

REVISITING MODERN WRITERS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Georgiana Mîndreci¹

Abstract

The richness and the depth of digital resources nowadays is not only unimaginably (if compared to, let's say, merely fifty years back into the past) and utterly dependable on, but also highly misleading if not carefully verified and double-checked against all already known and accepted references among critics. But once this step is cautiously and academically dealt with and checked on any researcher's list, the digital abundance of information can open (virtual) door after (virtual) door, can hasten the research process dramatically and lead to new discoveries and paths. This article tries to identify how the digital era can help find new meanings and connections between a modern writer's life and his literary career by taking the example of a very influential 20th century American writer: J. D. Salinger.

Keywords: *Digital era; literary connections; literary career; J. D. Salinger; digital resources.*

JEL Classification: *KO*

Introduction

Jerome David Salinger is still one of the most debated writers, not only within academic circles, but also in any other art-related fields, especially the film industry. A mere “Google search” will end up with hundreds of different references, all different and distinct from one another. There have been films, songs, interviews books, articles, reviews made and written with and about Salinger and/or his characters.

Salinger's childhood has never been publicly discussed and almost all his biographers agree on the fact that he was more a recluse and some of them even consider that his popularity is due more to the controversy created around his name than to his writing talent. But in spite of all this we now know that is one of the most important American writers of the 20th century.

Sources and Literary Career Development

Concerning Salinger's education we can say that he attended schools on Manhattan's upper west side, where he had satisfactory results, except in arithmetic. He probably spent many summers in upstate or New England camps. When he was eleven, in the summer of 1930, he was voted “the most popular actor” at Camp Wigwam, Harrison, Maine – hence the cinematic atmosphere in all his works.

Concerned about his studies, his parents enrolled him in Manhattan's highly rated McBurney School, an expensive but none too chic establishment, when he was thirteen, in 1932. McBurney had links with YMCA and it was Jerry's last school. During the same year the family moved to Park Avenue. At the enrollment interview he said he was interested in dramatics and tropical fish. But he flunked out a year later. A friend who knew him then recalled that “he wanted to do unconventional things. For hours, no one in the family knew where he was or what he was doing; he just showed up for meals. He was a nice boy, but he was the kind of kid who, if you wanted to have a card game, wouldn't join in.”(Grunwald, 1962: 11-from *New York Times*, June 2 and 7, 1941).

At McBurney, Salinger's performance was well below the average, his most dismal grades were in Latin and geometry and he spent the summer of 1934 at Manhasset School, trying to make up in these subjects. His English and journalism marks were also poor (in the first year at McBurney he was rated seventh in a class of twelve). Here he was also

¹ PhD Lecturer, Constantin Brâncoveanu University, Pitesti, g_mindreci@yahoo.com

nicknamed Sonny by his colleagues, perhaps with a hint of sarcasm. The only school activities that attracted him at this school were in the fields of journalism and dramatics.

All these facts easily available nowadays, at just “a click distance,” obviously point out to an array of similarities between the author and his most outstanding literary creation in terms of characters: Holden Caulfield. Like Holden, he became the manager of the school fencing team, but he also was the heading of the Dramatic Art. Jerome Salinger also was a reporter on the *McBurneian*, and he acted in two school plays, taking a female part in each, and winning rave reviews. His passion for acting actually started very early: at the tender age of seven, Jerome was the best actor at a summer camp in Maine. The final report from this school described him as “very good in dramatics” and - more surprising - “good in public speaking.” He was not very much interested in or involved with sports, but he liked Ping-Pong and soccer (but he also suffered a lot of accidents: a broken leg, a broken ankle and a broken arm).

It is often said that Jerome Salinger started writing at the age of fifteen, which is to say during his first year at Valley Forge Military Academy, which might also be a model for Pencey Prep in *The Catcher in the Rye* – yet another important similarity pointed out by the numerous digital and traditional bibliographical resources. The academy is not very far from New York; it is near Wayne, a small town in Pennsylvania. It seems that the decision to send Jerome Salinger to Valley Forge was taken in haste, because Sol’s letter of enrollment is dated September 20 and the school’s academic year was due to start on September 22. Salinger spent two years at this school, graduating in June 1936.

J. D. Salinger was not a recluse at Valley Forge; he belonged to a lot of clubs, like, for example: the Glee Club, the Aviation Club, the French Club, the Non-Commissioned Officers’ Club, and Mask and Spur (a dramatic organization). During his senior year, he also served as literary editor of *Crossed Sabres* - the academic yearbook. In 1935 Salinger was nicknamed in this school magazine “Salinger the Sublime”. On the final page of the 1936 yearbook, Jerome D. Salinger excels himself in a rhetorical vein and his contribution is offered as a class song for the boys of ’36 (*Crossed Sabres, 1936:138*):

*Hide not thy tears on this last day
Your sorrow has no shame:
To march no more midst lines of gray,
No longer play the game.
Four years have passed in joyful ways
Wouldst stay these old times dear?
Then cherish now these fleeting days
The few while you are here.*

*The last parade, our hearts sink low:
Before us we survey—
Cadets to be, where we are now
And soon will come their day.
Though distant now, yet not so far,
Their years are but a few.
Aye, soon they’ll know why misty are
Our eyes at last review.*

*The lights are dimmed, the bugle sounds
The notes we’ll ne’er forget.
And now a group of smiling lads:
We part with much regret.*

*Goodbyes are said, we march ahead
Success we go to find.
Our forms are gone from Valley Forge
Our hearts are left behind.*

To this day, Salinger's class song is enshrined in the Valley Forge school hymnbook, along with works by Martin Luther and John Wesley, and is still sung at graduation ceremonies.

Salinger was enrolled as a boy soldier, but he has said that he hated life at military school. Nevertheless, the evidence is contradictory. His career at Valley Forge is marked by a curiously companionable struggle between eager conformism and sardonic detachment. Some of his co-students remember the sardonic side of the writer: he used to talk in a pretentious manner ("as if he were reciting something from Shakespeare"), he had sardonic wit and humor, and sometimes he was cynical, moody and a bit of an outsider. He knew he was more gifted about writing than the rest of his colleagues, he also was very sophisticated. In his conversations he often used sarcasm when talking about the others and the routines they had to obey and follow in school. He did not want to become a cadet; he enjoyed breaking the rules. Somebody else remembers that "he loved conversation. He was given to mimicry. He liked people, but he couldn't stand stuffed shirts. Jerry was aware that he was miscast in the military role. He was all legs and angels, very slender, with a shock of black hair combed backwards. His uniform was always rumped in the wrong places. He never fit it. He always stuck out like a sore thumb in a long line of cadets." (Hamilton, 1988: 23)

During the years at the military academy, Salinger met a lot of people, cadets or colonels, who, later on, might have been models for some characters (like Ackley, Stradlater, Marsala, etc.) in the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and not only. For example, there was a cadet who did fall to his death from a window in one of the dormitories, like James Castle in *The Catcher*.

It was at Valley Forge that Salinger first began to think of himself as a writer, and not just as a writer for the school yearbook. At nights, he said, holding a flashlight under the bedcovers, he wrote stories. But these stories are now lost because none of them was published.

At the age of seventeen, Salinger left Valley Forge and, in June 1936, respecting his parents' wish, he applied for admission to New York University. His grades were adequate for college entry, and so he was accepted for the fall semester. He left after a single year, leaving no trace of ever having been there. But secretly, he had made up his mind; he was going to be a writer, a professional. But this, being a professional, meant making a living by the sale of words, and also constant productivity. In the mid 1930's the market of short stories was healthier than many other sectors of the American economy. At the time there were some very famous magazines, which played a very important part in Salinger's literary career. A magazine like *Esquire*, for instance, had won itself an audience and some prestige by publishing Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and Fitzgerald's *The Crack Up*. Thus, magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Esquire* were, for Salinger in 1936, the quintessence of high sophistication.

In the relationship between Salinger and his father there was a tension. Sol Salinger did not want his son to be a writer or an actor; he wanted him to join the family tradition, but this would prove to never be the case.

Salinger decided to get out of New York and he went to Cape Cod and Canada. The only job Salinger had held on to was his *Kungsholm* jaunt of 1937. Back in New York in September, he started work on an autobiographical novel and some other short stories. Although J. D. Salinger was now pouring out the stories at a hectic rate, the breakthrough came in the summer of 1941; *Collier* printed the short piece *The Hang of It* as "A Short Story Complete on This Page." In March 1941, Lend-Lease began, and in April the first U.S. "shot in anger" was fired at attacking German submarines. America could soon be at war. At the

beginning of July, it had been announced that U.S. Army troop strength had reached 1.4 million eight times larger than it had been a year earlier. So Salinger probably wrote *The Hang of It* in May 1941, aiming at a new audience: the apprehensive young recruit. It was J. D.'s first major magazine appearance, but it also marked the loss of his literary innocence.

In the same year, 1941, he finally broke into the pages of *Esquire* with a good-humored parody, of the same sort of story with which he had contributed to *Collier's*, this one being called *The Heart of a Broken Story*. The narrator tells us a story for the slicks, a "boy-meets-girl" story, as the writer characterizes it. But, of course, in this story the boy does not meet the girl, except in his imagination.

At the age of twenty-two, Salinger was still living with his parents, in their apartment on Park Avenue. At this particular time he was not very happy; he wanted more money, he craved respectability and he was thinking of the boy hero Holden Caulfield as a portrait of himself when young.

Further on, we find out about some letters in Texas, addressed to Elizabeth Murray. Her name was found in a biography of Eugene O'Neill. In the fall of 1941, Salinger had been dating O'Neill's daughter, Oona. Someone called Elizabeth Murray had introduced him to her. According to the biography, the romance had always been fairly uneasy, and Salinger had all along had serious reservations about Oona's personality. During the period when he first began dating Oona O'Neill, Salinger was restless and irritable. He was not able to settle at Park Avenue. He took off to the country for a while, or he rented himself a room in the city for a couple of weeks, but not really using it.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and Salinger was surprised by his own feelings of patriotic outrage. Earlier in the same year, he had volunteered for the draft but he had been rejected. He was told he had a mild heart complaint. But as the war was declared, he wanted to make a contribution. So he even wrote to Milton S. Baker at Valley Forge, asking if the colonel could recommend a defense job for him. Four months later, though, the volunteer was reclassified and drafted for service in the army. On April 27, 1942, he reported to Fort Dix and from there he was transferred to Fort Monmouth in New Jersey for a ten-week instructor's course with the Signal Corps. His writing hadn't been very good lately, so the break was quite welcomed and well timed. In June 1942, Salinger decided he would make a try for Officer Candidate School, and he wrote off for references to Colonel Baker at Valley Forge and to Whit Burnett. Nothing seems to have come from this first application. In July, most of Salinger's Signal Corps class transferred to Signal OCS. He himself was given an instructor's job with the Army Aviation Cadets and posted South to the U.S. Army Air Force Basic Flying School at Bainbridge, Georgia. Salinger, as a military school graduate, was annoyed he had not been granted a commission. In 1943 he tried again. He had been posted by then to a cadet classification squadron at a base near Nashville, Tennessee.

In September-October, 1942, he published in *Story*, *The Long Debut of Lois Taggett* set in a New York "society" world that Salinger himself had known between the time he left school and he entered the army.

Coming back to Salinger's sentimental life, we can say that during his early twenties, he had plenty of girlfriends. For him there were two kinds of girls: those he despised immediately and those he fell in love with and afterward semidespised. When Carole Marcus (a friend of Oona O'Neill) got married to William Saroyan, Salinger saw it as a sign and he started to woo Oona by mail. Now she seemed more urgently desirable than when he had actually been with her in New York. But some time later, Oona married the fifty-four-year-old Charles Chaplin. At first Salinger pretended indifferent, but then he made no effort to disguise his sense of physical revulsion.

In 1943, Salinger believed he had “hit the jackpot” when the *Saturday Evening Post* bought a story called *The Varioni Brothers*. But nothing came of this. The book is a parable on evils of commercialism.

In the autumn of 1943, the FBI paid a visit to McBurney School to check on Salinger’s school background. This time his application was successful, he was vetted for admission to the Counter Intelligence Corps. Thus in October 1943, Salinger was demoted from acting staff sergeant back to corporal and was transferred to Fort Holabird in Maryland to be trained as a special agent. Between December 1943 and May 1944 about eight hundred American special agents were shipped to England to be trained there in “theatre intelligence duties” before being assigned to specific fighting units. Salinger’s posting came through in January 1943. Not long after his departure for Europe, Salinger sent three stories to the *Saturday Evening Post* and the magazine accepted all three. They also paid two thousand dollars per story and it seemed the big score Salinger had been dreaming of. One of the stories deserves much more attention and it is called *Last Day of the Last Furlough*. The hero of the story is called John F. Gladwaller, and his army number is 32325200, and this was Salinger’s own army number. The message is clear: those close to him (close enough to recognize his number) should attend to this story with special care. The story appeared in July 1944, a month after Salinger was known to have gone into combat.

In the same year, 1944, Salinger also published in *Story* magazine the story *Once a Week Won’t Kill You*.

By March 1944, Salinger was stationed at the headquarters of the Fourth Infantry Division at Tiverton, in Devon, the setting for the first section of his famous postwar story *For Esmé- with Love and Squalor*.

From Salinger’s letters we could learn that during the pre-D-Day buildup he was writing hard and had actually completed six chapters of the Holden Caulfield novel. In England, he was made to feel like an American, an American soldier at whom the Devon locals were usually staring.

Between June and August the 12th Infantry Regiment moved from Cherbourg down to Paris. But on August 25, when the regiment entered Paris, Salinger had heard the biggest news since D-Day: Paris was free. He was only in Paris for a few days but, of course, he did not allow all the excitement to distract him from his literary objectives. Salinger had heard that Ernest Hemingway was in town, holding Liberation day court at the Ritz Hotel and he decided to pay him a visit. So, they met and it had been a cozy visit, with Hemingway admitting that he had read Salinger’s stories in *Esquire* and that he had liked them, he thought that Salinger had a lot of talent. Nevertheless, there is in print a story that on some later occasion Hemingway visited Salinger’s unit (as a war correspondent), but Salinger became disgusted when Hemingway shot the head off a chicken to demonstrate the merits of a German Luger. Of course, there is no evidence to demonstrate the authenticity of the story; but we do learn from Salinger’s letters that he had little patience for Hemingway’s macho posturing. Salinger’s war heroes rarely have a taste for war.

The war went on. There were various battles but one was the toughest and the bloodiest -the one at Hürtgen Forest, about which Salinger wrote an elegy called *The Stranger*.

Salinger, after a short hospitalization, finally got his discharge from the army in November 1945. But in between another odd thing happened. He got married. His bride was a French girl he could hardly have known for more than a few weeks. Her name was Sylvia, and, according to Salinger’s army friends, she was a doctor, probably a psychologist or an osteopath. They got married in September 1945 and then moved and lived in Germany. It seems that the marriage lasted eight months. Salinger did take Sylvia back to the States, but “she couldn’t separate herself from her European ties,” as a friend has explained. She went

back to France and she got a divorce. Salinger announced the end of the marriage from a hotel in Florida. This setting is similar to that in *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*.

For the next two years, 1945 to 1947, Salinger did not publish too much, but he continued publishing short stories and also the first published stories to include material about Holden Caulfield.

Ironically, it was in these troubled years that Salinger at last made his debut in *The New Yorker* with *A Slight Rebellion off Madison*, on December 21, 1946.

In 1949, Salinger had his first and last experience of teaching. He agreed to spend a day at Sarah Lawrence College, addressing a short story writing class. He said he liked the class but it was not something he would ever want to do again. He had to label the writers he respected, and afterwards he said the names he should have said at the college: Kafka, Flaubert, Tolstoi, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Proust, O'Casey, Rilke, Lorca, Keats, Rimbaud, Burns, E. Brontë, H. James, Blake, Coleridge. Only one American was mentioned, but Salinger did not want to name any living writers.

On July 16, 1951, the product of ten years' labor, *The Catcher in the Rye*, was published. The book was not an immediate success, but after two years it was in the top of postwar fiction. In the same year Salinger also published in the *New Yorker* the story *Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes*. During the period after *The Catcher*, Salinger planned a trip to Florida and Mexico, he fell in love unsatisfactorily, he used to go to parties and then wished that he hadn't.

Up until 1952, Salinger aimed to belong to an order based on talent and on the disciplines of art; but after 1952, he spoke of "talent" as if it were the same thing as "enlightenment". The author Leila Hadley met him first in 1951 and then after two years, after she got married, and she remembers Salinger was a great friend of Sid Perelman, but he was not easy to be with. She had read some of his work at the time and she had liked it very much, but she also remembers that he hated clichés and he liked contradicting people. "But he did have this extraordinary presence—very tall, with a sort of darkness surrounding him. His face was like an El Greco. It wasn't a sexual power; it was a mental power. You felt he had the power to imprison someone mentally [...]," she said. (Hamilton, 1988:127) She also recalls that Salinger had written her a list of ten books on Zen art—an old interest in J.D. Salinger's philosophy of life.

In March 1952, he finally set off on his trip to Florida and Mexico. We do not have too much data about this trip, but we do know that on his return he urged Hamish Hamilton to consider publishing a British edition of *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*. He even sent a copy of the book to the editor. The book is more than a thousand pages and is a kind of a single volume study course in world religions or of the Hindu mystic way. Ramakrishna believed that no religion, no quest for God or Allah could be thought of as "untrue," and he had offered hospitality to Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist teachings in the course of his own search of enlightenment. The book was first published in America in 1942 and that is also period around which Salinger became interested in Zen art and philosophy. There have been found many connections between Zen art and Salinger's works, especially in *The Catcher in the Rye* and in *Nine Stories*.

Few people have seen Salinger during a decade; but his reputation and the excitement about his work continue to grow. His fiction has been translated into Italian, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Japanese, Hebrew, Serbo-Croatian, Czech, Finnish, and other languages.

A son, Matthew, was born February 13, 1960, but the marriage lasted only until 1967, when his wife obtained a divorce in Newport, New Hampshire. The children continued to see Salinger. In fact, his daughter Margaret Ann continued to avoid publicity as completely as her mother does, but his son did not do the same thing. He followed the very path that once

tempted J. D. Salinger himself. While an undergraduate at Columbia University, Matthew took three acting classes and one singing lesson a week at the Lee Strasberg Institute. This training resulted in some appearances in off-Broadway theatres and led to his starring in *Deadly Deception*, a movie made for television. Salinger's daughter, later on, wrote a very original biography about her father, called *Dream Catcher: A Memoir* – one of the best books, but also the most critical.

The excitement over Salinger reached what may be called his apogee in September 1961, when the already much-discussed *Franny and Zooey* were published in a book with a few witty and misleading remarks by Salinger on the dust-jacket instead of an announced introduction of a thousand words. The book almost immediately shot into the first place on the *New York Times Book Review's* list of best sellers and remained there for six months. Even though Salinger refused to permit book clubs to circulate the work, it sold more than 125,000 copies within two weeks after the publication. Dissatisfied with his previous publisher, who allowed a volume of Salinger's short stories to be published in a paperback volume with a lurid cover; Salinger finally sold the rights to William Heinemann for an advance of four thousand pounds, although another publisher had offered him ten thousand.

While translations of *Franny and Zooey* were prepared, Salinger continued to lead a life much like that Holden Caulfield dreamed of when he said that he would pretend to be a deaf-mute and hide his children.

The publication in a single volume in January 1963 of *Rise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* marked a collection of his most recent work, which was apparently all he wished collected.

Salinger's last published story had appeared in *The New Yorker*, 19 June 1965, before the breakup of his family: *Hapworth 16, 1924*.

In 1978, Salinger had the fourth largest private land holdings in Cornish, assessed at \$216,350. His desire for privacy was respected, especially by his neighbors.

In 1974, appeared an unauthorized edition, published in two volumes, apparently in Berkeley, California, by still-unidentified persons, under the title *Complete Uncollected Short Stories of J. D. Salinger*. So, Salinger denounced violation of his privacy, in his first public statement in years, to Lacey Fosburgh, the San Francisco correspondent for the *New York Times*.

Later, in 1986, the suit against San Francisco booksellers over the private collection of short stories settled in Salinger's favor. But, similarly, when the British writer Ian Hamilton (as we have already mentioned in the beginning of this chapter) wanted to publish in August 1986 an unauthorized biography of Salinger, based in part on previously unpublished materials, Salinger again through an agent objected and obtained a restraining order. The temporary order became a permanent injunction when, in November 1987, the U. S. Supreme Court refused to review the verdicts of two lower federal appeals courts that had upheld Salinger's position. The American and British publishers, however, announced the publication of a completely reviewed book under the title *In Search of J. D. Salinger* in 1988.

Conclusions

J. D. Salinger was not a total recluse. For example, he came at a testimonial dinner for the retirement of John L. Keenan, with whom he served World War II.

He appears to be in total control of his affairs; he simply does not want to be bothered. He has earned the right to mind his own business, and he insists also that others mind theirs. But the others do not always do so, and thus Salinger cannot always escape the publicity he shunts. Kevin Sims's documentary, *The Man Who Shot John Lennon*, telecast on British ITV, 2 February 1988, and on 9 February on the American PBS "Frontline" program, dramatized the way in which a misreading of *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced the slaying of the former member of "The Beatles" by Mark David Chapman, who had totally identified himself with

Holden Caulfield. It is thus obvious that the richness of the resources, especially the digital ones facilitate indeed the connections and hasten the research process dramatically, leading to new discoveries and paths, as long as they are reliable.

Selected Bibliography

Grunwald, Henry Anatole. ed. *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962. Print.

Hamilton, Ian. *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. New York: Random House, 1988. Print.

Kazin, Alfred. *Contemporaries, From the 19th Century to the Present*. 1982. Revised edition. Horizon Press. 2006. Print.

Online Resources

Ana Doina. "The Catcher in the Rye." n.d. Web. 10 July 2007.

<http://www.eclectica.org/v8n2/doina_rye.html>.

"Behind the Picket Fences: America in the 1950." n.d. n.a. Web. 25 January 2009. <<http://intranet.dalton.org/ms/8th/students/decades99/Muffins1950/Pages/index.html>>.

Booth, Jenny. "JD Salinger Sues over Unauthorised Sequel to Catcher in the Rye." Timesonline. 2 June 2009. Web. 9 May 2009.

<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6415281.ece>.

Fosburgh, Lacey. "J. D. Salinger Speaks About his Silence." The New York Times on the Web. 3 November 1974. Web. 10 December 2007.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/13/specials/salinger-speaks.html>>.

Hamilton, Ian. Interview with Don Swaim. *Audio Interviews with Ian Hamilton about Robert Lowell and J. D. Salinger*. Rec. 1988. (30 min. 44 sec.). n. d. Web. 20 November 2007.

<D:\J. D. SALINGER\Interviews with J.D. Salinger\Ian Hamilton Interview with Don Swaim.htm>.

Kakutani, Michiko. "From Salinger, A New Dash of Mystery." *The New York Times on the Web*. 20 February 1997. Web. 3 June 2007.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/13/specials/salinger-hapworth.html>>.

Film

Chasing Holden. Dir. Malcom Clarke. 2001. Film.