MAJOR RECURRENT THEMES IN J. D. SALINGER'S FICTION: ARCHETYPAL MOTIFS AND PATTERNS

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***Abstract**: J. D. Salinger's fiction abounds in certain attitudes, patterns, and motifs that repeat themselves, under different forms and names, and that evolve from his early short stories to his last published literary creations. Many critics have tried to identify and explain these patterns to better understand the meaning of Salinger's friction. Some of the major themes identified in Salinger's fiction are related to faith, conformity vs. society, love of various kinds, the repressed and perverted sex instinct, the misfit hero, "phony" and "nice" worlds, crucial moments of revelation or epiphanies, alienation and vulnerability, escapism, quest for a moral ideal, religion and Western philosophy, symbolism of names, childhood and adulthood, relationships, specific use of language, and so on.*

Salinger's protagonists are usually intelligent and sensitive ones. Some of them are also very aware teenagers, or adults who seek their own identity in relation to an external world with which they find themselves more or less in conflict. Alienation or disenchantment with the so-called adult world is one of the most frequently met themes in Salinger's writings. This theme is often emphasized by rather "common" characters (parents, teachers, marriage partners, etc.) who interrelate with the troubled protagonist. Sometimes Salinger's characters search for a definition of the "adult" world or this definition is simply offered in Salinger's writings. This adult world may be viewed as commercialized, materialistic, phony, ugly, grotesque, and all these reasons make the sensitive character retreat from it. This retreat can be real or symbolical and Salinger's most used tools for rendering this escapism are madness, suicide, or introversion and fantasy. Salinger is also very concerned with the question of innocence and experience in human lives. But, more important than this concern is that of how the life experience, which is unavoidable, can best be realized in true spiritual growth. Sometimes true "love" of humanity seems to be the solution offered. Salinger's style and writing technique are unique and they include a rather inspired use of detail, slang characteristic to the 20th-century, vocabulary specific to teenagers, and colloquialisms. All these major aspects of Salinger's fiction represent the focus of this article.

***Keywords:** themes, symbolism, archetypes.*

J. D. Salinger is still a very important and much discussed figure in post-war II American fiction and many critics have taken great interest in his life and literary creation, although it is universally acclaimed that Salinger was not a very prolific writer and that he has written relatively little throughout his literary career. But Salinger has managed to catch the public's and the critics' attention soon after he started writing short stories and after important publications accepted his stories for publication. The main aim of this paper is to see which are the most important patterns and themes in Salinger's works and how Salinger has managed to maintain his reputation, how it has managed "to survive such a long self-imposed silence" (French, 1988: ix).

The main aim of this paper is to outline the most important themes and patterns that recur in all of Salinger's literary creation. Salinger used characters bearing the same or similar names in different stories, characters who were in similar situations or had similar attitudes in certain circumstances, characters who used a similar style or tone of language, and all these similarities entitled many critics to believe that there is a

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connection between a group of characters and the different stories in which they reappear. This idea would lead to a pattern of development or evolution of Salinger's literary models. The task of tracing back Salinger's characters was not an easy one and many critics took great interest in identifying, demonstrating, or finding out the line of evolution of certain Salingerian heroes. This task was all the more difficult given that Salinger tried as hard as he could to bury his early short stories in oblivion by censoring their publication in collections on the grounds that they were his property and he did not consider them worthy of being published again.

Salinger worked on his novel step-by-step, starting early in his youth. Although Salinger wrote many short stories, *The Catcher in the Rye* is his only novel. It could be considered the culmination of some of the major themes that appeared throughout a number of his short stories. Yet, some of these themes form the basis of only individual chapters in *The Catcher*. The Caulfield family is the subject of two of Salinger's major stories: "I'm crazy" and "This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise." The basis of *The Catcher in the Rye* as a sequence of distinct short stories, as well as Salinger's fondness for that form explains the pace and relative lack of narrative continuity in the novel. Different settings or different characters do not reappear in more than one or two successive chapters. The first chapters of the novel, which are all located at Pencey, are the only ones that maintain the same characters and setting for an extended period. Holden, as narrator, is the only character that recurs throughout the entire story. Characters such as Sally Hayes or Mr. Antolini appear in only one chapter and then almost disappear. Moreover, as Salinger reiterates thematic elements all through the novel, such as Holden's complaining about phonies al the time, many of the characters can be viewed as short stories in themselves.

Gwynn and Blotner classify the "Caulfield Stories" as "the sextet of stories that do develop five years later into 'For Esmé,' 'Bananafish,' and *The Catcher in the Rye*" (Gwynn and Blotner, 1958: 16). The six stories are: in 1944 "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," in 1945 "A Boy in France," "This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise," "The Stranger," "I'm Crazy," and in 1946 "Slight Rebellion off Madison."

In the first of these stories, "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," the reader meets Technical Sergeant John (Babe) F. Gladwaller and his ten-year-old sister, Mattie. Babe Gladwaller and his twenty-nine-year-old friend, Vincent Caulfield, prepare to go off to war. Gwynn and Blotner believe that Mattie plays a similar role with Phoebe's, she understands Babe Gladwaller just as Phoebe understands Holden (Gwynn and Blotner, 1958: 16). The presence of a child in the story is something very representative for Salinger, a trademark as W. French would say, and "[t]he child always represents the individual born good and corrupted by institutions" (Lundquist, 1979:15). This theme will be present throughout all of Salinger's stories and in his novel. The fact that Vincent is a soap opera writer represents one of Salinger's recurrent patterns and "lasting obsessions—the writer as sell-out" (Lundquist, 1979:16). The detail that Vincent has a younger brother, named Holden, does not entitle us to consider him a prototype for the Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, since "the earlier Holden is referred to as tough—something the later Holden certainly is not" (Lundquist, 1979: 17). With this short story yet another one of Salinger's recurrent patterns becomes obvious: the use of names as symbols for the characters who bear them. J. Lundquist believes that "Babe's very name suggests his nature—like so many of Salinger's characters, he is in love with innocence, and it is the very childishness of his date that

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appeals to him" (Lundquist, 1979: 17). In "The Last Day of the Last Furlough" Salinger depicts a theme and an attitude that will become leitmotifs for his fiction: "not a crisis in the life of Everyman, but the inner feelings of those who prefer to dwell in the 'nice' world of their imaginations rather than in the 'phony' world of sad partings" (French, 1963: 62).

Salinger's attentiveness to details and carefully thought choice of words, as well as his special treatment of colors are present in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough" from the very beginning when he describes Babe: "Technical sergeant John F. Gladwaller, Jr., ASN 32325200, had on a pair of gray-flannel slacks, a white shirt with the collar open, Argyle socks, brown brogues and a dark brown hat with a black band" (Salinger, 1944: 26). All the colors chosen by Salinger—gray, white, brown, dark brown, black—seem to anticipate the gloomy end of the story and the presence of war throughout the story. The reference to his mother, to the chocolate cake and the glass of milk, as well as the symbolism of Babe's name, all seem to refer to his innocent nature and love for everything that bears the hallmark of childishness. The short story also seems to anticipate Salinger's penchant for citing novels, titles, characters, authors—later on developed especially in *Hapworth 16, 1924*—referring to Anna Karenina, Count Vronsky, Father Zossima, and Alyosha Karamazov, when talking about sergeant John F. Gladwaller being surrounded by books "at the studio of Mihailov, the painter" in the opening of the story (Salinger, 1944: 26). In addition to the specific tone and register of the language, which make Salinger unmistakable, he also uses italics throughout his short stories, especially in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," either to emphasize certain words, parts of words or sentences, or to distinguish Babe's thoughts from the rest of the story, as it happens in the last part of this short story.

In "A Boy in France" we meet Babe Gladwaller again, for the second time, but this time he is reading over and over again a letter from his sister, complaining about the shortage of boys on the beach. Here, once again, the recurrent motif of the letter is present in Salinger's short story. Letters or notes, and later on telephone conversations, recur in the Salingerian fiction as the most important means of communication, next to face-to-face conversation or characters' inner thoughts. The recurrent motif of the letter is usually associated with the character's repeated reading of the letter, as it happens in this short story: "All of a sudden, and hurriedly, the boy took a soiled, unrecent envelope from his pocket. Quickly he extracted the letter from inside it and began to reread it for the thirty-oddth time" (Salinger, 1945: 92). There is always a strange need in Salinger's characters to read their letters again and again and never part with them. The letter usually symbolizes a very suggestive means of communication between two characters who are separated and who frequently long for each other. The repeated reading of the letter stands for the need of affective connection with the sender of the letter, the need for love, protection, and security given by the feeling of being in the presence of an object from someone dear. The story is important at least for two reasons: on the one hand it announces the sequel pattern in Salinger's fiction, and on the other hand it deals with the themes of war and squalor, in embryonic phase at least. Salinger's technique, just as his characters, will develop in only a few years and a reach high point, such as in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," to mention only one of his masterpieces.

"This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise" focuses on Vincent Caulfield who is training in Georgia in the Air Corps. Vincent serves as the basis for D.B. Caulfield,

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Holden's older brother in the novel, and the protagonist in a number of stories by Salinger. Babe Gladwaller survives the war, but Vincent does not. In "The Stranger" we meet Babe Gladwaller again. This time he takes his sister to New York. French classifies Salinger's "The Stranger" as one of his "most complete failures" (French, 1963: 63). He explains that the reason why Helen had broken up with Vincent is because he was very affected by the death of his younger brother, Kenneth, before the war. Yet, this is not a good reason for alienating a man from his girlfriend; and, moreover, Salinger does not provide any further explanation of why Kenneth's death would entitle Vincent's alienation. Then again, there is no connection between Vincent's sudden death and the separation from Helen. "The Stranger" is the last story where we meet Babe Gladwaller. Lundquist believes that Babe is a prototype for Seymour Glass in some readers' opinion (Lundquist, 1979: 19). The critic also explains that Babe's sudden disappearance from Salinger's work is due to the fact that "Salinger seems to have been trying to develop the same sensibilities in Babe that he later does more successfully in Holden. Babe is ultimately unworkable as a character. He is too uncomplicated for his age. He is made to act like Holden in many ways, but he is simply too old" (Lundquist, 1979: 20).

In "I'm Crazy" Salinger focuses on Holden and his first appearance as a prototype for the main character in *The Catcher in the Rye*. This is one of the major short stories concentrating on the Caulfield family. The story presents Holden's interview with his history teacher before he decides to run away from the preparatory school, and his conversation with Phoebe in her bedroom. Thus, the story forms the basis for the first two chapters of the novel, as well as the chapter in which Holden goes home to see Phoebe. In this story, however, Holden expresses greater regret for his expulsion from Pentey, even lamenting that he will never again play games of football on Saturday evenings with his friends. The chapter in which Holden tries to convince Sally Hayes to run away with him to New England is the basis for the story, "Slight Rebellion off Madison."

In 1945, when the short story was published, people read for the first time in "I'm Crazy" about Holden Caulfield and his teacher, "old Spencer," about his copy of the Atlantic Monthly, about the history test Holden had flunked, about the lagoon in Central Park and Holden's inquietude about where the ducks go when the lagoon freezes over, about Holden's speech and use of language, about phoniness, about Holden's little sisters, Phoebe and Viola (French, 1963: 67). Viola seems to be one of Salinger's most exquisite creations, but a very short-lived one. The character, bearing the same name as William Shakespeare's central character in "Twelfth Night," is Holden's youngest sister. Both Holden and his ten-year old, Phoebe, love Viola immensely. Viola is the one who tells Holden about the bad breath of Jeannette, their colored maid. This symbol will recur in Salinger's novel, standing for the adult world interfering and tainting the children's innocent world. Viola is a very funny and vivid character; she wants Holdie to bring her Donald Duck back, and before she goes to sleep she asks her brother to bring her "ovvels," instead of olives, "with the red in them" (Salinger, 1946: 51). Perhaps Salinger decided not to use Viola's character in the novel because he wanted to fully concentrate on Phoebe and this could not have been possible with Holden having two exquisite sisters, and so he decided to keep Phoebe and turn her into the prototype character of the innocent child. In "Slight Rebellion off Madison" Salinger tells "the wonderful Holden-Sally Hayes episode in Rockefeller Center," and

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which “allows Holden’s climactic opinion of Sally to stamp him as at once neurotic, self-reliant, and honest” (Gwynn and Blotner, 1958: 18). The episode of Holden’s date with Sally Hayes will become part of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

It has been universally accepted that the climax of Salinger’s literary creations is represented by *The Catcher in the Rye*, which seems to have a unique power on the young readers who discover it for the first time, and also for Salinger’s fans who usually identify themselves with Holden Caulfield and his experiences and feelings. Salinger’s use of colloquial language is present throughout the novel, and it offers humor, pathos, understanding and insight, and a unique view of the world. Holden Caulfield knew the difference between phoniness and truth. The major theme, and the subject of the novel, is growing up. The theme can also be considered the author’s attitude about his subject, and that is why, in a broad sense, could be the difficulty of growing up, the lonely and difficult passage from innocence to experience. Salinger’s novel is shaped as a circle, since it begins in California, in Holden’s rest home when he starts telling about the experiences that lead to his breakdown, and it ends when Holden returns to his rest home again, completing the circle. Salinger manages to intensify the circular structure of the novel by repeating the same symbols and themes at the conclusion of the novel that he used at the beginning, and this demonstrates the maturation and development of Salinger’s writing technique.

Salinger’s use of point of view in *The Catcher in the Rye* is an example of subjective, first person narrative. Holden is the one who tells the reader everything about what happens to him and about his feelings. By using this technique, Salinger manages to connect the reader directly in the novel and to create depth. The language used in the novel has paramount importance. Salinger’s colloquial and slang language helps to increase Holden’s portrayal and to control the pace of the novel. Many critics have noticed that Holden’s brusque speech serves to show his inarticulate and rebellious personality. Donald Costello in “The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*,” managed to encapsulate the numerous instances of Holden’s speech, demonstrating the importance of Salinger’s use of italicized words or syllables, Holden’s use of the same word in many different contexts, all the subtle aspects that force the reader to pay close attention in order to understand the exact shades of meaning Holden intends. Some of the most important symbols that can be identified in the novel are the song by Robert Burns, the red hunting hat, and the sports images that appear throughout the novel. The title, which comes from a mishearing of the song, indicates Holden’s great desire to have a transcendent moral purpose, to save children from any loss of innocence.

Many critics agree that Salinger’s *Nine Stories* represents the highpoint of his publishing career. In this collection the readers and the critics can see how Salinger’s art and life came together in the best possible way, how Salinger’s Zen interests fused with his favorite themes, and how he managed to give a new perspective to the American short story. Salinger’s collected stories mainly focused on “genius, spiritual integrity, moral corruption, and the occasional ability of innocence to transform our lives” (Smith, 2003: 639+). Salinger seems to admit a certain degree of social torment in the morality of young Americans since, as D. Smith points out, “seven of the nine stories feature children, all of whom stand on higher moral ground than their adult guardians.” The main themes that Salinger deals with in his stories are those of hope and despair, or, as Salinger himself had named them, “love and squalor.”

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J. D. Salinger's fiction abounds in certain attitudes, patterns, and motifs that repeat themselves, under different forms and names, and that evolve from his early short stories to his last published literary creations: the misfit hero, "phony" and "nice" worlds, crucial moments of revelation or epiphanies, alienation and vulnerability, escapism, quest for a moral ideal, religion and Western philosophy, symbolism of names, childhood and adulthood, relationships, and specific use of language. Salinger's characters are usually intelligent and sensitive ones; most of them are also very aware teenagers who seek their own identity in relation to an external world with which they find themselves more or less in conflict. Alienation or disenchantment with the so-called adult world is one of the most frequently met themes in Salinger's writings. This adult world may be viewed as commercialized, materialistic, phony, ugly, grotesque, and all these reasons make the sensitive character retreat from it. This retreat can be real or symbolical and Salinger's most used tools for rendering this escapism are madness, suicide, or introversion and fantasy. Salinger is also very concerned with the question of innocence and experience in human lives. But, more important than this concern is that of how the life experience, which is unavoidable, can best be realized in true spiritual growth. Sometimes true "love" of humanity seems to be the solution offered, as in "Teddy." Salinger's style and writing technique are unique and they include a rather inspired use of detail, slang characteristic to the 20th-century, vocabulary specific to teenagers, and colloquialisms.

The concept of the "misfit hero" can be attributed to Paul Levine who traced and wrote about the condition and the evolution of the Salingerian hero. This type of hero always bears the hallmark of a "moral code" and thus the main dilemma in Salinger's stories seems to focus on the moral hero who is forced by the society to give up his compromise his high ideals. This vision of the Salingerian hero becomes the writer's trademark as he develops his writing talent. The first prototype of Salinger's hero as an artist was created in "The Varioni Brothers" and Warren French believes that Salinger tried to make a statement about the role of the artist in modern American society. Joe Varioni seems to outline the type of character that dominates most of Salinger's fiction – Levine's "misfit hero." The moral issued raised by the story focuses on the troubled artist who lives in a materialistic society and who worries about the essential problem related to keeping and following moral principles or giving up on them and settling for commercial success. The stories written by Salinger during the war focus on the hero's isolation from the corrupted world. Many of the recurrent themes in Salinger's fiction begin to appear in these short stories: isolation, retreat, alienation, and loneliness.

"The Inverted Forest" is one of Salinger's works that deserves more attention than it had at the time of its publication and afterwards since Salinger uses some of the recurrent patterns, ideas, and attitudes present in all his writings: conjugal responsibility, repressed sexuality, and artistic integrity, which are all linked, as J. Lundquist mentioned. Raymond Ford is what Paul Levine called the "misfit hero" and Salinger created him based on the model of Joe Varioni and later on he developed him into Seymour Glass. There are main themes and patterns specific to Salinger's fiction that are present in the story—phone conversations, which stand for the characters' trouble in communicating directly, suicide (Corinne's father), marriage and attitude towards sex, the place of the artist in society, and, implicitly, Salinger's concept of the artist. The idea of inversion suggested by the title is present throughout the entire

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novella, and it is connected to Ray and his ideas of beauty that leads to art and which is deeply rooted underground.

The misfit hero is a person in conflict with himself, and he is a combination of nice and unique qualities. Salinger developed the earlier above-mentioned models of the "misfit hero" and completed them with the creation of Seymour Glass in the short story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," which is the first short story that actually drew much of the critics' attention. Seymour Glass, the character who commits suicide at the age of twenty-five, to everybody's bafflement, becomes the prototype for the Glass family. Salinger masterfully embodied two worlds in this story: the child's world and the adult's world, and these represent one of Salinger's most frequent themes or recurrent patterns. There is another important Salingerian recurrent attitude that figures once again in this short story, next to the suicide theme, namely that of the main character's inability to communicate. This inability to communicate with the world in which he lives and come to terms with it finally leads Seymour to suicide. Criticism of the "misfit hero" depends upon how favorably or unfavorably his unavoidable isolation, or alienation, from his world is viewed.

It is obvious that Salinger's style and characters have greatly developed and evolved, bearing the marks of the numerous influences present in Salinger's life, personal experiences, historical, and cultural background of his time. The themes and the form of *Nine Stories* seem, as D. Smith declares, "to hover in the middle of the last century as a strange and compelling amalgam of influences" (Smith, 2003: 639+). The critic also traces certain modernist trends in Salinger's stories, such as: "the religious style epiphany of Joyce, the cinematic elegance of Chekhov, and some of the hardboiled irony and deep subtext of Hemingway stories," and he believes that the writer magnificently manages to encapsulate "the bourgeois malaise and spiritual hunger of post-war America as opposed to the spirit of prosperity and return to suburban quietude that often characterizes fiction of this period" (Smith, 2003: 639+).

Salinger's literary creations that followed *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*, and *Hapworth 16, 1924*, contain moments of brilliance, but, in D. Smith's opinion, "were a little too self-conscious and rambling, and they floundered between forms," and they also "lacked the distilled power of good short stories and the full-bellied story arcs of superior novels" (Smith, 2003: 639+).

In *Franny and Zooey*, although the reader is introduced to Lane Coutell, the real subject of the novel is Franny herself. The story of Franny focuses on her looking profoundly at herself and trying to discover her real self, her relationships to people and her place in the world. The answers to her questions materialize in the second and longer part, *Zooey*. The short story deals with themes of phoniness, niceness and integrity, alienation and vulnerability, reality, Franny's idealization of beauty, the quest for a moral ideal, Salinger's use of the letter pattern. Briefly, Franny—seen more evidently in *Zooey*, tries to define herself and take responsibility for her selfhood. Franny is deeply conscious of the difference between her values related to literature, education, religion and life, and the values of those around her. Franny cannot deal with, or at least improve, the "phoniness" in the world around her. She is both confused and worried by her effort to find out what her own values are, and she feels guilty at the same time. Franny is tormented by her inability to accept to live by everyone else's

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values—as she does in appearance—and nevertheless she cannot find genuine values of her own.

Franny introduced all the members of the Glass family, but sometimes the reader did not get enough information on all of them. Zooey continued the "account of specific events introduced in 'Franny'" (French, 1988: 94). Zooey is in a sense similar to The Catcher in the Rye, this novel is a novel of internal conflicts and responses since very little action takes place and thus the main interest and "action" shift to the psychological side. All the details about the Glass family are illustrated through facts revealed in Zooey's thoughts and conversations and in Buddy's letter. Zooey undergoes a personal self-analysis that prepares him for his lecture to Franny, which culminates in the resolution of Franny's emotional and spiritual crisis and her discovery of peace of mind. Some of the most important themes in this story refer to Zen Buddhism, his theories of education, the nature of deceptive differences between things, alienation and the problem of communication with other human beings. The literary device Salinger decided to use in this story is based on his early pattern of the letter. Zooey's decision to reread the letter indicates his own need for self-definition. It is a sign of some inner questioning and discontent. He rereads it in an attempt to look for help when faced with the decision on his career that he must soon make. The influence of Zen Buddhism and related theories of knowledge is indicated in the letter.

It seems that all Salinger's mature works represent, more than in his previous writings, a quest, a search for the seer and all his characters have a very well-defined role in helping the reader find this seer. Salinger seems to be an author accessible to a wide range of students, especially young people. A chronological approach of his literary creations can only help to understand Salinger's repertoire of characters, symbols, patterns, and recurrent themes. Thus, one can easily read and understand the early Salinger stories, such as "The Young Folks," then the story that introduced Holden Caulfield, "I'm Crazy," and then the Glass family, introduced in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Books like The Catcher in the Rye, Franny and Zooey, and the others above-mentioned, demonstrate how Salinger managed to add details in order to improve his writing technique and his characters, who developed from their introductions until they finally emerged as fully developed characters. An outlook of Salinger's entire fiction sheds light on his prose styles, on Salinger's trademarks—such as his direct contact with the reader, his confusing story lines, his being a complete master of dialogue in which the choice of every word seems to be a very well balanced and detailed act, his italicizing words for emphasis, his colloquial language often considered too strong for those who wanted to censor or ban his books, the symbolism of his characters' names and of his stories' titles, the Zen imagery, and the portrayal of honest feelings in characters as Holden, Seymour, Franny, or Buddy, who are all searching for meaning in a crazy and phony world. All these aspects of Salinger's fiction will be detailed in the following subchapters, using the findings of numerous authorities and specialists on Salinger.

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