**Alexandra A. Reinecke**

High School Student

Campolindo High School

alexandra.a.reinecke@gmail.com

**Sean M. Quimby, M.S.**

Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Columbia University

smq2109@columbia.edu

**The Inverted Forest: A Critical Analysis of**

**J. D. Salinger’s Democratic Vedanta**

**Abstract**

This article looks at Vedanta Hinduism in the fiction of J. D. Salinger. The article defines and traces the concept of manifold divinity—the presence of God in all we know as “earth-bound”—through Salinger’s work, highlighting a humanistic perspective literary scholars and scholars alike have ignored in the author’s canon. The aim of this paper is to use Vedanta Hinduism as a lens through which to place Salinger’s fiction in its rightful humanistic context.

**Key words:** Vedanta Hinduism, J. D. Salinger, humanism, democracy, manifold divinity

“He who seeth Me everywhere, and seeth everything in Me, of him will I never lose hold, and he shall never lose hold of Me.” -*The Bhagavad Gita*

Standing at 65 million copies sold, roughly one out of every ten people alive has read *The Catcher in the Rye*. Approach the number of readers for Salinger’s other works, however, and that number considerably dwindles. Readership of even his most famous stories, and novellas, such as “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “Seymour: An Introduction” are estimated at in the hundreds of thousands—a fraction of those which have poured over *Catcher*. From there, many of his stories, however initially published, are currently out of print.

The effect is that while misconceptions about Salinger loom large, his humanistic sentiment, often painstakingly crafted, goes unread. It is true that much illuminating work has been accomplished by Salinger scholars, such as Eberhard Alsen’s argument that Seymour Glass, of Salinger’s “Seymour: An Introduction,” subscribed to the Vedantic path of karma yoga, or action for the sake of action and not reward, and the argument Gerald Rosen makes in his *Zen in the Art of J. D. Salinger* (1977), that Catcher’s Holden Caulfield does not, as many believe, hate the world, but rather the expiration date nature makes inherent to all those things of the world he knows and loves.

It is also true, however, that little has been said about Salinger’s politics, or his ethics, and that much has been misunderstand about his estimation of and relationship to his fellow man. Salinger was undoubtedly reclusive, but he was also a man in love with this world. One could argue that he was evading life by moving to Cornish, New Hampshire, but one could also argue that he was burrowing *into* it. He was a hike’s distance from Walden Pond, after all, where Henry David Thoreau went to “live deliberately” [Thoreau, 1854] and who believed that “we should be blessed if we lived in the present always” [Thoreau, 1854].

Salinger’s fiction can be cynical, but to dismiss it with the blanket statement of being wholly cynical, as many critics and readers do, is to fail to fully understand it. To borrow from Holden Caulfield, “People think a thing is all true,” and often incorrectly. Incorrectly is to reject that Salinger, who in Cornish, like Thoreau, cut his own firewood and hauled his own water, who, for God’s presence that creature, was in the habit of sparing the livers of spiders, was a man “not just strongly attached to beauty, but, almost, hopelessly impaled on it” [Fields, Salerno, 2013].

Salinger described this tendency in correspondence with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, the Hindu center Salinger he attended in New York, by expressing that the senses were a forest in which prowled a huge tiger, and that he found himself mauled by that tiger almost every waking minute of his life [Salinger: 1973].

He expresses similar in “Zooey,” where he writes, “Don’t tell me I’m not sensitive to beauty. That’s my Achilles’ heel, and don’t you forget it. To me, *ev*erything is beautiful. Show me a pink sunset and I’m limp, by God. A*ny*thing. ‘Peter Pan.’ Even before the curtain goes up at ‘Peter Pan,’ I’m a goddam puddle of tears” [Salinger, 1961, 81-82].

Salinger’s aestheticism, his humanism, the passionate democratic argument threaded through the totality of his writing is the part of his work that remains, as his piece “The Inverted Forest,” puts it, “A great inverted forest with all the foliage underground.” This forest is best understood in the context of Vedanta, the Hindu religion tracing its roots to 500 BCE which captured Salinger’s attention in 1945.

In “The Stranger,” Salinger calls existence the “depleting joy of being alive.” One could focus on two words in that fragment. Most scholarship to date runs along the lines of examining “depleting.” I, however, choose for myself the second, “joy,” which recognizes Salinger’s appreciation for the world in which and of which he wrote.

With reference to Salinger’s complete canon (1940-1964), documents housed at Princeton University’s Firestone Library and the Morgan Library, and Vedantic texts with which Salinger would have been acquainted, my aim is to place Salinger’s fictional treatment of Vedanta in its rightful humanistic context.

This article will reference both primary and secondary sources to support the claim that Salinger’s Vedanta is one defined by the concept of manifold divinity, a concept which purports that

everything is God and, being God, deserves not only our admiration, but our democratic and equal respect.

**We, the Holy**

In Christianity, Jerusalem is described as the city where one finds oneself surrounded my “thousands upon thousands of angels” [1611: Hebrews 12:22]. In Vedanta Hinduism, the world, being filled not with angels, but with the manifold presence of God Himself, makes travel to the holy city unnecessary. In Vedanta, as Salinger clearly recognizes in his fiction, the world is not akin to Jerusalem. The world, harboring omnipresent Atman, or God, *is* Jerusalem.

“I am seated in the hearts of all,” [Bessant, 1895: 15]. Atman narrates in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The same concept is outlined in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, where Arjuna emphasizes to Krishna through the blackberry parable that not only does God surround humanity, but that He is present in all to be seen, or felt, or experienced on earth: “I see a huge tree,” said Arjuna, “and on it I notice fruits hanging like clusters of blackberries.” Then Krishna said to Arjuna, “Come nearer and you will find that these are not clusters of blackberries, but clusters of innumerable Krishnas like Me, hanging from the tree” [Gupta, 1942: 128].

In “De Daumier-Smith’s Blue Period,” John Smith, a lonely art instructor in— taken from Picasso’s portrait series of the same name—a ‘blue period’ proceeds to fall in love with the craftmanship of the students he teaches: “I am an agnostic; however, I am quite an admirer of St. Francis of Assisi from a distance . . . You paint slightly the way he spoke” [Salinger, 1953: 150]. Similarly, in “The Last and Best of the Peter Pans,” the narrator describes his mother as an actress who, despite the mediocrity of whatever part she is given, maintains the virtue of assuring her name is never, in reference, divorced from the word ‘great’

That Salinger uses the word ‘agnostic’ in describing John’s appreciation of his student’s art is important because it reveals the religious lens through which he views human talent, or that he, in other words, subscribes to the Vedantic belief in the manifestation of God—in talent, beauty, objects, experiences, people—on earth. As he poses in a letter to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, how could one refrain from such a subscription? [Salinger, 1975].

Salinger wrote once in a personal letter that he loved the ordinary act of sharing a hotel room with his children. The act of watching his children sleep as he read in the same room [Salinger, 1966]. His favorite part of New York was not its towering skyscrapers, its world-famous museums, or the stiff and orchestrated versions of life presented on the stage, but, rather unorthodoxly, the subway, in which he liked to shuttle across town on summer nights [Salinger, 1969]. He found God in a friend’s aging face [Salinger, 1969], in the Christmas weather which reminded him of his time spent in Newport [Salinger, 1990], in Prague’s utilitarian cobblestone [Salinger, 1994].

Salinger’s fictional appreciation of God’s earthly manifestation is no less potent than that he sustained off the page. “I saw a girl standing . . . submerged in the pool of autumn twilight. She wasn't doing a thing that I could see, except standing there leaning on the balcony railing, holding the universe together,” [Salinger, 1948: 3] he writes in “A Girl I Know,” with language no less reverent than the Bible uses to describe how, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” [1611: Genesis 1].

Similarly, does he appear to reveal religious awe in “The Heart of a Broken Story,” wherein his narrator lists a triage of high school boys in the spirit one might rattle off the Apostles: “Donald Nicolson, the boy who walked in the rain and knew all Shakespeare's sonnets backwards. Bob Lacey, the handsome gink who could shoot a basket from the middle of the floor, with the score tied and the chukker almost over. Harry Miller, who was shy and had such nice, durable brown eyes”

[Salinger, 1941: 6].

Of His earthly presence, Atman instructs in the *Bhagavad G*ita that “Whatsoever is glorious, good, beautiful, and mighty, understand thou that to go forth from a fragment of My splendour” [Bessant, 1895: 41]. So, Salinger’s Babe Gladwaller recognizes in “The Last Day of the Last Furlough,” in reverentially describing his old lover, Frances:

“I tell strangers about her. Coming home on the train, I told a strange G.I. about her. I've always done that. . . . Look, stranger, here is where I was seventeen and borrowed Joe Mackay's Ford and drove her up to Lake Womo for the day. Here, right here, is where she said what she said about big elephants and little elephants” [Salinger, 1944: 10].

In his exuberant sharing of Frances to strangers, Babe is no less reverent of his lover than are the Bible-thumpers who try to sell Jesus Christ in pamphlets in similarly public locales. In referring these strangers to where he ‘drove her up to Lake Womo,’ and to ‘right here’ where she ‘said what she said,’ Babe is doing nothing less than highlighting to these unexpecting strangers his own array of meccas, or holy places.

In Babe’s, and the Vedantic vantage, that he should be speaking of Frances as though she were Christ is not blasphemy, but observance. In Vedanta, it is not only rightful, but reverent that we think of our fellow man so. As *the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* phrases, it: “Why do we salute each other? It is because God dwells in everybody’s heart” [Gupta, 1942: 909]. In Vedanta, “Jesus is not the Son of Mary. He is God Himself” [Gupta, 1942: 922]. And so is Frances, as is every person and every thing present, past, or future, we know as earth-dwelling.

In “Zooey,” the Glass siblings’ mother, Bessie, remarks that she doesn’t consider her daughter Franny “in exactly the same light that I do the Lord” [Salinger, 1961: 86]. The same cannot be said for Seymour, her Vedanta-enlightened son. As Buddy recounts in “Seymour: An Introduction,” his truth-seeing brother subscribes instead to the revolutionary notion that “all we do our whole lives is go from one little piece of Holy Ground to the next” [Salinger, 1963: 248].

As some might be surprised to consider, as did Salinger’s moody Catcher in the Rye protagonist Holden Caulfield, in whose narration one can’t make it a few passages before coming across the humanity-loving oblations which, in Holden’s words, proceed, left and right, to “kill” him. His brother D. B.’s story “The Secret Goldfish” being about a goldfish kept hidden in a closet. His sister, Phoebe, writes of an orphan having a father who interrupts her orphanship. A man who talks to Jesus in his car.

Ring Lardner’s fiction. That his classmate at prep-school is wary of letting him borrow his roommate Ely’s bed. Muckle-mouthed Jane Gallagher. Calls from a Harvard freshman. Referring to actors as angels. Praising the Rockettes’ ‘precision.’ Fitzgerald’s use of ‘old sport.’ Telling a date she has aristocratic hands. Phoebe changing her middle name to Weatherfield. Calling ‘tombs’ ‘toons.’ A girl’s arm around your neck. Phoebe putting the pieces of a broken record in her nightstand.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Atman instructs “Worship Me as the One and the Manifold everywhere present. I the oblation; I the sacrifice; I the ancestral offering; I the fire-giving herb; the mantram I; I also the butter; I the fire; the burnt offering I” [Bessant, 1895: 15]. Atman, or in Seymour’s words, ‘Holy Ground’ is not restricted to certain places, like cathedrals or rosaries, but exists with such frequency that not only do we need not seek Him, but, inversely, are we to consider hopeless the crusade of His evasion. Or, as Salinger phrases it in “The Stranger,” given God’s omnipresence, “There was never a way, even back in the beginning, that a man could condition himself against the lethal size and shape and melody of beauty by chance” [Salinger, 1945: 2].

Atman is everywhere in Vedanta. And in Salinger. The author’s fictional universe, a place we would more readily accept as being the haven of red-tartan hunting caps, steamy bathrooms, New York City blocks, and men waiting around for ‘the weekend of the Yale Game’ proves itself, instead, as a Promised Land whose omnipresent and reincarnated Holy Ground makes existence what might be referred to as a spin-cycle of pilgrimages and revelations, of saints and Apostles.

Reaching to assume the copper flicker of a penny is a pilgrimage. Watching your sister “in her blue coat” [Salinger, 1951: 275] a revelation. Holy Ground is lips that “represented the answer to everything,” a knock that “on my door was always poetry,” and “the little jump from the curb” which was “such a beautiful thing to see.” A fallen olive, being a relic, is something you, despite the dust “put in my jacket pocket.” [Salinger, 1941: 5, 1948: 4, 1945: 7, 1945: 8].

Letters are that which you carry around as container, no less seriously than do the Catholic’s gilded ones, to store that “maladjusted little apparatus” of your dead brother’s heart. “A sticky little dance,” no less an act of observance than that of attending mass, is where, to listen to the organ sounds of jazz, to be among your common man, or a paper-angel strands of God himself, where “you’re aching to go” [1945: 7].

It’s “sacrilege” to miss a sunny day, as something as simple as “them showers in Mee-ami” is something “you shoulda seen,” and letters are not slips of paper but relics you become of the habit of “opening and reading it in bars, between halves of basketball games, in Government classes” and carry around so devotedly that they eventually “get stained, from my wallet, the color of cordovan” [Salinger, 1953: 180, 1945: 3, 1948: 8].

In Salinger’s world of manifold divinity, you don’t fight wars in the name of God, but for the presence of God in “mom's apple pie, ice cold beer, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the Lux Theater of the Air” [Salinger, 1948: 1]. “A kind of frozen cream-cheese affair, with raspberries in it” makes “tears come” [Salinger, 1963: 79]. Poetry “flows through . . . all things” [Salinger, 1963: 84]. You worship your lover’s “simplicity, her terrible honesty” [Salinger, 1963: 85]. You canonize entertainers as saints [Salinger, 163: 171]. “The Irish traffic cop” is a “Druidic oracle” [Salinger, 1963: 217]. “Pool . . . [is] almost a protestant reformation” [Salinger, 1963: 231]. You are in the habit of “investigating loaded ashtrays” expecting to see “Christ himself curled up cherubically in the middle” and, in such activity, never find yourself “disappointed” [Salinger, 1963: 127].

When you bike-ride, the activity’s holiness stays with you so that you aren’t sure you “ever got off” [Salinger, 1963: 173]. You can still see, “on one of the red squares . . . this tear” which plopped down on a checkerboard years ago” [Salinger, 1951: 102]. Your favorite word in the Bible is the word ‘watch,’ because it encourages attention to the divinity of all these things [Salinger, 1963: 177].

Your martyrdom is admiring professors to such an extent that you lament their never having “called for volunteers to come to the blackboard and drop dead” [Salinger, 1943: 3] in their name. The stories narrated by your cub scout leader become so real to you that elements of sheer fantasy pronounce themselves on Manhattan street corners—“The first thing I chanced to see . . . flapping in the wind against the base of a lamppost . . . [was] someone’s poppy-petal mask” [Salinger, 1953: 70]—to not only rival the Bible’s “living and active” [1611: Hebrews 4:12] word, but to become it.

Experiences others mistake as ordinary pronounce themselves holy, as they do to Holden Caulfield in “I’m Crazy,” wherein he stands in reverence of dead games of September football:

“I kept seeing myself throwing a football around, with Buhler and Jackson . . . and I knew I'd never throw a football around ever again with the same guys at the same time. It was as though Buhler and Jackson and I had done something that had died and been buried, and only I knew about it, and no one was at the funeral but me. So, I stood there, freezing” [Salinger, 1945: 1].

The only more pronounced evidence of manifold divinity Salinger presents than through reverence of such objects and experiences is in the varied portraits he paints of Christ Himself. In “Just Before the War with the Eskimos,” Christ takes the form of Franklin, the older brother of the protagonist Ginnie’s tennis friend Selena; his crucifixion ensues not on a cross, but in a box of razor blades in which he severely cuts his finger.

Initially angry at Serena’s habit of snubbing her the cab fare from the tennis courts, Ginnie befriends her brother Franklin while waiting to collect the change she is due, and, despite finding the act “too civil under the circumstances,” [Salinger, 1953: 42] partakes in Franklin’s communion offer of a chicken sandwich. Beyond the reduced crucifixion and the communion, Salinger further alludes to the Son in describing Serena’s acceptance of Franklin through reference to an ‘Easter chick’ that Ginnie left lying without disruption, as Christ is said to have laid, “for three days and three nights” [1611: Matthew 12:40].

“She took it out and started to bring her arm down, to drop the sandwich into the street, but instead she put it back in her pocket. A few years before, it had taken her three days to dispose of the Easter chick she had found dead on the sawdust in the bottom of her wastebasket” [Salinger, 1953: 52].

In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the Master narrates: “I saw an English boy leaning against a tree. As he stood there his body was bent in three places. The vision of Krishna came before me in a flash” [Gupta, 1942: 231]. No smaller a revelation of God is made in Salinger’s “Elaine,” wherein a dumb though beautiful child named Elaine, despite her stupidity, is commended for her silently spectacular performance in the school play, “The Blood of Democracy”:

“Elaine Cooney enacted the part of the Statue of Liberty. . . . She was required simply to stand with her arm raised for nearly fifty minutes, supporting a torch made of solid lead, painted bronze . . . Elaine never dropped the heavy thing. She never relaxed under the weight of solid lead . . . Nor did she once furtively scratch her golden head, which was adorned with a light, tight cardboard crown. It didn't even seem to itch” [Salinger, 1945: 4].

Numerous details in Salinger’s description of Elaine point to his implementation of the girl as an allusion to Christ, and therefore to his subscription to his Vedantic conviction in God, as the Gita phrases it, “abiding in all things” [Bessant, 1895: 29]. Elaine plays the Statue of Liberty, a figure, like Christ, considered a Savior, or a symbol of salvation. Elaine’s arm is raised for a long duration of time, as Christ’s were in crucifixion; the, like Christ’s of thorns, also wears an uncomfortable crown.

Another of Salinger’s Christ figures emerges in his early story “Soft-Boiled Sergeant,” where He takes the form of Burke, an average and homely soldier who plays the role of a Savior to the narrator, a meek, young, and bullied soldier named Phillip:

“He was like Burke, only not as good. . . . When all Burke's medals was on my chest, I sat up a little off my bunk, and come down hard so that I bounced, and all Burke's medals chimed, like—like church bells, like. I never felt so good. . . . Burke, he didn't stay for the whole show. . . . Most of the time I didn't call him nothing; the way it is when you think a guy's really hot . . . as if you don't feel you should ought to get too clubby with him” [Salinger, 1944: 2, 4, 5].

Salinger’s allusion to Burke as the living Christ is no less clear than his of Elaine to the dying one. In speaking of another man he admires, Phillip doesn’t say that the man was equal to Burke, but only ‘like’ him, using Burke in the same way one might holy figure—as a point of reference, but never as a direct comparison. The medals can be understood as reference to the salvation Christ bestows upon man, oftentimes described as being, as in the Golden Chain of Salvation, of being similarly metallic.

That the medals sound ‘like church bells,’ further completes the symbol of the medals as salvation; the sound, like that of church bells, is the sound of salvation on earth. Burke waits for Phillip outside the movie, as Jesus, in the Christian tradition, waits for us at the end of our own lives, or movies. Finally, Phillip doesn’t ‘call him nothing.’ His explanation is that you don’t get too close to someone you find worthy of respect. A better one is found in Exodus 20:7, wherein we are instructed that we “shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.

The democratic context of Salinger’s manifold divinity is clearest in “Teddy,” where Teddy describes one of his past revelations: “I was six when I saw that everything was God . . . My sister . . . 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” [Salinger, 1953, 186].

*The Bhagavad Gita* proclaims enlightenment as seeing, as Teddy does in the milk incident the “equality in everything”: “He who seeth Me everywhere, and seeth everything in Me, of him will I never lose hold, and he shall never lose hold of Me” [Bessant, 1895: 29]. The equality Salinger’s fiction establishes through divinity? Deeming the boy on the corner in corduroys, standing outside the chapel, rather than the figure set above the altar inside, he does little less than call forth a religious revolution.

During the American Revolution, revolutionaries came to each farm and barn, each apartment and each house, inquiring as to whether the residence’s male head was or was not a patriot. An answer in the affirmative won them a recruit, one in the negative, the task of arson. In his revolution Salinger is, if less violent, no less resolute.

When he was a young soldier, Salinger dove under sniper fire, and broke his nose [Fields, Salerno, 2013]. Where he might have easily had his nose re-set, he never did it. Where he might have removed trace of injury, Salinger kept the dent in his nose. This might be a point of great confusion to some.

To those who understand his vantage, however, who understand that his are eyes through which, had Holden neglected, instead of remembered that five-year old tear on the checkerboard, who wrote of funerals being due for football played in New England September, never to be played so again, who knew a knock as poetry instead of a mere pounding on wood, nothing could have more logic.

The chip in his nose was a relic, the incident, if an unpleasant one, no less than a revelation. Salinger’s reverence for this world and everything in it was a complete one. He doesn’t just see the boy in corduroys as holy. He sees him as Christ. And so, he sees salt shakers and schooners, orchids and cream cheese deserts, friends and enemies alike. To him inequity is not injustice. It is, to quote the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* “another crucifixion” [Gupta, 1942: 941].

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