



J.D. Salinger

Context and Background
for *The Catcher in the Rye*

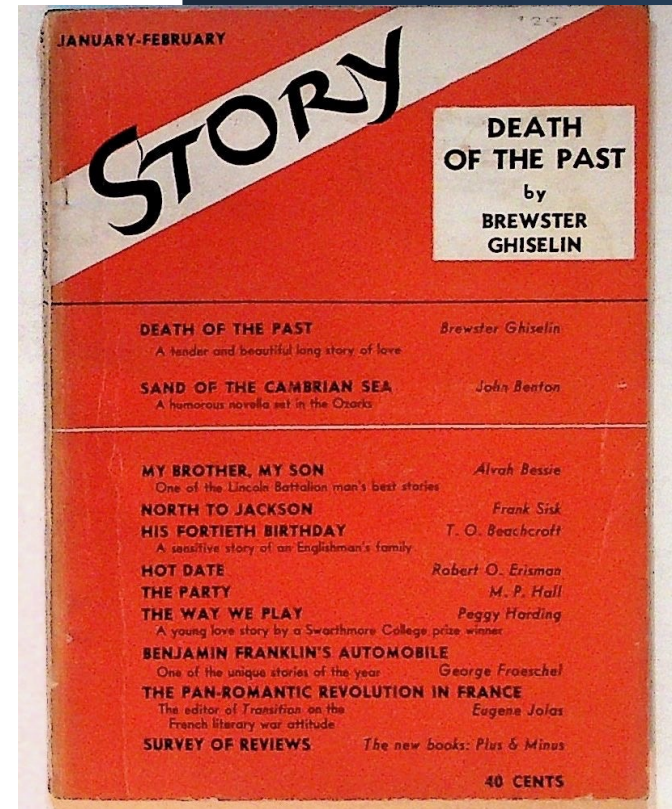


Brief Biography— Early Years

- Born in Manhattan in 1919
- Father Jewish; Mother Christian, but considered herself Jewish after marriage
- Early on attended public schools, but at age 13, his family moved to Park Avenue and he attended a private school.
- Failed out and his family sent him to Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania for 11th and 12th grades—model for Pencey Prep?

College and Beginning Writing Career

- Attends NYU briefly in 1936, but drops out
- Takes a creative writing workshop with Whit Burnett at Columbia University
- Burnett is editor of *Story* magazine and helps Salinger get early short stories published





War Years

- Initially rejected when he tries to enlist, in 1942 drafted into the U.S. Army
- Serves in counter-intelligence
- Fights at D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge; helps to liberate Dachau concentration camp
- After the war, checks himself into a mental hospital suffering from “combat fatigue”

Writing After the War

- “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” published in *The New Yorker* in 1948; introduces recurring character Seymour Glass and the Glass family
- *The Catcher in the Rye* appears in July of 1951
- *Nine Stories* published in 1953





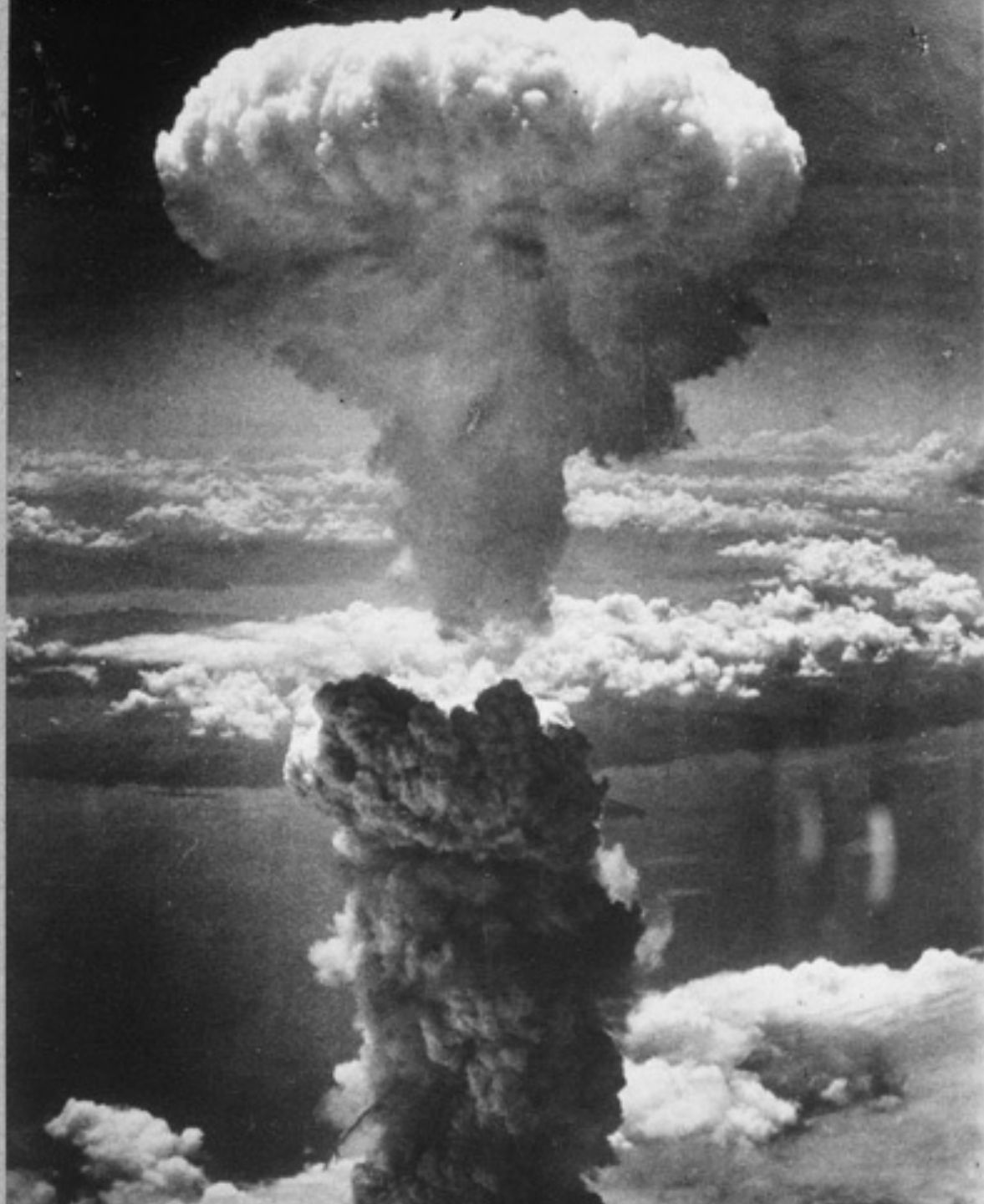
Later Life

- After a brief marriage to a German woman that lasted only 8 months, marries Claire Douglas (they would divorce in 1967)
- They have 2 children
- Salinger takes up Zen Buddhism very seriously
- Last book (2 novellas) published in 1963; last story in 1965
- Famously becomes a recluse living in isolation in New Hampshire
- Left many unpublished manuscripts in a vault—supposedly to be published by 2030



Context: Post-War Angst

- Discovery of mass atrocity, concentration camps at end of WWII
- Many writers distrusted American “virtues” of progress and power after dropping of the atomic bomb



Atomic Bomb

- Los Alamos a metaphor for spiritual emptiness of modern rationality
- Many scientists contribute small parts to creation of doomsday device
- Loss of morality

Context: The Post-War Middle-Class



To many artists (including the Beat writers) middle-class life in the 1950s seemed sterile and conformist:

- Rise of the suburbs
- Madison Avenue
- The “organization man”
- McCarthyism



Rise of the Suburbs

- Levittown in New York, the first modern American suburb, built in 1947 with 2,000 homes
- 17,000 homes by 1951

Madison Avenue

- 1950s has been called “The Advertiser’s Dream Decade”
- Post-war prosperity gave rise to new products
- Advertising subsequently increased as well
- Also associated with growth of TV
- American culture began to seem overly materialistic to many writers, thinkers



“The Organization Man”

Idea of conformity also in the world of work

- *The Lonely Crowd*, an influential sociological study from 1950, argued that Americans had become more “other-directed,” hyperaware of how others lived, what they consumed, and desiring to fit in
- *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) by Sloan Wilson a best-selling novel about corporate conformity; trying to find a meaningful life in the materialistic and anti-individualist culture of the big corporation
- *The Organization Man* (1956) by William Whyte, non-fiction bestseller that depicted individuals subsumed within organizations





The Red Scare and McCarthyism

- A second “red scare” (fear of Communism) in the late 1940s, early 1950s America
- Peoples’ Republic of China established in 1949
- Korean War begins in 1950s
- Joseph McCarthy achieved national prominence in 1950 when he claimed to have a list of over 200 State Department employees who were members of the Communist Party
- Later declared that Communists had infiltrated the U.S. Army and the CIA
- Hearings were held in 1953-54

1950s Artistic Responses: The Teen Rebel

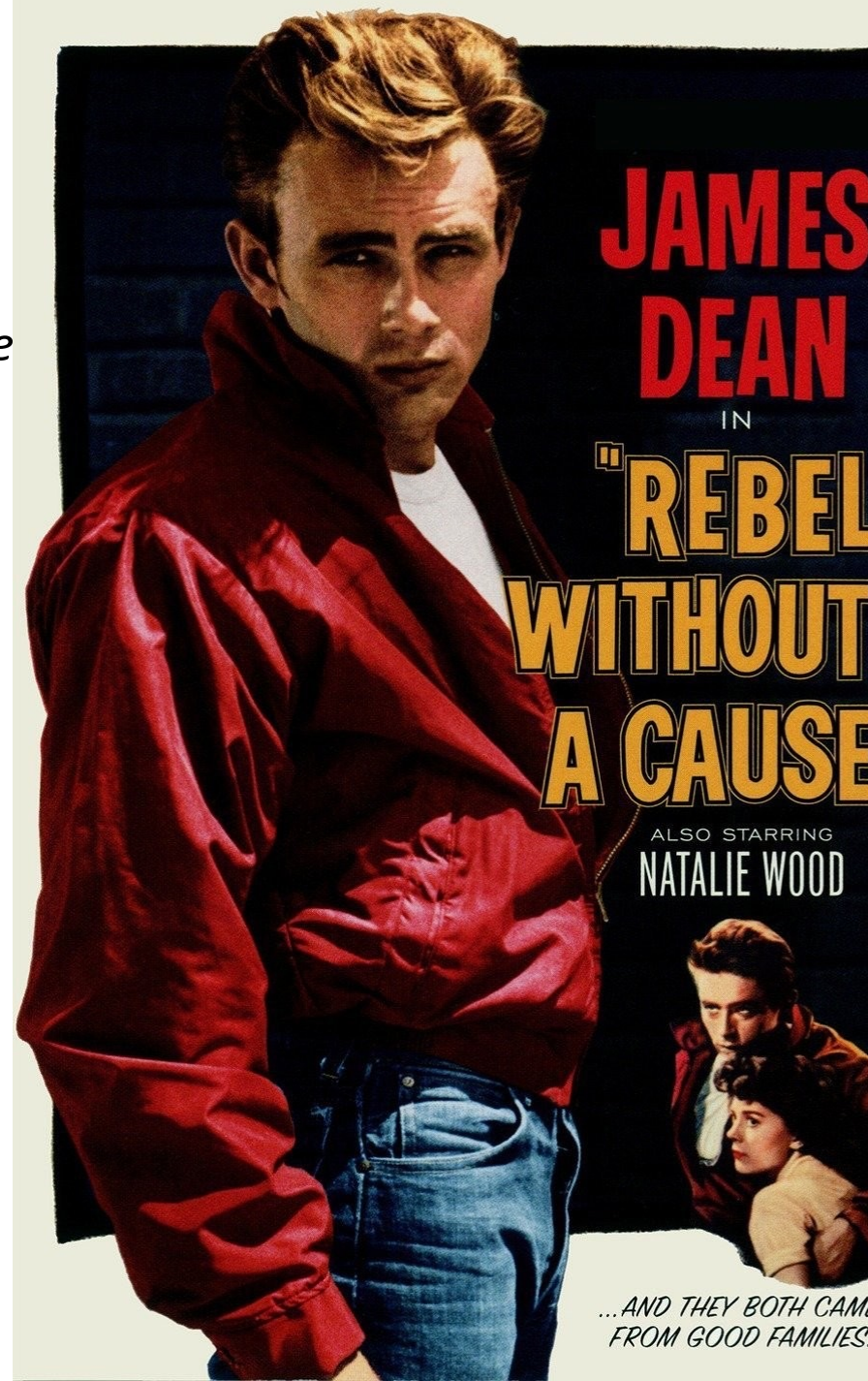
- Invention of adolescence and the teenager as an identifiable stages, separate from adulthood
- Child labor laws and the prevalence of mandatory secondary schooling
 - Only 30% of young Americans attended secondary school in 1920; up to 60% by the war years
 - Distinct youth culture begins to form as young people spend so much time together
- Postwar economic boom—focus on children, spending on childhood enrichment such as camps, activities
- The rise of the automobile



1950s

Artistic
Responses:
The Teen
Rebel

- Fear of juvenile delinquency
- Rise of the figure of the teen rebel in film:
 - *Rebel Without a Cause*
 - *Blackboard Jungle*
 - *Etc. etc.*





1950s Artistic Responses: Beatness

- Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beat writers offered “Beatness” as a solution to 1950s conformity
- Acc. to Ginsberg, beatness involves “looking at society from the underside, beyond society’s conceptions of good and evil”
- Personal salvation through heightened awareness (however obtained—drugs, sex, etc.)
- Pursuit of “total experience” by disrupting social taboos

Return to Romanticism?



- In many ways, the beat writers carried forward traditional American literary projects of individualism and Transcendentalism.
- Believed in a transcending spirituality that no human “systems” could dissolve
- Salinger himself a latter-day American Romantic?