J. D. SALINGER AND THE EDUCATION OF THE SPIRIT

by
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Education is not merely acquiring knowledge, gathering and correlating facts; it is to see the significance of life as a whole.
–Jiddu Krishnamurti

This paper is concerned with the written works of J. D. Salinger and the implications of these works for modern education. Salinger's criticisms of modern education and social life are based on a critical analysis of educational and social values, thought processes, and the individual's interrelatedness to the social world. A further aspect of Salinger's criticism is the searching quality viewed in many of his characters as they search for significance or relevance in their personal lives and in the educational process. This search for relevance in Salinger's works clearly indicates the gross gap between the education received by his characters and the relationship of their education to their social lives. This gap is the paradox or dilemma that Salinger presents for his readers' attention.

There are several important philosophical considerations that may be illustrated in relation to the search for relevance. The paradox as dealt with in this paper involves two basic philosophical conceptions of humankind in their relatedness to other humans and the objects of their world.

The first is the basic conception of a materialistic society, one in which education is viewed, as well as social living, in terms of achievement or success in correlating and gathering facts about the world. This conception is viewed as objective, and is based on the exclusive limitation and selection of facts to fit some formal criteria of objective or deductive reflection. This fact orientation excludes the individual and his intuitive nature from the objectification process. An example may help here: in our modern technological society we are confronted every day with the technological mentality that is based on consumer facts and figures and traditionally in the United States, institutional and bureaucratic structures have been set up to manage the affairs of social life in a technological way. Looking into the history of public education in the United States, it was clearly set up to make the American citizen a good consumer, politically, philosophically, and emotionally. But by whatever technique used, the

basic concern behind it was simply to maintain the status quo by producing a society of good consumers. Is this the purpose of education? For man to consume what he has been told he may consume? Here we have identified one of the aspects of the paradox that Salinger is demanding in his works that we begin to consider.

The second basic philosophical position is at the opposite extreme and is basically an idealistic conception. The idealistic conception of man is one which approaches man's relationship with his spiritual existence in the world. Naturally, today many people will raise their eyes to hear the phrase "spiritual existing," because in a materialistic world where is the place for spiritual concerns? And especially in education? What of that part of our existing that is not material or physical in nature, that part which unifies us with the totality of existing? An existing marked by intuition, paradox and feeling. Is not this a part of the reality that we must confront as we experience the events of our lives in a social world?

Salinger's *Nine Stories* are short stories which relate to the basic relationship between these two paradoxical conceptions of humankind. The importance of these short stories for education lies in the fact that they involve situations in which the characters Salinger portrays are confronting their spiritual death in a world which prepares them only for material living. And so the distinction is developed between education for knowledge in material life and education with spiritual or philosophical insight or wisdom. Wisdom based on the understanding of the interrelatedness of both the material and the spiritual. The best description of this inter-relatedness comes from the last stage of zen tetralimma; as it is stated in negative terms, wisdom is understanding of neither the material nor the spiritual. This last stage of the tetralimma is important for the zen mind but is also descriptive of the leap of faith that many existential and mystical writers have presented for many years, and it involves living in the face of death. In other words, living involves not just the confrontation of the material world but also the spiritual world. This notion is the basis for Salinger's educational criticisms and is the underlying assumption of his plea for the education of the spirit. The relevance of life cannot be established by an education which excludes spiritual concerns or insights from its educational responsibilities. What of a society which disengages itself from spiritual concerns? Relevance in a society like this has no other basis than the material basis in order to provide meaningful experiences for its members. But in order for these experiences to be meaningful, its members must accept that material conception of the value of man. What Salinger is pointing to in many of the short stories in *Nine Stories* is the fact that the

need for relevance in life is not being fulfilled by the material conception of man. Salinger illustrates this search for relevance or meaning in the lives of his characters as they confront the paradox of their existing, to see beyond their material existence.

Examples from *Nine Stories* provide ample support for this analysis. In "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," two women engage themselves in the task of finding meaning in their lives. Both have had education at the college level, but find it impossible to apply anything that they learned in schools to the reality that they find themselves in. In "Just Before the War with the Eskimos," Salinger presents us with a situation which involves people who quit going to college because what they were being taught was not menningful to their lives–and the search for relevance and purpose is limited to purposeless wandering without spirit. The story "For Esme–with Love and Squalor," points to a situation in the lives of two combat soldiers in war: during battle one suffers from combat fatigue or a nervous breakdown. His friend writes a letter to his girlfriend back home who is studying psychology in college and tells her of his friend's nervous breakdown. She takes the letter to her psychology class and in class discusses or analyzes the reasons for the nervous breakdown of the friend on the basis of what had been written. The implications of this type of analysis of life's problems or living in the face of death points to the inadequacy of the education received in the college classroom. Others of the *Nine Stories* that deal with the basic paradox between the antithetical conceptions of humans and their relationship to the educational process all involve the problem of relevance or meaning for life. They are "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" and "De Daumier–Smiths Blue Period." These two stories illustrate the gap between life and its meaning and the inability of the educational process to provide any necessary meaningful basis for understanding life as we live it.

In "Teddy," Salinger introduces a young, gifted boy who has bridged the gap between the material and spiritual conceptions of reality and presents us with the first glimpses of an educational theory. Teddy, unlike most people in our society, has somehow discovered spirit or meaning for his life, his abilities move away from the material world, to a world unified in space and time which is beyond the illusory material world. His wisdom lies in his understanding of the inter-relatedness of all things. When confronted by a professor of education, Teddy describes how he would educate children.

> 'Well. . . . I'm not too sure what I'd do,' Teddy said. 'I know I'm pretty sure I wouldn't start with the things schools usually start with. . . . I think I'd first just assemble all the children together and show them how to meditate. I'd try to show them how to find out who they are, not just what their names are and things like that. . . I guess, even before that, I'd get them to empty out everything their parents and everybody ever told them. I mean even if their parents just told them an elephant's big, I'd make them empty that out. An elephant's only big when it's next to something else–a dog or a lady for example. . . I might show them an elephant, if I had one handy, but I'd let them just walk up to the elephant not knowing anything more about it than the elephant knew about them. The same thing with grass, and other things. I wouldn't even tell them the grass is green, it makes them start expecting the grass to look a certain way–your way–instead of some other way that may be just as good, and maybe much better.[1]

Then the professor of education asked the inevitable question, "Won't you be raising a generation of ignoramuses?" To this Teddy replies,

> 'Why? They wouldn't any more be ignoramuses than an elephant is. Or a bird is. Or a tree is,' Teddy said. 'Just because something is a certain way, instead of just behaves a certain way, doesn't mean it's an ignoramus.'[2]

The spiritual element involved in Teddy's educational theory marks Salinger's concern with the importance of the unity and relativity of all things. This is a concept that belongs to many spiritual conceptual systems. The point here is that Salinger emphasizes spiritual consciousness as the tool necessary for the total development of man, as the integrative part of our human functioning, calling attention to Teddy's last statement above, where he points to the distinction between what is and the reality that certain behavior produces. We must begin to educate ourselves to strip away the layers of film that cover the reality that is illustrated by our behavior. But, as Salinger has so aptly identified, this stripping away can only begin with an education based on spiritual considerations of man and his inter-relatedness to other things. And so we see in Teddy that he is attempting to help the professor of education to begin to strip away some layers of his social behavior when he says,

> 'Logical. You're just giving me a regular, intelligent answer,. . . I was trying to help you. You asked me how I get out of the finite dimensions when I feel like it. I certainly don't use logic when I do it. Logic's the first thing you have to get rid of.[3]

Some discussion about thinking and the relationship it maintains with the material and spiritual conceptions of man may help here. Too often consumer mentality maintains that thinking is a logical or deductive process with beginning and end finitely related to things and their names. In contrast is the type of mentality based on the consideration of all things as one thing or the integration of all things in one. Teddy provides us with an example of this mentality.

'I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up and all that, . . . It was Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a very tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk and all of a sudden I saw that *she* was God and the *milk* was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.'[4]

Another example of this mentality is provided by Shunryu Suzuki and is from the zen tradition.

'If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to something else, then there is no dualistic understanding in the activity of your mind. You understand activity as just waves of your mind. Big mind experiences everything within itself. Do you understand the differences between the two minds: the mind which includes everything, and the mind which is related to something? Actually they are the same thing, but understanding is different, and your attitude towards your life will be different according to which understanding you have.'[5]

And yet another example of this kind of mentality is seen in Martin Heidegger's book, *What Is Called Thinking*, where he says that "the most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is that people are still not thinking."[6] The book is an analysis of the concept of thinking and what that concept must involve in order to truly be thinking. Heidegger provides criteria on the basis of his analysis of thinking and states that thinking must involve not only logic but also devotion and heart. Here we see the relationship between material and spiritual thinking and the positive notion that thinking must involve both. This reciprocal involvement serves in the search for relevance that Salinger seeks for his characters and that we cry for in American society.

An example from Salinger's work for this need is seen in *The Catcher in the Rye*, where we meet Holden Caulfield in the grips of an educational process that is not providing him with the relevant tools for dealing with his life. Instead small mind or unthinking materialistic catch phrases are repeated to him time and again by his teachers, that he must accept education for a life in the material world without the necessary integrative spiritual functions provided by devotion and heart. The story that follows is his reaction to that materialistic conception with its lack of purpose, meaning or significance for his life.

What, then, is involved with thinking in the spiritual concept is that thinking is not merely logical, deductive reflection, but must also involve the heart and the devotion of the Big Mind. Such thinking provides the basis for the integration of big mind and small mind and also the basis for the necessary leap of faith to the big mind. This is the search for relevance or significance that Salinger's characters are involved in and marks the

distinction between the material and spiritual conceptions of man, and the balance provided by these two conceptions when considered in their reciprocal relationship with one another.

An illustration of the reciprocal relationship between the material and spiritual aspects of our existing is seen in *Seymour, An Introduction*, in which Seymour, the eldest sibling in the Glass family, has made the final leap of faith and has achieved some degree of enlightenment. The important point to be stressed in the character of Seymour is illustrated in two ways. First, in his enlightened state, Seymour lives in two worlds, the world of a college professor and the enlightened world. He functions in both of these worlds precisely because he is aware of the reciprocal relationship that exists between them. The tension created between the material and spiritual creates a space or a realm in which one lives between worlds and is therefore affected by neither to the exclusion of the other. Second, the incident of his suicide in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," pervades his character and is illustrative of his enlightened state or his balanced state between worlds. Because Seymour has accepted his death or his life in the face of death, his suicide is nothing more than his living was; the difference is that now there is no body. His enlightened state, however, lives on in the lives of his family. In Seymour, Salinger has created the character which best supports the demands for spiritual education and the importance of that education for living in a social world--an example from the other side and in contrast to most of his characters.

The book *Franny and Zooey* is a final articulation by Salinger of the importance of the spiritual concerns of man for his complete education. In this book Salinger again points to the duality of the world that we live in, materialistic and spiritualistic. Franny, with one foot in the material world and the other in the spiritual world, is confused about the relevance of her life and education. Zooey, influenced by his mother, undertakes to help Franny take that final leap of faith. What follows is an exciting account of spiritual awareness or the breaking down of logical reflection and discrimination. The techniques used are techniques that are and have been used for spiritual development in many religious orientations and in educational theory. The Socratic dialogue is used, story-telling and finally jolting or demanding that the heart make the leap that the mind cannot. The result of this leap is relevance or significance for life as it is now. The permanence or lasting effect of the leap of faith that Zooey forces Franny to make is not the issue or concern here. What is important is the notion that this spiritual step had to be taken before Franny could accept the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds which provides significance or relevance for life. You don't change, but your understanding changes and thus everything changes; you are complete.

Salinger's criticisms against modern education are not intended to change education from its materialistic concerns to more spiritualistic concerns. Instead, he is illustrating the importance and necessity of spiritualistic concerns in our modern materialistic world. There is no one answer that will solve all of life's riddles. But what is necessary for Salinger is that both the material and spiritual aspects of our existing be dealt with in an equal way, giving equal importance to both, created by the tension of both. This is the task that he levels on education and the demand that he makes of the modern world, the integration of education and life.

> "The function of education is to create human beings who are integrated and therefore intelligent."[7]

FOOTNOTES

1. J. D. Salinger, "Teddy," *Nine Stories*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1953), pp. 298-299.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
5. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1972), p. 31.
6. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), p. 6.
7. Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Education and the Significance of Life*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1953), p. 14.