be sad if he died, as Holden puts it, but also because he needs her just as much (140-141). The mutual affection they have for each other is expressed in their first meeting, where Phoebe greets him with as much enthusiasm as she later scolds him: "'Holden!' She said right away. She put her arms around my neck and all. She's very affectionate . . . I sort of gave her a kiss, and she said, 'Whenja get home?' She was glad as hell to see me. You could tell" (146). The time he spends with her in D.B.'s bedroom becomes this happy and safe bubble where they are isolated and protected from the world that makes Holden unhappy. John Seelye captures the atmosphere of the chapters where Phoebe and Holden are home alone: "Only in Phoebe's bedroom does he [Holden] find a temporary haven" (28). Sofia Helgegren offers a good explanation for Holden's despair at leaving his sister when she calls Phoebe "Holden's one ally against the world, and his eventual lifeline" (5).

The redemption that Holden experiences at the end of the novel is not only his sister's work but is also made possible by an act of his own. His need to say goodbye to his sister before he leaves for the West resembles his decision to go to her when he is in a bad state in

Central Park; once again when Holden finds himself in despair, Phoebe becomes his lifeline. However, due to Phoebe's refusal to be separated from her brother, there is never actually a goodbye. Although Holden rejects her at first when she comes dragging her suitcase, ready to follow him, he cannot stay unaffected by her act. As many critics have argued, it is the persistent love of his sister that makes Holden decide to give life another chance.

Holden's decision to go home also comes from a sense of responsibility that he feels for his sister: Holden finally understands that Phoebe needs him the same way that he needs her. His decision to stay therefore becomes an act of unselfishness. From having been completely absorbed by his own feelings, Holden finally stops being the centre of his own universe and puts someone else instead of himself first. He welcomes the responsibility that is put upon him because by being needed his life becomes meaningful, and it also releases him from the burden of his own anxiety. This is expressed in the peace of mind that Holden finally finds when watching Phoebe on the carousel:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them.  
(190)

Holden understands that responsibility is not about controlling others but being there for someone when they do fall off the horse. With this epiphany, he abdicates from his formerly desired role as a catcher.

At the end of his journey Holden has come to some sort of acceptance of how things are, that things will change, children will grow up, and that it does not have to be a bad thing. Instead it is his constant struggle against everything and everyone that is negative for him. With that realization he can finally let himself go home, as he has been longing to do his entire journey. Although we leave Holden at a mental institution, unsure of his future and with "No universal resolution to phoniness . . . found", there is hope in the responsibility that he shows for his sister (Helgren 12). Being needed by someone has not only given Holden "a cause worth living for" as he was urged by Mr. Antolini to keep searching for (Galloway 206), but his acceptance of responsibility for his sister is also a sign of him developing into a mature man. In the next chapter we will meet the Sergeant who from the very start is the mature man that Holden Caulfield might one day become.

## Chapter 2

### Overcoming the Squalor

While *The Catcher in the Rye* might be considered to be a confession intended to create self-knowledge for the narrator and perhaps the audience he is telling the story to, the intention of the next story – “For Esmé - with Love and Squalor” - is different. As the title tells us, this short story is written for Esmé. It is the fulfillment of a promise the narrator made to a little girl he met six years ago at the time of World War II while stationed in England with the invasion forces, waiting to be sent into France. The story is also what Hassan calls “a modern epithalamium” (271), and what John Wenke calls a “wedding gift, a parting gesture of love” written for Esmé’s wedding which the narrator cannot attend (117). Furthermore, the story is an acknowledgement and tribute to the girl who probably saved the narrator’s life. However, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, this short story ends up being just as much about the narrator himself as it is about the girl it is dedicated to. This chapter will begin with an analysis of the Sergeant, and then, unlike the first chapter, move on to the meeting and introduction of the little girl Esmé before it handles the crisis of the protagonist. This difference in structure between the two chapters simply reflects the different structures of the two stories; unlike Holden, the Sergeant meets the little girl before he experiences his crisis. However, like chapter one, this chapter will end with the redemption of the protagonist where, once again, the little girl plays a central role.

It is only a limited part of his life that the narrator reveals to us: we are given glimpses of his present life which is the frame story. The rest of the story falls into two parts: recollections of his pre-invasion time in England where he meets Esmé and of his time in Germany, in the immediate aftermath of the war, where he suffers from a nervous breakdown but is saved by a letter from Esmé. Since “For Esmé” is a short story it is natural that some things will be left out. One of these things is the background of the narrator who is also the protagonist. It is quite telling that he does not reveal his own name but only refers to himself as “Sergeant X”. Unlike Holden, the Sergeant realizes Holden’s claim that he is not going to tell us his “whole goddam autobiography” (*The Catcher* 1). The focus of the story is instead the meeting and relationship between the Sergeant and Esmé. It is here that we find the explanation to why Esmé’s letter has a saving effect on the Sergeant.

The Sergeant's relationship to Esmé becomes a contrast to the one personal thing about himself that he reveals, namely the relationship to his wife. He tells us in the frame-story that the reason why he cannot attend Esmé's wedding which he would "give a lot to be able to get to", is because his wife, whom he ironically calls "a breathtakingly levelheaded girl", will not allow it since her mother is coming to visit. That his wife is preventing him from doing something that obviously means much to him shows a lack of concern for her husband. There seems to be a parallel between the Sergeant's relationship to his wife and Holden's complicated relationship to women and his problem with being attracted to the wrong women. However, the Sergeant's humorous attitude towards his wife and his situation also reveals the stability of his character. It is this stability that foremost distinguishes him from Holden who suffers from much youthful instability. So in spite of the Sergeant's reticence when it comes to his background, the attentive reader will be able to form a picture of who this young man is and the situation he is in. This is important in order to understand why his meeting with Esmé has such a lasting influence on him.

When we meet the young American Sergeant in the pre-invasion part of the story, he is in a difficult situation in his life where one would imagine it would be natural for his wife to try to show her love and support. It is 1944 and the war is in its last stages. The Sergeant is taking part of a specialized pre-invasion course in Devon, England, waiting for D-Day. He is a young man, a recent college-graduate, far away from home and not knowing if he will ever return from the war. However, the stale letter from his wife that the Sergeant is carrying around in his pocket, not only indicates that she rarely sends him letters, but it also hints that she is a self-centered person complaining to her husband about a petty thing like, "how the service at Schrafft's Eighty-Eighth Street had fallen off" but offering him no comfort (137). The wife's oblivion or disregard of her husband's situation, suggests that they do not have a good relationship even this early on in the marriage. The Sergeant's failed relationship with his wife seems to increase the isolation he is experiencing.

The Sergeant's time at the camp is characterized by loneliness. He claims about his group that "there wasn't one good mixer in the bunch. . . We were all essentially letter-writing types . . ." (132). The Sergeant shares Holden's interest in literature and writing and has even made it his profession. However, he is of a more introvert personality or perhaps loneliness is not something that is painful to him as it is for Holden. Unlike Holden who goes out of his way to avoid being alone, the Sergeant handles his loneliness with calm. He also seeks it out

himself, preferring solitary walks through the English countryside and books to the company of his fellow soldiers.

Despite the seriousness of the Sergeant's situation and the lack of support from home, he is a man who is far from being in a crisis in the pre-invasion section of the story. Instead we meet a mature young man who seems to have accepted his part in life and is handling it the best he can, and observes his environment with much good humor. However, this does not mean that he is unaffected by his coming participation in the war. His books and walks away from camp might be ways of escaping the reality he is facing. On his last day in England, before being sent into the war, the Sergeant takes a walk into the little town and decides to go into a church, although he is not, as he claims himself, a particularly "denominational man" (135). This may indicate that he is affected by the war situation and is searching for peace of mind before leaving for the war. It is also this last walk that leads him to the girl that will give him redemption when in the aftermath of the war we find him in a crisis.

It is in the children's choir of the church that the Sergeant sees Esmé for the first time, and she immediately catches his attention. Without any communication taking place between them, Esmé stands out from the rest of children to the Sergeant, not only through her beautiful singing voice, but also because of her way of being, with, "blasé eyes that . . . might very possibly have counted the house" (136). This is the first insight we get into Esmé's personality and to why critics usually refer to her as "precocious". It is this characteristic that she shares with Phoebe that will make her into a challenging conversation-partner for the Sergeant despite her youth, just as Phoebe is for Holden. This episode also foreshadows their upcoming meeting in the tearoom and the special connection that develops between the Sergeant and Esmé from the very start, which Wenke calls "some kind of inscrutable magnetism" that according to him "evolves from an instinctual and unconscious sense that each possesses what the other most deeply needs" (116).

It is only a coincidence that Esmé happens to walk into the same tearoom that the Sergeant has decided to visit after he has left the church. In the short time that they spend together, Esmé manages to make a lasting impression on the Sergeant. Being about thirteen years old she is midway between childhood and, if not adulthood, at least youth - innocent and mature at the same time. Harper calls Esmé, "an incongruous blend of innocence and maturity" representing the opinion of many other critics (74).

Part of Esmé's innocence is her straightforwardness that brings to mind Phoebe.

The meeting between the Sergeant and Esmé is brief, but thanks to her openness and ability of “getting straight to the point” as Harper calls it, they are not strangers anymore when the meeting is over (74). She claims herself to be “quite communicative for my age”, a statement which could not be more accurate (153). She manages to get the quiet Sergeant to open up, asking him forthright questions like if he is in “very deep love with his wife”, the only question he does not answer, which is telling in itself (153). The way Esmé manages to reach the Sergeant, and his obvious enjoyment of her company and conversation, forms a contrast to his failed or unwanted communication with others. Just as in the case of Phoebe, it is in the meeting episode that we get to know Esmé. It is through her conversation with the Sergeant that we get the chance to form a picture of who she is.

There is a reason why Esmé is precocious; she has lost both her parents and has taken on the responsibility for her little brother Charles. We see her protective attitude towards him when she for example spells to the Sergeant that her father was “s-l-a-i-n” in Africa in an attempt to protect her brother (146). Living with an aunt who thinks Esmé is a “terribly cold person” speaks of her being a lonely girl (144). Her question to the Sergeant if he also finds her to be a cold person reveals her need for confirmation and even love (144).

However, Esmé seems unwilling to show any sign of insecurity or helplessness. Instead she puts up a self-assured and fearless front. She approaches the Sergeant with “enviable poise” at the tearoom, speaking to him with the brazen opening line: “I thought Americans despised tea” (139). When she later on points out that the Sergeant is actually the eleventh American she has met, it not only supports this side of her personality but also implies that this is a little girl who is searching for contact.

From Esmé’s wish to come off as experienced and mature comes her desire to appear older than she is. When the Sergeant claims that he is visiting Devon for his health, she replies: “*Really...* I wasn’t quite born yesterday, you know” (142). The story she asks to be written for her by the Sergeant should preferably be about squalor, and not be “childish and silly” (151). Esmé almost manages to hide her youth behind her good manners and well-developed language. However, her repeated misuse of difficult words, as when she wishes that she and the Sergeant had met “under less extenuating circumstances”, reveals the child that she is (156). This is something that the Sergeant notices but leaves unsaid, probably because he finds it endearing but possibly also out of respect and admiration for a little girl who is courageous and trying to put on a brave face despite a difficult life. Furthermore, the

circumstances of Esmé's life have seemingly forced her to grow up fast and possibly left her feeling older than she is.

Esmé is a self-involved and somewhat conceited little girl, at the same time as she is compassionate and kindhearted. She is just as talkative as Phoebe, and enjoys talking about herself at great length, like how she is going to be a professional opera singer. She is also conscious about her looks and repeatedly apologizes for looking “a fright” because of her wet hair, which she claims is “quite wavy” when it is dry (143). With naïve snobbery Esmé refuses to tell the Sergeant her full name, in case he might be impressed by her title. The Sergeant does not react negatively to this side of Esmé; instead it seems to appeal to his sense of humor. As he proclaims in answer to her question, he recognizes that she is not a cold and egotistical person, on the contrary. Apart from caring for her brother, she also shows concern for a stranger like the Sergeant. Esmé offers him her company because she thinks he looks “extremely lonely” (144). Although she claims to not be “terribly gregarious”, it is probable that she also is looking for relief for her loneliness (144). Esmé seems to have a need to talk about her dead parents, whom according to her, Charles misses exceedingly, and it is likely that she misses them too. Perhaps she senses a “surrogate father” in the Sergeant as Wenke claims or in him at least she finds the support of an adult that she is missing and someone she can confide in (116).

The Sergeant approaches Esmé and her little brother with the same interest that Holden shows the children he meets along his way. He manages to be amused by Esmé and Charles without offending them. Just like Holden he has a way with children and takes them seriously, which I think is what Esmé appreciates about him. As in *The Catcher*, the children of this story become a reason for joy in the dark reality that the protagonist is surrounded by.

When it is time for Esmé to leave, the Sergeant experiences a “strangely emotional moment” (155). In the short conversation, he has experienced “a moment of human warmth and sanity” in this girl whose genuine personality really seems to have touched him (James E. Miller 22). His short conversation with a stranger forms, as Ylva Grönberg states, “a complete reversal to the egocentric and trivial message from his wife” (13). Only Esmé manages to break through his isolation at the same time as he offers her the company that she terribly seems to need. They part with the promise that she will write him a letter, and that he shall write her a story about squalor. Esmé leaves him with the encouraging wish that he may return from the war with all his “faculties intact” (156). This comment is not only an example of her

wish to use sophisticated language, but it is also a perceptive comment from a girl who knows the implications of a war. Later on Esmé's words will prove to be prophetic of her role in the Sergeant's war experience.

The meeting between the Sergeant and Esmé in the tearoom can be said to parallel the meeting of Holden and Phoebe in her bedroom. Both protagonists are in a difficult situation in their lives. However, they are reacting to it in different ways; Holden with confusion and anxiety, the Sergeant with acceptance and calm. Holden himself has looked up his sister to find relief, while the Sergeant only finds Esmé, and thereby relief, by chance. The strong connection between the episodes is that they both reveal the relationship between the protagonists and the little girls, which later on will explain the saving influence of the girls. The atmosphere of seclusion, understanding and mutual affection in the tearoom resembles the happiness and safeness that Holden experiences in Phoebe's bedroom.

While *The Catcher* is much concerned with depicting Holden's journey into a crisis, this development is completely omitted in "For Esmé". This means that we move directly from the tearoom to the time of the armistice where we find the Sergeant in a state of crisis, leaving a gap where the war took place. Although we never find out what the Sergeant has been through in the war, he is when we meet him again, a man who according to himself has not "come through the war with all his faculties intact" (157). So compared to Holden's crisis which has no obvious beginning and is quite difficult to define, it is made quite clear in "For Esmé" that the Sergeant's crisis is caused by the war.

The crisis part of the story is explicitly introduced, textually and stylistically. The first line of the last part of the story which deals with the time of the armistice, plainly says: "This is the squalid or moving part of the story, and the scene changes. The people change, too" (156). The idyllic English countryside has been replaced by a war-torn Germany. We find the Sergeant living there in a civilian house which is occupied by his unit. From having told the story in first person he now switches to a third person point of view, cleverly disguised, as he humorously claims, as "Sergeant X", as if he was not talking about himself. The change of point of view is not only a sign of change of scene but it is also a way for the narrator to distance himself from a difficult experience, as if it is too emotionally difficult to retell it in the first person.

Although it is the man from the tearoom that we meet in the German civilian house, he is a very changed man. Despite just being released from a hospital in Frankfurt where he has been

recovering from a nervous breakdown, he is obviously still ill. The Sergeant's breakdown is affecting him physically; he gets so sick that he vomits and has lost so much weight that his fellow soldier Clay claims that he "goddam near fainted" when seeing him at the hospital (163). The Sergeant also has troubles controlling his body; he has facial tics and his hands are shaking so violently that he can hardly write. However, the Sergeant's physical condition is probably a symptom of his mental breakdown; he seems to be as sick inside as he is outside. The fact that he has let himself go, not washing himself properly, is a sign of his state of mind. He even feels "his mind dislodge itself and teeter" and presses his hands against his temples in an attempt to "set things right" (158). He is unable to read books anymore which earlier were his source of solace, and as he himself claims "[t]he trouble lay with him, not the novel" (157).

The war has profoundly changed the Sergeant's former ease with the difficulties in life into a serious state of hopelessness. Although he belongs to the winners of the war, his soul seems to share the desperation of the defeated. This is expressed in his reply to the German woman's inscription "Dear God, life is hell", which he finds written in a book by Goebbels belonging to her (159). As member of the Nazi party she belonged to the enemy and used to live in the occupied house until being arrested by the Sergeant himself. To her words he adds the quotation from Dostoevski: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love" (160). It is as if the Sergeant is saying that when it comes to lack of love, there is no difference between his side and the enemy and it is the hatred of both sides that is the cause of their misery. It is the Dostoevski quotation that is the reason why many critics find the cause of the Sergeant's crisis to be an inability to love. However, Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller Jr. explain it better when they call the Sergeant's breakdown a "manifestation . . . of the lack of love" (199). Since a war itself is an action which is the ultimate representation of lack of love, it is only natural that the state of the world is reflected in the Sergeant's mind. As Grönberg puts it, the Sergeant is in a situation where he "finds himself surrounded by evil, suffering and indifference and sees the world and himself as devoid of love" (16). He is in a state where he feels no love within, nor can he find it outside himself. Despite his stay at the hospital he is still sick, because as long as there is no sign of love around him he will remain in a state of crisis.

Just as in the pre-invasion part of the story, the Sergeant again isolates himself in his time of need. While he used to find comfort in his loneliness, for example going on solitary walks,

his loneliness has now turned into alienation. Although it is his own choice to close himself up in his miserable dark room, avoiding the company of his fellow soldiers, it depends on the disconnection he feels to those around him. His relationship to the other soldiers is represented by Clay. This is a man of a different constitution who is “untouched by the horrors of the war”, and therefore cannot comprehend the reason why the Sergeant has had a breakdown, nor the severity of it (Grönberg 15). When stating to the Sergeant that he agrees with his girlfriend’s theory that the war itself is not reason enough for one to have a breakdown, instead the Sergeant has probably been “unstable like, your whole goddam life”, Clay not only reveals his own insensitivity but also comes close to the truth (166). Although Clay exaggerates, there is a certain truth to his statement; despite them sharing the same difficult experiences, he and the Sergeant have had different reactions to the war. This might be explained by a difference in their character where the Sergeant has a sensitivity that makes him more vulnerable to war than a person like Clay. Clay is evidently not a man with whom the Sergeant can find comfort. Their disconnection comes through in their dialogue where the Sergeant confronts the stupidity he finds in Clay with irony and absurdities, using a language that resembles Holden Caulfield’s. When Holden gets remarks about needing to grow up, Clay irritably tells the Sergeant “[c]an’t you ever be *sincere*”, when in fact it is the Sergeant’s way of responding to Clay’s insincerity (167).

The letter from the Sergeant’s brother is also a failure of communication and personal contact. “[n]ow that the g.d war is over”, he writes, “how about sending the kids a couple of bayonets and swastikas”, oblivious of how inappropriate his request is and that although the war may be over it may still have repercussions for the Sergeant. His brother’s incomprehension of what a war means represents the ignorant attitude of most Americans back home, including the Sergeant’s wife. It was not possible for them to comprehend what the soldiers had been through overseas. Therefore, “his brother’s letter accentuates distance, fails to provide relief, and moves X closer to an absolute loss of reason” (Wenke 117). Again, it is the English girl who is the only one who manages to have successful communication with the Sergeant.

Like in *The Catcher*, it is the return of the little girl that brings redemption to the protagonist. Like Phoebe, Esmé comes back when the protagonist is about to give up; the Sergeant has stopped opening the letters that have been sent to him. Although Esmé does not physically appear again, she comes back to the Sergeant in the form of a letter and a package

which he only by chance happens to open. It is a letter that captures the very essence of Esmé, and that brings back the Sergeant's memory of her in the tearoom and the existence of "decency, kindness and sanity" (Grönberg 16). Sending him her late father's watch which she cherishes is not only an unselfish act, but her enclosed words that the Sergeant may "use it to a greater advantage in these difficult days than I ever can", also show her understanding of his situation. Being a war-child herself, Esmé has as Wenke claims "a sensitive understanding of the way war can destroy one's being" (117). She has also lost both her parents and knows what it means to be alone in the world. She seems to be showing the Sergeant a kindness she herself is in need of, and she does this with a child's fearlessness to express emotions, telling him how she has thought of him frequently and "the extremely pleasant afternoon we spent in each other's company" (171). It is the same open affection that Phoebe shows Holden, but what was a brother in *The Catcher* could be considered to be a stranger in "For Esmé", possibly making the gesture even greater. Like Phoebe, Esmé also subtly expresses her own wish to have the Sergeant in her life. The Sergeant is deeply touched by the letter and the gift: "[i]t was a long time before X could set the note aside" (172). According to Galloway the package represents "a gesture of love which directly opposes the squalor of his world" (215). After reading the letter, the peace of mind that Holden experiences by the carousel comes to the Sergeant in the form of healing sleep. As the narrator informs us in the finishing line of the story, a sleepy man always stands a chance to become a man "with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact" (173).

Unlike the unclear fate of Holden, the Sergeant's story has closure. Since the introduction shows him as a recovered person six years after his breakdown, we can be sure that the "darkness of despair has been dispelled by love" (Harper 75). However, this does not mean that the Sergeant is now leading a perfect life - the problems between him and his wife still remain. Despite this he has as Wenke claims, "found a way to avoid paralyzing isolation and survive with good humor even though living within a world dominated by the likes of his wife and mother-in-law" (118). The Sergeant is a man who has found a way to live his life within an imperfect society, which is something that yet remains for Holden to learn.

There is a contrast between the Sergeant's relationship to Esmé and his other relationships; this is the only one where the Sergeant finds the communication to be meaningful and loving. This means that although "For Esmé" can be viewed as an optimistic story where love finally prevails, it is also as, Wenke claims, a story about "the problems of human communication",

of how difficult it is to find someone who understands you (117). However, the story gives us hope that this is possible, and the rare moments it happens it can help individuals “pass through squalor to love” (Wenke 118). By writing this story for Esmé in an important stage of her life, the story comes full circle; the Sergeant returns the love that Esmé once offered him when he needed it the most. Together with Esmé’s wedding invitation it confirms the significance of the meeting in the Devon tearoom for both individuals.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this essay was to show that the theme of how a troubled young man in a crisis who is saved by the love of a little girl is central in J.D Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as in his short story “For Esmé - with Love and Squalor”. Furthermore, the argument was that there is a strong kinship between the protagonists of both stories as well as the little girl, thereby supporting the existing opinion of critics that Salinger is a writer who returns to favored themes and characters.

Through the analysis it has been shown that both protagonists share the same development of being in a crisis, meeting with a little girl, and then attaining redemption through the love of that girl. However, within each of the categories there are differences between the protagonists. Holden is already in a crisis when the novel begins. Furthermore it is argued that there is no obvious answer to the question why Holden is in a crisis, instead four different issues have been put forward as the components of his crisis, namely: *death, social injustice, sexuality* and *a search for companionship*. They are united by a fifth component which is *a sense of guilt*. As mentioned in the introduction, the Sergeant on the other hand is in a difficult situation of his life, about to be sent into war, when he meets Esmé, but he is not in a crisis. Unlike Holden, it is quite clear that the Sergeant’s crisis is caused by the war, and not until then does his meeting with Esmé prove its importance. Holden’s saving little girl is his sister who he already has an established relationship with; when all others fail him he knows that she is the person to turn to. Esmé on the other hand is a stranger who the Sergeant only meets once by chance. Still, these two meetings are similar in the way that they show the deep mutual affection and understanding between the protagonists and the girls.

It is this meeting that explains the saving influence of the girls and it is also here that we get to know the girls’ similar personalities. Not only are Phoebe and Esmé described as

physically similar but they also share defining characteristics like being talkative and self-involved at the same time as they are kindhearted, open and sincere. Most important, however, is that they share the difficult experiences of the protagonists, which perhaps explains their most salient trait, namely their precociousness. The redemption occurs when they return to the protagonists, Phoebe in physical form and Esmé through a letter, where they express love and need for the protagonists.

Due to the scarce information that is given about the Sergeant, it is difficult to establish with certainty a parallel between his background and Holden's. However, from the bits and pieces that the reader is given, the picture emerges of a well-educated young man with a serious interest in reading and writing, quite similar to Holden. Although their nervous breakdowns have different sources, their crises are similar in the way that they are both characterized by the protagonists' alienation, their inability to connect with people around them: the Sergeant with his wife and fellow soldiers and Holden with his peers, and adults like his teachers and parents. Both are drawn to the world of children where they find Phoebe and Esmé with whom they finally find mutual understanding and joy in each other's company.

Even though it is argued that it is the girls' love that motivates the protagonists' decision to return to society and brings them out of their crisis, there is a difference between Phoebe's and Esmé's redeeming influence. Unlike Holden who we leave recovering but unsure of his future, love becomes the resolution to the crisis of the Sergeant and he is able to re-enter society. With Holden we have yet to see if he will reconcile himself to society. The difference in their ability to recover from their crisis might not only have to do with a difference in age, but also in perspective. With six years having past by since his breakdown, the Sergeant has a longer perspective on his crisis and has had more time to recover. Holden on the other hand, is looking back on a breakdown that happened to him barely a year ago. This difference is shown in their recollections where the Sergeant's focus is as much on Esmé as the squalor he went through, while Holden's recollection is more of an effort to figure out his crisis, making it more self-centered. With the similarities in their personalities, one might consider the Sergeant to be a grown-up and more mature version of Holden Caulfield. In that way the Sergeant's recovery and ability to cope with life despite an imperfect society, gives hope for Holden.

While much has been written on Salinger's male heroes like Holden Caulfield and Sergeant X, less has been said about the importance of the little girls in his fiction. In this

essay an effort has been made to emphasize the role of Phoebe and Esmé and explore their personalities, thereby giving nuances to the image of the “innocent children”, which is usually how they are referred to by critics. However, in line with most critics, my main focus has been on the male protagonists. In my opinion, there is still more room for further exploration of little girls in Salinger’s fiction, especially as they are central agents in Salinger’s literary theme of love as man’s salvation: it is through their love that the squalor is overcome.

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