I. INTRODUCTION

For the future historian, the most significant fact about American literary culture of the Post-War Period may be that whereas young readers of the Inter-War Period knew intimately the work of a goodly number of coeval writers (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Wolfe, Sinclair Lewis, for example), the only Post-War fiction unanimously approved by contemporary literate American youth consists of about five hundred pages by Jerome David Salinger.

Just why he is the one writer to whom so many young men and women, high-brow and middle-brow, in college and out, are devoted is not yet clear, although there is no lack of critical guesses as to the magnetic core of his work. For Heiserman and Miller (see Bibliography for these references), Salinger's fiction centers on the necessity for love, and its most striking feature is the poignancy of its humor. For David Stevenson, the typical crisis of a Salinger story sends the reader back into his own problems, making him aware of how we are "members all of the lonely crowd." Ihab Hassan sees a double conflict at the heart of Salinger's writing—the struggle between what Leslie Fiedler calls the "dream of innocence and the fact of guilt," and the tension between "the Assertive Vulgarian and the Responsive Outsider," the typical Salingerian hero being the out-

sider who expresses his responsiveness in a "strange quixotic gesture." Donald Barr feels that most of Salinger's fiction "is about those who think they are in hell." For William Wiegand, Salinger has not only revived the dialectal charm of Mark Twain, but like Thomas Mann has given us a coherent vision of the non-conformist who resists the disease of Illusion. To Maxwell Geismar, Salinger also speaks for non-conformism—that of the "Ivy League Rebellion of the Fifties" (Geismar does not tell us just what this is), but in the last analysis Salinger seems to Geismar to be perhaps the cleverest of the *New Yorker* Impressionist writers, whose staple theme is the lost innocence of childhood.

To all this we may add that if one labels Post-War youth the Beat Generation, one may see the fondness for Salinger as a literary retreat from the largeness and rhetoric paraded in current revivals of giants like Melville, James, and Faulkner; for Salinger's protagonists are mostly metropolitan introverts with whom the young reader can more easily identify himself than with, say, the aspiring Captain Ahab, Isabel Archer, or Thomas Sutpen. If one considers the Beat Generation "basically a religious generation"—as one of its spokesmen, Jack Kerouac, asseverates—and if "Beat means beatitude, not beat up,"[1] then one can conjecture about the relationship between Salinger's popularity and the fact that he is probably the only American writer of fiction ever to express a devotional attitude toward religious experience by means of a consistently satiric style. Or if one feels simply that the essence of sensitive youth is the impulsiveness of its explorations and retreats expressing itself in a mixture of unconscious idealism and self-conscious but humorous cyni-

cism, then one has some notion of why there is a gap left by Nelson Algren, Kingsley Amis, Samuel Beckett, Truman Capote, Ralph Ellison, James Jones, Wright Morris, and Tennessee Williams (to mention a few contemporary and various originals)—a gap that is filled by J. D. Salinger.

Finally — and most importantly for us — one may feel that a half-dozen of Salinger's short pieces of fiction are nearly perfectly organized works, with a variety of organizations, in which vivid human characters are involved in the basic human conflict between love and what Salinger's Esmé calls squalor—that is, evil, trouble, inhumanity, and sin—and in which the characters and conflict are embodied in original and memorable symbols that are often humorous, even as the dialogue and narration are always humorous.

To be able to make this assertion, however, requires an examination of the *corpus* of Salinger's work: one novel, two short novels, and thirty short stories, published over a period of almost two decades. The present study, which considers each piece of fiction on its own merits, comes to the early conclusion that Salinger's achievement, described in the paragraph above, occurs in what may currently be called the middle of his career, and that the progress of his creativity has run up from second-rate magazine items to the half-dozen masterworks, and thence downward, most recently, to ambitious failures.

This examination has little concern with the author himself, for two reasons. In the first place, we are chiefly interested in discovering specific elements in each work that contribute to the success or failure of the work, and in noting the incidence of these elements in the comparative progress of Salinger's art; we do not propose specu-

lating as to how this author's life and work have dove-tailed with each other. Secondly, even if we wanted to see the author in his fiction, we would have a difficult job in acquiring much to see with. An apparently secretive man, Salinger has revealed to the public (chiefly via magazine editors and in *Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement)* only that he was born in New York City in 1919 and brought up there, that he went to public school, to a Pennsylvania military academy, and to three colleges without a degree; that he traveled in Europe before the War, and during the War —when, as a staff sergeant in the Fourth Infantry Division, he took part in five combat campaigns from D-Day to V-E Day. Beyond this, and the record of his publications registered in the Bibliography, almost everything about this popular writer is unknown to the public.

1. The High Point of Salinger's Art: "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor"

At the outset, it might be well to consider Salinger's major fictional victory—the victories being the only reason for considering any of the failures that punctuate his unique career. The high point of his art, the moment at which particular narrative and general truth are identified most successfully with one another, comes in his most famous story, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," when Sergeant X, stationed in Bavaria after V-E Day, reads a German inscription in a German book and caps it with a Russian quotation written in English. The four agents in this process are perfectly chosen, and three of them are presented simply and at top speed. The reader is told that the book is *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel* by

Joseph Goebbels, that one inscription is by a 38-year-old unmarried woman, "a low official in the Nazi Party," and that the other inscription is from Dostoevsky. The fourth agent, Sergeant X, whose gesture of quotation sounds the depths of the human condition, thereby prepares himself and the reader for the salvation he receives from someone else's gesture later in the story.

What Goebbels represents should be obvious to anyone over thirty, but surely the range of this evil can not be fully registered on the generation that adores Salinger, and it may even have dimmed in the more timeworn mind. To make any kind of contact with Joseph Goebbels is to be overwhelmed by the very type of psychotic hatred for everything weaker or more human than itself. His diaries show him to be "the unflagging motive force behind the vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime," as Hugh Gibson says, whose "aim was the extermination of all Jews"; an ex-Catholic, he planned to "deal with the churches after the war and reduce them to impotence." It was this man, the holder of a *bona fide* doctorate, who in 1933 personally selected and had burned thousands of printed pages in which man had communicated with man. Less known than the genocide and the book-burning is Goebbel's hatred for humanity itself. In 1925 he wrote in his diary: "I have learned to despise the human being from the bottom of my soul. He makes me sick in my stomach." A year later he concluded that "The human being is a *canaille.*"

But as Louis Lochner says, "Nobody who has not lived under Nazism can grasp how absolute was Goebbels's control of the German mind." It is this irresistible influence that (we may guess) had stimulated the second agent in the Salinger situa-

tion first to her Nazi Party activities and later to the revulsion that she expressed by penning in the Goebbels book that X finds:

" 'Dear God, life is hell.' " To X, "the words appeared to have the stature of an uncontestable, even classic indictment," and he impulsively writes a comment underneath, one of Father Zossima's exhortations in *The Brothers Karamazov*: " 'Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.' "

The woman's substitution of the Christian God for Hitler and Goebbels is paralleled by the Sergeant's reference to Russian Christianity, and her implicit recognition of *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel*—The Unprecedented Era—as unprecedented hell is paralleled by Zossima's and X's awareness of the non-love that brings about disintegration and war; together these form not only a "classic indictment" but a profound objective correlative for the love and "squalor" experienced by Sergeant X—and the reader—in the rest of the story. (It is the young girl Esmé who asks Sergeant X to write her an "extremely squalid and moving" story, adding the question, " 'Are you at all acquainted with squalor?' " The Sergeant's answer is typically ironic but correct: "I said not exactly but that I was getting better acquainted with it, in one form or another, all the time. . . .") We may now see exactly what is correlated.

The conflict of "Esmé" places the protagonist, Sergeant X, against four "squalid" forces in the four chronological sections of the story. (1) In 1950, the present, he is set off against his wife, "a breathtakingly levelheaded girl," and his mother-in-law. (2) Back in April 1944, he is set off against the dullness of pre-Invasion training and the in-

communicativeness of his sixty male mates, as well as against his wife and his mother-in-law, the women who write selfish civilian letters to this soldier about to be landed in France. (3) In the long year from D-Day in 1944 to V-E-Day in 1945 (referred to only briefly in the story), the protagonist is set off against war itself (which has resulted in his nervous breakdown) as well as against his jeep-mate, Corporal Clay. (4) In May 1945, Sergeant X's combat fatigue is set off against the insensitivity of the loutish Clay, as well as against the selfish civilian triviality of his brother (who writes asking for souvenirs) and Clay's girl Loretta (who sits at home callously and amateurishly derogating X's psyche).

To balance these "squalid" antagonists there are four demonstrations of "love." (1) In 1950, exactly six years after X met Esmé, and apparently without any communication between them during this period, he receives an invitation to her wedding that makes him want to fly to it, "expenses be hanged." (2) In 1944, he has met Esmé, a brave English orphan of thirteen, who, nervous like X ("her nails were bitten down to the quick," "her hand, as I'd suspected, was a nervous hand, damp at the palm"), is also precociously sensitive to artistic, intellectual, and emotional values. (3) Set opposite X's shattering experience in the war against Germany is the simple inscription in the book that communicates to him the shattering experience of a German in the war against the Allies. In answering the *cri de coeur* of an enemy whom he has actually just arrested as a criminal, Sergeant X equates himself with her simply as human beings against the total war they have suffered in—"a method of existence that is ridiculous to say the least," as Esmé naively but perceptively describes

World War II. (4) Finally, in 1945, X receives the wrist watch which Esmé mailed to him the day after D-Day, almost a year before. It is a stunning gesture for a titled gentlewoman who is "Usually not terribly gregarious" thus to give her father's watch to a G. I., a foreigner casually and briefly met, a man who had countered almost every one of her statements with an ironic answer. The gift, which belonged to a British nobleman "s-l-a-i-n" in war (in her younger brother's hearing she spells out crucial words), helps restore the possibility of life ("f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s") for the American Staff Sergeant X.