

Evaluating J.D. Salinger's Female Characters Through Beauvoir's French Feminist Theory

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ABSTRACT

J.D. Salinger's books have brought new and experimental ideas to post-World War II America; for example, the introduction of the adolescent perspective in *The Catcher in the Rye*. This innovation resulted in a majority of the critical analysis conducted to be based on the adolescent perspective. However, since this criticism is primarily focused on the main character, Holden Caulfield's, perspective, analysis of Salinger's female characters' perspective has been discounted in the academic world. The lack of female perspective recognized in Salinger's novels makes it difficult for female readers to identify with his characters. This study aims to bring forth Salinger's most prominent female characters from *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey* and evaluate their alignment with Simone De Beauvoir's French feminist theory. The French feminist theory focuses on how women are taught that they are the "other" sex in comparison with men from a young age, and what situations a woman must be in to transcend subordination. The researcher designed a rubric including the primary ideas of Beauvoir's French feminist theory as described in the second volume of her book *The Second Sex* and tested the ideas' alignment with selected characters. All of the characters chosen aligned with ideas of the theory to some extent, which shows that many of Salinger's most prominent female characters occupy subordinate positions in comparison to their male counterpart. This research can serve as a basis for how Salinger's female characters can continue to be studied in the future.

Introduction

J.D Salinger has introduced many important ideas to post-World-War II American Literature. According to Stefania Ciocia of Canterbury Christ Church University, Salinger was praised for creating an "authentic adolescent voice" in *The Catcher in the Rye*. His introduction of the adolescent perspective to literature provided English students with a character they could identify and connect with in and out of the American classroom. *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's most well-known novel with about 250,000 copies sold each year (Burke), follows seventeen-year-old Holden Caulfield as he deals with being kicked out of a third boarding school, accepting his forthcoming adulthood, and most overlooked, his relationships with women.

While the adolescent perspective was groundbreaking in his writings, there is an inherent lack of female perspective in his young adult novels; especially in *The Catcher in the Rye*, since it is told from the point of view of an adolescent boy. This has created a problem with the way Salinger's novels resonate with female readers. It negatively affects the students studying his novels because they are only shown the male point of view, which excludes the novel's female readers and prevents them from being able to relate to the characters. Only much later in his career did Salinger include a female perspective in his writing. When Salinger did include prominent female characters, for example in *Franny*, the women were subordinated by the male main character. While it is understandable that the primary male perspective serves purpose to the stories, it is important that further analysis is conducted to evaluate the extent by which the female perspective is used in Salinger's young adult novels.

Literature Review

A majority of the criticism on *The Catcher in the Rye* has been focused on psychoanalysis of Holden Caulfield. Since the idea of the adolescent perspective was only newly expanded upon through *Catcher*, most of the novel's criticism is centered around the psychological changes one goes through when approaching adulthood. Holden struggles with accepting becoming an adult and losing what innocence he has left. "Holden longs to protect children, including himself, from the fall away from the innocence of childhood into the decadence of adulthood" (Recommended Reading 1). However, the importance of the adolescent perspective should not discount the application of the female perspective. There is very little feminist criticism regarding Salinger's women, and exploring their perspective through feminist analysis would allow readers to better understand their characterization and the novels as a whole.

Although there is a lack of feminist analysis on Salinger, some small ideas involving feminism have been discussed. Most of such ideas involve either adolescent sexuality, or analysis of the characters as people not as women. According to Carl F. Strauch of Lehigh University, when he based his reading of *Catcher* off of Jane's views on sex with Holden he claimed that, "Jane's reluctance to put her kings into play is not merely an expression of her desire to remain sexually innocent..." (Mueller and Hochman 80). The idea Strauch is referencing in the book is when Jane and Holden play chess together the summer they became friends. This analysis involves the sexuality of a young woman and the choices she makes for herself, which suggests feminism. However, Strauch then goes on to explain Holden's treatment of the kings, letting them "range freely over the checkerboard." Strauch claims that this illustrates Holden's lack of experience of understanding of his sexual feelings. Strauch did not base his analysis on the sex of the subject, but if the 'kings' metaphor were only applied to Jane as a woman, it would be considered feminist analysis. Because Holden was included and the claim was not based on the sex of the subject, it is not feminist analysis.

Franny contains a female main character yet still lacks the criticism to help understand Franny as a woman, not just a person or student. However, like *Catcher*, there have been some small ideas included in the story's criticisms that contain some elements of feminist ideas. For example, "[Franny wants] social and spiritual equality" (Mueller and Hochman 155). Franny gains this desire after reading *The Way of a Pilgrim* which includes a scene where servants share a meal with the family they work for. Mueller and Hochman never specify whether or not Franny wants equality regarding gender or otherwise. There is no analysis that argues whether Franny wants to be treated equally as a woman, as a student, or both.

Unlike Salinger's works, other influential post-World War II novels were heavily criticized through feminist analysis. For example Nabokov's *Lolita* tells the story of Humbert Humbert, who has sexual feelings toward his twelve-year-old step-daughter. "feminist critics... faulted the book for turning the rape of a young girl into an aesthetic experience and making art out of perversion" (Grogan 53). It is easy to understand the reason for the plethora of feminist analyses on *Lolita* since most of the novel is about how a grown man either fantasizes about or takes advantage of a pubescent girl. It is important to compare Salinger's works to other novels of the same era and experimental style because the lack of feminist analysis on Salinger shows the need for analysis of his female characters.

Since the feminist perspective of Salinger's novels have been so unexplored, it would be most logical to begin by applying a feminist literary theory to the female characters. The theory being used in this study is the French Feminist Theory, as constructed by Simone De Beauvoir. Beauvoir's theory is based on the role of women in society and how they have been subordinated by men. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains how women have been placed in a state of fundamental oppression by organizing the book into the perspective of a girl, the perspective of a woman, and the analysis of facts and myths to see how they had been imprinted on society. She uses biological and psychoanalytical factors as facts to explain female inferiority in society. The myths refer to the representation of women in arts; for example, the myth of the "eternal feminine" and how it resulted from male discomfort with the thought of his own birth.

The application of the French Feminist Theory involves an objective approach to literary criticism. The ideas discussed in *The Second Sex* are pragmatic yet complex. Beauvoir's theory combines elements of socialism with existentialism to create the uniqueness of French Feminism. "In spite of its commitment to socialism, *The Second Sex*

is based not on traditional Marxist theory, but on Sartre’s existentialist philosophy” (Moi 90). Beauvoir chose Sartre’s theory because, according to his book “Existentialism is a Humanism”, the theory focuses on finding oneself and the meaning of life in an independent manner. This is essentially what Beauvoir did when exploring the reasons for the normalization of female oppression; she analyzed the reasons for the subordination of women and the potential reasons behind them.

Beauvoir’s theory in particular will be effective to Salinger because it focuses on what makes a woman a woman. In order to study the characterization of the women in Salinger’s novels, it is necessary to understand what separates them from their male counterparts. This suggests the question: To what extent can Beauvoir’s French Feminist Theory construct a better understanding of the young female characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey*? By applying this theory to the novels, students will better understand where Salinger’s literature fits in a time of female subordination and how it has shaped the future of female characters in years following its publication.

Method

The researcher will be conducting a qualitative textual analysis on selected female characters from the novels *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey*. In doing so, the researcher will attempt to develop a further understanding of their representation and subordination as women influenced by the male characters. This study will be conducted using the French Feminist Theory as constructed by Simone De Beauvoir. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains the idea that women are fundamentally oppressed by men. Since there was no rubric modeled after *The Second Sex*, the researcher created a rubric with subpoints using elements of the theory to apply to Salinger’s characters. These subpoints would make for replicable results showing the differences in the characters’ representation as women.

“The Girl” from “Formative Years”	The character “grasps herself a the inessential” (Beauvoir 396). She is taught to prioritize her male counterpart.
“Woman’s Situation and Character” from “Situation”	The character’s situation primarily defines her character.
“The Woman in Love” from “Justifications”	The character assumes the position of the essential to the man she is in love with.
“The Independent Woman” from “Toward Liberation”	The character is free from the societal constraints to be the inessential to the man.

The rubric focuses on the second volume of the theory, entitled *Lived Experience*, because the section discusses stages in a woman’s life where she is either taught the nature of subordination, experiences situations where she is subordinated, or transcends subordination. These stages align with those of the women being studied. The researcher selected one chapter from each part of the volume. In these chapters, Beauvoir discusses the characteristics of women in each category. The chapters were chosen as representatives of each part of the volume and are described in the table above. “Formative Years” discusses the early stages in a young woman’s life where she is taught the nature of subordination. She is taught to prioritize marriage and motherhood. The part entitled “Situation” discusses the social

pressures of being an adult woman, and the standards placed on her to be married and to have children. “Justifications” describes the justifications for why a woman would view herself or be viewed as the essential in a situation. Beauvoir states, “there is no other way out for her than losing herself body and soul in the one designated to her as the absolute, as the essential” (Beauvoir 774). The part entitled “Toward Liberation” describes the situations a woman must be in to reach transcendence. Beauvoir states that a woman gains independence when “there is no longer a need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe” (Beauvoir 813). This means that she takes initiative to make a life for herself without a man’s assistance. Each character chosen will be evaluated based on whether or not they could be compared to the traits explained in each chapter.

The researcher chose the characters Jane Gallagher, Sally Hayes, and Phoebe Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*. These characters were the most prominent women in the novel, so they have enough characterization to evaluate their alignment with Beauvoir’s French feminist theory. In *Franny and Zooey*, Franny Glass is the only significant female character. She is presented differently in both *Franny* and *Zooey*, so her character alone is sufficient for evaluating the novel’s relation to the French feminist theory. The researcher hypothesizes that all of the characters chosen will be able to be applied to the theory to some extent. This method would aid in evaluating the characters’ representations, and whether or not their subordination would have an effect on female students studying Salinger’s works.

Findings and Analysis

Each character will be individually evaluated based on their portrayal and characterization throughout Salinger’s novels. Their traits and behaviors will be considered in order to evaluate how the characters in Salinger’s novels align with Beauvoir’s French feminist theory, and therefore to what extent the theory served in better understanding the characters as women.

Jane Gallagher

Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jane Gallagher was only discussed in conversation, or depicted in flashbacks; she was never present in the story and was never given any speaking roles. The primary source of characterization was Holden’s idealized version of her. The first trait he assigns her is innocence when he expresses that she kept all her kings in the back row when they played checkers. “With this allusion, Salinger may be suggesting that Jane has kept her innocence and virginity” (Mueller and Hochman 96). However, Holden’s roommate, Stradlater, suggests that he had “given her the time” on their date, which Holden chooses not to believe (Salinger 49). Holden continued to portray Jane as innocent when he described the day her step-father interrupted their checkers game to ask where there were any cigarettes and she broke down crying. Holden claimed he “knew her like a book”, however only parts of character are being portrayed because her representation is so limited.

Jane’s characterization is most aligned with the position Beauvoir describes in the chapter entitled “Woman’s Situation and Character.” This chapter explains how a woman’s situation defines her character. Holden only provides a partial and idealized version of Jane’s character, which only shows a limited outline of her as a woman.

Sally Hayes

Sally was Holden’s girlfriend, although he never explicitly referred to her as a girlfriend. Holden did not express feelings of love for her as he did with Jane, and she was only present twice in the whole novel. Holden took Sally on a date in the city to see a matinee (Salinger 136), and was present again when Holden called her while drunk to tell her he would come to trim the Christmas tree with her family (Salinger 167).

Sally’s characterization best aligns with Beauvoir’s description of “The Independent Woman.” Her character is not defined by Holden because she has speaking roles, and her actions and behaviors allow her to define herself; the reader does not rely on Holden for her characterization. For example, she is unapologetic of her interests. “Old Sally didn’t talk much, except to rave about the Lunts...” (Salinger 141). She does not limit her enthusiasm for the

play, even when Holden is not reciprocating. Sally also follows the characteristics of an independent woman by resigning herself to the constraints of being placed in a subordinate position when she rejects Holden's proposition to run away and get married. "we're both practically *children*. And did you ever stop to think what you'd do if you *didn't* get a job when your money ran out? We'd *starve* to death" (Salinger 147). Sally's reasoning and rationale proves her desire to pursue transcendence and happiness regardless of whether it is with or without Holden.

Phoebe Caulfield

Holden's ten-year-old sister Phoebe listened to and understood him more than most people. Because of this, she was the most prominent female character to Holden. Throughout the story, he thinks of or wishes to contact Phoebe; especially when times were getting especially hard for him. When he felt "lonesome and depressed", he wished he "could go home and shoot the bull for a while with old Phoebe" (Salinger 91). When he was walking around the city before his date with Sally Hayes, he was trying to find a record store so he could buy her a popular record he thought she would like (Salinger 127). When Holden left Mr. Antolini's house and he noticed the Christmas decorations around New York, he "wished old Phoebe was around" because they reminded him of when they went Christmas shopping a few years prior. Phoebe's child-like and innocent personality makes Holden feel the most comfortable because of his resistance to the inevitability of growing up.

Phoebe's characterization most aligns with two of Beauvoir's categories: "The Girl", and "Woman in Love." Phoebe's willingness to accept and listen to Holden's struggle can best be explained by the idea that the girl views herself as inessential to the male, but he is essential to her. Beauvoir's theory implies that this principle is taught to "The Girl", however it is not specified in the novel whether Phoebe's empathy is taught or natural. Subsequently, her putting Holden before herself aligns with the characteristics of "The Girl". Phoebe assumes the role of essential to Holden since she is the person he trusts the most. This aligns with the idea of the "Woman in Love".

Franny Glass (as portrayed in "Franny")

Franny Glass is a twenty-year-old college student in the midst of a breakdown. The "Franny" section of *Franny and Zooey* follows her on her visit with her boyfriend, Lane Coutell. Throughout their lunch date, it is evident that Franny holds herself to a higher standard than she is capable of following through with; for example, the guilt she felt after telling Lane she had missed him (Salinger 9), and her insistence to let Lane drone on about a paper he had written while he hardly let her have any input (Salinger). As the date progressed, Lane became more frustrated with Franny, and Franny became more frustrated with herself. After she commented on him "talking like a section man," Lane lashed out saying, "You've got a goddam bug today-you know that? What the hell's the matter with you anyway?" (Salinger 13). Franny insisted that she was just feeling off that day and assured Lane that she would "snap out of it" (Salinger 14-15). Her attempt at changing the subject and explaining that she was unhappy at school, which was what was making her feel "off", was interrupted by Lane accusing her of generalizing the whole English Department as "tearer-downers". This progressed to her excusing herself to have an emotional breakdown in the bathroom of the restaurant (Salinger 19). Her breakdown only grew worse as the story went on until after she fainted (Salinger 35). When she woke up, Lane's demeanor changed entirely; he was very caring and patient with her. "I'll get somebody to bring you some water. Then I'll get the headwaiter and call off the spirits of ammonia- and, incidentally, pay the check" (Salinger 37). It can be assumed that the uncertainties Franny was feeling about school prior to her and Lane's date was heightened by his lack of patience and consideration for her as a person, let alone a woman.

The version of Franny Glass portrayed in "Franny" aligns with the characteristics Beauvoir explained in the chapter that described "The Girl". Franny held herself to a standard that limited her self-assertion. She did her best to keep this part of her personality concealed in order to not deny herself of her femininity. This was evident when she stayed quiet but listened intently to Lane's story about his paper for over a quarter of an hour. In this instance, Franny chose to "realize herself as [passive]...[and] to accept dependence" (Beauvoir 399). Franny did not understand the separation between her humanity and her femininity, so she acted as though they were synonymous.

Franny Glass (as portrayed in “Zooney”)

In “Zooney”, Franny is portrayed as an emotional wreck. After her visit with Lane, Franny returns home. Franny and Zooney’s mother explained to Zooney that she is crying at the slightest of things and that she wants him to her. Zooney explains that Lane is to blame for her breakdown because “he’s a charm boy and a fake”, and he’s only taking interest because he’s “probably worried because he minded leaving the goddam football game before it was over- worried because he probably showed it and he knows Franny’s sharp enough to have noticed” (Salinger 83-84). At the end of the story, Franny talks on the phone with Zooney who is impersonating their late brother, Buddy. Zooney knew this would help her, and the story ends with her falling asleep.

To evaluate Franny as portrayed in “Zooney” separately from how she is portrayed in “Franny”, she would best be aligned with the ideas presented in Beauvoir’s chapter “Woman’s Situation and Character”. In this section of the novella, we get a limited point of view from Franny herself because Zooney’s feelings regarding her situation are highlighted. If “Zooney” were read without knowledge of Franny’s date with Lane in “Franny”, her character would be entirely defined by her situation as explained by those around her.

Jane Gallagher	“Woman’s Situation and Character” from “Situation”
Sally Hayes	“The Independent Woman” from “Toward Liberation”
Phoebe Caulfield	“The Girl” from “Formative Years” and “The Woman in Love” from “Justifications”
Franny Glass as portrayed in “Franny”	“The Girl” from “Formative Years”
Franny Glass as portrayed in “Zooney”	“Woman’s Situation and Character” from “Situation”

While Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooney* fail to provide a strong female perspective, his most prominent female characters all align with at least one element of Beauvoir’s French Feminist Theory. This alignment does not imply that these characters are portrayed to be “feminist”. Beauvoir’s theory outlines the roles women occupy in a world where men are the subject and women are the object. These situations are detailed in the “Lived Experience” volume and were adapted in this paper to provide a better understanding of Salinger’s female characters. The chapters selected by the researcher all described situations where the woman occupies the subordinate position to the man, except “The Independent Woman”, whose character is not influenced by their male counterpart.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of Salinger’s characters, the reader can better understand how the characters were subordinated in post-World War II America. The representation of women in Salinger’s writings reflects how women were viewed and treated at the time the stories took place. Evaluating the levels of subordination these characters experiences provides the reader with better insight on the female experience in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.

Using Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* may have posed some limitations as to how well Salinger’s characters can be evaluated from a feminist perspective. In the late 20th century, the book was dismissed by American feminists as misogynistic. It was said that “her notion of liberation...implied making women conform to a male ideal” (Kruks 94). Although Beauvoir’s writing may conflict the current implications of feminism, it is effective when being applied to Salinger’s works because they were all published in the post-World War II era. While her views of the female experience are dated, they can help to provide context to texts that reflect the same time-period as the publication of *The Second Sex*.

Since there is an insufficiency of feminist analysis regarding Salinger's works, there is still further research to be done. Analyzing these or other works' prominent female characters of Salinger through other feminist theories will be beneficial to further our understanding of their characterization. Further, there are many minor female characters in *Catcher* alone that can be analyzed through the French feminist or other feminist theories. These minor characters were neglected in this study in order to evaluate the most well-known characters in Salinger's works, however, expanding the study to minor characters would help to provide a better understanding of these women and the position they occupy in society as presented by the male main character. Finally, in addition to studying Salinger's minor characters, other works of fiction can be evaluated using the rubric presented in this study to compare how Salinger's young female characters relate to other young female characters.

The female perspective Salinger provides must be included in the studies of his novels in order to fully understand the story and the male characters' relationships with women. Including the analysis of the female perspective will not only allow for a better understanding of the characters, but female students will also be able to better identify with the novel. As shown in the results section, Salinger's female characters are mostly characterized by the male counterpart or the situation they are put in by the man. Continuing to study Salinger's female characters will broaden our understanding of how women were subordinated in the post-World War II era and how we have improved our characterization of young women in literature.

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