I. J. D. Salinger and Existentialism in American Literary Tradition

In America, the expression of existential concepts and themes during the early part of the twentieth century was primarily in the area of literature and conversations. America simply did not have any philosophical texts on par with Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In fact, the only major existential philosophical thinker in America during the twentieth century was Paul Tillich, a German-born, American Protestant minister. Tillich is best known for his treatise *The Courage To Be*, which definitely places him within the religious camp of existential theory.

From 1918 to 1939 existentialist concerns could be discerned in the work of major American writers like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright. An effective example of existential theory in Hemingway's work is to be found in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (1926) in which the protagonist experiences anxiety before the perceived nothingness of existence that forces him to seek temporary refuge in the orderliness of a Café. Faulkner's work also reflects existentialist concerns. Faulkner, who grew up in the Old South, was obsessed with its history of defeat, destruction, and loss. The futility of existing without your own clear sense of self in the world in which traditional values have been swept away informs *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Sanctuary* (1931).

Finally, Wright's work provides another important example of American existential literature. For example, in *Native Son* (1940) Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, becomes existentially aware of the economic and social forces shaping his life and how ill-prepared he is to deal with them. Later, he experiences moments of insight into the possibility of his own non-existence and the implications of human contingency.

After World War II, novelists like Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Walker Percy, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Ken Kersey, Flannery O'Connor and Joseph Heller, among others, portrayed their own sense of anxiety, absurdity, disorientation, and exile with a clear existential focus. For example, Captain Yossarian, the protagonist of Joseph Heller's *Catch – 22*, experiences the world of regimentation, non-authenticity, and inhumanity in the form of the operations of an American bomber squadron stationed in Italy during World War II. Yossarian finds himself trapped in a nightmare of mindless butchery perpetuated by men who have become more like machines than humans, because they are being defined by what's around them instead of what's within them.

Post-war existentialism also found a home in American literary journals. For example, *The Partisan Review* published a variety of sections from Camus and Sartre immediately after the war. And William Barrett published a pamphlet in 1947 titled "What is Existentialism?" In 1951 he published an article in *Commentary* called "What Existentialism Offers Modern Man"; in 1958 he published *Irrational Man*, which has been recognized as a definitive analysis of existential theory.

In his most comprehensive and acclaimed work *Irrational Man* William Barrett outlines the most frequently themes of existentialism as "(1) the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; (2) the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; and (3) the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal" (56). Barrett's explication forms the general characteristics of existential literature, at least in spirit, as involving a protagonist who must freely choose, in loneliness and anguish, a course of action which leads him towards the authentic life.

J. D. Salinger first gained attention by publishing short stories in the late thirties and forties in magazines like *Story*, Colliers, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In all, he published twenty-one short stories in these national magazines. Many critics, however, regarded these stories as raw or unfinished, a bit uneven. In the late forties and early fifties, most of Salinger's short stories found their way into the *New Yorker*. It wasn't until 1951 that he published his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*; this was followed by the publication of *Nine Stories* in 1953.

In the mid-fifties and early sixties, Salinger continued to publish his stories in the *New Yorker*. "Franny" and "Zooey" were collected and published as a book in 1961, followed by "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" and "Seymour: An Introduction," two short stories which were published as a book in 1963. Salinger's final publication, "Hapworth 16, 1924" was published in the *New Yorker* in 1965. With the publication of only twenty-one short stories, and one full-length novel, Salinger still managed to arouse so much controversy as Salinger and his infamous protagonists. Much of this is due to the face that he published during an era that in retrospect was intellectually, emotionally and even literarily conservative. The controversy that Salinger raised among critics becomes obvious when one looks at the essays of Warren French and George Steiner. French in his essay "The Age of Salinger" claims, "certainly, no writer has won a remotely similar place in American affections during the 60s; nor did any single writer largely monopolize readers during an earlier decade" (24).

Not only did Salinger have such an effect on the public and popular critics of his time, he also had a great influence on the literary canon of postwar America. On one hand, other writers were fascinated with Salinger's works because they could

identify with the heroes, and, on the other, most remained very puzzled and perplexed while interpreting what Salinger said and how well he said it.

J. D. Salinger published *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, and during the 1950s and early 1960s it was too early to identify the characteristically existential American authors or bodies of writing. For that generation of writers, it will suffice to note what might be called the "Existential Moment" in literature, those passages in which the writer touches on some aspect of human experience or treats a particular episode in such a way as to evoke the spirit of the existentialist view of life.

In his book *Humanistic Psychiatry: From Oppression to Choice*, Roy Waldman says, "the obstacles and discontinuities that face man on the road to becoming himself are thus difficulties encountered at the level of self, family, and society" (40-41). In such circumstances, when the individual faces so many obstacles, uncertainties and pressures, it is not uncommon for him to reach "the end of his rope." Since the individual cannot go beyond his circumstances, there is no chance for him to become a complete, independent, self-governing individual. In existentialism such a situation is called the "boundary situation." Even in the "boundary situation" the individual can make his decision, (for or against himself) but regardless of his decision he must be ready to face the consequences of that decision. "If he decides against himself, he adopts the attitude of his opposition, accepts the guise of some other person, some other ideal, or philosophy, and moves into "nonbeing." He is not true to himself, so by existential reasoning he is consequently inauthentic." (Smith 1). "However, if a man confronting the boundary situation decides for himself, he instead resists the urge to dissolve into nothingness and claims an inheritance of the human freedom found in being, in living, in experiencing life. He operates in spite of any

opposition that pushes him to the boundary (and indeed, there are many).” (Smith 1). In doing so, time and time again, he becomes authentic.

Therefore, authenticity in the larger existential sense—incorporating early and later existential thinking—does not refer to a single pattern that is identical for all. Rather it is an individual “becoming,” one which shows a unique search for person.

Literary characters, as explicators, are forced to adopt different types of behavior in their quest for authenticity. Salinger’s three main protagonists experience a societal boundary situation erected (by Salinger, ultimately) in order to force them into playing an expected role. In this sense, each character represents a pattern of protest against inauthentic experience. These patterns are significant in that they offer clear case studies which help to explain how and why the existential movement came into being as a literary possibility in America. America, to be sure, is the backdrop against which each pattern evolves. However, as the culture has historically built into its framework levels of “normality,” Salinger’s characters cannot find authentic selves within the culture’s dominant structure.

Salinger basically deals with the problem of life through his writings. The problem of life, to Salinger’s protagonists, is that it is void of sustaining values. However, this is not entirely the fault of society, as the existential philosophers point out. Rather, their victimhood comes from their general lack any conception of who they are. They have, in other words, not defined themselves. What Salinger is showing is that help for the alienated does not come from outside. His protagonists simply are caught in a paradox: they have not defined themselves, and they cannot accept the results of not having done so. They cannot exist in their present state. Notice, for instance, that his characters seldom seem able—in fact, the possibility never occurs to them—to benefit from their moments of pain by accepting that

loneliness may be integral to their humanity. By doing so, they might see that how they bear it and react to that of others would provide a sustaining moral value to life. Salinger's characters are quite aware of what they don't want to be, but their values, for the most part, are negative ones of disapproval. They simply have nothing viable to offer instead—to others, or to themselves. Their alienation is of their own choosing. It takes the form of their placing themselves outside the community of man because something someone has done has sickened them.

Salinger's protagonists form two competing visions as a result of their alienation; those of innocence, and those of experience. A central theme in Salinger's fiction becomes their futile attempts to fuse their two visions, even though as readers we realize all along that it cannot be done. Salinger seems to want us to recognize what his characters have become through their inability to come to terms with their own egos and attain some kind of peace with their own existence. We see that they love the abstraction "mankind" but not the individuals within it. Salinger's characters never realize that it is not possible to love the abstraction while at the same time rejecting its real-world components. At best they can only expect temporary abatement. Both Sergeant X, after reading the letter from Esme (the little girl he'd met in England) and Franny, after being reminded by Zooey of the "fat lady," achieve through gestures of love an integration of sorts and are able to sleep. But this is only temporary. Later they both realize that nothing has changed: the little girl is still far away, and the "fat lady" is just a fat lady, with not literal meaning in Franny's life. In short, Salinger's characters face an unsolvable dilemma: they seek an immersion in humanity while wanting to avoid the human components within it.

Salinger's characters are also burdened by another dimension of alienation, one which comes through their realization that they fall short of their idealized

conception of what a man should be in their idealized humanity. Their alienation is compounded by the fact that they not only find much of society detestable, but they also find themselves detestable. They detest their own membership into humanity. It is worth noting that Holden, Sergeant. X, and Seymour are not politically or socially oriented. They are the quintessential Americans of their time—unengaged and anti-social. They consider themselves as in that category of being who are not being loved while fully accepting that they are also unable to love.

Alienation, as Salinger depicts it, is more complex than the standard existential explication of it, for it is not solely due to man's inability to know himself. As Paul Levine notes, Salinger's is a more American concept. He notes that an even more important factor is that the American society within which Salinger's characters must live denies them the opportunity to be themselves. American society has no place for its own individuals. For these characters to operate successfully in society as they view it Levine believes that they would have to fragment themselves; they would have to repudiate something within them. They don't have a clear idea of just what that is, but they sense that assimilation in a repugnant society requires a personality repugnant to what they ought to be. In this sense, they are outsiders by choice, and they have the honesty to be unwilling to accept what the culture has to offer. In their alienation, these characters do not feel superior, a posture many outsiders sneeringly adopt when thumbing their noses at the society they find contemptible. Their attitude is that anyone who doesn't need an analyst is a vegetable, with the anomalous implication that those people who are fitting into society are really sick. The anomaly is that therapy is sought to enable the individual to fit into society which revolts him. But, in Salinger's case, individuals cannot fit into society, and they are not satisfied to remain outside. As Levine maintains, "Their vision renders the problem insoluble.

With it they cannot live in society. Without it they cannot live with themselves. Holden Caulfield becomes the prototype for the whole family of Salinger protagonists: sensitive, loving, combining a whimsical sense of humor and an overbearing sense of his own misfitness in the world" (94).

Besides appearing in the literary journals, existentialism found its way into many guides and pamphlets in America, albeit with a decidedly political bent. An introduction by Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism*, was published in 1948. Like Barrett's *Irrational Man*, which depicts existentialism as a philosophy of crisis, Grene explains the theoretical tenets of existentialism in relation to political realities. Examining existentialist ideas in relation to Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Heidegger, Grene emphasizes dread–and the concealment of it–in the face of historical freedom. The philosophy did not begin with the Resistance, she says, but it was the Resistance that made it popular and compelling. Grene maintains that the life of the underground had brought to light what the inner self-torment of a Kierkegaard had revealed a century earlier: The utter loneliness of each of us in moral crisis and the essential union, almost the identity, of that loneliness and the freedom that we find in it. Man makes himself, but only in secrecy and solitude–publicity is betrayal or illusion" (96).

Despite these efforts by prominent Americans, when people today talk about existentialism it is typically Sartre's philosophy they have in mind. In some ways, 21st Century existentialism has reverted back to his emphasis on existence as preceding essence, man's freedom to make choices, and the responsibility that all men have in defining the concept of themselves. Americans today are also drawn to Sartre's politics. As *Being and Nothingness* was published in 1943 at the height of the German occupation of Paris, they focus on how Sartre's philosophy arises from the

horrid experience of seeking freedom under the Nazi dictatorship. In *The Republic of Silence,* he gives an unequalled description of the experience:

> We were never more free than during the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, beginning with the right to talk. Every day we were insulted to our faces and had to take it in silence. Under one pretext or another, as workers, Jews, or political prisoners, we were deported *en masse*. Everywhere, on billboards, in the newspapers, on the screen, we encountered the revolting and insipid pictures of ourselves that our suppressors wanted us to accept. And because of all this we were free. Because the Nazi venom seeped into our thoughts, every accurate thought was a conquest. Because an all-powerful police tried to force us to hold our tongues, every work took on the value of a declaration of principles. Because we were hunted down, every one of our gestures had the weight of a solemn commitment. The circumstances, atrocious as they often were, finally made it possible for us to live the hectic and impossible existence that is known as the lot of man. (498)

The occupation itself gave Sartre the impetus for his basic thesis that the choices that the French people made during this period of time were authentic because they were face to face with death. As an experience of freedom, their choices stressed both the negative and positive sides of liberty. The negative side was the power of resisting oppression and the positive side was the genuineness of choice and the responsibility of that choice. Consequently, the main concept in Sartre's philosophy is the concept of freedom and his philosophy is designed to make man aware of his power to make free choices.

In the November 21, 2003 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* there is a lengthy article on the renewal of interest in Sartre's work. "A team of scholars, including several American professors, is now finishing the *Dictionnaire Sartrean*, with entries on the thinker's concepts, influences and political alliances" (1). According to Scott McLemee, author of the article, the revival in Sartrean scholarship came on the 20th anniversary of his death in 2000 and the publication of *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century* by Bernard-Henri Levy: "Growing interest in Sartre is by no means an exclusively French phenomenon. Strangely enough, his philosophical writings may now be receiving more scrutiny in the United States than in his native country" (2).

A school of philosophy, such as Idealism or Positivism (sometimes referred to as Realism), means that there is agreement among members of that school with regard to the basic beliefs. They have metaphysical and epistemological constants, in other words. A movement in philosophy, on the other hand, indicates that there are problems—or likely, on main problem—that is central to the movement, which operates with the larger context of a particular school. What brings the center thinkers of a school together is an attempt to explicate their perception of the "problem." A movement, then, is more difficult to explicate because different existential philosophers emphasize different aspects of the central problem of Being.

Finally, like most movements in philosophy, existentialism has had to go through a period of popularization and oversimplification—especially in America in the 50s and 60s—during which anyone who could speak knowingly of its themes or vaguely refer to Sartre's *Nausea* was often doing so to an uninformed audience. As has been detailed above in the brief sub-sections of the central existential philosophers utilized in this dissertation, existentialism is not merely a more extreme form of the

literature of doom but, instead, a fully responsible philosophy whose main goal is to restore to man the freedom to determine the meaning and value of his own life.

II. Literary Theory of Existentialism

Sartre's Freedom of Choice

Besides the concept of death, another concern of existential thought is the concept of freedom. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre stated, "What is at the very heart and center of existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself" (47). Kierkegaard believes that the concept of freedom was prevalent in individual's existence because freedom gives the individual a choice to choose his level of existence which consequently determines the level of his existence – aesthetic, ethical, or religious – and the values he will bring into the world. It is only by exercising the choice of freedom that the individual is able to make a decision about the level of existence. If man did not have free will, then existence would be determined and existentialism as a philosophy would not exist. According to Robert Solomon, in *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, "Freedom is the recurrent theme in every author who is identified with this movement" (279). Heidegger's definition of the concept of freedom is drawn from the concept of facticity which Heidegger explicates in *Being and Time*. Sartre takes Heidegger's definition a step further and utilizes it to explain his concept of existential freedom.

For Heidegger, the existential concept of freedom is based on his concept of facticity which comes directly from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and is used by Sartre to define his perception of existential freedom. In Heidegger's perception, facticity is equal to the concept of thrown-ness which means that the situation that the individual finds himself in is arbitrary. Facticity is the arbitrary facts which shape individual's particular situation. For example, if a person is born in Turkey, at a certain period in time, with or without parents, in a certain social class, male or female, with specific

physical characteristics, then that is that person's facticity. What both Heidegger and Sartre point out as being important is that we are born into a situation over which we have no control. Sartre maintains that we are free within our situation while, at the same time, we are restricted by it. All we can do is choose among alternatives within the situation in which we find ourselves; however, we are not free to choose the situation itself. Robert Solomon maintains that "In so far as we are free to choose Sartre tells us that we have *transcendence*; in so far as we are determined by our situation Sartre tells us we have *facticity*" (274). Transcendence means that we can rise above the situation in which we find ourselves. In other words, we are free to construct new values and characteristics which are not in our facticity. The American existential theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, in *A Courage To Be*, stated that "Man is essentially. . . 'freedom': freedom not in the sense of indeterminacy but in the sense of being able to determine himself through decisions in the center of his being" (48). Freedom, for Sartre, means one cannot change the situation in which he finds himself. For instance, one cannot change his gender, cannot fundamentally change his physical characteristics (cosmic surgery notwithstanding), but one is always free within this facticity to construct the essence or the meaning of his existence.

Sartre goes a step further by claiming that "a man can do anything he wants to do"; and that "man is always free within his particular situation to confer significance upon that situation" (Solomon 280). This is especially important in narration, when one has the ability to re-assign significance. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Sartre maintains that "Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it" (442). Therefore, the situation determines the freedom insomuch as the situation puts limitations on one's freedom.

It is important to understand the distinction between infinite freedom and finite freedom; the applicability of this distinction is clearly stated by Solomon:

> This understanding of absolute freedom as freedom within a situation will allow us to appreciate the difference between the bold and obviously false claim that human beings are absolutely free to do what they want and the more reasonable claim (made by Sartre) that human beings are absolutely free to choose their own projects and impose their own interpretations on the situation in which they find themselves (that is in which they are "thrown" or "abandoned"). (281)

Although Sartre's concept of freedom is basically man's freedom to choose—and therefore, his freedom of intention—it does not mean that man has freedom of success. This is because external circumstances may hamper his choice and his ability to reach his goals. Man is absolutely free to set goals relevant to his life and his situation, but he is not absolutely free to be successful in achieving those goals. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre states, "Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is" (599). Obviously, external circumstances may interfere with the success of my projects; but, in the beginning of the same text, Sartre claims that my freedom is my awareness "that nothing can compel me to adopt that particular conduct" (38). This statement is derived from Sartre's concept that "existence precedes essence," which while implied by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, received much more attention by Sartre who placed it within the core of existential theory.

Plato argued that there are two realms of being: the familiar world of things and people and the pure, ideal world of Forms. For example, there are individual

chairs each with its own peculiarities and imperfections which partake in varying degrees of the "form of the chair" which is how we recognize it as a "chair". Sartre sees things differently, however. To him there is an essence of chairness that comes before a chair's existence.

Western philosophers for more than 2000 years have claimed that "essence precedes existence." However, Sartre would agree that when it comes to chair making his "existence precedes essence" is reversed. Before starting to make a chair, every carpenter has an idea of the chair in his head and therefore the essence of the chair – a concept of the thing to be constructed – precedes its existence. But the main concept for Sartrean existentialism is that human beings are different in that they create their own meaning for themselves. In other words, they create the essence of their existence. Man's existence comes before his essence because Sartre's claim in *Existentialism is a Humanism* is that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism" (3). In the same article, Sartre repeats himself when he states, "If man as the existentialist sees him as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (2). In *Being and Nothingness*, the word "Nothingness" implies that man has no preconceived essence, no preconceived definition, simply because man has the ability to construct his own essence. Again, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre reinforces his notion of nothingness: "If existence really precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (3). Man is free to construct the meaning of his existence; this led Sartre to claim that man is not pre-determined and

therefore does not have a fixed human nature. Man is free to create himself and the meaning of his essence in the world.

The factual nature of freedom was stressed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* because he believed that freedom was simply a fundamental fact of man's existence as a conscious, self-creative and self-creat*ing* being. Being fully conscious means that man is able to start afresh each time he makes another choice; he is free, in other words, from his past mistakes. His freedom may remain a pure and undiluted state throughout his entire life, if he so wills it. (Gene Thibadeau "Sartre's Concept of the Individual). This is not easy, however, for even Sartre admits that the choices that one makes means that man cannot return to the same starting point again. Sartre understands that his freedom is as unpolluted at one end of the series of actions as it was at the other. Even if man were absolutely free at the beginning of his life, each subsequent decision would serve to further limit him and circumscribe his freedom. The essence which a particular man has created for himself through choice and the actions cannot simply be discarded by him for a fresh start. They follow and haunt him throughout his life. In Sartre's own terminology, "each decision of a For-itself has created or engaged him to the world in tangible ways and the For-itself cannot pretend otherwise" (18).

Sartre makes a clear distinction between In-itself and For-itself. In itself refers to objects in the world such as a house, a car, a TV, a knife, or a hammer. The meaning or the essence of the object is built into the object itself and can be understood just by looking at the object. That is, the object reveals its essence to me. The For-itself stands for human consciousness and is only applicable to human beings. The essence of a human being is not determined until the moment of death. The word "For" in Sartre's term "For-itself" signifies our understanding that we have a future; however,

unlike an object in the world, we can continually determine our essence or meaning of existence. A chair, in other words, cannot make choices that change what it is or what it does in the world. In Sartre's later philosophy, the cumulative effect of past decisions cannot be ignored, not even by the existential man.

Sartre's theory of freedom rests upon two basic assumptions. The first is that man's choice is autonomous; the second is that autonomy of choice is the true meaning of freedom. Wilfrid Desan, in *The Tragic Final: An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,* states, "The autonomy of man's choice is not in fact independent of external conditions. Choice, even for Sartre, must always be made with respect to a given amount of data and the data is usually determined by factors other than man's own freedom" (170). Since choice is not unlimited, the freedom which is expressed by means of choices is not unlimited either. Dependence on things that are outside of one's own powers—for example, what is around him when he is making his choices—is not in the meaning of the word autonomy. Hence, man's choice cannot be said to be truly autonomous at all, for it is impossible to remain independent of some external realities, such as political oppression or severe illness.

That said, it is possible that man is more free and responsible than he typically wishes to admit. Sartre deserves credit for making us aware of this fact, and for describing its consequences in life. For Sartre, the concept of freedom formed the core of Being-for-itself's fundamental structure. From this structure, Sartre created such related ideas as bad faith, authenticity, and situations.

Sartre's Concept of Bad Faith

The key concept in Sartre's analysis of freedom is the concept of Bad Faith. Bad Faith occurs when the individual ignores his freedom of choice and he refuses to carry the burden of making a decision about a particular situation. Sartre claims that

an individual can find himself exercising Bad Faith because he is tempted and pressured by the implications of freedom as well as the societal demands and he states "man prefers to mask this obligation by imagining himself not as a being that ceaselessly creates new significations, but as a fixed essence" (qtd. in Alberes, 62). From a Sartrean perspective, while trying to fulfill the demands of society, a person becomes the job that he performs. In other words, a waiter is just a waiter, a teacher is just a teacher, and the person who exercises bad faith fails to realize that he has potential other than becoming something other than a waiter or a teacher. Petty tasks and concerns shape the mundane existence of the individual. Man who exercises Bad Faith is so obsessed with satisfying the role imposed on him by society that he convinces people around him and himself that his role and identity are identical.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that at the root of bad faith lies the restrictive demands of society because it forces the individuals to fit into certain modes which dictate the way an individual should act. Furthermore, it turns individual into a kind of robot where the individual can carry out a particular function only. Society pressures man to remain within the confines of his role which helps to explain why so many live in a state of Bad Faith. Bad Faith is not a mere accident and something that just happens to certain people; Bad Faith is a permanent possibility for all human beings.

In other words, Bad Faith can be described as being in self-deception about one's own possibilities. When talking about Bad Faith, it should be noted that the individual can choose to Bad Faith as much as he can choose the other levels of existence, whether it is aesthetical, ethical or religious. It takes a higher level of awareness, as illustrated in Salinger's characters, for an individual to recognize the choices that he has. Sartre argues, "We can choose ourselves as indecisive, fleeing,

and the like, as well as heroic; but in each instance, a choice has taken place (*Being and Nothingness* 472).

At any time or situation there is an ever present danger that man will in Bad Faith. However, it should be noted that Bad Faith is not a continuous and dooming occurrence for the individual. The individual can get out of Bad Faith when he comes to a realization that he has potential and when he is ready to make decision that will give a new meaning to his life. Even though man makes persistent efforts to capture authentic existence, there is never a warranty that he will achieve this goal. Nonetheless, this should not stop him from trying. According to Robert Olson, in *An Introduction to Existentialism*, "the authentic man for Sartre is the person who undergoes a radical conversion though anguish and who assumes his freedom" (139). The existentialists reject the notion of a complete and fully satisfying life because life is characterized by irreparable losses, frustration, insecurity, and painful striving. As noted previously, the existential philosophers differ significantly in "the relative ranking of the values which they say accompany a deliberate espousal of anguish and suffering" (17). Existentialists agree that "existentialist values intensify consciousness, arouse the passions, and commit the individual to a course of action which will engage his total energies" (18). This, thus, is yet another way of looking at authenticity. In other words, an authentic man is not afraid to act on impulse. According to Temple Kingston, the authentic man "is not only the man often referred to as the man of action; the authentic man is willing not merely to act, but to act without what would normally be termed a satisfactory justification for these actions" (181). The authentic man has a self-perception and based on this perception he does not justify his actions to the people around him. Furthermore, he is aware of the fact

that once he has made a decision he is ready to face the consequences of his particular decision.

Authenticity is achieved through "a self-conscious choice in the face of anguish, through acting in the world of contingent and modal realities" (McBride 375). The authentic man, therefore, must form a stable base within himself to address a shifting exteriority. Authenticity, then, requires individual is courage and "a clarity of vision. It is the successful outcome of the debate of the individual with whatever is opposed to his integrity" (Levi 426). The authentic man clearly does not seek to escape from the peer pressures around him, nor does he ever shirk from the outcomes of his choices. According to James Collins in *The Existentialists*, the authentic man is the man who makes choices with near-perfect lucidity and with a full acceptance of the responsibilities following the actions he makes based on his choices (83). The authentic man is in a very real sense a converted man who is awakened to his human condition and has assumed it; plunges into the world, but does not lose himself in the world; he accepts total responsibility and engages himself fully, and always maintains a separation from himself which constitutes his personal actions, so that they have value and give value. (Blackham 147)

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes a clear distinction between the concepts of transcendence and facticity: "man is what he is not and is not what he is" (70). This means that by being always conscious of his future and always future oriented, man can transcend his present status. At the same time, man is not what he is in the sense that what he is now is not the meaning of his existence. (This, as stated previously, can only be determined at the moment of death.) Because man has a consciousness, which Sartre refers to as "the For-Itself," he can transcend his present condition and choose to give a new meaning or essence to his existence. To exist in

facticity evokes Bad Faith because such an existence does not allow one to recognize his future. It is the recognition of one's future makes man free to choose and gives him transcendence.

One of the primary functions of existentialism is a reevaluation of certain traditional problems and a focus on problems that are lived, directly experienced, suffered and intimately connected with man's Being. That is, problems which are facing man today and from which we cannot escape. The justification for attempting to prove that Salinger's protagonists meet the criteria to be characterized as "existential heroes" is that it results in a heightened awareness of the fact that we as individuals are responsible for the quality of the world, the quality of our society, and the quality of our lives. It is imperative to recognize that change will only occur if there is first an awareness that the change can occur. Because an awareness of a goal always comes before its actuality, one of the reasons for the revitalization of existential philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre is that it will encourage and foster an awareness in people of their disenchantment with life.

F. H. Heinemann, in his brilliant explication of existential theory *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, notes that "The existentialists truly reveal the predicament of man at a time when the moral law has lost its Divine Sanction and when the individual, unable to fall back on any accepted standard of values, has to make his own solitary decisions" (177). The concept of man making "his solitary decisions" is a part of Paul Levine and William Wiegand's definition of an existential hero and lies at the center of Kierkegaard's concept of subjective truth. Prior to World War I, Gordon Bigelow in his "A Primer of Existentialism" notes that there was a common belief among intellectuals and philosophers of Western Europe that reason and science would provide uninterrupted human progress. Furthermore, it

was believed that each generation will enable humanity to move forward by building on the knowledge acquired from the previous generations. However, this was not the case. As stated by Bigelow, “Their vision of a continuous upward spiral of Progress that cracked open like a melon on the rock of World War I…died in that sickening and unimaginable butchery” (175). After the devastating experiences of World War I, Great Depression and World War II, the loss of idealism and the optimistic vision was inevitable. In his autobiographical notes, Salinger talks about experiencing the horror of World War II in the European Theatre and how he became aware of the slaughter of millions of Jews by the Nazis. He describes it as having left him with a meaningful understanding of evil in the world. “But only with the atomic bomb did this become an unbearable terror, a threat of instant annihilation which confronted all men, even those most insulated by the thick crust of material goods and services” (Bigelow 173). The unspeakable horror and drastic changes in living conditions forced people to live:

> at ever higher levels of abstraction, have collectivized individual man out of existence, have driven God from the Heavens, or what is the same thing, from the hearts of men. The existentialists are convinced that modern man lives in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other men, from his own true self (173).

While all four conditions are important, from an existential perspective, self alienation or an unauthentic existence is of most importance and the stress on authenticity is a unique existential emphasis.

Although human beings have a life-long craving for happiness very few people manage to find true happiness. According to existentialists once that state of being is achieved, lasting happiness depends on a man’s state of maturity, most of which has been derived from extremely unhappy encounters and experiences. The

relationship between happiness and maturity defies the reigning wisdom of the West, that happiness is a product of youth and naturally diminishes with time. Many writers and thinkers seem to present old age as catastrophic, a final bad joke on the false dream of ever being happy. Existentials maintain that unhappy people rarely blame themselves for their condition. There is not one definite road to happiness, but the concept of Being, that is, giving meaning to your existence and creating your own essence, regardless of the path you take, is central to the existential attitude. What the existential philosophers have in common is a passion to create meaning contained in human beings' lives. This attitude, which is central to the existential movement, is dominant in the Salinger characters primarily considered in this research.

The aforementioned theoretical concepts of existentialism will be applied in Salinger's short story "For Esme—with Love and Squalor"" with a focus on the character like Sergeant X. Sergeant X has the ability to transcend his situation, his 1945 nervous breakdown in Germany, which means that he has the ability to create a future different than the last four years that he spent in the Army. War, in other words, forces its participants to become past-oriented instead of future-oriented. Looking at Sergeant X as "an existentialist" reveals a man struggling against a difficult outer reality that prevents him from undertaking the existential path toward self-definition.

III. Sergeant X and Existential Themes

One year before the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, in April 1950, J. D. Salinger published "For Esme—with Love and Squalor" in *The New Yorker*. This short story, which was later included in Salinger's *Nine Stories* in 1953, is not only his best but also his most autobiographical short story.2 Warren G. French, in a review of *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* by Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, notes that the authors have sound reasons for assessing "For Esme" as "the high point of Salinger's art" (22). By broad agreement among Salinger's critics, "For Esme' which has been reprinted at least six times. . .has also achieved more critical attention than any of his other stories" (Pickering 121).

In her memoir *Dream Catcher*, Salinger's daughter, Margaret, describes how her father told her, "You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nostrils, no matter how long you live" (55). This sincere confession to her daughter illustrates how traumatic the war experience was for Salinger. We also learn from Salinger's biographies that he had a nervous breakdown during the war, just like Sergeant X. However, none of the biographies of Salinger give details about the severity of his breakdown. Salinger himself has repeatedly tried to downplay it—in the few interviews he's given—and there is controversy in the literature about the cause of it, whether it was due to combat fatigue or more conventional causes.

According to Eberhart Alsen, in "New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger's Sergeant X and Seymour Glass," Salinger wrote a letter to Ernest Hemingway from Germany in 1945 to tell Hemingway that he had checked himself into a military hospital in Nuremberg. He describes himself as being in "an almost constant state of despondency" (379). Alsen's claim is that "Salinger had his nervous breakdown in May of 1945, shortly after the end of the war" (380). Many of

Salinger's critics assert that Salinger's nervous breakdown was a consequence of "combat fatigue," although Alsen, and many other Salinger scholars, do not believe that this is true. Their reasoning is that Salinger was not an infantry man and, "as a counter intelligence sergeant, he had the task of interviewing prisoners of war and civilians in order to find out information about enemy troop strength, number of tanks, location of heavy artillery, supply depots and so forth" (380).

There is another explanation for Salinger's breakdown as well. In addition to providing information about troop strength and the number of tanks, he was one of the first American Army personnel to enter the concentration camps. We know from Margaret Salinger that this experience had a devastating effect on her father. It is an undeniable fact that war has devastating effects on people and that an individual adjustment after war will naturally take some time. But, the first scene of the short story takes place in 1950, approximately six years after Sergeant X meets Esme and five years after the end of the war. In this scene, Sergeant X is living with his wife in America. He realizes all along that he has not recovered from his psychological breakdown. John Wenke in "Sergeant X, Esme, and the Meaning of Words" maintains that "the story does in fact dramatize Sergeant X's redemption from an emotional and physical breakdown through the transformative powers of love" (252). The criticism that this short story has received is mostly unanimous and James Bryant outlines such criticism when he asserts, "From everything that I have seen, critics have read 'For Esme' more or less exclusively as the story of a man's miraculous salvation from the war and squalor by the love of a child; and their appraisals have seemed to depend largely on their emotional response or lack of it, to the love and squalor" (279). Despite the critics' assessments, it is worth focusing on Salinger's and Sergeant X's nervous breakdowns because of their relationship to the importance of

boundary situations in existential literature. In the short story, Esme represents love and Sergeant X's wartime experiences represent squalor.

This chapter will closely analyze Sergeant X's behavior and his relationships with Esme and Sergeant X's wife and mother-in-law to substantiate the claim that Sergeant X is an existentialist. To collaborate this particular claim, this chapter will emphasize the concepts of alienation, freedom, Bad Faith, and boundary situations from an existential perspective using mainly Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy. Existentialism is basically a philosophy of crisis and Jean Paul Sartre, who became its most famous and dominant spokesman, explicated its basic concepts from 1948 onwards and brought awareness of the existential movement to the American intellectual landscape.

Sergeant X as an Existential Hero

The American Heritage Dictionary provides four definitions of the word "hero," citing mythology and legend, a war hero, heroes with special achievements, such as a hero in medicine, and "The principal male character in a novel, poem or dramatic presentation" (608). Levine and Wiegand are justified on the basis of this fourth definition to characterize Salinger's protagonists as heroes. But, in this research this definition is insufficient to justify labeling Salinger's protagonists as heroes. Levine views Salinger's "misfits" as heroes because they have not been able to reconcile their unique vision with their ability to communicate in society. Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* attempts to liberate himself from the banalities of life by not pursuing wealth, a nice car, a beautiful house, and a "la dolce vita" life style. Obviously, Holden is a misfit who is clearly portrayed by Salinger's literary genius. We need to see it in light of Sergeant X. What do they have in common? They never stop trying to define themselves in society and every time they fail, they try again.

They are heroes because they make their own choices, because they keep trying even though their choices fail them, and because they refuse to compromise.

Wiegand makes a distinction between a non-conformist who is threatened by the forces within society and "the Salinger hero" who significantly contributes to the conflict that exists between him and society. For example, Holden's memory of the death of his brother Allie motivates him not to care about his relationships with people with the one exception of Phoebe. His constant awareness of death is termed by Wiegand as a "spiritual illness," which causes his alienation from society and is not caused by a confrontation with it. "Although the non-conformist hero is constantly threatened by external forces in society which seeks to inhibit and to destroy him" (Wiegand 253), this is not true for Holden. Holden does not flunk out of Pencey because he is not able to meet the unreasonable demands placed on him. Rather, he flunks out because he does not pay attention in class and does not want to get involved in the process of learning. Learning is not a priority for Holden if it is going to lead to nothing. Holden is responsible for his alienation from his classmates at Pencey, his teachers, his parents, and his previous classmates at the two private schools that he attended prior to coming to Pencey because of his "spiritual illness," which is his preoccupation with death.

Why do Salinger's protagonists want to liberate themselves from the banalities of suburban society in the New York City area? Salinger's characters are aware of the fact that death is stalking them. They have, in fact, a horrible awareness of death, which is crippling them. They realize that being alive and giving meaning to their existence overshadows the particulars such as success, fame, and money. They do not have the same criteria for judging success as society does because life for them is finite. For Holden the ultimate end is death in that there is no distinction between

someone who is rich and famous or someone who is a street bum. He is a hero because he wants to give meaning to his existence and in the pursuit of doing so, he views himself as having to go against society.

Rosette C. Lamont published “The Hero in Spite of Himself,” in the Yale French Studies in 1962, eleven years after the publication of *The Catcher of the Rye*, when Salinger’s fame was at his highest point. Lamont argues that the concept of the “hero” has changed considerably from traditional concepts. She states, If we examine the works of contemporary writers, we are struck with the shift which has occurred in the image of the hero. The traditional concept no longer applies to our times. In the past the hero was the shining example of society. Whether he was myth turned to reality, or reality become myth, he was the man or woman who has been able to battle past personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forces. (73)

The traditional hero represented society with the task of guiding that society “towards values shared by all, but best represented in one” (73). However, in contemporary times, with the threat of the destruction of humanity, “the hero cannot, indeed must not, represent his society” (73). The male or female hero instead of representing society is a rebel or an outcast from society such as Holden and Sergeant X and the degree to which they are a rebel or misfit is equal to the degree to which they influence society. Passive resistance to society, such as in the case of Seargeant X is substituted for traditional feats of courage because contemporary society has experienced two World Wars, concentration camps, ethnic genocide, and revolutions that have completely destroyed its legitimacy. The traditional super hero is significantly different from Salinger’s hero in that his hero exhibits everyday human flaws and can be labeled as reclusive, alienated and lonely. Salinger’s heroes do have

flaws and failings that they sometimes conquer as in the case of Sergeant X but not in the cases of Holden. Salinger's flawed heroes are facing the same types of problems that the everyday person is facing. They are not the typical hero type when viewed from the perspective of their defects. Sergeant X makes mistakes and is just average man that faces boundary situations. Sergeant X works his way out his boundary situation, in Gaufurt, Bavaria as evidenced from the first section of the short story which occurs six years later.

It is accurate to state that Sergeant X is alienated from his respective society. Prior to his psychological problems in the third section of the short story, when his face is twitching and he is triple reading the sentences, Sergeant X's behavior shows that he is alienated from his wife and mother-in-law in both the first and second sections of the short story and that he is alienated from the other men in his unit (he never plays pool with them) during the second section of the story while he is experiencing military training. In the first section, it is obvious that Sergeant X is acting in bad faith with his wife because he does not explain to her his need to go to Esme's wedding. In the third section, he is alienated from himself because of his horrific wartime experiences, being the first one into the concentration camps and witnessing the gruesome scenes of bodies lying on the ground. It is in Germany in 1944 that Sergeant X faces a boundary situation which he, nevertheless, successfully deals with after receiving the letter from Esme. Sergeant X's need is explained to the reader in the last section of the story when he opens the box and reads the letter, and he reaches down to the gift of her father's watch. The title "For Esme – With Love and Squalor" means that he has a non-sexual, platonic love for Esme and that part of his human condition enables him to begin the cure of psychological disorientation by allowing him to sleep.

The title informs the reader that Sergeant X has this feeling of love and connectiveness to Esme, represented by the word “squalor,” which stands for war and death. Yes, he has capitulated to his wife and his mother-in-law, and he is alienated from them in the second section of the story when he complains about the quality of his wife’s letters and how boring and difficult it is for him to read them. But his love for Esme as a human being enables him to sleep, which is the beginning of his cure.

Sergeant X is a misfit who has psychological problems although the source of his psychological problems is not to be found in his relationship to society. He receives psychological treatment. He gets it Sergeant X while he is stationed in Germany and Seymour while he is in the Army prior to meeting Muriel. In “For Esme,” the first section of the short story takes place in 1950, six years after Sergeant X’s mental breakdown in Germany, and it is obvious that Sergeant X has faced his boundary situation and is able to logically deal with his reality although he does continue to exist in bad faith with his family.

During the war, Sergeant X’s wife and mother-in-law do not show any concern for him. The mother-in-law has the audacity to ask Sergeant X to send her some yarn. Feeling abandoned and rejected, Sergeant X is depressed. For Sergeant X, Esme’s letter and her father’s watch are invaluable. Not only do the letter and the watch give Sergeant X a glimmer of hope that he yearns for, but they also illustrate the fact that someone indeed cares for him even though Sergeant X and Esme have only spent twenty or thirty minutes together a year ago and have never seen each other since. Therefore, the question we need to ask is not why Sergeant X gives in to his wife and mother-in-law. The question that we ought to ask is, “What would have happened to Sergeant X if he had not received the letter and the watch?”

The concept of Bad Faith is illustrated in the very first scene of the short story. In this scene Sergeant X informs the reader that he has received a wedding invitation from Esme, the English girl he'd met in April 1944 during World War II: "I received an invitation to a wedding that will take place in England on April 18th. It happens to be a wedding I'd give a lot to be able to get to, and when the invitation first arrived I thought it might be just possible for me to make the trip abroad, by plane, expenses be hanged" (Salinger 87). Esme is important to Sergeant X and he wants to go to the wedding. Despite his eagerness, Sergeant X cannot act forcefully in this situation. Because Bad Faith is the lack of belief in ourselves to be ourselves and because Bad Faith occurs when we let other people make decisions for us, Sergeant X acts in Bad Faith when he does not tell his wife that he wants to go to the wedding. Instead, he is submissive with his wife, whom he describes as "a breathtakingly levelheaded girl" (87) and complies with her wishes by making a trivial excuse for not going to the wedding: "I'd completely forgotten that my mother-in-law is looking forward to spending the last two weeks in April with us. I really don't get to see Mother Grencher terribly often, and she is not getting any younger" (87). Sergeant X's wife is indifferent to his needs and the importance of Esme in his life. She is insensitive and controlling towards her husband.

Salinger also makes it evident that, besides acting in Bad Faith in his decision not to go to Esme's wedding, Sergeant X is alienated from his wife and his mother-in-law at home. Alienation, of course, is another crucial existentialist concept. John Wenke maintains that Sergeant X's inability to tell his wife exactly how he feels "marks a continuation of the 'stale letters' that Sergeant X received during the war" (253). During the war, Sergeant X's wife would send him letters in which she complains about the service at a restaurant they frequented together; while he is under

fire and dealing with horrid conditions, she directs him to send her cashmere yarn. Wenke develops this line of thought further: “Reports on the service at Schrafft’s and requests for cashmere yarn, like the prohibition against attending the wedding, extend selfish interest, while, at the same time, they evidence little concern for the narrator’s needs” (253).

Richard Rupp in *Celebration in Post-War American Fiction, 1945-1967* maintains that “Life in the present is at best tolerable for Sergeant X. Though the story begins in 1950 with Esme’s wedding announcement, the clue to X’s problem is his condescending description of his wife. At the same time, he romanticizes his communion with Esme. ‘For Esme’ demonstrates no evidence of a livable present” (121).

In the second scene of the short story, set during April 1944, Sergeant X is stationed in Devon, England for three weeks of pre-invasion intelligence training. This experience is characterized by his alienation from his fellow enlisted men. Most of his personal time is filled by writing letters back home. X experiences the constant “uncomradely scratching of many fountain pens on many sheets of V-mail paper” (88). According to Sergeant X, “there wasn’t one good mixer” (88) in the sixty men that comprised his unit. The men do not socialize with each other. Sergeant X also notes that he writes his letters back home to his wife sitting near the pool table, which he never uses. Sergeant X almost seems like a pseudo-soldier in that he takes rather lightly his military duties. For example, he remarks that he packs his “canvas gas-mask container full of books” (instead of leaving the gas mask container empty) even though he realizes that “if the enemy ever did use gas I’d never get the damn thing on in time” (88).

On the afternoon when the unit is being transferred to the London area, Sergeant X takes a walk in the rain through the small English town of Devon. Then he wanders into choir practice in a church. There he watches a thirteen-year-old girl singing more beautifully than the others; this girl has “an exquisite forehead and blasé eyes” (90). Later she enters the public tea room where Sergeant X is sitting. She joins him. This is how we are introduced to Esme, who is precocious and quite clearly knows it. “The next thing I knew, the young lady was standing, with enviable poise, beside my table” (92). She says, “I purely came over because I thought you looked extremely lonely. You have an extremely sensitive face” (95). Sergeant X asks Esme if she would care to join him for a cup of tea at his table and Esme responds “Perhaps for just a fraction of a moment” (92). Sergeant X learns that Esme and her five-year-old brother Charles are war orphans, since their father was killed fighting in North Africa. Moreover, their mother is deceased. Sergeant X notes, “I had been feeling lonely […] I was very glad that she’d come over” (95). Esme then talks about her mother and her father while her aunt, who had entered the tea room with her, sits at another table. During their brief conversation, Esme tells Sergeant X, “You seem quite intelligent for an American” (94). Sergeant X replies “that was a pretty snobbish thing to say” (94); this causes Esme to blush and, as Sergeant X puts it, she begins to confer “the social poise I’d been missing” (94).

John Pickering in *J.D. Salinger: Portraits of Alienation*, maintains that

> The conversation in the tea shop is masterfully done; the tone is one of warm restraint, apt for the communication between two people who had not known each other before but who in their loneliness (he, a soldier going to war; she a daughter whose father was killed in the war) need to talk with someone. (124)

At the very beginning of their conversation, Esme asks Sergeant X, “How were you employed before entering the Army?” (99). Sergeant X replies, “I like to think of myself as a professional short-story writer” (99). When Esme learns that Sergeant X is a professional writer who will soon be involved in military action, she asks him if he would “write a story exclusively for me sometime. I am an avid reader” (100). Sergeant X agrees to write a story for Esme, who then says “I am extremely interested in squalor” (100). Before they leave each other, Esme says, “You’re quite sure you won’t forget to write that story for me?” (103). Sergeant X says that “there is absolutely no chance that I’d forget” (103). Esme nods and says, “Make it extremely squalid and moving. Are you at all acquainted with squalor?” (103). Sergeant X says that “I am getting better acquainted with it in one form or another, all the time, and that I’d do my best to come up to her specifications” (103). This promise to Esme to write a story especially for her about his wartime experiences is codified by the title “For Esme.”

During the conversation in the public tea room, Sergeant X notices that Esme is wearing an “enormous-faced, chronographic-looking wristwatch” (100). It is too big for her thin wrist; he asks her if the watch had belonged to her father. He sees that Esme “Looked down at her wrist solemnly”; she then says “Yes, it did. He gave it to me just before Charles and I were evacuated” (100). It is evident to Sergeant X that the watch she wears is very important to her. Esme has to go back to sit with her aunt and asks Sergeant X, “Do you think you will be coming here again in the immediate future? We come here every Saturday, after choir practice” (101). Sergeant X responds that he is “pretty sure I won’t be able to make it again” (101). While saying goodbye and shaking hands, Esme says, “I hope you return from the war with all your faculties intact” (103).

The third and final scene of “For Esme” takes place in Gaufurt, Bavaria, during May 1945 (this is shortly after the end of the war). Salinger tells us that Sergeant X “was a young man who had not come through the war with all his faculties intact, and for more than an hour he had been triple reading paragraphs and now he was doing it to the sentences” (104). In “New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger’s Sergeant X and Seymour Glass,” Eberhart Alsen states that Salinger’s “regiment was involved in some of the bloodiest battles of World War II, from the D-Day invasion through the battles of Cherbourg, Mortain, and the Hurtgen Forest, all the way to the Battle of the Bulge” (380). Alsen identifies Colonel Gerden Johnson as a battalion commander in Salinger’s regiment and the author of *The History of the Twelfth Infantry Regiment in World War II.* Colonel Johnson reports that “during the Battle of Mortain in Northern France, the carnage was so frightful that there were many cases of combat fatigue even among our older men” (Johnson 163). However, the battle of Mortain occurred during July of 1944, whereas Salinger’s breakdown occurred in May of 1945. Many scholars take this to mean that Salinger’s breakdown was likely not due to the stress of combat, but instead “it was due to what he witnessed at the concentration camp that he mentioned to his daughter” (Alsen 381). Although Alsen has a meaningful argument to exclude combat experience as the main causal factor in Salinger’s breakdown, the majority of Salinger scholars view his hospital stay as a combination of his experiences behind the lines of battle in which he viewed “the carnage that was so frightful” (Johnson 163), and his entry into the labor camps where the ground was covered with emaciated corpses. According to Alsen and Col. Johnson, the concentration camp that Sgt. Salinger entered was near the village of Hurtingen, Bavaria. It was liberated on April 27, 1945. Sgt. Salinger was given a jeep and a driver to enable him to be one of the first

American soldiers to enter the many concentration camps that were discovered in Bavaria. The camp that Sgt. Salinger entered was one of eleven in the Hurtingen area; it had a total prisoner population of more than twenty-two thousand. These were mostly Jewish slave laborers from countries that had been occupied by the Nazis. According to Alsen, "The SS guards evacuated some three thousand prisoners by train and killed all those who were too old or sick to travel" (382). Lt. Colonel Edward Seiller, in his *12th Armored Division and the Liberation of Death Camps,* maintains that "when one of our infantry battalions approached . . . someone at the camp (presumably the SS guards), herded the inmates into the barracks, nailed the door shut and set the barracks on fire" (382). It is probable that the American troops "knew they were near a camp because of the sickening odor of burning bodies" (Bradstreet 118) which Salinger remembers most clearly in entering the camp.

The reason why Sergeant X is an existentialist is not only because of his alienation from his wife, his mother-in-law, his fellow soldiers in Devon and, most important of all, from his own sanity. The reason why Sergeant X is an existentialist is because, in addition to alienation in all three scenes of the short story, Sergeant X also exhibits Bad Faith in the first section of the short story and Sartre's freedom of choice in the third section. He ultimately has the strength of character to overcome his mental disarrangement in that he has faced a boundary situation as explicated by Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both philosophers believe that most people face some crisis situations in their lives over which they have limited or no control and how they react to this situation determines the degree to which they become authentic.

It is late at night in Gaufurt, Bavaria when Sergeant X, "opened his eyes, he found himself squinting at a small, unopened package wrapped in green paper [. . .]. He saw that it had been readdressed several times. He could make out, on just one

side of the package, at least three of his old A.P.O. numbers" (112). Sergeant X opens the green envelope, which contains a letter from Esme. This is the first letter he has received from her, and reading it makes him recall their meeting in the tea room in Devon. Esme's letter and the gift of her father's watch, which is included with the letter, "spring from Esme's deep desire to express love" (Wenke 257). Esme provides Sergeant X with the most important possession in her life—that is, her dead father's watch. She writes, "I am taking the liberty of enclosing my wrist-watch which you may keep in your possession for the duration of the conflict. I am quite certain that you will use it to greater advantage in these difficult days than I ever can and that you will accept it as a lucky talisman" (113). The phrase "for the duration of the conflict" used by Esme makes the reader believe that there might be a future meeting between Esme and Sergeant X after the war and the wedding invitation that Esme sends Sergeant X certainly presents the opportunity to do so. However, Salinger never lets the two characters meet again after their first meeting.

In the short story, Salinger informs the reader that "it was a long time before Sergeant X could set the note aside, let alone lift Esme's father's wristwatch out of the box" (114). Sergeant X sits in his room late at night in Gaufurt having read Esme's letter. Suddenly he feels sleepy. Sergeant X, having read the letter, believes that he has experienced Esme's love for him "which begins his cure by inducing sleep" (Wenke 257). Wenke notes that one of the problems that Sergeant X experiences during his nervous breakdown in Bavaria is his inability to sleep. The ability to sleep is the beginning of Sergeant X's curing himself.

The love of Esme for Sergeant X enables him to improve his faculties and heal from what he has witnessed during World War II. Sergeant X is not depicted as a callous enlisted man but as an enlisted man who is sensitive to the frightful

experiences he has encountered. The story ends with the following sentence: “You take a really sleepy man, Esme, and he always stands a chance of again becoming a man with all of his fac—with all of his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact” (114). In the second scene of the short story, when Sergeant X is with Esme in the tea room, the last thing she wishes him is to return from the war with his faculties intact. Because the first scene of the short story occurs five years after the end of World War II, and because Sergeant X is no longer triple-reading paragraphs and sentences, it may be that he is seriously searching for a way to effectively deal with his reality, which would put him on an existential path toward self-definition away from the battlefield. Sergeant X’s reading of the letter from Esme in the green envelope is the beginning of his cure. However, he never quite finds the end of it.

What Sergeant X is trying to do is to balance the two components, the social/materialistic and spiritual selves, and he fails miserably in his attempts. For him, the spiritual component is the dominant form of existence as personified by Holden in *The Cathcer in the Rye* and to a much lesser extent Sergeant X with his self fascination with his alienation from society. But Holden lacks the social component, and he knows that he cannot fill the void without compromising the spiritual component, which he is not willing to do. This indictment cannot be made against Sergeant X because his boundary situation is caused by his wartime experiences. His relationship to society, as stated previously, illustrates his ability to move up the ranks in the Army and to successfully finish his intelligence training, and although he definitely displays alienated behavior with the significant others in his life, he does have a record of a positive relationship with society and cannot be included within the same category as Holden Salinger’s protagonists, therefore get pain of life as they try to have a balance between the two hands so that they could hear the sound of two

hands clapping. All receive psychological treatment in order to recover from their traumatic experiences.

Sergeant X is alienated from his respective environments based on the evidence of their behavior. Sergeant X is alienated from his wife, his mother- in-law, and the other men in his unit, but not from Esme who represents “love” in the title of the short story. Sergeant X does not exercise Sartre’s concept of the freedom of choice in a greater extent but does exhibit Sartre’s concept of Bad Faith by not attending Esme’s wedding in England. Sergeant X does exhibit, after his military experiences, a “spiritual illness” which is challenged by Esme’s gift of her father’s watch. Salinger indicates on the final pages of the short story that Sergeant X is in the process of dealing with his psychological dysfunctionalism. But, there is no information that indicates to the reader that Sergeant X is going to lead an authentic existence, that he will find fulfillment and some happiness in life. The reader is required to come to a conclusion as to what happens in the future to Sergeant X.

The protagonist of the story Sergeant X exists in a self alienated mode which is dominated by his social and materialistic nature. Sergeant X gets an experience of frustration and disappointment in interaction with his perspective. He is striving toward authenticity and can act as a model and guide for others. So Sergeant X can be labeled as existentialist because his behavior is accurately described based on existential themes including Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s concept of death, Sartre’s concept of freedom of choice and bad faith, and all five of the existential philosophers’ interpretations of the concept of alienation.

IV. Conclusion

This research labels Sergeant X as existential hero because he illustrates that in a cruel, materialistic society, like the one we live in, it is still possible to choose to search for spirituality. Needless to say, the search will not be easy, but it takes an existential hero to take the unbeaten path and achieve that goal. In their quest for spirituality, Salinger's existential hero has been labeled as "freaks," "outsiders," and "rebels" but he did not deserve such hard labeling, just because he was idealistic and frustrated. What we need in today's society is to have more people who are caring, sensitive, and who share the same ideals as Salinger's existential heroes. This research project provides a thorough analysis of Salinger's protagonist and only after such analysis Salinger's deep-seated message becomes apparent: It is very difficult to lead a spiritual life, but it is not impossible. Keep trying! What distinguishes Salinger's characters is that we the readers see them as they are engaging on their last attempt to lead a spiritual life—through the very act of narrating their life. Salinger indeed gives us a very powerful—and indeed heroic— protagonist like Sergeant X, whom consequently, and tragically, illustrate the importance of remaining sympathetic to spirituality in a destructive society. He, by consciously narrating his demise, shows us that the quest of authenticity does not end with the end of life. It, like literature itself, endures forever.

The research places Sergeant X into the role of alienation. But it is difficult to do so from a totally social perspective as he is somehow comfortable in his society in 1944. Salinger's "For Esme" has received immense critical recognition for the way in which Salinger structured the short story: the first scene occurs in 1950 in the United States, the second scene occurs in 1944 in England, and the third scene occurs in 1945 in Germany shortly after the end of the war. It is in the third and last section of the

short story that the reader is hooked and cannot stop reading. The main concept in "For Esme" is not the concept of death as it is for the characters like Holden of *Catcher in the Rye* but the concept of love which, from Salinger's perspective, is a powerful force in the world. Sergeant X is somewhat alienated from his wife and mother-in-law, which means that he is probably alienated from most of the people he works with because Salinger portrays him as a man without close friends. Sergeant X is not close to his jeep driver, not close to any other character in the short story, and has just been released from an Army hospital because of his behavior. When he opens the green box and reads Esme's letter and touches her father's watch, he remembers her last words to him when they parted and then he can sleep. Death and love are the two main concepts that Salinger portrays in the protagonist Sergeant X. in the story.

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