Existentialist Notions Portrayed in the Collection of Jerome David Salinger's Short Stories

Čović, Ivana

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti; nastavnički smjer (dvopredmetni)

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Introduction

More than half of a century has passed since the publication of Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a novel that has firmly established itself as a classic piece in American post-war literature. With that kind of status, it is no surprise to see Salinger's first and only novel became an often-seen reference in popular culture, especially in the English-speaking countries. And apart from that, *The Catcher* found itself on many reading lists in secondary schools across the world, which also applied to Croatia's school curriculum until 2019. Looking beyond this novel, Salinger's literary form of choice was the short story, some of which are yet to be published posthumously [1].

Although the name J. D. Salinger (1947-2010) is, at least to a wider audience, an immediate trigger to the association of *The Catcher in the Rye*, there is a larger body of literary works by Salinger preceding his debut novel. This literary work is consisted of a collection of short stories published in various magazines like *Collier's*, *The New Yorker*, *Story* etc. This particular literary style – the short story – enabled Salinger to develop a distinct writing style which made his literary fame grow rapidly after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Some authors dared to draw parallels between Salinger's biography and specific short stories which might hold true (e.g. Salinger served in the US Army during World War II; Sergeant X in *For Esmé* is a soldier stationed in the United Kingdom), however this thesis will be using minimal interventions in Salinger's personal life, putting complete focus on the characters and their situations.

With an author such as Salinger, whose popularity and audience began to grow right after the publication of *The Catcher* and who was determined to live a severely recluse life for reasons which are only known to him, it might be tempting for some to psychologize him and

[1] „A recent biography of Salinger claimed that five posthumous books by the author would be published between 2015 and 2020." Flood, Alison. "JD Salinger Stories Published after 70 Years out of Print." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 28 July 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/28/jd-salinger-stories-published-70-years-out-of-print

draw conclusions from his short stories. While it can certainly be true that writers sometimes use personal, real-life facts even when making works of literary fiction, it's important not to link the author's biography too often and instead, keep in mind Sartre's dictum 'being of the phenomenon is not phenomenon of being' (*Being and Nothingness* 7). That dictum, simply speaking, means that there is always more to a certain reality, in this case – a short story – than what the subject, i.e. the reader, is immediately given. Thus to draw firm 'conclusions' between Salinger's lifestyle and his writings seems to be unjustified. With that in mind, the analysis of existential concepts in the selected boy of Salinger's short stories will place emphasis on the characters and their contexts, i.e. existential situations drawing on the philosophy of existence as espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was the 'successor' in the chain of philosophers throughout history who tried to describe the human condition without excessively tapping into the metaphysical foundations seen in religious explanations where reality as we know it all came to be from one source – the Absolute (God). Sartre's atheistic existentialism places human beings into the centre of the world and explains why they fall into phenomena of bad faith, how they can overcome that state and try to accept certain facts about ourselves by taking an authentic attitude towards our own facticity.

This thesis will be an attempt to exemplify Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy in a selected body of J. D. Salinger's short stories. The titles chosen are *Nine Stories* (1953), *Three Stories* (2013), and *Three Early Stories* (2014), which contain the most popular short stories both for the general readers as well as academic commentary. The majority of these short stories were written around the period following up to World War II and just after it, and as we will see, many of them are threaded with themes that echo the sentiment of escapism from a period in history that many wanted to see end as soon as possible To support this literary analysis,

Sartre's philosophy is best outlined in his essay called *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* published in 1943, amidst the last years of World War II. In that essay he describes the state of the human condition and why depicting human beings as a 'constant lack' leads them to pursue the impossible goal of founding themselves as an in-itself-for-itself, thus fleeing from freedom by escaping into bad faith and anguish. Other significant moments in the philosophy of existentialism pertain to the ideas of subjectivity as a 'being-for-itself' and objectivity in the relationship to the Other. Concepts such as the 'look', 'shame', 'death' and 'alienation' will lead the analysis while the most relevant Salinger's short stories in the three collections are referenced.

Salinger's Misfit Hero

In *Existentialism and the American Novel*, Jean Bruneau says that the "[p]rogressive realization of the human condition is the vital machinery of the Existentialist hero." (70). This holds true for many of Salinger's protagonists in the short stories, as we will see, whose situations lead them to attempt to find meaning in their existence, no matter how bizarre this might seem to the 'phonies', i.e. people in their close or wider social circle who are unable to see beyond the superficial given. The outcomes that emerge from the choices made by Salinger's existential protagonists vary from minor to radical resolutions, some of them even reaching a standstill point. Indeed, the attempt to ascribe meaning to one's existence is not an easy feat, so it does not surprise to see that most of Salinger's heroes experience alienation from different parts of the social fabric (e.g. family, friends, government institutions etc.). For that reason, Paul Levine's characterization of Salinger's heroes is adequate when he states that "Salinger's misfit who is a hero is really a hero who is a misfit: a misfit in society because he refuses to adjust and a misfit in the private world because he cannot pass through it's 'dark night of the soul'." (97)

In *Nine Stories*, Salinger's misfits are embodied in people of different age groups and personal backgrounds, with children oftentimes having a special role in the re-examination of a misfit's personal history. The stark contrast between the world of adults and the world of children or young adolescents is a strong staple of much of Salinger's writing, especially if readers recall the struggles of Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*. As for the question of reconciling these two conflicting worlds, Salinger pans out several different outcomes though he entertains the fact that open interpretations are also possible, as we can infer from the cryptic Zen koan written at the very start of *Nine Stories*: "We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?".

The first story in line – ‘A Perfect Day for Bananafish’ (1948) – sets a recurring topic that is present in almost all Salinger’s heroes, and which William Wiegand names the “bananafish diagnosis” (7). The manifestations of this ‘banana fever’ are exhibited differently for Salinger’s heroes, however, the banana fever can be described and explained by the existentialist concepts that will firstly be introduced through ‘A Perfect Day for Bananafish’, which is considered to be one of Salinger’s most famous stories in the *Nine Stories* lot. What is common to Salinger’s misfits is that they, in most cases, choose to be alienated from society, though this alienation is not always negative to a hero’s development. For example, Teddy McArdle in ‘Teddy’ (1953) sees the world around him as a pure contingency and accepts that as a fact of everyday life. For him, being and the world are randomly arranged events as much as he is Teddy and this orange peel is an orange peel. In the dichotomy ‘love’ and ’squalor’, we are acquainted with the restorative experiences of the presence of children’s insight in a contingent world made serious by serious people living in a spirit of seriousness. For Staff Sergeant X, a brief conversation with Esmé allowed him to abandon the world of squalor and catch a glimpse of the world of love, especially after the letter he received by her and which he read several years later, reminding him of his first experience of the world of love he very much so needed as a soldier stationed in England.

There is no one quick cure for Salinger’s misfits, and there does not need to be one, because for them, their situations and attitudes towards the world are very much needed in the world dominated by the spirit of seriousness, a topic often labelled differently by Salinger – ‘phony’. Moreover, misfits, existentialists, outcasts or however else one might call them, as Salinger’s heroes, are important because they are at an advantage by understanding that individual projects can echo on a universal scale if one transcends the superficial given spirit of seriousness.

The Significance and the Genesis of the 'Banana Fever'

In 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish', the narrative begins with a telephone conversation between Muriel and her mother, Mrs. Fedder, who seems to be concerned for her daughter's safety while she is vacating with her husband, Seymour Glass. Based on their conversation, we learn that Seymour's mental health showed signs of deterioration, and Mrs. Fedder's concern slowly turns into distrust with Muriel's ability to take care of herself, despite her being a married adult.

> "'Who drove?'
>
> 'He did', said the girl . . .
>
> '*He* drove? Muriel, you gave me your world of – ' . . .
>
> 'Did he try any of that funny business with the trees?'" (*Nine Stories* 5)

Mrs. Fedder's involvement in her daughter's martial relationship goes beyond a phone conversation, with Mr. Fedder now being involved as well:

> "'Your father talked to Dr. Sivetski.'
>
> 'Oh?' said the girl.
>
> 'He told him everything. At least he said he did – you know your father. The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda – everything.'" (6).

Before slipping into other minor and unnecessary parental concerns as well as gossip, Mrs. Fedder even suggests separating her daughter from her husband followed by another prying comment:

> "'Muriel, don't be fresh, please. We're *very* worried about you. Your father wanted to wire you *last night* to come home, as a matter of f —— '
>
> 'I'm not coming home right now, Mother.

So relax.'

'Muriel. My word of honour. Dr. Sivetski said Seymour may completely lose contr —'

'I just got home, Mother. This is the first vacation I've had in years, and I'm not going to just pack everything and come home', said the girl." (7)

Already in the first part of the first story we encounter an example of alienation through Mrs. Fedder. First she attempts to alienate her daughter from her husband, and then she tries to alienate Seymour from his own personal mental wellbeing. This brings us to an occasion to describe the way how alienation is accounted for in existentialism.

The appending title to *Being and Nothingness* states that the means of examining 'being' and 'nothingness' in their ontological sense will be phenomenology. In other words, Sartre is using phenomenology as a descriptive tool when talking about a human being and their relationship with the Other. What distinguishes humans from other inanimate objects in the world is their ability to transcend a given object and make use of it in a way that suits a person's project. In ontological terms, i.e. in studying the ontology of human beings, Sartre states that human beings are constituted out of two regions of beings: being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). While the former describes the region of being that simply 'is' without any special cause, the latter Sartre often synonymously addresses as 'consciousness'. Unlike chairs, computer parts, *de facto* laws and other entities that are in-itself and contained, human beings as beings who are ontologically constituted by being-for-itself are able to take a step beyond the immediately given in a situation. Thus, Sartre says that "[c]onsciousness is consciousness of something. This means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness . . . " (*Being and Nothingness* 23).

The intentional nature of consciousness allows humans to objectify the various forms the in-itself takes. As intentionality, consciousness is of this chair, of this tablet device, of this book. With that in mind, we can also say that consciousness can also objectify others things as

well as other people, because humans have an in-itself attached onto them in the shape of their own birthplace, physiological predispositions, childhood history, etc.; the in-itself in this way is a part of the human condition called facticity, meaning it is something that is immediately given to me, a contingent mass that one can choose to ignore and go about their life or use it as human beings are a for-itself, i.e. consciousness. Adding to that, facticity can also be ascribed to a for-itself too, though in what way exactly? To illustrate this point, an individual can choose to get a haircut, and in order to do so, they must work with their immediate given. In this case, the in-itself as immediate given are dry split ends, the fringe is too long and keeps obstructing my vision etc. This individual has made a choice to negate the immediate given thanks to the consciousness of freedom and in that sense, Sartre also makes it clear that we can talk of the particular facticity that is presupposed by the transcendence of the for-itself as well: "If, therefore, freedom is defined as the escape from the given, from fact, then there is a *fact* of escape from fact. This is the facticity of freedom." (*Being and Nothingness* 623).

Thus the total constitution of the human condition is formed of transcendence (i.e. being-for-itself) and facticity (i.e. being-in-itself). Such a seemingly unique ontological structure is shared across all humankind despite people's individual beliefs of the metaphysical origins and meaning of the universe. The philosophy of existentialism that emerged among the group of post-WWII intellectuals in France is after all, first and foremost, based on the atheistic premise that the world as we know is not created by a supreme omniscient being which does not have a prior cause to it, though which causes the world to be.

> "If man[2] as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be,

[2] The term 'man' here and in all other contexts when referencing the works of Jean-Paul Sartre is used in a neutral sense to denote all human beings in general, not a particular male individual.

> and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 22).

This perspective is further summarised in Sartre's famous expression that existence precedes essence (*Being and Nothingness* 567), meaning that all our actions and choices are defining factors of who we want to be and they consequentially create possibilities for others to be affected in a way and further to act in their own chosen way. This model of atheistic existentialism places human beings in the centre of the ethical plane of being, clearing out the 'baggage' of all previous historically traditional moralities, especially the religious one in which a god or gods, play a special role in determining one's future. The fact that human beings are the sole creators of their destinies also links to a further fact of existentialism – values are created, determined and agreed upon humans and as such they have a status of being-in-itself, meaning their being is structurally confined and are for a for-itself, values are for human beings. Values can also serve as instruments to objectify others in an alienating way; this bring us to the next point when talking about experiencing the Other's presence in the instance of 'the look'.

As the examination of human beings in existentialism is methodologically guided by phenomenology, it can be said that all individuals experience the world and others in it subjectively, from their intimate point of view. Inevitably, this also means that one experiences the other as an object through this instance of the look, which is not to say that the look is strictly a physical moment which is made possible by the human physiology of two eyeballs and the corresponding neurological link; the look is manifested as a subject's quality of being-looked-at. When talking about the existence of others, Sartre says:

> "He [an individual] is the subject who is revealed to me in that flight of myself toward objectivation. But the original relation of myself to the Other is not only an absent truth

> aimed at across the concrete presence of an object in my universe; it is also a concrete, daily relation which at each instant I experience. At each instant the Other is *looking at me*." (345)

After this brief interlude of the outline of some of the theoretical concepts in existentialism, we can now resume the analysis of 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish' by examining how 'the look' is present in the conversation between Mrs. Fedder and her daughter Muriel. The look allows Mrs. Fedder to cast her own values on how she perceives Seymour to be, his being-for-others (*I'être-pour-autrui*) is confined by Mrs. Fedder in a being-in-itself. For her, Seymour is a person whose actions fall out of the standard order of things for Mrs. Fedder, and she attempts to go to great lengths to talk Muriel out of spending her time with her husband. Without him being even actively engaged in the conversation between his wife and mother-in-law, the intervention of the look made Seymour alienated from his closest family members.

The second part of the story introduces Seymour relaxing on the beach and talking with a child called Sybil, an acquaintance who he met on a previous separate occasion in the lobby of the hotel they are both staying at. Their conversation starts to take on an amusing, though metaphorical and didactic tone with an idea entertained by Seymour when they went for into the sea for a swim:

> "They waded out till the water was up to Sybil's waist. Then the young man picked her up and laid her down on her stomach on the float . . . 'You just keep your eyes open for any bananafish. This is a *perfect* day for bananafish.'" (*Nine Stories* 15)

Sybil's attention is completely immersed into finding the mysterious bananafish, and so is Seymour's, something he can rarely achieve with his wife Muriel, or any other 'phony' for that matter, as Paul Levine points out that "Salinger juxtaposes the delightful conversation Seymour has with the little girl on the beach with this complete inability to communicate with any of the

adults around him." (94) Sybil's intrigue about bananafish does not falter even when complaining that she cannot see any and Seymour continues to build the story behind them:

> "'You know what they do, Sybil?'
>
> She shook her head.
>
> 'Well, they swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary-looking fish when they swim *in*. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas.' (. . .)
>
> 'What happens to them?'
>
> 'What happens to who?'
>
> 'The bananafish.'
>
> 'Oh, you mean after they eat so many bananas they can't get out of the banana hole?'
>
> 'Yes', said Sybil.
>
> 'Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die.'
>
> 'Why?' asked Sybil.
>
> 'Well, they get banana fever. It's a terrible disease.'" (15-6)

In light of reading the third section of 'Bananafish', it becomes apparent that Seymour's tale about the bananafish was an indirect account of his own life as he returns to the hotel room, picks up a gun from his luggage and commits suicide. While the bananafish metaphor addresses those phonies who are too immersed in short-lasting pleasures, such as the gossipy Mrs. Fedder, at the same time, the bananafish diagnosis applies to those individuals such as Seymour who are simply unable to be that bananafish society asks for. Levine's previous quote is further supported by Warren French in *J.D. Salinger* who maintains that Seymour's ability to talk to children so easily is also due to the fact that he himself is childish (82). It does not surprise that this is so as in the story we learn that Muriel was waiting for Seymour to return from war,

making their Miami beach resort vacation the first break they had together in a long time. The combination of having experienced the traumas of war and the attempt to quickly adapt to a mental state in which he is able to enjoy the simple pleasure of spending a holiday with his wife, James Miller makes on observation that Seymour's banana fever is caused

> "(. . .) because of his keen sensitivity to the overwhelming physicality of existence - his senses have been ravaged by the physical world, and he has found himself entrapped and must die . . . figurative fatness." (28-9)

Seymour's childish side is a side that yearns for connections that are untainted and innocent by bananafish attitudes, though being an adult himself, he finds it difficult to establish a genuine connection with other children as well, which places him in the position of an outcast. One binding theme that threads *Nine Stories* is that

> "Salinger's stories seem to usher in an entirely different sentiment: the war has been internalized; men are broken and brutalized; corruption of the spirit can only occasionally be undone by the antidote of innocence, often in the form of children." (Smith 645).

Although the banana fever in the first and last story in *Nine Stories* is resolved with death, that is not to say that all Salinger's protagonists are encountered with situations of gluttonous bananafish that gorge themselves on something until they die. We shall closely examine other contexts where Salinger's heroes face the inescapable challenges of the human condition and relations with the Other.

The Phony World of the Spirit of Seriousness

That existence precedes essence is an inalienable and immutable fact for Sartre despite many certain philosophies prior to French existentialism stating and attempting to prove otherwise. And the fact that people exist is a purely contingent fact which carries other facts about ourselves; the fact that we did not choose to be born, the fact that we were born in a certain place at a certain time, be that during Yugoslavia or fast-forward in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, raised in a certain family with their own worldview. This contingency of our being constitutes our facticity, and we are completely free to take a certain attitude towards it. In existentialism we can thus no longer find a prescribed way of doing something (as opposed to, for example, when people say "Let that be god's will!"), as every choice we make is as contingent as existence is. However, such a seemingly unobstructed existence will still have certain conditions it will need to meet in order to communicate with the Other and comprehend the world. For this reason, it is imperative that an existentialistic ethics should start as "man is-in the world. That is, *at the same time* a facticity surrounded by the world and a project that surpasses it. As project, he assumes his situation in order to surpass it." (*Notebooks for an Ethics* 431)

In *Nine Stories*, not everyone is capable of committing to freedom when thinking about their past lives. One such character is Eloise Wengler in 'Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut' (1948), a short story imbued with nostalgic feelings for the past that slowly corrode into the present transforming themselves as sentiments of bitterness and regret.

As her husband Lew is away, Eloise invites her old college friend, Mary Jane, to spend an afternoon for a catch-up over some drinks. Their conversation immediately takes on a gossipy tone, and Eloise insists on being accompanied by a constant supply of alcoholic drinks, making her open up about some personal things in her own past that seemed to have been sitting on her mind for a while. We learn that Eloise is not really fond neither of her mother-in-law nor

her husband, Lew. This marks the beginning of the 'phoniness' in Eloise's recollection of her current life to Mary Jane, the only thing missing is that Eloise is not yet aware of it. Seized by her own facticity, Eloise's resentment colours her perspective on how she views the episodes of her life that happened in the past. Warren French identifies 'Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut' as a story which starkly contrasts, in Salinger's characteristic choice of adjectives, the 'phony' and 'nice' worlds of one's existence (*The Phony World and the Nice World* 23). Further to that, he adds that "Eloise has succumbed to the material comforts of the 'phony' world and can now find only temporary relief from her despair in alcohol." (23). Eloise's dislike of her current life and her marital relationship with her husband Lew is even translated into the way she talks about her daughter, Ramona, despite Mary Jane being excited and eager to meet her for the first time.

> "'Oh, I'm dying to see her. Who does she look like now?' (. . .)
>
> 'Lew. She looks like Lew. When his mother comes over, the three of them look like triplets' (. . .)
>
> 'What I need is a socker spaniel or something', she said. 'Somebody that looks like me.'" (*Nine Stories* 24)

Because existence precedes essence, an individual is in a constant state of making their being, only to negate it afterwards and make a new being of what has-been. This dynamic of our existence is made possible by the ontological structure of the human condition; as a being-in-itself, one is situated in the world as a particular subject and in order to make sense of the situation, one first needs to negate it, transcend it, and establish something new and meaningful. Since this process can only be achieved by a being who is a for-itself, i.e. consciousness, once a consciousness of freedom has been established, it does not mean that human beings will automatically take this as a foundation for all their actions. The fact that consciousness is intentional, meaning that it is always consciousness of something, makes way for individuals

to be radically free, in a sense. As a consequence of the radical character of freedom is the state of anguish, which is "anguish pure and simple, of the kind by all who have borne responsibilities." (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 27). A common state where human beings tend to avoid anguish Sartre calls 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*) which breaks the coordinated unity of facticity and transcendence constituting the human condition, and makes it so that facticity appears and transcendence and transcendence as facticity. In Eloise's slightly self-deprecating comment about getting a pet dog, she expresses regret about the fact that her marital relationship was not realized with Walt instead, her previous partner who died in an accident caused by a stovetop explosion. This is even more apparent as the story progresses and Eloise starts to recall how Walt was like:

> "'He was the only boy I ever knew that could make me laugh. I mean *really* laugh. (. . .) And the best thing about it was that he didn't even try to be funny – he just *was* funny." (*Nine Stories* 28-9)

Afterwards, prompted by Mary Jane, Eloise begins to compare Lew to Walt:

> "'Yes. Only, why don't you tell Lew about him sometime, though?'
>
> 'Why? Because he's too damn unintelligent, that's why', Eloise said.
>
> 'Besides. Listen to me, career girl. If you ever get married again, don't tell your husband *any*thing. Do you hear me?'" (31)

Eloise confides some of her most intimate memories to her friend Mary Jane, but does not want anyone else to know about them because she realizes that she has not yet managed to cope with the passing of the 'nice' world she used to live in. As Warren French puts it: "The loss of this 'nice world' has turned Eloise into a bitch." (*The Phony World and the Nice World* 25). The present Eloise is living in a phony world, acting out of bad faith as she snaps at her daughter, Ramona, for forgetting to take her galoshes off as she enters the house as well as angrily rejecting her housemaid's request to have her husband stay the night as it is a cold winter's day

and the roads might be too icy for driving. Eloise here is processing and becoming increasingly conscious of her freedom, though anguish and bad faith overcome her as she tries to escape these feelings by lashing out on others. Here we have precisely what Sartre means when he says that human beings are 'condemned to be free':

> "In a word, I flee in order not to know, but I can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish. Thus anguish, properly speaking, can be neither hidden nor avoided." (*Being and Nothingness* 83)

After putting her daughter to bed, Eloise becomes even more upset and the culminating point of her past 'nice' world coincides with the last sentence of the short story where she seeks recognition from Mary Jane by asking her "'I was a nice girl', she pleaded, 'wasn't I?'" (*Nine Stories* 38).

Despite the concept of god being removed out the metaphysical picture in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, he nonetheless uses that concept in order to provide an explanation of why individuals constantly have the need to reaffirm themselves, even if it means slipping into bad faith. We have seen that on the one hand, human beings are an in-itself immersed in their own facticity that can be presented to the Other through one's body or as a concrete nothingness of one's presence in the form of public institutions, the handwritten note on the refrigerator door, a pair of shoes in the hallway etc. Inanimate objects, i.e. things, are nothing other than a pure in-itself in the sense that they *are*. And what allows humans to different in the way of being from the in-itself of a chair, for example, is the fact that they are able to transcend the immediate given and surpass it as a for-itself. The chair in the living room is for a for-itself however she or he wants to use it, sit on it, use it as a tool to do dips as a physical exercise, gift it to a friend etc. The intentionality of consciousness (for-itself) transcends the present formation of entities in a concrete situation in order to realize a choice. As human beings are

constantly ‘in the making’, Sartre says that we can owe this to the fact that the human condition ontologically defines us as a ‘lack’ – nothingness – which permeates our being until our death. The only being that is capable of not being this lack is god – where the in-itself-for-itself are merged together. Once an individual makes peace with this fact of being a lack, i.e. nothingness, one can use them as drivers for an authentic existence. If the dialectical relationship of transcendence and facticity has been distorted, then an individual either falls into bad faith or attempts to conceal the radical nature of their freedom by clinging onto values proposed in a spirit of seriousness:

> “The spirit of seriousness has two characteristics: it considers values as transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity, and it transfers the quality of 'desirable' from the ontological structure of things to their simple material constitution. For the spirit of seriousness, for example, *bread* is desirable because it is *necessary* to live (a value written in an intelligible heaven) and because bread is nourishing. The result of the serious attitude, which as we know rules the world, is to cause the symbolic values of things to be drunk in by their empirical idiosyncrasy as ink by a blotter; it puts forward the opacity of the desired object and posits it in itself as a desirable irreducible.” (*Being and Nothingness* 796).

The serious attitude is the attitude present when Mrs. Fedder says Muriel should relocate only herself to another vacationing spot; when Dr. Sivetski’s opinion about Seymour’s mental health is taken by Mrs. Fedder as an undisputable fact, despite Dr. Sivetski having gotten this information indirectly; when Mrs. Fedder says that Muriel should tell Seymour to remove his bathrobe off when he is at the beach, and lastly, when Muriel’s primary intention is to spend her holidays on the Miami beachside, setting that as a priority above everything else. Here we can see a movement in the serious attitude in which an individual performs an act of double alienation – first the individual attempts to alienate oneself from the consciousness of freedom,

afterwards alienating the Other through a conduct that makes a certain value an imperative. In a difficult attempt to identify the ‘mysteries’ that led Salinger to put the short stories in *Nine Stories* in such way as he did so, Ruth Prigozy notices that Salinger’s collection “*Nine Stories* heralds that period in our nation's history that has been since characterized as frighteningly conformist, spiritually bankrupt, and intellectually adrift - the American 1950s." (93)

'Shame' Joins the Party

The mood of this aforementioned period is accurately captured in J.D. Salinger's first short story that he ever wrote when he was 21-years-old called 'The Young Folks'. Originally published in the magazine *Story* in 1940, 'The Young Folks' experienced a light comeback since 2014 when the publisher Devault-Graves obtained the rights to three Salinger's short stories from his early period, publishing 'The Young Folks' together with 'Go See Eddie' (1940) and 'Once A Week Won't Kill You' (1944) into a collection *Three Early Stories*.

In 'The Young Folks', Edna Philips is attending Lucille Henderson's house-party, the main guests being upper-class students whom the narrator finds as "noisy young people she [Lucille] had invited to drink up her father's scotch." (*Three Early Stories* 7). While the party is well on its way, Edna Philips is depicted as the estranged guest who is sitting by herself and "yodeling hellos" (7) until Lucille intervenes and introduces her to William Jameson Junior, a young man who is keen on meeting a "small blonde girl" instead. At the outset of them having introduced each other, it is clear that Edna is making all the effort she possibly can in order to keep the conversation afloat with Jameson, who keeps murmuring out his responses, and mostly being distracted by glancing at the 'small blonde girl' whose loud shrieks keep permeating the room. Jameson keeps repeating the fact that he was not even planning to stay so long at the party as he has a college project to finish up for Monday, though a few more reasons for him keep interrupting Edna's efforts are to drink Lucille's dad's scotch and get closer to the blonde girl. Edna does not seem to be too much bothered by the boresome company of Jameson and her awareness of the situation quickly captures the fact that Jameson is clearly interested in trying to find a way to join the circle of partygoers where the blonde girl is. At this point in the story, we see an interesting turn in the dialogue triggered by Edna, and what anticipates the concept known in existentialism as 'shame'.

In *Being and Nothingness*, when Sartre discusses the problems around the existence of Others, it becomes apparent that one's subjectivity can only be exclusively experienced by the subject, and so any attempts at experiencing the Other as a for-itself are futile. In the chapter titled *The Existence of Others*, these different modes of consciousness that are seemingly exclusive to the for-itself region, get transformed into something ontologically different from their starting point when grasped by the Other's look. First of all, for Sartre, shame is always "shame *before* somebody." (301). This means that one's action initially conceived as a private movement in which all possibilities for an acute disruption in the form of alienation are closed off, have suddenly become disclosed to the Other and offered to the Other as an immediate given that they are free to transcend, because the Other too is a being-for-itself. In other words, "[s]hame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame I have discovered an aspect of *my* being." (301). Returning to 'The Young Folks', the moment of shame is precisely depicted in the following dialogue excerpt:

> "(. . .) 'Did you notice Doris Leggett, by the way?'
>
> 'Which one is she?'
>
> 'Terribly short? Rather blonde? Used to go with Pete Ilesner? Oh, you must have seen her. She was sitting on the floor per usual, laughing at the top of her voice.'
>
> 'That her? You know her?' Jameson said.
>
> 'Well, sort of,' Edna told him. 'We never went around much together. I really know her mostly by what Pete Ilesner used to tell me.'
>
> 'Who's he?'
>
> 'Petie Ilesner? Don't you know Petie? Oh, he's a *grand* guy. He went around with Doris Leggett for a while. And in my opinion she gave him a pretty raw deal. Simply rotten, I think.'
>
> (. . .) 'Wuddaya mean?'

> ‘Oh, let’s drop it. You know me. I hate to put my two cents in when I’m not sure and all. Not any more. Only I *don’t* think Petie would lie to me though. After all, I mean.’” (*Three Early Stories* 20-1)

Jameson’s being-for-others has suddenly been looked at by Edna who was, until the moment of ‘the look’, a mere being-in-the-world with her own set of projects, which Jameson did not bother to acknowledge as much as Edna tried to do so with Jameson’s. In this instance Jameson’s mode of his being is presented to him as an object, though an object that still belongs to him, but in a way that has been transcended by the Other as a looked-at. As defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, contrary to the use of the word ‘shame’ in everyday language to denote “an uncomfortable feeling of guilt or of being ashamed because of your own or someone else's bad behaviour”, Sartre’s notion of shame is not wholly negative as much as it is an inevitable fact necessary for the experience both of my own looked-at subjectivity as well as the Other. For that reason, he says that

> “the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I *appear* to the Other. By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other." (*Being and Nothingness* 302)

Shame as an important concept in existentialism will lead Sartre to further discover the concept of ‘conflict’, which is, again, not conflict taken in a physical concrete sense, but rather it is a conflict among consciousness, the for-itselves, when encountering one another as beings belonging to the world as beings-in-the-world with their own projects who organise their situations in a way to derive a meaning of the life they live in. This is why Sartre sees conflict so essential to the encounter of the Other, proclaiming conflict as “the original meaning of being-for-others.” (475).

Edna Philips and William Jameson Junior parted each other's company shortly after bringing up Doris Leggett; Jameson hardly making an effort to come up with another excuse repeats that he needs to get going and work on this project, only to have Edna's keen awareness confirmed of Jameson's being-for-others seized in 'shame': "William Jameson Junior, a glass in his right hand and the fingers of his left hand in or close to his mouth, was sitting a few men away from the small blonde." (*Three Early Stories* 28-9). The mood of 'The Young Folks' anticipates those themes that we will see later on in *The Catcher in the Rye* against which Holden will be basing his metaphysical rebellion, and which Salinger's biographer, Kenneth Slawenski pinpoints when talking about 'The Young Folks' that it

> "shone a stark spotlight on the unglamorous truths of upper-class society. It exposed the emptiness and unromantic realities of their pampered existence: the characters of Salinger's first story are dull and brittle, with heir trivial social skills having long ago eclipsed any hint of introspection or empathy." (*J.D. Salinger – A Life* epub).

Though in comparison to Holden whose narrative allows the reader to draw their own conclusions, adding an additional complexity to the plot's resolution, in 'The Young Folks' we have Edna who does not want to ruin her own experience at the party and exclaims: "'Hey, Lu! Bobby! See if you can't get something better on the radio! I mean *who* can dance to that stuff?'" (*Three Early Stories* 29), which is Salinger's decision to end the scene on a playful note, a rarity that we almost never get to see in his mature, *Nine Stories* period.

Children in Salinger's stories

It was an anonymous individual who bypassed the strict surveillance measures at Princeton University Library (Jansma, "Saving Salinger") required in order to gain access to read Salinger's, at the time, unpublished works, which the author banned to be seen by the general audience until 50 years after his death, in 2060. On the 27th of November 2013, fully digitized and widely-available copies of 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls', 'Birthday Boy' and 'Paula', were leaked online in a compilation named *Three Stories*. Of the three pieces, Salinger's biographer, Slawenski, is understandably and particularly impressed with the first one, 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls', saying it is "one of his [Salinger's] finest unpublished works" (*J.D. Salinger – A Life*, epub).

'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls' (1945) is a short story narrated in first-person by Vincent Caulfield, a young adolescent writer who is spending his time in Cape Cod with his parents and siblings, especially his younger, 12-year-old brother Kenneth. He is a very insightful and intelligent boy, extremely interested in literature and baseball. Vincent spends almost the whole day writing a new story, 'The Bowler', which talks about the relationship of a married couple, where the highly controlling wife only allows her husband to go out bowling on Wednesdays and so after his death she discovers that he had had a love affair on Wednesdays, the revelation making her angry, afterwards smashing a window as she threw out her late husband's possessions, including the bowling ball. He asks Kenneth to comment on it, and he gives Vincent bad feedback, telling him that the husband received unfair treatment without having the possibility to defend himself since he is deceased. Vincent acknowledges the feedback seriously and scraps the story.

Kenneth's insight into Vincent's story here hints at how death is viewed in existentialism – as a consciousness of freedom, an individual can only be a for-itself while being able be simultaneously a transcendence-transcended and a transcended-transcendence, this

means that as a being-in-the-midst-of-the-world, the intentionality of consciousness is constantly in play which differentiates an individual from the Other as well as the pure being-in-itself such as things. What happens with death is that "the for-itself is changed forever into an in-itself in that it has slipped entirely into the past. Thus the past is the ever growing totality of the in-itself which we are." (*Being and Nothingness* 169). All the deeds and actions one has done during their lifetime are now accumulated and presented before the Other. Human beings as a constant lack attempt to achieve a unity that only the metaphysical being – God – is able to, which is the in-itself-for-itself, and so they easily slip into bad faith and embrace the spirit of seriousness as a cover up for these failed attempts. In death, an individual is no longer able to resist the being in the world by the way of bringing nothingness as a consciousness of something. Sartre provides an example of the feeling of grudge – holding a grudge is sustainable only if the person we are holding the grudge against is alive. Otherwise, once death steps into place, the person is fully identified with a being-in-itself and is no longer capable of responding to the grudge holder. When Kenneth tells Vincent: "'Don't have her throw that thing out of the window. That bowling ball. Huh, Vincent? Okay?'" (*The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls*, epub), it is supported by Sartre's clarification that a grudge, or any other feeling that presupposes the Other in their for-itself for that matter, is "addressed to the living man who in his being is freely what he was. I am my past and if I were not, my past would not exist any longer either *for me* or for anybody." (*Being and Nothingness* 169). As the two get in a car to drive to Lassiter's, their favourite place that sells freshly steamed clams, Kenneth starts talking about Vincent's girlfriend and listing all the reasons why Vincent should marry her:

"[Kenneth:] 'You don't wanna let her get away.'

[Vincent:] 'I won't.' It was as though I were talking to a man twice my age.'" (*The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls*, epub)

That Kenneth is clearly a child prodigy in a sense, able to make adult-like insights, is shown in two other separate occasions later in the story. The first one is when he comments on a letter he received from his brother, Holden Caulfield, who is spending the summer in a camp and complains about his situation. For Kenneth, Holden's situation can be easily solved by compromising, but "'[Holden] can't make any compromises.' (. . .) 'He's just a little old kid and he can't make any compromises. If he doesn't like Mr. Grover he can't sing in the dining room even when he knows if he sings that everybody'll leave him alone.'" (*The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls*, epub). Kenneth shortly after applies his lesson on compromises as he reflects on his death:

> "'You know what?' he said. 'If I were to die or something, you know what I would do?'
>
> He didn't wait for me to say anything.
>
> 'I'd stick around,' he said. 'I'd stick around a while.'" (*The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls*, epub)

As the reader approaches the ending, we learn that Kenneth did fulfil his promise – he stuck around as an in-itself in the form of Vincent's short story, 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls'. That night Kenneth died due to heart problems as he was swimming in "the ocean" that "threw its last bowling ball at him" (*The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls*, epub)

Many similarities of 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls' can be drawn with Salinger's later stories, such as 'Teddy' (1953) which also features the genius of a child who can understand freedom to the degree where he also accepts the fact that people would rather conceal themselves in the spirit of seriousness, and as a response, children in Salinger's short stories are often shown as genuine and intellectually brilliant characters. From Sybil's wax and olives to Esmé's hope that Sergeant X will be able to write a short story for her with all his "faculties intact" as there is a danger he might lose it on the battlefield, it is possible to describe children in Salinger's short stories as genuine phenomenologists in a sense that they show

simplicity and purity that was lost in the process of people falling ill of the banana fever. Aleksander Hemon in *The Importance of Wax and Olives* talks about Sybil and the rest of the children in Salinger's stories:

> "Her questions are an expression of a desire to understand them in a state before they enter a web of social evaluations and hierarchies, before science and analysis, before wax is considered a worthless, formless thing, useless unless it is a candle, before olives are accessories to a martini – before, if you wish, they become commodities. Salinger's kids and young adolescents always have a profound interest in things whose true value is well below – indeed beyond – their use value, let alone their market value." (64)

The bananafish adults in Salinger's stories are hypocrites that find children sometimes an annoyance although the adults are the origin of imposing the serious world of values. Some adults willingly keep themselves confined within the realm of phoniness, withdrawing from any attempts to transcend their facticity and so "[l]ike the child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them." (Beauvoir 37). Such is the case with Eloise Wengler in 'Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut' when she finds out that her daughter Ramona has two imaginary friends, Jimmy Jimmereeno and Mickey Mickeranno. Because Ramona has the childhood spontaneity and access to the freedom of play, Eloise finds this irritating and makes Ramona get rid of Jimmy. In this way she too imposes on Ramona the serious world where imaginary friends are not allowed, and with that she implicitly acknowledges that any attempt at recovering the 'nice world', the past world her where she was Walt's girlfriend is forever lost.

The deliverance brought about by the collapse of the serious world (Beauvoir 39) is depicted in the third part of 'For Esmé - with Love and Squalor' (1950) when Staff Sergeant X finally gets to sleep restfully after going through weeks of psychological trauma as a member of the Ally military forces stationed in England amidst the end of World War II. The adults

present in Sergeant X's life are not able to understand the existential crisis he is going through; he receives letters from his family members asking him to bring souvenirs, Corporal Z's girlfriend who is studying psychology is suspicious of the fact that Sergeant X's bad mental state is caused by the war, she believes it is something he has been accumulating since childhood. Like Seymour, it seems that Sergeant X can only escape the squalor world of the adult bananafish when talking to Esmé and her pleasantly hyperactive brother Charles.

The ambiguous cause of Teddy McArdle's death in 'Teddy' (1953), the final piece in *Nine Stories*, represents the culmination of all of the notions discussed so far in this thesis. The narrative around Teddy, a 10-year-old boy who possesses an almost frightening power of self-introspection and equally impressive sense of calling out phony characters, corresponds with his gradual alienation from the Other, starting from his materialism-focussed parents to the point where the premonition of his death turns out to be true. Regarding the moment of subjectivity's permanent passing into an-itself handled by the Other, both Kenneth from 'Bowling Balls' and Teddy parallel each other's attitude towards death as acceptance that they will 'stick around in people's minds for a while'.

Conclusion

Perhaps the literary interest in Salinger's available works has slightly subsided over the years regarding his short stories, however the topics that are scattered throughout his work yield ideas that can be universally shared by people across the globe. His topics are reinforced when paired up with those that emerged in the circle of French post-WWII intellectuals who offered a fresh set of attitudes and ideas that are equally easily adaptable to individual situations if we take the starting point of the existentialists – the human condition.

This starting point allowed Jean-Paul Sartre to present the philosophy of existentialism as an approach to revisiting the concepts of 'being' and 'nothingness' as conceived by his predecessors into a principal statement that 'existence precedes essence'. For the context of Jerome David Salinger's short stories as found in *Nine Stories*, *Three Early Stories* and *Three Stories*, this is embodied in Salinger's heroes as misfits, which was the subject of the first chapter of this thesis. We saw there that misfits are existentialists in the sense that they chose to withdraw from the society in their existential situations because encounters with the Other proved to be an alienating experience for them. The two realms that can be roughly separated in Salinger's stories – the adult world and the world of children/young adolescents – are worlds where the bananafish diagnosis is viewed either as an illness to be cured or a living standard. For the misfit, the answer to the banana fever calls for an individual struggle between oneself and Others.

The second chapter covered the problem of banana fevers started with the story where the 'disease' originated, 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish'. The misfit in this story is Seymour Glass who is on holiday on the beachside with his wife, Muriel. Having returned from his military posting, he finds it difficult to communicate with the people closest to him, including his wife Muriel, whose privy mother, Mrs. Fedder makes several attempts alienate her daughter Seymour, ultimately alienating him in the process as she seeks medical opinions without

consulting Seymour. The only person he is able to connect to is the young girl Sybil, who is intrigued by the tale of the gluttonous bananafish which is Seymour's allegorical way of symbolising the people who surround him to the point of alienation. His response to escaping it is suicide. In existentialism, human beings are ontologically constituted into two realms of being, the for-itself (consciousness, freedom) and the in-itself, the immediate given brute existence. Individuals are not in the same way as this chair is a chair (a pure being-in-itself), and so in encountering Others, their being-for-others is captured by the way of 'the Look'.

To embrace the spirit of seriousness is to inverse Sartre's slogan that existence precedes essence. What the serious person does is to refuse to see the significance of questioning and transcending the values that are immediately given to us a ready-made. Such is the character of Eloise Wengler in 'Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut'. While reflecting on her past life with her boyfriend Walt at the time, she realizes the 'nice' world she once had is now replaced with a 'phony' world although not realising that she is a phony too. Those people who can not stand the fact that they are the sole creators of values in the world, with consciousness as the radical movement of freedom in an ontological sense, attempt to conceal this fact of responsibility by withdrawing into bad faith.

The concept of 'shame' in existentialism was the primary concern of the following chapter. Shame is embodied in a scene in Salinger's short story 'The Young Folks'. Edna Philips is at a college student party, talking to William Jameson Junior who keeps making excuses to leave the party early, although ultimately all he wants is to be in the group of loud partygoers with Doris Leggett. When Edna brings this up to Jameson, it represents the moment known as 'shame' where Jameson's being-for-others is invaded by Edna's look, objectified and seized into a moment of acute disclosure of being. Both the 'look' and 'shame' are inevitable moments of experiencing the encounter with the Other.

Children in Salinger's stories was the topic of inquiry in the final chapter of this thesis. The leaked compilation of Salinger's stories planned to be published in 2060 were made available much earlier in 2013, called *Three Stories*. The opposing world of adults and children and young adolescents appears throughout 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls'. The young Kenneth spends a day with his brother Vincent, talking about his new short story and the prospect of Kenneth's death. One of the aspects of the facticity of the for-itself, i.e. consciousness, is its ability to transcend the past and move towards the not-yet-being, the future. An individual's death marks the points where this for-itself is transformed and sealed as an in-itself, that is now left to the Other to proceed with this past event in a particular form. Kenneth's death was tribute in Vincent's short story, 'The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls'. Other children in Salinger's stories, such as Teddy and Esmé provide an insight into the world before the coming of the spirit of seriousness. The squalid world of Sergeant X's trauma begins to heal when meeting Esmé who introduces him to a peaceful world in which he is finally able to cure his insomnia. The children in Salinger's stories are thus, in a way, existentialist heroes as they represent an alternative insight to the serious world imposed by the adults; both birth and death are understood as contingent moments of the for-itself by Teddy and Kenneth, while Esmé sees love in the life despite having lost both parents in the war.

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EXISTENTIALIST NOTIONS PORTRAYED IN THE COLLECTION OF JEROME DAVID SALINGER'S SHORT STORIES: Abstract and key words

Despite being best known for his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, there is a large body of short stories that J.D. Salinger had published in various American magazines in the 1940s and early 1950s. Salinger carefully picked out the best short stories he wrote during that period and assembled them into a collection called *Nine Stories*. Since Salinger was a prolific writer, there is still a vast majority of his work which is expected to be released posthumously in the future by his family who hold the publishing rights. However, the leaked collection of *Three Stories* in 2013 and the publication of *Three Early Stories* by Devault-Graves in 2014 offer a preview of Salinger's lesser known short stories. Salinger's heroes and their existential situations in the three works form the aim of this thesis, which uses the philosophy of existentialism as espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, in order to perform a literary analysis of existentialistic concepts found throughout these short stories.

Key words: J.D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, short story, existentialism, banana fever, alienation, the look, shame, bad faith, death

EGZISTENCIJALIČKI KONCEPTI PORTRETIRANI U ZBIRKAMA KRATKIH PRIČA JEROMEA-DAVIDA SALINGERA: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Premda najpoznatiji po svome romanu, *Lovac u žitu*, postoje opširne zbirke kratkih priča koje je J.D. Salinger dao objavljivati u raznim američkim časopisima tijekom 1940-ih i ranih 1950-ih godina. Salinger je pažljivo izabrao najbolje kratke priče koje je napisao u tom razdoblju i skupio ih u kolekciju imena *Nine Stories*. Budući da je Salinger bio izuzetno produktivan pisac, još uvijek postoji velika zbirka njegovih radova za koje se očekuje da će njegova obitelj, koja ima izdavačka prava, dati izdati u budućnosti posthumno. Unatoč tome, kolekcija *Three Stories* koja je iscurila 2013. i izdanje Devault-Gravesa, *Three Early Stories* u 2014., nude pregled Salingerovih manje poznatih kratkih priča. Salingerovi heroji i njihove egzistencijalne situacije u ovima trima djelima formiraju cilj ovog rada, u kojem se koristi filozofija egzistencijalizma kakvu je zastupao Jean-Paul Sartre, kako bi se provela književna analiza egzistencijalističkih koncepata prisutnih u ovim kratkim pričama.

Ključne riječi: J.D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, kratka priča, egzistencijalizam, banana groznica, otuđenje, pogled, sram, loša vjera, Drugi, smrt