

ANALYSIS

“For Esme—with Love and Squalor” (1950)

J. D. Salinger

(1919-2010)

“This time the narrator is a mature American soldier, who meets an adolescent English Esme during World War II. The clear-eyed British girl, whose father has been killed in the war, asks the American if he writes stories about ‘squalor’ as well as ‘love,’ because she recognizes that her genteel upbringing has shielded her from experience of the dark side of life. The second half of the story then describes the chaos of the invasion of Europe, from which the narrator is saved, psychologically, by remembering the ‘love’ of the young English Esme. Where *The Catcher...* described only the confusions of innocence facing the evils of experience, through a recognition and acceptance of apparently ‘evil’ experiences. The mature individual must experience and accept ‘squalor’ as well as ‘love,’ and not try to ‘catch’ those innocents who rush confusedly towards the experience of what may seem evil.”

Frederick I. Carpenter
“The Adolescent in American Fiction”
The English Journal XLVI
(September 1957) 313-19

“The high point of his art, the moment at which particular narrative and general truth are identified most successfully with one another, comes in his most famous story, ‘For Esme—with Love and Squalor,’ when Sergeant X, stationed in Bavaria after V-E Day, reads a German inscription in a German book and caps it with a Russian quotation written in English. The four agents in this process are perfectly chosen, and three of them are presented simply and at top speed. The reader is told that the book is *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel* by Joseph Goebbels, that one inscription is by a 38-year-old unmarried woman, ‘a low official in the Nazi Party,’ and that the other inscription is from Dostoevsky. The fourth agent, Sergeant X, whose gesture of quotation sounds the depths of the human condition, thereby prepares himself and the reader for the salvation he receives from someone else’s gesture later in the story.

What Goebbels represents should be obvious to anyone over thirty, but surely the range of this evil can not be fully registered on the generation that adores Salinger, and it may even have dimmed in the more timeworn mind. To make any kind of contact with Joseph Goebbels is to be overwhelmed by the very type of psychotic hatred for everything weaker or more human than itself. His diaries show him to be ‘the unflinching motive force behind the vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime,’ as Hugh Gibson says, whose ‘aim was the extermination of all Jews’; an ex-Catholic, he planned to ‘deal with the churches after the war and reduce them to impotence’... It is this irresistible influence that (we may guess) had stimulated the second agent in the Salinger situation first to her Nazi Party activities and later to the revulsion that she expressed by penning in the Goebbels book that X finds: ‘Dear God, life is hell.’ To X, ‘the words appeared to have the stature of an uncontested, even classic indictment,’ and he impulsively writes a comment underneath, one of Father Zosima’s exhortations in *The Brothers Karamazov*: ‘Fathers and teacher, I ponder ‘What is hell?’ I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.’

The woman’s substitution of the Christian God for Hitler and Goebbels is paralleled by the Sergeant’s reference to Russian Christianity, and her implicit recognition of *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel*—The Unprecedented Era—as unprecedented hell is paralleled by Zossima’s and X’s awareness of the non-love that brings about disintegration and war; together these form not only a ‘classic indictment’ but a profound objective correlative for the love and ‘squalor’ experienced by Sergeant X—and the reader—in the rest of the story. (It is the young girl Esme who asks Sergeant X to write her an ‘extremely squalid and moving’ story, adding the question, ‘Are you at all acquainted with squalor?’ The Sergeant’s answer is typically ironic but correct: ‘I said not exactly but that I was getting better acquainted with it, in one form or another, all the time....’)...

The conflict of 'Esme' places the protagonist, Sergeant X, against four 'squalid' forces in the four chronological sections of the story. (1) In 1950, the present, he is set off against his wife, 'a breathtakingly levelheaded girl,' and his mother-in-law. (2) Back in April 1944, he is set off against the dullness of pre-Invasion training and the in-communicativeness of his sixty male mates, as well as against his wife and his mother-in-law, the women who write selfish civilian letters to this soldier about to be landed in France. (3) In the long year from D-Day in 1944 to V-E Day in 1945 (referred to only briefly in the story), the protagonist is set off against the war itself (which has resulted in his nervous breakdown) as well as against his jeep-mate, Corporal Clay. (4) In May 1945, Sergeant X's combat fatigue is set off against the insensitivity of the loutish Clay, as well as against the selfish civilian triviality of his brother (who writes asking for souvenirs) and Clay's girl Loretta (who sits at home callously and amateurishly derogating X's psyche).

To balance these 'squalid' antagonists there are four demonstrations of 'love.' (1) In 1950, exactly six years after X met Esme, and apparently without any communication between them during this period, he receives an invitation to her wedding that makes him want to fly to it, 'expenses be hanged.' (2) In 1944, he has met Esme, a brave English orphan of thirteen, who, nervous like X ('her nails were bitten down to the quick,' 'her hand, as I'd suspected, was a nervous hand, damp at the palm'), is also precociously sensitive to artistic, intellectual, and emotional values. (3) Set opposite X's shattering experience in the war against Germany is the simple inscription in the book that communicates to him the shattering experience of a German in the war against the Allies. In answering the *cri de coeur* of an enemy whom he has actually just arrested as a criminal, Sergeant X equates himself with her simply as human beings against the total war they have suffered in—'a method of existence that is ridiculous to say the least,' as Esme naively but perceptively describes World War II.

Finally, in 1945, X receives the wrist watch which Esme mailed to him the day after D-Day, almost a year before. It is a stunning gesture for a titled gentle-woman who is 'Usually not terribly gregarious' thus to give her father's watch to a G.I., a foreigner casually and briefly met, a man who had countered almost every one of her statements with an ironic answer. The gift, which belonged to a British nobleman [slain] in war (in her younger brother's hearing she spells out crucial words), helps restore the possibility of life...for the American Staff Sergeant X."

Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner
"The High Point of Salinger's Art: 'For Esme—with Love and Squalor'"
The Fiction of J. D. Salinger
(U Pittsburgh 1958)

"'For Esme—with Love and Squalor' is a story built around the typical Salinger child, grave, grown-up, and whimsically wise. In this case the central character is a little English girl who meets the narrator while he is a soldier stationed in Devonshire. Behind her serene sophistication Esme demonstrates all the British virtues: she is heroically matter-of-fact about the death of her father, who was 'slain' in North Africa, and she is proper enough to write a quite adult letter to the narrator after he is transferred to Germany. This story, virtually plotless, is built around the tenderness which the soldier feels for the little girl and the contrast between the juvenile immaturity of his fellow soldiers and Esme's own precocious maturity."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 284

"'For Esme—with Love and Squalor' is a wonderfully moving story, perhaps the best study to come out of the war of the way in which the greater facts of hatred play havoc in the private soul."

George Steiner
"The Salinger Industry"
The Nation CLXXXIX
(14 November 1959)

"In what has been considered Salinger's best story, 'For Esme—with Love and Squalor,' Sergeant X in the American Army of Occupation in Germany is saved from a hopeless breakdown by the beautiful

magnanimity and remembrance of an aristocratic young English girl. We are prepared for this climax or visitation by an earlier scene in which the sergeant comes upon a book by Goebbels in which a Nazi woman had written: 'Dear God, life is hell.' Under this, X writes down, from *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love'."

Alfred Kazin
The Atlantic Monthly CCVIII
(August 1961)

"Salinger's story, 'For Esme-with Love and Squalor,' has been anthologized, selected as his best story, and in general accorded the high point of his as yet beginning career. And the attention that has been given to Esme is warranted, for it juxtaposes in one story two of Salinger's major theses, love and squalor, in one of his favorite subjects, children: Esme, the distillation of squalor, of people who are, according to the choir director in the story, 'silly-billy parrots' if they sing without knowing the meaning of the words; and Charles, Esme's five year old brother, the epitome of love. Not all critics agree, but I should like to suggest, contrary to some recent interpretations, that it is Charles, rather than Esme, who is the key to the story. It is his riddle of what one wall says to another: 'Meetcha at the corner,' which is the nexus between Sergeant X and the world, and it is Charles's final, spontaneous, and insistent Hello, Hello, Hello, Hello, Hello, affixed to the end of Esme's letter, that brings Sergeant X's F-A-C-U-L-T-I-E-S back together.

The contrast between Charles and Esme is the burden of the first half of the story. The second half, in which the *I* point of view is shifted to Sergeant X 'so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me,' is 'the squalid or moving part of the story,' and shows a projection of Esme's squalor (lack of compassion, of affection) in Corporal Clay, his girl friend, Loretta in the States, her psychology professor, Sergeant X's older brother—the same squalor, magnified further, which war itself shows in the punishment of a German girl who has been a minor Nazi official. It is the extension of this squalor, that war engenders, that has driven Sergeant X to the brink of disintegration, of faculties shattered. Esme's letter, with Charles's P.S. at the end, brings the worlds of *I* and Sergeant X together at the conclusion of the story.

In the first half, the character of the narrator has been well established by the time he meets Esme, Charles, and their governess, Miss Megley, in a tea-room in England during the war. From an introductory two paragraphs, we know that it is six years after the end of the war, that the narrator is married to 'a breath-takingly levelheaded girl' in the States, that he has been invited to Esme's wedding, that with the help of his mother-in-law they have decided he is not going, and that instead he is jotting down a few notes for Esme's groom: 'And if they give him an uneasy moment or two, all the better. Nobody's aiming to please here. More really, to edify, to instruct.' The notes that give not only Esme's groom but everyone an uneasy moment or two follow, based on experiences during the war.

The narrator has been undergoing commando training at a small town in England in preparation for D-Day. Finished with the training, waiting for orders and the chance to liberate Europe, he looks out the window of his quonset hut, 'his trigger finger itching imperceptibly, if at all.' It is our first indication of what he thinks training to kill other people is worth—nothing. We know that he also synchronizes his over-the-top watch by the clock in the latrine (what he thinks of their regulations), and wears his overseas cap (Two fingers above the left eye, soldier) jammed straight down over both ears. His gas mask long ago has been chucked out the window of the ship coming overseas and its case used as a convenient knapsack. The *esprit de corps* of his outfit manifests itself in isolated heads bent over V-mail letters home, in the thoughtless whack-whack of a ping-pong ball back and forth across the net 'an axe length away' from where he sits. Except for the two introductory paragraphs, the tone has been wry, jocular—a man making fun not only of the army but of himself.

Later, wandering the streets in the rain, he hears children singing in church and enters. They are practicing. One of the singers is a young girl 'whose eyes seemed to be counting the house.' Even in a church. It is the first intimation we have of Esme's character, and it is given by the narrator half in admiration, half in amazement. After the practice, they meet by accident again at a nearby tea-room, where Esme comes with Charles and their governess. Before the narrator quite realizes how, Esme is standing

with 'enviable poise' beside his table. Invited, she sits down, a 'truth lover or a statistics lover' of thirteen. He is the eleventh American she has met. She sits beautifully straight on her chair so that he too must come out of his army slouch. Her conversation with the narrator is that of a census taker—'Are you deeply in love with your wife?' 'How were you employed before entering the army?'—or has the tone of an almanac dispensing facts—'To be quite candid Father really needed more of an intellectual companion than Mother was' (her parents become case histories in psychology); her wet hair, now straight, is when dry 'not actually curly but quite wavy' (she is meticulously exact even in a situation in which a young girl might normally be tempted to alter truth a trifle, claiming curls rather than waves).

She finally asks the narrator, even though she is somewhat disappointed that he is not a published writer, to write her a story about squalor. 'About what?' he says, incredulous, for he is confronted with a girl who believes everything can be learned by statistics, by so many notes taken, by so many Americans kept count of, by so many figures put together. 'Silly-billy parrots' the choir director had said of those who mouth words without knowing their meanings. She is talking about Esme. The contrast is Charles, disdainful of appearances like wet hair, of the facts that his sister cherishes ('He certainly has green eyes. Haven't you, Charles?' the narrator asks him. 'They're orange,' Charles says); enjoying his game of riddles; arching his back across the chair in contrast to Esme's perfectly achieved poise; covering up his face with his napkin; giving a Bronx cheer at one point of the conversation between his sister and the narrator; engulfed with laughter at his own jokes; and furiously disappointed when the Sergeant tells him the answer to the riddle when asked the second time. He is everything his sister is not (She takes his wet cap off his head when they enter the tea-room 'by lifting it off his head with two fingers, as if it were a laboratory specimen').

The last image that we have of the two of them in this part of the story is the picture that remains: Charles, blushing but determined, comes back to kiss the Sergeant good-bye. Asked the answer to the riddle, his face lights up. He shrieks: 'Meet you at the corner,' (and he does at the end of the story, saying at the corner of sanity and insanity to the Sergeant, Hello, Hello, Hello) and races out of the room 'possibly in hysterics.' Esme leaves too, 'slowly, reflectively, testing the ends of her hair for dryness'; one risking embarrassment to show his friendship; the other, worried about her own appearance.

The second, or squalid part of the story, extends Esme's attitude to other people, etching the dilettantism into callousness, into stupidity, into destruction. For what does it mean to know squalor without love? It means a Corporal Clay who uses Sergeant X to write letters home to impress his girl, Loretta. It means a Loretta who uses the war experiences of men overseas as case histories in her psychology class (Esme's treatment of her father and mother's relationship). It means a psychology professor explaining what war is about to soldiers who have suffered in it and have made other people suffer. It means an older brother, stateside, who writes: 'Now that the g.d. war is over, how about sending the kids a couple of bayonets or swastikas.' It means Goebbels's book, *Die Zeit Ohne Beispiel*, and on the fly-leaf the words of the thirty-eight year old, unmarried German daughter of the household where Sergeant X is staying and whom he has had to arrest: 'Dear God, life is hell.' It means finally the last protest of Sergeant X, scribbled almost illegibly underneath: 'Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love,' which are the words of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Esme: 'My Aunt says that I'm a terribly cold person.' 'I am training myself to be more compassionate.') And Sergeant X's faculties under these pressures being to disintegrate.

On his desk is a pile of packages, letters, books, that he has left unopened for days. He pushes them aside to use his typewriter to write a letter connecting him to someone, somewhere. But he cannot. He collapses on the typewriter. When he opens his eyes again, he sees a green package ('He certainly has green eyes, haven't you, Charles?' 'They're orange,' Charles says). Unconsciously Sergeant X moves to open the package. It is a present and a note from Esme—her father's watch (broken), and the notation that it was an extremely pleasant afternoon that they had spent 'in each other's company on April 30, 1944, between 3:45 and 4:15 P.M. in case it slipped your mind.'

But appended to the note is a message from Charles, of one wall saying to another, without thought, without knowledge, without statistics, but with compassion and affection: Hello Hello Hello Hello Hello. And Sergeant X's F-A-C-U-L-T-I-E-S disintegrating under squalor gradually come back together again. Much as we like Esme's intelligence, poise, and breath-taking levelheadedness, it is her brother Charles,

with the orange eyes and the arching back and the smacking kiss, who knows without counting the house, without 3:45 and 4:15 P.M.'s, the riddles of the heart."

John Hermann
"J. D. Salinger: Hello Hello Hello"
College English XXII
(January 1961) 262-64

"I'm for critical ingenuity and latitude of interpretation and all, but there is some stuff up with which I will not put. Like Mr. John Hermann's view of Salinger's Esme (January 1961) as a symbol of squalor, of lack of compassion and affection. Mr. Hermann gets facts wrong, as when he says that Charles, 'blushing but determined...risking embarrassment to show his friendship,' comes back into the tearoom to kiss Sergeant X good-bye. In context it is obvious that Esme has to 'drag' and 'push' Charles to get him to kiss the sergeant. But more important, Mr. Hermann has committed two basic errors.

One is to read the story in the light of a rather romantic preconception, the other is to neglect the role of the narrator. The romantic preconception is that love of truth, including statistics, makes one unable to love people. Since Esme is a statistic-lover, she must be unable to love people; Charles, not a truth-lover, is the real people-lover in the story. (In passing, I wonder how Mr. Hermann gets around Charles' scientific curiosity about kissing in the movies.) But Esme's love of truth is simply part of her admirable integrity. She is still child enough not to have lost wonder and curiosity; her intelligence has not been corrupted by wishful thinking (her cool appraisal of her mother, her refusal, which Mr. Hermann thinks abnormal, to pretend that her hair is curly when it's only wavy). True enough, her literalness is a trifle comic, but it is not morally disabling, as it might be in an adult.

In the tearoom Esme approaches X in part because her aunt had told her she was 'terribly cold,' and she was 'training herself to be more compassionate.' Despite Mr. Hermann, this passage does not put her in Dostoevsky's hell of being unable to love; on the contrary, her willingness to try is enough to save her. Esme's fidelity to the truth and her acute though unseasoned intelligence do not prevent her from loving people; on the contrary they cause her to bestow her love fully on adults who, she perceives, have somehow escaped the general corruption: her father and X, whose 'extremely sensitive face' attracted her in church. Though Mr. Hermann found her inattention in church objectionable, she wasn't simply counting the house, she was making an acute judgment of X, and ultimately the right response to him. For aren't we too meant to like him, and to think him worthy of love? If Esme doesn't love him, why in the world does she write him and send him her dearest possession, the watch?

Of course her love of people, like her love of truth, has its comic side. The nervous concern about her hair, the question about X's love for his wife, the fear of seeming either too childish or too forward, these all indicate a schoolgirl's crush on a soldier. But it seems unfortunately necessary to insist on the obvious: Esme is comic as well as admirable. Her slips when she tires to be grown-up in speech and manners, like her ignorance of Ohio and of physical squalor, are both funny and charming in X's eyes. He never tries to squelch her; he is amused, and he is also aware that her effort to act grown-up is a tribute of love to the adults she admires. Thus, after one of her polysyllabic speeches, 'I said I imagined her father had had quite an extraordinary vocabulary.' Throughout the story there is nothing in X's tone, explicit or implicit, which modifies the admiration for Esme he so frequently exhibits: for her forehead, voice, smile, dress, posture, feet and ankles.

And how authoritative a narrator is X? By Mr. Hermann's own account of the preliminary section, he is wry and jocular. This sophisticated, ironic person is the most intelligent and mature observer in the story. Without discussing X's views, Mr. Hermann accepts the position of the aunt and of the choir coach with the dissonant voice, who sees Esme and her choirmates as 'silly-billy parrots.' (The choir coach gets the treatment she deserves from the children, 'a steady, opaque look.') When Esme asks X if he, like her aunt, finds her terribly cold, the reply of this ordinarily reserved man is, 'absolutely not—very much to the contrary, in fact.' I will back him against the aunt, the choir coach, and Mr. Hermann."

Robert M. Browne
"Rebuttal: In Defense of Esme"
College English XXII

(May 1961) 584-85

“There are persuasive reasons for thinking that Salinger’s most famous *New Yorker* story, ‘For Esme—with Love and Squalor’ (April 8, 1950), is also a part of the Seymour saga—and that Sergeant X is Seymour Glass. There are certain thematic parallels between ‘For Esme’ and the Seymour stories which help to establish the identity of Sergeant X as Seymour Glass.... To Sergeant X... (as Seymour Glass) Clay’s act [killing a cat] embodies the destruction of the Buddhist concept of sentient love, symbolized by the master’s koan-like answer, and the childhood innocence of Charlotte Mayhew and Boo Boo’s cat. Furthermore, the pattern of character development that Salinger employs in creating Seymour Glass, his second major protagonist, parallels the development he used in creating Holden Caulfield, the major figure of *The Catcher in the Rye*—a kind of biography in reverse... Salinger’s characterization of Sergeant X and Seymour Glass reveals too many parallels to be accidental. Both have been in the army in Germany, both have been treated for mental disorders in army hospitals, both treat children as equals, and, significantly, both are married—a fact which several critics have ignored....

Sergeant X is Seymour Glass, and the ‘breathtakingly levelheaded’ wife and self-centered mother-in-law in ‘For Esme’ are Muriel Fedder Glass and her mother. Before D-Day in Normandy, for example, the mother-in-law writes to ask for some cashmere yarn; when Esme asks Sergeant X if he loves his wife and then wonders if she is being too personal, he says he’ll tell her when she becomes too personal—but he does not answer her first question. And his reply, in indirect discourse, ironically underlines the lack of love in Sergeant X’s—and Seymour’s—life.”

Tom Davis
“J. D. Salinger: The Identity of Sergeant X”
Western Humanities Review XVI
(Spring 1962) 181-83

“The Summer issue of the *Yale Review* (1953, p. XII) gave one highly concentrated paragraph of critical observation to the collection. ‘For Esme—with Love and Squalor’ was hailed as ‘certainly one of the great short stories of the last decade, and technically one of the most dazzling I know. The other eight stories are very nearly as remarkable.’ The thematic content, however, was seen as extremely limited: ‘one may feel that for the health of his writing, if nothing more, Mr. Salinger should become interested in something else—beekeeping or Peruvian pottery or anything—so that his characters can stop picking at the scab of their own suffering to see if the blood still flows beneath.’”

Marvin Laser and Norman Fruman, eds.
Studies in J. D. Salinger: Reviews, Essays and Critiques
(Odyssey 1963) 20

Michael Hollister (2015)