The Role of Children in the Fiction of J.D. Salinger

by Anne M. Goebel

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In the short stories and novels of J.D. Salinger, children hold prominent roles. Through their interactions with older people, they provide valid insight into basic human problems. Most of Salinger's children possess an untainted and precious wisdom about life that has the power to inspire and save a disillusioned older generation. The children exhibit an innocence that their older counterparts have lost and are struggling to regain. To their elders, children represent an ideal of truth and love that is victorious over a contaminated adulthood. They also symbolize the simple things that make life worth living and that adults often overlook. Throughout Salinger's fiction, children exhibit indestructible spirits. Although they face death, jealousy, prejudice and phoniness in an often cruel world, they triumph with honesty and compassion. Their resilience is admirable and inspirational.

Of Salinger's entire body of works (one novel, two short novels and thirty short stories), I will only deal with his one major novel, The Catcher in the Rye, one of his short novels, Franny and Zooey, and his only collection of short stories, Nine Stories. In this paper, I will prove my thesis by discussing the roles of some of the children in Salinger's works: Phoebe, who saves her older brother from self-destruction in The Catcher in the Rye; several children from Nine Stories: Esmé, who brings salvation to the life of a battered soldier in "For Esmé—With Love
and Squalor"; Ramona, who leads her mother to an important self-realization in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut"; and Sybil, whose innocence provides inspiration to a disillusioned man in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." I will also allude to some examples of children as symbols of Zen Buddhism in Franny and Zooey.

Phoebe Caulfield is the ten year old sister of protagonist Holden Caulfield in Salinger's novel, The Catcher in the Rye. Phoebe is one of Salinger's most endearing and real children. In the words of critic S.N. Behrman, "This Phoebe is one of the most exquisitely created and engaging children in any novel" (74). She is both fanciful and intelligent, imaginative and realistic. "Roller-skate skinny" with red hair stuck behind her ears in the summertime, Phoebe writes unfinished books about a girl detective named Hazle Weatherfield; she knows lousy movies from good movies; she likes to spread out in the old room of her big brother D.B. who is a screenwriter in Hollywood; she will play Benedict Arnold in the Christmas play at school. Phoebe is also a wise and compassionate girl who plays a significant and positive part in her teenage brother's agonizing quest to find his role in a bewildering world of which he disapproves.

Phoebe is undeniably Holden's favorite (living) person. Besides the close bond they share due to the loss of their brother Allie to leukemia, Phoebe and Holden have shared many good times together, which Holden remembers happily throughout the novel.
They have seen the movie *The 39 Steps* ten times, and Phoebe has memorized the dialogue and recites it along with the actors; they have gone Christmas shopping at Bloomingdale's and played jokes on a shoe salesman by trying on too many pairs of shoes; they have gone to the park with Allie to play with his sailboat; Holden has taught Phoebe to dance and treats her talent seriously. Holden's memories of Phoebe are a simple and consistent source of joy for him while he is continuously disgusted with his complicated, present situation. Holden has just flunked out of yet another "phony" prep school. He has decided to strike out on his own for a few days until he can return home unsuspected for Christmas vacation.

Holden first thinks of his kid sister Phoebe when he's feeling down after a dissatisfying phone conversation with a girl he barely knows. "While I was changing my shirt, I damn near gave my kid sister Phoebe a buzz, though. I certainly felt like talking to her on the phone. Somebody with sense and all" (66, ch. 10). Holden knows that Phoebe is the one person he can communicate with, the one person who will understand him. "She always listens when you tell her something...I mean, if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about" (67, ch. 10; 167, ch. 22). When Holden finally goes home, it is significant that he is going "home" to Phoebe. Phoebe is the security, love and understanding that Holden desperately needs.
When Holden arrives after sneaking into his parents' apartment, Phoebe is genuinely glad to see Holden; she shows her joy with a spontaneous hug around the neck. Phoebe's deep sibling love for her older brother often expresses itself through physical contact. As self-conscious Holden himself puts it, "she's a little too affectionate sometimes. She's very emotional, for a child" (68, ch. 10). However, although Phoebe's demonstrative affection embarrasses Holden, his feelings are mutual. At one point during his journey, he buys Phoebe a record called "Little Shirley Beans." Although he later accidentally drops and breaks the record, he offers her the pieces. Phoebe graciously accepts the heartfelt gift and saves the sacred pieces.

Phoebe is just as genuinely concerned that Holden has been kicked out of yet another school. (His lie that school got out early doesn't fool Phoebe.) When she reacts tempestuously by punching him and then burying herself under her pillow and refusing to speak (except to admonish his swearing), Holden tries to explain his failure and the blame he feels belongs to Pencey Prep.

Now Phoebe is moved to action. She is still angry with Holden for flunking, partly because she is disappointed that he has failed again and partly because she knows he will be in big trouble with their parents, especially their father. In a typical sisterly way, she repeatedly reproaches him with "Daddy's gonna kill you" (165, ch. 21). For these reasons, Phoebe can't quite let Holden off the
hook, although she understands how depressed he is. After he rambles on and on about the phonies at Pencey, Phoebe challenges him to name one thing he likes. The only thing Holden can think of is a dead schoolmate who committed suicide by jumping out of a dormitory window. Although he wasn't that close to the boy, Holden seems to identify with him. Finally, Holden admits he likes Allie. When Phoebe reminds him that Allie is dead, she tries to make him see that in order to live and to enjoy life, he must start identifying with the living instead of the dead. She insists that Holden face his present situation. "What Phoebe has done here is to pull Holden out of his obsession with the sorrows of his past and direct his attention to the existential situation he is in at present" (Rosen 560). Holden concedes by responding, "Anyway, I like it now... I like doing what I'm doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff" (171-172, ch. 22). Phoebe has succeeded, if only for a moment, where no other character in the novel has. She has made Holden realize that his life can be good and fulfilling.

Besides having an eye for seeing the truth, Phoebe also has a compassionate heart. When their parents arrive home from being out for the evening, Phoebe conceals Holden's presence when their mother questions the smoke in the room. Phoebe tells her mother she had been smoking. Phoebe wants to protect Holden from immediate grief from their parents, although really only succeeding in postponing their discovery of his failure and subsequent
punishment, just as Holden wants to protect Phoebe from what he perceives as a cruel adult world.

Luckily, Phoebe's mother doesn't seem as concerned about Phoebe's newly-acquired smoking habit as she does about Phoebe's evening. Although Holden remains undiscovered, he is anxious to escape unnoticed while he still can. Phoebe doesn't want to see him go, but she still offers him her Christmas money -- all eight dollars and eighty-five cents of it. Phoebe's generosity finally proves too much for Holden; he breaks down and cries. Phoebe has touched his aching heart. Her gesture means more to him than dollars and cents; it has proved to him the existence, the power and the necessity of love. Phoebe wordlessly comforts him with another hug around the neck.

Phoebe is persistent in forcing Holden to look forward. In the scene which gives the novel its title, Phoebe asks Holden to name something he'd like to be. He answers her with a naive though poignant fantasy. Holden begins by reciting part of a song he has heard, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" (173, ch. 22). Phoebe, always a stickler for accuracy, is quick to correct him. The line is actually from a poem by Robert Burns which reads, "If a body meet a body coming through the rye." Although the significance of Holden's "crazy" dream may go over Phoebe's head, it has a great deal to do with Phoebe herself. Holden envisions himself as the savior for all children.
Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. (173, ch. 22)

Holden's dream to be "the catcher in the rye" is evident throughout the novel. His desperate and naive wish to protect the innocence of all children is partly a wish to save Phoebe from having to go through the pain and anguish he has experienced. In his essay, "The Love Ethic", David D. Galloway explains Holden's response to this "destructive life experience."

Since, Holden reasons, there is no fulfillment in the adult world, since all it can offer man is frustration or corruption, the only worthwhile task to which he can devote himself is that of the protector who stops children before they enter the world of destruction and phoniness and keeps them in a state of arrested innocence. (207)

When Holden sees an obscenity scrawled on a wall in Phoebe's school, his first reaction is to rub it out so that Phoebe and the other kids won't have to see it and worry about what it means. He even has a gory fantasy about killing the person who has written the words.

When Holden again finds the rude graffiti on another staircase, he begins to realize that his dream to erase all the foulness in the world is hopeless. However, Holden has not yet realized that Phoebe and the other children in the rye that she
represents cannot circumvent the unpleasant realities that exist in an imperfect world; in fact they must encounter these things and deal with them in order to grow up. Holden underestimates their strength and tenacity, because he himself feels he lacks courage. Certainly Phoebe seems more emotionally stable and resilient than Holden; she appears capable of getting through adolescence without experiencing the dangerous fall that Holden is heading towards. In fact, it is Phoebe who causes Holden to reevaluate his plans of further isolating himself from humanity in one of the final scenes in the novel.

Holden eventually gets fed up with all the phonies and perverts he has encountered, decides to drop out of society altogether and move West to live like a hermit. He doesn't forget Phoebe, although his plans must include leaving her behind. "All I wanted to do first was say good-by to old Phoebe" (199, ch. 25). Holden gets a note to Phoebe at her school telling her to meet him at lunchtime. Phoebe arrives at their meeting-place, the museum, with a suitcase of clothes in tow. She asks him, simply, if she can go with him. She is determined to be with Holden, even at the expense of missing the Christmas play at school. In hopes of convincing him to let her be his companion, she even offers to leave behind her clothes. However, Holden harshly refuses Phoebe's request; he must push her away to save her from his own demise. Holden is surprised and angered that Phoebe would give up so much for someone so undeserving as he considers himself. It upsets him
that someone whose life is so full of promise could depend on him. "I almost hated her. I think I hated her most because she wouldn't be in that play anymore if she went away with me" (207, ch. 25).

Although it may not be safe for someone as impressionable as Phoebe to have such a strong dependence on someone as unstable as Holden, her constant love for him remains unconditional. Phoebe's attachment to Holden is understandable. The young girl has already lost two brothers, one to death and one to Hollywood; she is desperate not to lose another. When Holden harshly refuses her, Phoebe immediately withdraws from him. She is hurt and angered because Holden doesn't want to include her, but also because she senses Holden has given up on life. Holden comes close to destroying their relationship here. Their earlier closeness in D.B.'s old bedroom is jeopardized by Holden's self-centeredness and insensitivity. He is so involved in his own anger and pain that he even considers leaving Phoebe behind in his attempt to escape his meaningless life. Holden's intention to save Phoebe from himself is ironic because Phoebe is the very person who can (and does) bring him "back to life."

When Phoebe starts to cry in desperation, Holden sees the pain he has caused her and immediately gives up his plan to go West. However, as stubborn and unrelenting as usual, Phoebe retaliates by refusing to return to school. Even when Holden suggests that Phoebe skip school and that they go to the zoo, Phoebe holds on to
her hurt and won't speak to Holden or let him touch her. However, she eventually follows him to the zoo where at the carousel she again demonstrates the positive and life-affirming influence she has on her older brother. Phoebe's anger begins to wane when Holden suggests she ride the carousel. As Holden watches Phoebe going around and around, he notices that she and the other kids keep trying to grab the gold ring. Although he's afraid she might fall, Holden (for once) doesn't say or do anything. Instead, he stumbles upon a philosophical revelation. "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (211, ch. 25).

Holden has finally given up his impossible dream of being the catcher in the rye, the eraser of all curse words, the protector of Phoebe and all children from a contaminated world. "He gives up his desire to be a catcher and his craving for an Edenic world and accepts the world in which he finds himself at present" (Rosen 561). Holden realizes he cannot prevent Phoebe from experiencing pain, and it would be wrong if he tried. Phoebe, like all children, must be allowed some freedom in order to experience, to learn and to grow.

When Phoebe unabashedly tells Holden she's not mad at him anymore and gives him a kiss, the emotions Holden experiences are unexpected and overwhelming to him.
I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could've been there. (213, ch. 25)

Phoebe has given Holden his release to feel and to experience simple, unadulterated happiness. With a fleeting and almost imperceivable quality, this moment with Phoebe inspires Holden as many children inspire their elders. Phoebe's unaffected and unconscious beauty incites emotion in Holden that is hard for him to bear because of its very largeness. As Holden will undoubtedly although regrettedly discover, the blissful moment is temporary, just as childhood itself must be. However, Phoebe manages, unconsciously or not, to restore Holden's desire to live with her in an imperfect world. Holden is able to forget the bleakness of the world and his preoccupation with death. "He turns away from what he has lost, letting go of his obsessive hold on the vision of the dead Allie, and turns toward the happiness which comes in seeing what he still has - a living Phoebe, with him, right there in the present" (Rosen 561).

To sum up Phoebe's major contribution to the novel, Phoebe makes a positive difference in Holden Caulfield's distraught life. Because of his frustration with the corrupt world he has experienced, for a time Holden dreams of becoming a "catcher" to protect Phoebe from the disappointments and other pitfalls life inevitably holds for her. Phoebe, however, takes on the more
realistic position of "umpire" in Holden's life; she calls it the way she sees it. She is fair, wise and generous with Holden. "Phoebe remains the only person who has seen where he is and who has acted truly in his behalf" (Rosen 561). Although a child, Phoebe possesses the wisdom and compassion that succeeds in lifting Holden, although not entirely unscathed, out of a very tough period in his adolescence. Holden (and readers of his tale) are a little wiser and happier due to Phoebe's efforts.

Critics have generally agreed that Salinger reached a high point in the short story genre with "For Esme - with Love and Squalor." The narrator of "For Esme - with Love and Squalor" is an American soldier during World War II who calls himself Sergeant X. Yet "as in all of Salinger's best work, a child is near the center of the story" (Gwynn 27). Esmé, the wise child in this story of Salinger's, affects Sergeant X in a similar way that Phoebe influences Holden. Esmé, like Phoebe, "redeems from madness a mind at the point of surrender" (Fiedler, Love and Death 333).

At the beginning of the story, the narrator has just received a wedding invitation from Esmé. Because he is unable to attend, the narrator tells us he'd like to jot down some notes to inform Esmé's husband-to-be what he knew about her six years before. The first section of his story is set in Devon, England where Sergeant X, obviously uninterested in the military life, is participating in a pre-invasion training course with the British Intelligence.
Sergeant X is "the letter-writing type" (88) and would rather be writing short stories or reading billboards than using a gas mask. Through a series of coincidences, the soldier meets Esmé. On the eve of being sent to London for the D Day landings, his "trigger finger itching imperceptibly, if at all" (88), X decides to take a walk around town in the rain. He finally enters a church where a children's choir practice is being held.

The choir director is a humorless perfectionist who seems to have forgotten the joy of singing. She lectures her pupils in vain "to absorb the meaning of the words they sang, not just mouth them, like silly-billy parrots" (89). The children are so unenthusiastic that they struggle to lift their hymnbooks, "like so many underage weight-lifters" (90). The soldier's attention is soon drawn to the face of the child nearest him. "She was about thirteen, with straight ash-blond hair of ear-lobe length, an exquisite forehead, and blase eyes that, I thought, might very possibly have counted the house" (90). Although her voice is certainly the sweetest, highest and surest X has heard, the girl herself seems bored and even yawns, closed-mouth and ladylike, between verses.

Sergeant X departs after the hymn ends to avoid another of the choir director's lectures and makes his way to a civilian tearoom. A short time later, Esmé, her younger brother, Charles, and their governess appear. The girl with the blase eyes introduces herself
to X with the blunt observation, "I thought Americans despised tea" (92). At first Esmé seems like an unbearably annoying snob. She interrogates the soldier tactlessly on his personal life; she criticizes Americans although she's only had direct contact with ten; she coldly analyzes her deceased parents' marriage ("To be quite candid, Father really needed more of an intellectual companion than Mother was" (97)); she uses words like "intrinsically", "propensity", "gregarious"; and her general demeanor is downright supercilious.

However, X is never offended by her; on the contrary, he is alternately enchanted and amused by Esmé. He calls her "a truth-lover or a statistics-lover" (92), and teases her about her extraordinary vocabulary. X is understanding because of what he learns about Esmé. At the young age of thirteen, Esmé already has several burdens upon her. Orphaned, she is responsible for her precocious five-year-old brother, Charles. Esmé responds by putting on a grown-up act in her language, posture and manners. However, it is evident that she is also a nervous little girl. For instance, Esmé apologizes several times for her "frightful" appearance. Her hands self-consciously touch her wet hair a total of five times while she is sitting with Sergeant X. John Wenke suggests, "Esmé's fingernails are bitten to the quick and her tendency to keep touching her hair belies her posture of self-confidence" (255). Esmé is still very much a little girl beset with normal fears and insecurities as well as faced with more
difficult conditions that are beyond her control.

Robert M. Browne points out that although Esmé's literalness is somewhat comic, "her intelligence has not been corrupted by wishful thinking" (584). Browne also states that "Esmé's love of truth is simply part of her admirable integrity" (584) and that it doesn't make her incapable of loving people. Although her true salvation of X comes at the end of the story, Esmé begins her acquaintance with X out of instinctive compassion. She explains her motive to X: "I purely came over because I thought you looked extremely lonely. You have an extremely sensitive face" (95).

Esmé is also drawn to X by his similarity to her deceased father. During their conversation she frequently speaks of her beloved father. In loving deference to Charles, Esmé conveys the fact that their father was murdered by spelling out the words. Although she claims Charles is the one who has emotional ties to their father, she sentimentally wears his large military watch on her delicate wrist. She describes her father as a gifted genius and a beautiful letter writer, as well as being handsome and lovable. After learning that her new friend is also a writer, Esmé makes a heart-felt request that explains the real reason the narrator is writing the story in the first place. "I'd be extremely flattered if you'd write a story exclusively for me sometime...I prefer stories about squalor...I'm extremely interested in squalor" (100). Although X professes that he is still in the process of becoming
acquainted with squalor, he promises to do his best. Esmé also graciously promises to correspond with him and politely extends her hope that X will "return from the war with all your faculties intact" (103).

A lonely soldier whose bent is towards writing rather than war and an orphaned girl with sophisticated manners meet by coincidence, are mysteriously and instantly drawn to each other, and form a lasting bond. It is impossible to discern exactly when or how their acquaintance develops into something much more personal. Wenke suggests that "some kind of inscrutable magnetism touches the narrator and Esmé which evolves from an instinctual and unconscious sense that each possesses what the other most deeply needs" (256). Whether their feelings grow during their separation or whether the bond was there from the start, the truth is that the short time the two spend together is "a strangely emotional" time for both of them. Their special relationship may seem unlikely due to their differences in age and sex, or may even seem merely sentimental; however, its basis is rooted in love which transcends all worldly facts. The two recognize in each other kindred spirits and sense a similar emptiness in their souls.

The second part of the story switches time and place to Bavaria, several weeks after V-E Day. Sergeant X is a changed man; he has become acquainted with squalor firsthand and has not returned from the war with his faculties intact. He seems on the
verge of falling apart, mentally and physically. Salinger describes him as "rather like a Christmas tree whose lights, wired in series, must all go out if even one bulb is defective" (106). X has become a defeated and bitter man who uses sarcasm to deal with the pain and horror he has witnessed and experienced in the war, which is continually inflamed by his crass and oblivious partner, Corporal Z, as well as letters from his brother who requests toy bayonets for his son. The narrator is moved to open a green package which catches his eye. It is a gift and letter from Esmé. "I have thought of you frequently and of the extremely pleasant afternoon we spent in each other's company on April 30, 1944 between 3:45 and 4:15 P.M. in case it slipped your mind" (113). Esmé encloses her father's wristwatch and asks X to "accept it as a lucky talisman" (113). Charles also signs the letter with a series of Hello's.

Esmé's beautiful and uninhibited gesture of love grips X with paralyzing emotion. Although his hands had been practically useless due to their nervous trembling, X grasps on to the treasures he has received from Esmé as if they possess an actual life force. "It was a long time before X could set the note aside, let alone lift Esmé's father's wristwatch out of the box. When he did finally lift it out,...He just sat with it in his hand for another long period" (114).

Unlike X, Esmé has been able to accept the imperfect world she
must inhabit without letting herself be consumed by the pain. She bravely faces the squalor in her own life by using various defense mechanisms. She has learned to reconcile with the pain of the loss of her parents by assuming her father's role by fiercely carrying on his extensive vocabulary and raising her younger brother. She has acquired sophisticated manners to survive in a largely adult world. Although some of her childish insecurities remain, Esmé has found a way to overcome the hard knocks life has dealt her. She is also able to impart her wisdom to the soldier she befriends when she recognizes in him a similar pain. After their brief acquaintance, Esmé continues to wisely instruct Sergeant X through her gift and letter. Wenke adds:

Unlike all other attempts to communicate, Esmé's letter and the process of telling the tale itself come directly out of the forces underlying their personal encounter in the Devon tearoom and possess a basis in love which is founded upon similar recognitions of the effect of squalor in the other. (254)

Although Esmé is unaware of X's current condition, her example gives X the strength to rise above his own suffering.

Through Esmé's gesture of love, the weight and devastation of the war are lifted, if only partially, from X's shoulders. Her action is impulsive and irrational, yet it is the one and only thing that allows X a release, a reason to let go of his hatred and free himself from the war-imposed mental hell in which he is a prisoner. When he is finally able to let go of his pain and anger, he experiences a physical exhaustion which he recognizes as a sign that he is healing spiritually as well as physically. Although her
letter and gift will not entirely abolish X's memories of war, which Esmé pointedly calls "a method of existence that is ridiculous to say the least" (113), she has given him proof of the existence of love and hope at a time when people's lives are being destroyed by war. Esmé reminds X of another time in his life, far removed from his present situation, in which he was capable of loving, and of forging a lifetime friendship with a little girl in a tearoom.

In his short novel, *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger introduces the two youngest members of his famous Glass family. All seven Glasses were extraordinary children and performed on a radio program called "It's a Wise Child." General opinion of the freak geniuses was divided.

...those who held that the Glasses were a bunch of insufferably "superior" little bastards that should have been drowned or gassed at birth, and those who held that they were bona-fide underage wits and savants, of an uncommon, if unenviable, order. (54, pt. 2)

As adults, the Glasses are still recovering from their intellectually stimulating and celebrity status childhood. They are also still dealing with the suicide of their eldest brother and mentor, Seymour, at the age of 31. Zooey tries to cope by re-reading a four-year-old letter he had received from his older brother, Buddy. The tattered epistle is obviously precious to Zooey and is "exactly the kind of letter that a recipient, whether he wants to or not, carries around for some time in his hip pocket" (56, pt. 2). In the letter, Buddy attempts to explain why he and
Seymour took it upon themselves to educate their younger siblings in the style of Zen Buddhists. The elder Glasses believed that education should be a quest for no-knowledge and should begin with a state of pure consciousness. As Buddy relates to Zooey in the letter, Seymour once told him that "all legitimate religious study must lead to unlearning the differences between boys and girls, animals and stones, day and night, heat and cold" (68, pt. 2). Buddy further explains that his letter was prompted by a personal encounter he had with a child. Buddy was standing at the meat counter at a grocery store when he struck up a conversation with a little girl who was waiting for lamb chops with her mother. He commented that the girl was very pretty and must have a lot of boyfriends. When she admitted she had two boyfriends, Buddy asked for their names. The little girl answered, "Bobby and Dorothy." In the child's mind, there was no difference between genders. She operated at the base level of consciousness that Seymour described as the goal of Zen Buddhism.

Salinger's interest in the art and philosophy of Zen Buddhism is evident throughout most of his work. He even begins Nine Stories with a famous "koan" that Zen Buddhists use to realize a better self-awareness. ("We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?") Many of his characters display Zen attitudes. Children especially are used by Salinger because they best exemplify the enlightened state of consciousness that students of Zen Buddhism strive to attain.
Their naturalness, spontaneity and strong imaginative sense have not yet been destroyed by conventional education. "To the western mind, this unlimited freedom is most easily symbolized in children, and this, of course, is why Salinger relies on the child as symbol so often in Nine Stories" (Lundquist 78).

The "Zen child" in the short story, "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut", is Ramona, a lonely pre-school age girl with horrible eyesight but a tremendous imagination. Ramona is an awkward child who wears thick glasses and is always accompanied by an invisible friend she calls Jimmy Jimmereeno. Her disapproving mother, Eloise, angrily tells an old college friend who is visiting, "'Jimmy eats with her. Takes a bath with her. Sleeps with her. She sleeps way over to one side of the bed, so's not to roll over and hurt him!'" (27). Because there are no other children in the neighborhood for her to play with, Ramona has cleverly compensated by creating her own playmate. Although her vision is impaired, Ramona has the ability to see another world which is very real to her. However, in their essay, "Zen and Nine Stories," Bernice and Sanford Goldstein suggest that Ramona "with her childlike spontaneous imaginative power, is on the verge of having these qualities eradicated by her mother" (Bloom 83).

Ramona's mother, Eloise, is a cynical, insensitive and derisive woman. She is unhappily married to a man she considers to be an unintelligent, dishonest brute. (Eloise claims she married..."
Lew because he liked Jane Austen's novels. She seems to have turned her back on the marriage when she discovered Lew had never read Austen.) Eloise takes much of her frustration out on Ramona (when she pays attention to her at all) by treating the little girl with impatience and constantly chiding her for slouching, scratching herself and picking her nose. The disturbing resentment that Eloise feels toward Ramona and the self-pity that she harbors are displayed when she complains to her friend that Ramona resembles only her husband's side of the family. "'What I need is a cocker spaniel or something,' she said. 'Somebody that looks like me'" (24). It is no wonder that Ramona lives in a dream world where her best friend is a make-believe character who carries a sword and has no parents.

Jimmy Jimmereeno makes up for the love that Ramona does not receive from Eloise. Ramona inhabits her fantasy world to escape from her verbally abusive mother. However, despite the ridicule to which she is subjected, Ramona never responds with anger but with complacent obedience. Although it seems like she is apathetically succumbing to her mother's cruelty, Ramona has shielded herself behind the walls of her own reality-free world. In an endearing though morbid attempt to temporarily please her mother, Ramona casually announces after coming in from playing with Jimmy that her imaginary friend has been run over and killed. Ramona is not at all visibly upset by the tragic accident. It seems certain that she deliberately "killed" Jimmy because she sensed her mother's
disappointment. However, Ramona's imaginative powers remain intact despite her mother's attempt to destroy them. Shortly after the tragedy, Ramona dreams up a new playmate, Mickey Mickeranno, to replace Jimmy. Her spirit remains unbroken. She triumphantly endures and is resilient against her mother's careless cruelty.

Although Eloise finds Ramona's fantasies intolerable, she herself attempts to escape reality by drinking heavily and by hanging on to the memory of an old boyfriend who was killed in a freak accident while in the Army. Eloise's Jimmy Jimmereeno is Walt, whom she fondly remembers as "'the only boy I ever knew that could make me laugh'" (28). (Once when she twisted her ankle, Walt called it "Poor Uncle Wiggily."). Eloise has never been able to accept Walt's death. Adding to the pain of her loss are the strange circumstances that surrounded the accident. (Walt was packaging a little Japanese stove for a colonel to send home as a souvenir and it exploded.) Eloise's extreme grief over losing Walt has inflated her memories of him and exaggerated his character. In Eloise's mind, Walt has become the perfect, irreplaceable lover. She compounds her pain by comparing Walt to her unworthy husband. Eloise holds on to her broken heart and feeds her fantasy by crying over memories of Walt and keeping him a secret from Lew.

In a drunken stupor, Eloise's depression reaches its lowest point. Her behavior becomes malicious and unmerciful as she sends her daughter to bed early, refuses to let her maid's husband spend
the night and sarcastically tells Lew over the phone to "form a platoon and march home" (35) from work. Eloise finds her way to Ramona's room where she discovers the child again sleeping on one side of the bed. Eloise angrily shakes her daughter awake and demands an explanation. When Ramona tells her about Mickey Mickeranno, Eloise harshly drags the child to the center of the bed and insists that she stay there. Ramona characteristically makes no attempt to resist. "Ramona neither struggled nor cried; she let herself be moved without actually submitting to it" (37).

At this point, Eloise suddenly experiences an abrupt self-awakening. Having witnessed her daughter's determined attempt to create happiness for herself with make-believe friends, Eloise realizes how cruelly she has treated Ramona and feels deeply remorseful. As if begging for forgiveness, Eloise anxiously snatches up Ramona's glasses and holds them to her face. She laments her lost innocence as well as her dead lover by crying, "Poor Uncle Wiggily" over and over again. Eloise longs to return to the person she used to be, someone who laughed, loved and was loved. When she is later alone with her college friend, Eloise voices her regret. "'I was a nice girl,' she pleaded, 'wasn't I?'" (38).

A true example of a "Zen child," Ramona has led her mother to what Zen followers call "satori" or a moment of enlightenment. Eloise finally understands that Ramona's dream world is a
substitute for the real love that her mother has failed to provide. Through Ramona, Eloise realizes that her own obsession with Walt is a similar attempt to escape reality and create a false happiness. Eloise "is led by the example of a child to suddenly see through her life and come to a better understanding of her true nature...it is not until she sees through the glasses of a child that she begins to 'see more'" (Lundquist 89).

Fortunately, Eloise does not passively accept her moment of self-realization. Although we are not told how or if she reconciles with her husband, Eloise does reach out to her daughter. She lets go of her dream world with Walt by gently kissing her daughter's tear-streaked face. "This is Eloise's salvation, for it enables her to release her secret lost love into an active bond, albeit brief and drunken, with her myopic daughter" (Gwynn 23). The child's tears are the first overt sign from Ramona that Eloise's cruelty has affected her. The mother and daughter have finally connected on an emotional level. Their abrupt bond may be brief and unstable, yet it promises to be the start of a more fulfilling relationship between the two. Hopefully, both will be able to shed their fantasy lovers to experience real love with each other.

Salinger's most depressing as well as perplexing short story is "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Seymour Glass (who later appears as the eldest Glass family member in *Franny and Zooey*) is
on vacation in Florida with his materialistic and insufferable wife, Muriel. Although Seymour's emotional instability is the topic of the opening phone conversation between Muriel and her mother, it is still a shock when the story concludes with Seymour shooting himself in the head in the hotel room where Muriel is sleeping. Despite its tragic ending, the story is uplifting because of a charming and life-affirming conversation between a little girl named Sybil and the man she calls "see more glass."

Shortly before his horrible suicide, Seymour escapes from his wife (whom he sneeringly nicknames "The Spiritual Tramp of 1948") to be with Sybil. The time Seymour and Sybil spend together at the beach is a beautifully bonding experience. Their conversation is remarkable because of their ability to relate to each other despite a large difference in age. Bernice and Sanford Goldstein state:

Seymour is so attuned to the world of Sybil that he can respond with almost perfect spontaneity to the spontaneous overflow of joy, of seriousness, of destruction even, of Sybil's own verbal agility...They are almost perfectly attuned with no line of separation between the adult world and the world of the child. (Bloom 87)

Towards the beginning of their conversation, Sybil expresses her jealousy of another child that Seymour has befriended. In this excerpt, Seymour touchingly and skillfully allays her fears and makes her feel special once again.
"Sharon Lipschutz said you let her sit on the piano seat with you," Sybil said...
"Well," he said, "you know how those things happen, Sybil. I was sitting there, playing. And you were nowhere in sight. And Sharon Lipschutz came over and sat down next to me. I couldn't push her off, could I?"
"Yes."
"Oh, no. No. I couldn't do that," said the young man. "I'll tell you what I did do though."
"What?"
"I pretended she was you." (12-13)

It is evident that Seymour feels more comfortable with Sybil than he does with adults. His actions portray him as a man who goes to irrational lengths to avoid exposing himself in public. He becomes illogically hostile and verbally berates a strange woman on the elevator when he thinks she is looking at his feet. According to Muriel, Seymour has also refused to take off his bathrobe on the beach. ("I guess because he's so pale" (10)). However, Seymour is much more relaxed when he is with Sybil. When the little girl suggests they take a swim, Seymour willingly removes his bathrobe and takes Sybil's hand as they walk down to the ocean together.

Seymour enjoys being with Sybil because of her "devastatingly honest confrontation with the here and now" (Bloom 88). Sybil is certainly different from Seymour's wife who is more concerned with painting her fingernails, dyeing her hair and reading magazine articles entitled "Sex is Fun—or Hell." Despite Seymour's crafty but good-natured attempts to dissuade her, Sybil stands her ground on several concrete subjects. She repeatedly suggests they take a swim, insists there are only six tigers in the story "Little Black
Sambo," states she lives in Whirly Wood, Connecticut and is adamant about the color of her bathing suit.

"That's a fine bathing suit you have on. If there's one think I like, it's a blue bathing suit..."
"This is a yellow," she said. "This is a yellow." (12)

Sybil exuberantly lives for the moment and joyfully participates in the fullness of life. Although Seymour teases her, it is obvious that he finds her outlook refreshing and admirable.

It is puzzling, then, that after Seymour spends a life-affirming afternoon with Sybil, he leaves her to brutally end his own life. Although Muriel's mother may be overly-paranoid, the women's dialogue makes it evident that Seymour's mental illness has existed long before their vacation and Seymour's encounter with Sybil. Perhaps spending time with an innocent and unaffected child like Sybil made Seymour further realize the sickening and unacceptable frivolity of the adult world. The Goldsteins suggest that "the uniquely 'real' world of Sybil contrasts painfully with the self-conscious, ego-burdened, phony world of adults" (Bloom 88). Although this illumination is the tragical factor that leads Seymour to turn his back on life and choose to discontinue his existence in an imperfect world, Sybil exhibits the virtues of childhood and remains a triumphant symbol of goodness and purity. Once again, Salinger represents a child as "the touchstone, the judge of our world -- and a reproach to it in his unfallen freshness of insight, his unexpended vigor, his incorruptible naiveté" (Fiedler, No! in Thunder 251).
In conclusion, children prove to be extremely important characters in Salinger's fictional works. Phoebe, Esmé, Ramona and Sybil are not merely supporting characters in the short stories and novels in which they appear. Their impact on the tormented lives of the adults they encounter, whether they are blood relatives or strangers who become close friends, is positive and lasting. Salinger's children alone provide honesty and compassion to those adults who have become disillusioned about the contaminated world. They symbolize an innocence that many adults have lost and are trying to recapture. Salinger's children inspire adults to reevaluate their lives and to act on their realizations. They also possess a true vision of the world. They have not yet been tainted by conventional education and therefore exhibit a pure and precious wisdom. They maintain spontaneity and imagination in a world that is often artificial and prejudiced. Throughout Salinger's fiction, the goodness, honesty and resilience of children remains triumphant and inspirational.
Works Cited


