

A Reconsideration of J. D. Salinger's Work in Terms of Interpretive Codes and Layered Structures

Reiko Nitta

1. Salinger's Interpretive Codes and Layered Structures

From the very beginning, Salinger seems to have believed that one's most important feelings and thoughts are hidden in the deepest part of one's mind and should not be directly described. This is probably the reason why he used some words and items to describe a certain clear inner condition indirectly. Some of them have already been recognized by critics. Charles V. Genthe perceptively notes that Salinger associates the image of sex with the number, six, and discusses the "symbolism of the six bananas" (171) and other images of sex in relation to six, in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." John Russel examines Salinger's characteristic usage of the foot as "one species of symbol" (299) and Kenneth Hamilton refers to Salinger's usage of "color symbolism" (29). However, these critics deal with one or more of these special words or items independently and usually treat them as symbols while the messages superimposed on them are far more clearly defined than those of the symbols. They are, on the other hand, more functional than allegories and relate themselves to one another to create another layer of the story under its surface one.

In my book in Japanese published in 2004, under the title of Salinger-nanka *Kowakunai (Don't Be Afraid of J. D. Salinger)*, I call those particular words and items in Salinger's works "interpretive codes" and carefully analyzed how they are used to construct layered structures in each of his works.

Some of the typical interpretive codes are as follows:

- a. cigarette: "To light a cigarette" means to open one's mind to other people while "to extinguish a cigarette" means the end of an intimate conversation.
- b. body height: "To be tall" means to have a rich inner quality while "to

be short" means the lack of it.

c. foot: Men's "foot" indicates the foundation of one's existence, such as one's mind. Russel notices that "the connection between emotional balance and instinctive physical balance is not anything metaphoric, with Salinger" (302). The "root," the "foot" of a tree, is similarly used to represent one's mind.

d. glass: Transparent "glass" forms the boundary between the inside of one's mind and the outside world. Looking out of a window or putting a pair of glasses on indicates one's efforts to contact the outside world. The looking "glass," on the other hand, suggests the reflection of one's own image and one's self-centered narrow thought.

e. colors: Salinger's usage of colors is quite traditional. "White" and "blue" mean purity or spiritual nobility as they often do in western color images, while "yellow" means secularity through its association with gold and money. "Green" is the mixed color of blue and yellow and always indicates an ideal mixture of purity and secularity.

f. left side: "Right" hands practices daily necessities so that the "left side" belongs to the spiritual.

g. water: Through the association of blue, any kind of "water" belongs to the spiritual while "land" belongs to the secular.

h. indirect conversation: An "indirect conversation" through the telephone or any kind of writing allows sincere heart-to-heart communication while a face-to-face conversation is considered to be so affected and superficial that only its lower level reveals true inner feelings.

i. six: As Gengi points out, "six" is always associated with sex.

j. the East: Anything related to "the East" belongs to highly spiritual condition. Crossing legs is, for example, associated with Zazen (seated meditation) practice so that when one crosses one's legs in one's conversation, one's mind is sensitive enough to understand the other party's spiritual predicament.

k. child: For Salinger, younger "children" are purer.

As Salinger's literary world developed and added richness and complexity to its content, the role of a latent layer indirectly indicated by interpretive codes acquired importance. My book analyzes how this role developed and

declined. It also discusses other literary devices introduced to improve Salinger's layered structures in his later works, the Glass saga, and how they fail toward his last published work, "Hapworth 16, 1924."

Being based on those former discussions in my book, this thesis reconsiders some of the layered structures created with interpretive codes and other unique literary devices, as well as overviewing his writing career at the end.

2. The Completion of the Double Layered Stories

In his very first work, "The Young Folks," Salinger already used "cigarettes" tacitly to present Edna's naïve inner self, which is unnoticed by other people, as well as her pathetic yearning for communication, in contrast to her arrogant adolescent pride on the surface layer of the story. This work, however, uses a limited number of interpretive codes and only forms the lower layer here and there. In other words, the interpretive codes in this work do not yet function much more effectively than symbols.

The latent layer of a story assumed more importance after Salinger's World War II experience. When he had a deeper view of the world, he needed to refine his literary technique to express it. In his successful works in *The Nine Stories* such as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut," "Just before the War with Eskimos," "The Laughing Man," "Down at the Dinghy," and "For Esmé – With Love and Squalor," their surface layer presents a charming lovely story while interpretive codes construct their latent layer thoroughly in parallel with the surface layer and demonstrate another story of heart-to-heart communication in their most delicate artifice.

For example, the surface layer of "Down at the Dinghy" depicts the running-away of Lionel, the small son of the Tannenbaums. The first scene presents the anxious Sandra, a housemaid, through her conversation with Mrs. Snell, a housekeeper. The cause of her anxiety is so vaguely mentioned as to draw the reader's attention. In the second scene, Lionel's mother, Boo Boo, joins their conversation and casually explains Lionel's records of running-away. In the third scene, Boo Boo's motherly talk with Lionel unveils the fact that Lionel was intimidated by Sandra's careless anti-Semitic curse on his father. Boo Boo apprehends far more difficult situations that he will have to face in future but Lionel's innocent childish confusion of the word "kike" with "kite" makes a sweet twist in the ending and overwhelms his mother's apprehension.

The surface story of "Down at the Dinghy" thus looks like a story about Lionel with the victory of his childish innocence. Unless the latent layer of the story is understood, therefore, it is not clear why Boo Boo is "a stunning and final girl" (115), just as Warren French fails to recognize it and complains: "Boo Boo has only deferred a crisis, not confronted it [...]. Certainly in this sense Boo Boo does not here prove herself to be the kind of 'final girl' that Esmé is" (75). In this work, interpretive codes such as cigarettes, various types of glasses, and water, are combined with one another to indicate how both Sandra and Lionel are isolated and how only Boo Boo recognizes their inner problems and works out to open their minds to other people. Under the story about a commonplace and minor everyday incident taking place around Lionel, Salinger describes that Boo Boo's highly sensitive and humane consideration alone can counteract other people's hardened minds and their isolation.

3. The Multiple Layered Stories with a First-Person Narrator

One of the above six excellent works in *Nine Stories*, "The Laughing Man," has more than two layers. This work is narrated in the first person and the surface layer of the narration is divided into two layers; its upper layer was observed even when the narrator was nine years old while its lower layer was realized only after he grew up. Meanwhile, the interpretive codes form the lowest and the most difficult layer to detect, portraying such a harsh reality that even the grownup narrator cannot fully face it.

Salinger developed this technique further in *The Catcher in the Rye* and created three layers in it, too. The book deals with what Holden did during a few days near Christmas one year. Its surface layer presents Holden as acting like a dropout with poor communicative ability. He has partial views typical of the adolescent and categorizes people and things into a dichotomy: those he likes are nice while those he dislikes are phony. Using such simplified views, Salinger clearly demonstrates his own personal likes and dislikes.

However, Holden's narration is often contradictory. For example, though he says, "I have a lousy vocabulary" (13), his teacher actually regarded Holden as "a hot-shot in English" (37). He is not actually an honest narrator at all and even confesses himself, "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life" (22). His narrative discrepancies indicate a lower layer of the story and this layer reveals the problem of a young man who is cleverer than Holden presents

himself as being, as well as Salinger's deeper understanding of the world.

Besides the two layers based on Holden's narration, Salinger builds up another tacit layer with interpretive codes and traces Holden's inner search for his way into the adult world. Holden's spiritual adventure is the main theme of the book and this layer is closely connected to Salinger's personal likes and dislikes in the surface layer of the acting Holden and to his realistic view of the world in the lower layer of the narrator Holden. This is why the distinguished literary artifice of this book cannot be fully appreciated without understanding this tacit layer with interpretive codes.

4. The Embryonic Postmodern Writing

Ian Hamilton observes that the success of *The Catcher in the Rye* enabled Salinger to seclude himself in Cornish and that, after his marriage in 1955, he almost completely retreated from social life (155). When he searched for a new style to excel *The Catcher in the Rye* in such isolation, he grew seriously involved with Eastern mysticism and the meaning of writing. And as his concern was mainly related to the abstract, his works dealt less and less with action, depending more and more on thoughts and opinions. What is worse, in his seclusion, his literary world also gradually distanced itself from the real world.

It is true that the act of writing already played an important role in his earlier work, "For Esmé - With Love and Squalor," but its main character writes his story in order to recover from his squalid experience of World War II and retrieve his connection with the outside world. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden also writes a book in a hospital to reestablish his relation with the outside world, expecting to leave the hospital in the near future. On the other hand, in Salinger's later work, the Glass saga, Buddy Glass writes his stories in happy seclusion. As a professional writer, Buddy never feels any need to be connected to the outside world except in his writing as Salinger did in his later years.

Because Salinger's interpretive codes usually accompany the action in the upper layer of a story in order to reveal characters' interiors in its lower layer, the decrease in action in his works undermined the role of interpretive codes. This is true with *Franny and Zooey*. For example, Zooey shakes "a small glass sphere, [...] containing a snowman wearing a stovepipe hat" (140) during his

conversation with Franny. Glass is an interpretive code to indicate the border of the inside and the outside. And as its closed inside has romantic scenery, the glass sphere represents Franny's mind and her childish deed of escaping to her parents' apartment. And when he causes a snow storm by shaking it, Zooey upsets Franny with his critical comments. Nevertheless, these messages conveyed by the interpretive code of glass do not create a substantial lower layer because they are clearly stated in the surface layer, for example, in Zooey's direct comment, "[T]his just is not fair to Bessie and Les. Its *terrible* for them" (159), as well as Franny's irritated reaction toward him.

Though interpretive codes do not play essential role, *Franny and Zooey* nevertheless succeeds in making two important layers by means of words and delivers its primal humane message in its lower layer. This is how Zooey manages to reconnect Franny with the outside world at the end of the novel. There he tells her to act for "the Fat Lady" (199) because "*There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady*" (200). As "the Fat Lady" represents those commonplace people whom Franny could not stand and as she originally took refuge at her parents' apartment to avoid them, it cannot be the surface philanthropic meaning of this phrase that actually changes her mind. Besides, Seymour himself could not be saved by its surface meaning, for he already committed suicide in his first story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Moreover, suffering from an ulcer due to his attempts to get along with other people, Zooey is fully conscious that its surface meaning is not much helpful. The secret remedy for her consequently should be hidden in the tacit layer of this phrase and Franny must be saved because this phrase belongs to Seymour and reminds her of all the nice things related to him. In other words, it enables her to experience happy feelings in life once again. Even if her happiness may not last long, it brings a humane joyful sensation of life back to her and makes it possible for her once more to return to reality.

At the beginning of "Zooey," Zooey tries bitterly to preach to Franny about how one should face difficulties in reality. He fails then because Franny is too tired to accept more difficulties in life. Besides, her female nature is treated as too easily affected by the superficial to realize Zooey's genuine compassion for her in his severe words. After recognizing her limitation, Zooey changes his approaches and acts for her as if Seymour's sweet message were really worthwhile. And the success of this book lies in Zooey's practical

attitude of offering Seymour's phony love for everybody together, with Zooey's true love for his sister, because his act not only produces the lower layer to the prolix and argumentative conversation but also reveals in it, a self-sacrificing love which appreciates other people's viewpoints and acts according to their need.

After *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger aimed to develop these double-layered messages and became engrossed in layering words in his Glass saga. On account of its complicated usage of language and expressions, his efforts might be regarded as an embryonic form of Postmodern writing but they were not very successful. This is partly because words have strong surface messages in themselves so that messages in the upper layer easily overwhelm messages in the lower layer. This new challenge therefore required all the more delicate literary artifice but Salinger in seclusion indulged himself so much as blindly to head into a simplified structure instead.

5. The Failure of the Layered Structure

In "Seymour, an Introduction" in 1959, Buddy, who is connected to the world only by writing as Salinger was then, appears on the surface of the story. In this work, Salinger used a more experimental form of writing than before but from the very beginning Buddy revolts the reader with his conceited arrogance when he needs to ask the reader to be patient and sensitive enough to detect the hidden meaning under the surface description of Seymour as a pious genius with remarkable ability. In fact, most critics take its surface message as it is and criticize Salinger for trying to create a saint. For example, Warren French laments, "He[Salinger] intended to turn him[Seymour] into a god-seeking seer" (101) and Robert M. Adams asks, "How did Salinger get hung up on the idea that the Glass ménage had to produce a messiah?" (129). Ian Hamilton also describes Salinger's writing at this time: "Salinger's pounding of the typewriter and his search for God were now inseparable disciplines" (141).

To tell the truth, Salinger tried to sustain his realistic view in some places. For example, when Buddy asks himself, "Had Seymour no grievous faults, no vices, no meannesses [...]?" (108), he avoids the answer: "Thankfully, it isn't my responsibility to answer that one. (Oh, lucky day!)" (108). Buddy is "lucky"

because he does not have to retract the sanctification of Seymour while insinuating the realistic possibility that Seymour is just another man with human weakness. There the reader may catch a glimpse of Salinger's realistic view but Buddy usually treats Seymour as a saint so high-handedly that his attitude cannot be easily balanced by such a weak piece of realism.

What Salinger attempted with Buddy's writing was probably to make his favorite character, Seymour, an interpretive code to indicate a saint. He expected the reader to admire Seymour as an interpretive code and to accept his moral lessons without any criticism just as Franny delightedly did. He must have thought Seymour was suitable to be an interpretive code for a saint because the real Seymour already committed suicide in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." In this first work of Seymour, Salinger had presented him as another sensitive man who could despair in his life so that Salinger must have expected to keep his realistic view with the real Seymour even when he made the interpretive code of Seymour as a saint preach moral lessons and express his ideals openly. Unfortunately, however, Salinger's secluded life and pride as a successful writer prevented him from recognizing how conceited it is to preach to the reader through an interpretive code of a saint. Likewise, he failed to accept critical comments on his recent writing and was driven into more self-indulgent writing in "Hapworth 16, 1924."

In this work, Seymour acts and talks like a seer on the surface of the story. Even if Salinger did not intend to treat this work as a true story of Seymour but only as Buddy's creation, there are no postmodern meta-fictional devices to emphasize Buddy's fictionalization of Seymour. In fact, Seymour looks so pretentious and insolent with his feeling of superiority to other people that Salinger seems to have forgotten that Seymour's role of saint is nothing but an interpretive code in Buddy's fiction. And, without the double layers of Seymour's character, this work turned out to be so simple, unrealistic and absurd as only to demonstrate Salinger's inflated ego.

The essence of Salinger's literary artistry lies in the layered structures of his works. Especially his technique of incorporating multiple interpretive codes accurately in order to reveal exquisite heart-to-heart communication in a lower layer hidden under the surface of a charming sentimental story is quite amazing. The reader will be fascinated by his intricate layered structures just as when Fabergé's Easter eggs open their decorated outside shells to reveal

breathtaking inside sceneries. However, rejecting the outside world and other people's opinions, Salinger blinded himself with his pride and finally made such a simple absurd work as "Hapworth 16, 1924." Though they say that he kept writing after this failed work, his works written in his notorious seclusion might well be less interesting than his earlier ones.

Hiroshima University

Works Cited

- Adams, Robert M. "Fashions in Fiction." *Partisan Review* 30 (1963): 128-33.
- French, Warren. *J. D. Salinger, Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1988.
- Genthe, Charles V. "Six, Sex, Sick: Seymour, Some Comments." *Twentieth Century Literature* 10 (1965): 170-71.
- Hamilton, Ian. *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. "Hell in New York: J. D. Salinger's 'Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes.'" *Dalhousie Review* 47 (1967): 394-99.
- Russel, John. "Salinger's Feat." *Modern Fiction Studies* 12.3 (1966): 299-311.
- Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Little, 1951.
- _____. "Hapworth 16, 1924." *New Yorker* 19 June 1965: 32+.
- _____. *Nine Stories*. Boston: Little, 1953.
- _____. *Franny and Zooey*. London: Heinemann, 1961.
- _____. *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. London: Heinemann, 1963.
- _____. "The Young Folks." *Story* Mar.-Apr. 1940: 26-30.