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Retelling the Past

Connection and Addition in the Works of J. D. Salinger

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Introduction

J. D. Salinger persisted in protecting his ownership of his texts, seeming to want not to die as the author of his works, yet his death as an author is caused by the narrator he himself creates, whose narrative privilege transcends that of the author. In 1950, he was heavily critical of *My Foolish Heart*, the film based on his short story “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut,” and he never allowed any of his other works to be adapted for cinema,¹ and became well known also for refusing to allow translators to add commentaries to his works. Although after the publication of *Hapworth 16, 1924* in 1965, he did not even publish stories, it was said he continued to write stories. Moreover, Salinger’s name was also connected with issues of fair use. In 1987, he sued his biographer Ian Hamilton, who was working on *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, claiming that he still owned the copyright of letters that Hamilton was going to quote in his biography. Hamilton therefore paraphrased the letters instead, but Salinger argued that this still was a violation of his rights.² Finally, in 2009, an unauthorized sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye* was going to be published. The book was titled *60 Years Later: Coming through the Rye* written by a Swedish writer calling himself J. D. California and featuring a 76-year-old man called Mr. C, who mentions characters from the original work, such as D. B., Phoebe, and Mr. Spencer. Salinger sued the writer, and finally the publication was banned, although the work is now available through Windupbird Publishing. In court, Salinger’s comment on an interview he granted in 1980 was quoted: “There’s no more to Holden Caulfield.”³

Yet, Salinger himself contradicted this statement in the way that he gives his readers some opportunities to consider the possibility Holden is retold in Salinger's later works. The possibility stems from "Zooney," in which the privileged narrator, Buddy, first appears, and subsequently from "Seymour: An Introduction," which we will examine in order to demonstrate how the narrator excludes the reader from the text, demanding a return to Salinger's earlier works. In both of these texts, as we shall see, the narrator transcends the author's authority to add new layers to past narratives.

1. The Inclusive Narrator of "Zooney"

In this chapter, we will focus on the narrator of "Zooney," Buddy, who is the eldest surviving brother of the Glass family and appears as the narrator, but not as an agent. We will also examine the siblings' tendency to overlook differences, expressed in the peculiar notion, "The Fat Lady is Christ." Buddy begins the story with a 70-page introduction apparently so redundant that some critics argue that "the story should have begun" when Zooney saw Franny in the living room, which is described in the middle of the whole story. As other critics suggest, however, the introduction is vital to understanding the Glass family (Frederick 49). For example, Gordon Slethaug suggests that Buddy's description of their Irish and Jewish background "helps to explain the natural affinity for acting within the family and also the affinity for mystical religious insights" (10). Amy Hungerford also draws attention to the connection between the siblings' love of Vaudeville and their religious faith, arguing that in the novel "the ideal art is [...] something like family Vaudeville" (13), and Buddy introduces this story as "a sort of prose home movie" ("Zooney" 47). Although these statements are suggestive, it is necessary to examine the narrator's role more closely in order to explore the beliefs that the Glass children share.

James Lundquist remarks that "[t]he presence of Buddy is felt during the rest of the story, and there is a sympathetic, insider's tone that

gives the narrative more warmth and authenticity than we find in “Franny” (36). This is a perceptive statement, but Lundquist does not offer any further detail. My argument here will, therefore, examine Buddy’s presence as a narrator and a family member, especially with regard to the story’s climax.

The climax is framed around a telephone conversation between Buddy’s younger siblings. Franny tells Zooey that she does not want to talk with him, but with their eldest brother Seymour, who is already dead. At a loss Zooey calls her on telephone, pretending to be Buddy, who actually lives far away without a telephone. Even after Franny realizes she is speaking to Zooey, he continues to pretend, and at the end of their conversation, he makes the following assertion:

There isn’t anyone *anywhere* that isn’t Seymour’s Fat Lady. Don’t you know that? Don’t you know that goddam secret yet? And don’t you know—*listen* to me, now—*don’t you know who that Fat Lady really is?* . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It’s Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy. (“Zooey” 200)^{4,5}

Following their conversation, Franny lies quietly on her bed and then falls asleep without dreaming. Implicit in this is her recovery from depression, presumably because Zooey’s claim offers an answer. The Fat Lady, someone she has to pray to, is an imaginary woman who first appeared in Seymour’s instruction that his siblings show good behavior when they were on the radio show, “It’s a Wise Child.”

In Zooey’s assertion that Fat Lady is Christ, we discover a more deeply rooted belief that the Glass family share in the value of overlooking difference. Buddy also demonstrates this belief, even though he appears only as a narrator, as is clear from a letter Buddy writes to Zooey four years before the present narrative. In this letter, he describes a little girl he met, who was so pretty that he asked her how many boyfriends she had; the girl answered that she had two, adding the names of Bobby and Dorothy. Buddy comments on this episode

with reference to Seymour:

[...] I swear to you that I had a perfectly communicable little vision of truth (lamb-chop division) this afternoon the very instant that child told me her boy friends' names were Bobby and Dorothy. Seymour once said to me [...] that all legitimate religious study *must* lead to unlearning the differences, the illusory differences, between boys and girls, animals and stones, day and night, heat and cold. That suddenly hit me at the meat counter, and it seemed a matter of life and death to drive home at seventy miles an hour to get a letter off to you. ("Zooey" 67)

Buddy's explanation of the ideal of "unlearning the differences" accounts for his amazement; the girl's non-discrimination between male and female echoes Seymour's earlier notion. The connection of this belief to "religious studies" points us back to the conversation between Franny and Zooey, in which the statement that Seymour's Fat Lady is Christ similarly does not distinguish between the sexes. The letter also suggests that the girl's remark motivated Buddy's letter to Zooey, and the repetition of motifs therefore suggests that these religious notions may have encouraged Buddy to write the story as a whole.

The narrator's status as a family member is also significant. While Zooey is imitating Buddy, Franny asks where he is calling from. He tries to evade the question, but she uneasily presses the point. At this point, the narrator abruptly interjects:

"Where am I? I'm right in my element, Flospy. I'm in a little haunted house down the road. Never mind. Just talk to me."

Franny unplacidly crossed her legs. "I don't know exactly what you'd like to talk about," she said. "What all'd Bessie tell you, I mean?"

There was a most characteristically Buddylike pause at the other end. It was exactly the kind of pause—just a trifle rich with

seniority of years—that had often tried the patience of both Franny *and* the virtuoso [Zooey] at the other end of the phone when they were small children. (“Zooey” 187-88)

Although the word “Buddylike” provides no real clue about the nature of the pause, Buddy’s commentary, including his awareness of how his siblings experienced his silences, indicates that it is a long and frustrating break during a conversation.

Buddy provides further support for our understanding of the narrative at the point when Franny realizes that she is speaking to Zooey:

“The cigars are ballast, sweetheart. Sheer ballast. If he didn’t have a cigar to hold on to, his feet would leave the ground. We’d never see our Zooey again.”

There were several experienced verbal stunt pilots in the Glass family, but this last remark perhaps Zooey alone was coordinated well enough to bring in safely over a telephone. Or so this narrator suggests. And Franny may have felt so, too. In any case, she suddenly knew that it was Zooey at the other end of the phone. (“Zooey” 191)

As before, the “Zooeylike” quality of the expression is not explicitly described; instead, the narrator steps in and judges Zooey’s comment based on his own point of view, which helps to explain Franny’s next statement: “All right, Zooey” (“Zooey” 191). In both episodes, key aspects of the siblings’ relationships—their admiration of the “unlearning” of difference, the quality of characteristically “Buddylike” pauses and Zooey’s expressions—are thus revealed by the narrator’s invisible presence.

2. Exclusiveness in “Seymour”: Connection to the Past

Although the narrator of “Seymour” is the same as that of “Zooey,” the narrator lingers even more noticeably than in “Zooey,” digressing

so frequently throughout the story that David Seed suggests that this foregrounding of the narrator's mannerisms makes the failure of the narrative the subject of the work (84).

The narrator of "Seymour" distinguishes between two kinds of readers: one intimately addressed as "my dear [...] general reader" ("Seymour" 118)⁶ or simply "*you*" ("Seymour" 96), and the other who seems uninterested in the work.

Paradoxically, the reader he indicates as important is the one who is not close to him rather than the one who is. His definition of the intimate reader is strict: "You're a great bird-lover. Much like a man in a short story called 'Skule Skerry', by John Buchan" ("Seymour" 96). This narrow definition of his ideal, unrealizable reader suggests that every reader is classified as one who is not close to him, and who is thus urged to stop reading the work:

There are [...] readers who seriously require only the most restrained, most classical, and possibly deftest methods of having their attention drawn, and I suggest—as honestly as a writer can suggest this sort of thing—that they leave now, while, I can imagine, the leaving's good and easy. ("Seymour" 100)

In this passage, the narrator implies that some of his readers are unsuitable for the work, and he also commands them to "leave," declaring that if the reader wants a well-organized text, then they should read other, easier books.

Although he does not make it clear where the reader should go after leaving this work, he implies they should return to Buddy's former works, suggesting that those who are not close to him are likely to take other works into consideration when reading a book, as the following quotation indicates: "Some people—*not* close friends—have asked me whether a lot of Seymour didn't go into the young leading character of the one novel I've published. Actually, most of these people haven't *asked* me; they've *told* me" ("Seymour" 111). Although the

title of “the one novel” is not made explicit, this passage suggests that his “not close friends,” whom he has advised to “leave” the text, are readers who tend to return to his earlier works for comparison.

The most vivid evidence of his exclusive attitude toward his readers appears in some of his parenthetical comments. This begins with the following odd use of parentheses: “please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: (((())))” (“Seymour” 98). It subsequently becomes apparent that the “ominous offering of parentheses” (“Seymour” 99) is part of his exclusionary strategy, when he says, “I’m aware that a good many perfectly intelligent people can’t stand parenthetical comments while a story’s purportedly being told” (“Seymour” 99), indicating that as obstructions to reading, parentheses exclude some readers from the work.

The contents of the parenthetical remarks are also important; some in particular reveal the admiration of overlooking difference that we discussed in relation to “Zooey.” Writing about a library where he and Seymour used to go, he uses the word “fishing” to refer to finding a good book. He then begins to digress, describing Seymour’s poem about a boy fishing, which he composed for his younger brother, Walt. This digression is entirely in parentheses:

[...] Our younger brother Walt was a great bent-pin fisherman as a small boy, and for his ninth or tenth birthday he received a poem from Seymour—one of the major delights of his life, I believe—about a little rich boy who catches a lafayette in the Hudson River, experiences a fierce pain in his own lower lip on reeling him in, then dismisses the matter from his mind, only to discover when he is home and the still-alive fish has been given the run of the bathtub that he, the fish, is wearing a blue serge cap with the same school insignia over the peak as the boy’s own; the boy finds his own name-tape sewn inside the tiny wet cap.) (“Seymour” 123)

In this reminiscence, the admired ignorance of difference is reflected

in the vague boundary between subject and object. When the little boy stabs the mouth of the fish with his hook and reels the fish in, it is his own lip that gets hurt. Then the blurring is represented symbolically in the impossible description of the fish wearing the boy's school cap. In order to interpret this parenthetical comment, the reader needs to be familiar with the siblings' belief about difference, which is not described elsewhere in this work. The implication is thus that readers should read "Zooney" in order to understand "Seymour."

Interpretation of "Seymour" is further anchored in "Zooney," when the narrator discusses his parents' former job as Vaudeville actors, the importance of which we saw in the previous section. Within his digression, paragraphs are separated by a blank line, which he explains as a delay caused by acute hepatitis. He then refers parenthetically to his comment that his writing seems to "take on precisely the informality of underwear" ("Seymour" 150), which he illustrates by quoting from a burlesque:

I've announced a major delay between paragraphs by way of informing the reader that I'm just freshly risen from nine weeks in bed with acute hepatitis. (You see what I mean about underwear. This last open remark of mine happens to be a straight line, almost *intacta*, right out of Minsky burlesque. Second Banana: "I've been in bed for nine weeks with acute hepatitis." Top Banana: "Which one, you lucky dog? They're both cute, those Hepatitis girls."[...]) ("Seymour"150)

The digression contains two jokes: the pun on "acute hepatitis" as "a cute Hepatitis," that is, "a pretty girl whose name is Hepatitis," and the designation of each actor as "Banana," which refers to the yellow faces that is a symptom of hepatitis. Understanding the significance of this reference to Vaudeville depends upon familiarity with "Zooney," in which acting is a persistent underlying theme, as Slethaug and Hungerford argue.

The digression on “Zoocy” forces the reader to admit that they are not close to the narrator and cannot understand the content without referring to the earlier work. Through his instruction to leave the book, and his intentional interruption of the text with obscure parenthetical remarks, the narrator suggests subtly that the reader should go back and read his former works.

3. Retelling the Past: Addition to Other Works

In this section, we will examine other works that the narrator mentions in “Seymour,” *Catcher* and other short stories in which Caulfields appear in order to demonstrate how the narrator adds new layers to other texts. Although other works are not directly named, the allusions open up possibilities of other interpretations. The title “Seymour: An Introduction” is itself suggestive of Buddy’s later additions to the story. Indeed, he confesses that he originally planned to title this work “Seymour One,” suggesting that other texts “would logically have to follow” (“Seymour” 107), and that he discarded the idea. The redundancy of this allusion to the discarded idea suggests to the reader that further works about Seymour will appear.

In “Seymour,” the narrator briefly mentions two of Salinger’s earlier works: “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” (1955), which depicts Seymour’s wedding day, and “Bananafish” (1948), which describes Seymour’s death. Although Buddy acts as both protagonist and narrator in “Carpenters,” he does not appear in “Bananafish.” This work is originally narrated by the third person narrator, yet Buddy claims his authority over this work:

[...] I’ve written and published two short stories that were supposed to be directly about Seymour. The more recent of the two, published in 1955, was highly inclusive recount of his wedding day in 1942. [...] On the other hand, in the earlier, much shorter story I did, back in the late forties, he not only appeared in the flesh but

walked, talked, went for a dip in the ocean, and fired a bullet through his brain in the last paragraph. ("Seymour" 130-31)

While he confirms the identity of the one published in 1955 as "Carpenters," by referring to its year of publication, Buddy does provide clear detail regarding the "earlier, much shorter story." The paraphrase echoes the last sentence of "Bananafish": "Then he [Seymour] went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple" ("Bananafish" 26).⁷ And it suggests that here Buddy is claiming to have written this work himself.

There are further connections between these works. On a beach in Florida, Seymour meets a little girl called Sybil, about whom nothing is known except where she lives. Sybil complains that when Seymour played the piano in the hotel, another little girl called Sharon Lipschutz sat next to him. Seymour excuses himself by saying, "I pretended she was you" ("Bananafish" 18), echoing the belief articulated in "Zooey" and reiterated in "Seymour," that is, the belief that it is desirable to ignore difference. This aspect of Seymour's remark is clear only through this stream of the comprehension that runs throughout the Glass saga, revised and repeated in later publications.

The most mysterious notion in this story is the word "bananafish" itself, which Seymour describes to Sybil. According to Seymour, when bananafish eat too many bananas, they get bananafever and cannot escape from a banana hole. William Wiegand observes that "Seymour, a bananafish himself, has become so gluttoned with sensation that he cannot swim out into society again" (8); however, as the story does not offer any further information about the connection, this line of interpretation can go no further. Yet, by focusing on the allusion to earlier texts, another meaning can be revealed in the word "bananafish." As I explained in section 2, the narrator of "Seymour" uses the word "banana" to refer to actors, the key theme described in "Zooey." Further-

more, the word “fish” recalls Seymour’s poem, in which the difference between subject and object is ignored. Thus, it can be argued that “Bananafish” offers the scope for multiple interpretations, suggesting that Buddy deliberately adds new layers to interpretations of former works, by evoking them in subsequent publications.

The narrator’s retelling of earlier texts is not limited in the Glass saga. Holden is also hinted, despite Salinger’s insistence on his isolation from other works. When Buddy describes the radio show “It’s a Wise Child” that he and his siblings appeared on as children, he mentions a boy called Curtis Caulfield:

There used to be an exceptionally intelligent and likable boy on the radio with S. and me—one Curtis Caulfield, who was eventually killed during one of the landings in the Pacific. He trotted off with Seymour and me to Central Park one afternoon, where I discovered he threw a ball as if he had two left hands—like most girls, in short—and I can still see the look on Seymour’s face at the sound of my critical horse-laugh, stallion laugh. (“Seymour” 225)

This passage is important in two respects: the name “Caulfield,” and the description of the boy’s lack of masculinity. Buddy’s repeated reference to his previous works encourages us to connect the name “Caulfield” with the Holden Caulfield that appears in *Catcher*, as well as in short stories such as “The Last Day of the Last Furlough” and “This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise,” in which “Holden Caulfield” is a soldier missing in the Pacific.⁸

The expression “as if he had two left hands” is also suggestive, as it corresponds to Holden’s injury to his right hand in *Catcher*, when he breaks the windows in his garage the night his brother Allie died. Furthermore, when he tries to punch Stradlater with his right fist, he does not hit him and instead is knocked down. This lack of masculine ability anticipates Buddy’s description of Curtis throwing a ball “like most girls.”

Admiration of transcendence of difference also appears in *Catcher* again in terms of the boundary between subject and object. When Holden recounts visiting the Museum of Natural History with his school mates, he recalls a classmate called Gertrude Levine:

I remember you had to go through the Indian Room to get to the auditorium. It was a long, long room, and you were supposed to whisper. The teacher would go first, then the class. You'd be two rows of kids, and you'd have a partner. Most of the time my partner was this girl named Gertrude Levine. She always wanted to hold your hand, and her hand was always sticky or sweaty or something. (*Catcher* 156)⁹

Holden refers to himself here using both first and second person pronouns. First, he states that “my” partner was Gertrude Levine, and then he says the girl always wanted to hold “your” hand. This confusion of “my” and “your” evokes the same kind of perception that characterizes the Glass children, that is, the refusal to register difference. It also emphasizes the importance of the figure “you,” who listens to Holden’s story.¹⁰

The connection between “Seymour” and *Catcher* contradicts Salinger’s statement that “[t]here’s no more to Holden Caulfield,” belying his insistence on *Catcher*’s isolation from his other works, insofar as it allows us further glimpses of earlier works, through the narrator’s retelling of the past. In the real world, Salinger struggled to maintain his authority over his works, as J. D. California’s parody *60 Years Later* makes clear. However, the fact that he allows his narrator to retell the earlier stories and to connect multiple works restores his own authorial authority, because the references to published works draw the reader’s attention to the existence of the author.

Myles Weber argues that “Salinger *could* literally embrace silence and remain an artist. He went beyond the extreme of ‘Seymour’ to nonpublication and reclusion, yet many in the literary community per-

sisted in reading and interpreting the text he 'produced' and accused him of crass manipulation" (225). While Weber's argument is correct, he depends too heavily on the fact that many readers still read Salinger's works. The reason for his popularity is the intertextuality that occurs when Buddy keeps writing, regardless of the reader's convenience, as he has declared that the reader should leave while "leaving's good." Thus his popularity originates from Buddy's competency in creating new perspectives on narratives, which the author himself, in the real world, cannot do. In this sense, the narrator Buddy can go beyond the author's own limitations, although the intertextuality recognized here is produced through the fact Salinger wrote all of the works, and the works were actually published. However, this authorial control is highlighted by the fact that Salinger published nothing after 1965, although he said that he had written more stories. He commented at an interview granted in 1974: "I don't necessarily intend to publish posthumously, but I do like to write for myself, [...] I pay for this kind of attitude. I'm known as a strange, aloof kind of man. But all I'm doing is trying to protect myself and my work."¹¹ This comment, and the title of Buddy's last narrative, "Seymour: An Introduction," together suggest infinite possible retellings and reinterpretations of his works even after the death of their author on January 17, 2010.

Conclusion

The narrator of "Seymour" demands that the reader should go back to "Zoey" and other works, when he assumes that the reader is familiar with these writings. When the narrator claims the authorship of "Bananafish," the distance between Buddy and Salinger becomes so narrow as to be non-existent. Although these texts originally existed as separate works, the narrator internalizes the fact of their publication within "Seymour," and creates other meanings by retelling the past. Thus, it becomes necessary to take biographical details about the author into account; the appearance of other Caulfields in multiple

texts should come into focus when the narrator describes one (Curtis) Caulfield who shares traits with another.

The intertextuality that runs through all these works reinforces the author's privileged point of view, but at the same time cannot help but indicate the author's inability to protect his works as he would like. The unstable title of Buddy's last narrative, "Seymour: An Introduction," suggests further sequels, while the narrator's intertextuality contradicts Salinger's insistence that "[t]here's no more to Holden Caulfield." On the other hand, this intertextuality depends for its existence on the author himself, and comes into effect when the reader ignores his protective assertions. In this sense, the author does not die, and he is already dead insofar as his own statement about Holden is ignored. This death of Salinger as an author is the force connecting his two major works the Glass saga and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Notes

1. For details about the film, see Hamilton, 107-08.
2. For details about the case, see Pecchenino, who refers to the problem of fair use concerning the letters that were going to be quoted within *In Search of J. D. Salinger*.
3. For the lawsuit against the unauthorized sequel, see Lai.
4. J. D. Salinger, "*Franny*" and "*Zooey*" (New York: Little, 2001). All references to "Franny" and "Zooey" are from this edition.
5. All italics in this paper are original to the source.
6. J. D. Salinger, "*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,*" and "*Seymour: An Introduction*" (New York: Little, 1963). All references to "Seymour: An Introduction" are from this edition. Hereafter the novella is abbreviated as "Seymour."
7. J. D. Salinger, *Nine Stories* (New York: Little, 2010). All references to "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" are from this edition. Hereafter the short story is abbreviated as "Bananafish."
8. The surname of Caulfield appears in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough" (Jul. 15, 1944), "This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise" (Oct. 1945), "The

Stranger" (Dec. 1, 1945), "I'm Crazy" (Dec. 22, 1945) "Slight Rebellion off Madison" (Dec. 21, 1946), and *Catcher* (1951). In the first three stories, Holden has an older brother called Vincent, a little brother called Kenneth, and a sister called Phoebe. The latter two short stories depict the same family as *Catcher*. Thus, two groups represent totally different characters. These stories are no longer available, because all were published just once in magazines. In Japan, they are available in translation, so I refer to the Japanese translations by Takeju Suzuki. For the summaries of the stories, see French, 24-26.

9. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Little, 2010). All references to this work are from this edition. The novel is abbreviated as *Catcher*.
10. Michael Cowan states that Holden's "nominal audience" is the ideal listener(s), who is/are close enough to listen to his storytelling (40-43).
11. See Alexander, 186.

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