

J. D. SALINGER

Born: New York, New York
January 1, 1919

Principal Literary Achievement

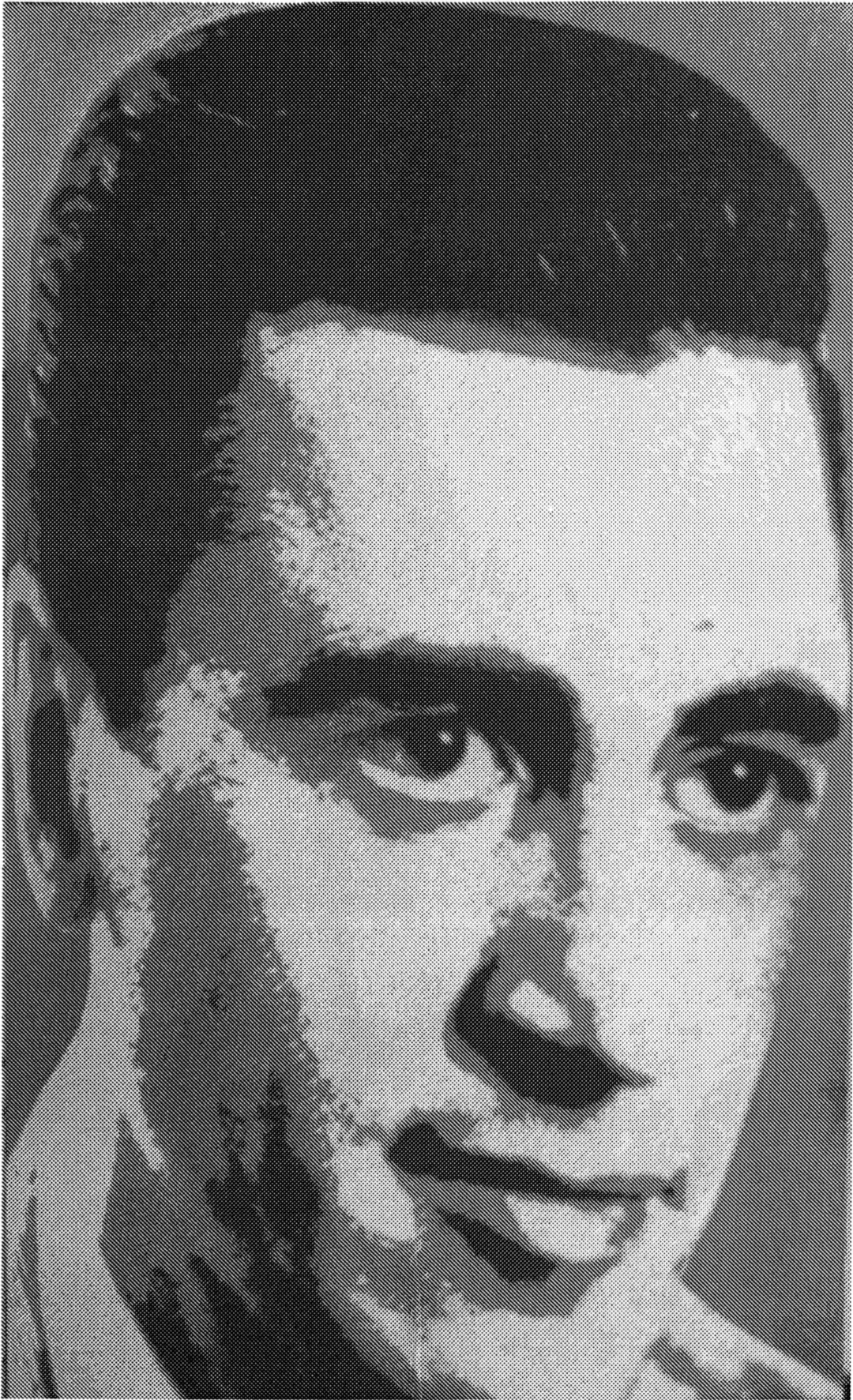
Although primarily a writer of short stories, Salinger is best known for his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, which had an enormous influence on young readers of the 1950's and succeeding generations.

Biography

Because of Salinger's insistence on preserving his privacy, and the willingness of his family and friends to assist him in doing so, little biographical information on Salinger is available, especially regarding his later life. Moreover, Salinger's habit of deliberately misleading would-be biographers with false information further complicates the picture; nevertheless, some elements of Salinger's biography are generally accepted as true.

Jerome David Salinger was born in New York City on January 1, 1919, to a Jewish father, Sol Salinger, a successful importer of hams and cheeses, and a Christian mother, Miriam Jillich Salinger. He was the second of two children; his sister, Doris, was eight years his senior. Salinger attended public schools on the upper West Side of Manhattan and seems to have been an average student. His first sign of distinction came at age eleven when he was voted "most popular actor" at Camp Wigwam in Maine. At age thirteen, Salinger was enrolled in the prestigious McBurney School in Manhattan, but he was dismissed with failing grades after a year. He was then sent to Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania, which was to become the model for Pencey Prep in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). At Valley Forge, Salinger was the literary editor of the school yearbook, and there he wrote his first stories.

After he was graduated from Valley Forge, Salinger attended the summer session at New York University, then accompanied his father to Vienna to learn the Polish ham business. He soon returned to the United States, however, and entered college again, this time at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. He wrote a column called "The Skipped Diploma" for the *Ursinus Weekly*, but he dropped out in the middle of his first semester there. He then enrolled in a short story writing class at Columbia University taught by Whit Burnett, editor of *Story* magazine. Salinger's first published story, "The Young Folks," appeared in the March/April, 1940, issue of *Story*.



Salinger subsequently published stories in *Collier's* and *Esquire* magazines, and more stories in *Story*, before being drafted into the Army in 1942. He attended officer training school, achieved the rank of staff sergeant, and was sent to Devonshire, England, for counter-intelligence training. On D Day, June 6, 1944, Salinger landed on Utah Beach in Normandy with the Fourth Army Division. As a security officer, he was assigned to interrogate captured Germans and French civilians to identify Gestapo agents. While in France, Salinger met Ernest Hemingway, to whom he later wrote an admiring letter.

After the war ended, Salinger was hospitalized for psychiatric treatment in Nuremberg, Germany, but continued to write and publish stories, as he had done throughout the war. He returned to New York in 1947 and signed a contract to write stories for *The New Yorker*. In 1950, Salinger's story "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" was designated one of the distinguished American stories of the year. Salinger spent much of this period in Greenwich Village, where he associated with other young writers and artists, and reportedly dated a wide variety of women in order to collect dialogue for his stories. He also began to exhibit a keen interest in Zen Buddhism, which would greatly influence his later work.

Another Salinger characteristic that began to manifest itself at this time was a desire for isolation. Salinger left Greenwich Village for a cottage in Tarrytown, New York (although he is said to have finished writing *The Catcher in the Rye* in a room near the Third Avenue El in New York City). When *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951, Salinger went to Europe to avoid publicity and the following year traveled to Mexico. In 1953, he bought ninety acres of land on the Connecticut River in Cornish, New Hampshire. During that year, he agreed for the first and last time to be interviewed by a reporter—a sixteen-year-old high school girl writing for a local newspaper.

In 1955, Salinger married Claire Douglas, an English-born graduate of Radcliffe College. Salinger is said to have written the story "Franny" (1955) as a wedding present for Claire, and the heroine of the story is supposed to be based on Claire. The couple had two children before divorcing in 1967.

Salinger's last published work was a short story called "Hapworth 16, 1924," which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965. Since then, Salinger has said he will allow no further publication of his work. In 1988, an unauthorized biography of Salinger by British literary critic Ian Hamilton became the occasion of a major court battle when Salinger sued to prevent Hamilton from quoting or even paraphrasing Salinger's unpublished letters. Salinger won the case, but even some of his supporters believed that the decision raised troublesome First Amendment questions.

Salinger has refused all requests for interviews or commentary on his published work, saying, "The stuff's all there in the stories; there's no use talking about it."

Analysis

Several characteristic themes are evident throughout Salinger's work: the innocence of childhood versus the corruption of adulthood; honesty versus phoniness;

estrangement, isolation, and alienation; and the quest for enlightenment and understanding of such fundamental issues as love, suffering, and the problem of evil. Several characteristic techniques recur as well: the use of dialogue, gesture, and personal objects to reveal character and relationships; the repetition of characters from one story to another; the reliance on puzzles, paradoxes, and riddles in a way similar to that used by teachers of Zen Buddhism; and frequent allusions to religious teachers and texts; philosophers, and authors and their works.

The importance of children to Salinger becomes obvious upon reading even a few of his stories: Sybil in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Esmé in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," and Phoebe and several other children in *The Catcher in the Rye* are examples of a certain wise innocence which the older protagonists of the stories seem to have lost and struggle to recapture. It is also noteworthy that many of these children are extremely precocious; indeed, *Franny and Zooey* (1961), as well as *Seymour: An Introduction* (1963) and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1963), deal with a whole family of precocious "whiz kids" who have been regular contestants on a radio quiz program called *It's a Wise Child*. The use of precocious children and the title of the program itself reflect Salinger's sense that children possess some kind of innate understanding only rarely and with great difficulty retained in growing up. This idea is closely linked to the theme of honesty versus phoniness. "Phony" is Holden Caulfield's favorite epithet for any kind of behavior that strikes him as insincere (in *The Catcher in the Rye*), and phoniness appears to Holden as one of the chief evils of the world. Thus the attraction children have for Holden and other Salinger spokesmen—they are rarely, if ever, "phony." Sincerity, honesty, and innocence are the features of the ideal state to which Salinger's characters aspire and whose absence, scarcity, or remoteness causes them such pain.

The quest for these lost qualities is ultimately a religious quest for Salinger, and his writing relies heavily on terms and concepts taken from a wide variety of religious teachings to describe this quest. Christian references are frequent in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Another religious tradition that is equally important to an understanding of Salinger's work but less familiar to most readers is the tradition of Zen Buddhism.

Zen is a branch of Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes the impossibility of arriving at enlightenment by logical means. For this reason, teachers of Zen make use of paradoxes and riddles (called koans) to illustrate the futility of logic as a means of acquiring religious understanding. One of the most well-known of these koans serves as the epigraph for Salinger's *Nine Stories* (1953): "We know the sound of two hands clapping/ But what is the sound of one hand clapping?" Just as this question has no rational answer, so many of Salinger's stories seem to have no rational explanation—particularly "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," which ends with the unexpected and unexplained suicide of the main character. By using such Zen techniques, Salinger may be adopting the role of a Zen teacher in inviting (or forcing) the reader into a non-rational mode of experiencing the story. If each reader experiences the story in a unique way, it then becomes impossible to establish an agreed-upon "mean-

ing" or "message" for the story, but this may be just what Salinger intended. In Zen, enlightenment can never be imparted to one person by another—each seeker must arrive there on his or her own.

As important as Zen may be as a means toward enlightenment, it makes no attempt to answer the profound questions troubling many of Salinger's characters: how to deal with the problems of evil; suffering, estrangement, and alienation. Esmé is obsessed with "squalor"; Holden is haunted by obscenity. Few of Salinger's characters can speak directly with those to whom they are supposed to be closely related, those whom they are supposed to love. They talk over the telephone, through bathroom doors, or by means of letters, but rarely look one another in the eye; they are afflicted with the essential estrangement and alienation that plagues modern life. The task of Salinger's characters is to overcome these barriers through love, but it is a task infrequently and imperfectly achieved.

The most widely admired of Salinger's writing techniques is his ability to create convincing dialogue, especially for Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden's speech is slangy enough to be believable, yet eloquent enough to make profound and intellectually challenging observations. Salinger also shows a particular gift for creating realistic telephone conversations in several stories, as well as minutely detailed descriptions of revealing personal gestures, such as Muriel's painting of her fingernails in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Salinger describes significant personal objects with the same effect: Allie's baseball glove, covered with poems written in green ink, in *The Catcher in the Rye* is a good example. Critics sometimes fault Salinger for excessive attention to dialogue and seemingly trivial details (particularly in *Franny and Zooey*), but Salinger consistently prefers to let his characters reveal themselves through their words and actions, rather than perform that operation for them.

Many of Salinger's characters are introduced in abbreviated form in his earlier stories, only to reappear for fuller development later on. Holden Caulfield appears several times (although sometimes called by other names) in stories published before *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Seymour, Walt, and Boo Boo Glass are first introduced in three separate stories published in *Nine Stories*, written well before the Glass family was first presented in its entirety in *Franny and Zooey*. This repetition of characters could be explained as merely the fondness authors often feel for the products of their imaginations or as representing various facets of Salinger himself, but their effect is one of further uniting Salinger's work, as if it were one long story composed of a number of distinct but interrelated chapters.

Finally there are Salinger's frequent and wide-ranging references to religious, philosophical, and literary figures and works: Christ, Buddha, Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Epictetus, Sri Ramakrishna, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Fyodor Dostoevski, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Ring Lardner are only a few. Some of these, particularly the religious and philosophical references, may be intended to point to the universality of the quest for enlightenment in which Salinger's characters are engaged. The literary references sometimes seem to be a form of

literary criticism put by Salinger into the mouths of his characters, and other times merely examples of the honesty and sincerity for which his characters yearn. It is impossible to say just what expectations Salinger may have had for his audience, since he has never said, but if he had any intention of directing his readers on their own quests for enlightenment, he may have left these references as signposts of a sort.

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

First published: 1951

Type of work: Novel

Having been kicked out of a prestigious prep school, a sensitive adolescent makes a disturbing odyssey through New York City.

The Catcher in the Rye, Salinger's only full-length novel, is the work that made him famous and for which he is remembered by high school and college students throughout America and much of the world. It has been translated into nearly every major language and continues to be assigned reading in many high school and college classrooms (though it has also been banned from many high school classrooms for allegedly obscene language). Its utterly convincing portrayal of the thoughts, words, and feelings of a troubled adolescent has permanently influenced entire generations of young people, as well as writers throughout the world.

The book opens with Holden saying,

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like . . . and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. . . . I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.

The opening paragraph is emblematic of the book in several ways: First, it introduces the reader immediately to Holden's essential character—his cynicism, irreverence, and complicated mixture of frankness and evasiveness. Eventually the reader comes to learn that "out here" is actually a psychiatric hospital in California and that Holden has been sent there for observation and treatment, not merely to "take it easy." Second, the language Holden uses to begin his story gives further insight into his character. Several phrases appear here which will serve as refrains for the novel: "If you really want to hear about it," "I don't feel like . . .," "if you want to know the truth," and "madman." Holden's language is both representative of the typical adolescent of his time and place and indicative of his personal fears and frustrations. "If you really want to hear about it" and "if you want to know the truth" reflect Holden's despair that most people really do not want to know the truth. "I don't feel like . . ." demonstrates the emotional paralysis that contributes to Holden's breakdown, and "madman" expresses his fear of going crazy, not only going crazy him-

self, but the world going crazy as well. "This madman stuff" is everything that led up to Holden's collapse, beginning with his ejection from Pencey for "failing everything but English."

Holden begins his account with a description of the school and the "phonies" in it—administrators, teachers, and students. Phoniness is one of the many things that Holden says "drive me crazy" or "make me puke," another example of a slang expression pointing to an underlying truth—that the corruption of the world makes him physically ill. Holden despises his fellow students for being physically repulsive, like Ackley, the pimply faced boy with bad teeth in the room next door, or for being too attractive, like Stradlater, Holden's "handsome, charming bastard" of a roommate. Strangely enough, Holden ends up missing these same people, and practically everyone he has met, by the end of the book—typical of the mixture of attraction and repulsion life holds for him. Following a fight with Stradlater about a girl both boys have dated, Holden decides to leave Pencey in the middle of the night and, after shouting "Sleep tight, ya morons!" by way of farewell, walks to the station to catch a train to New York City.

Once in the city, Holden is unsure what to do. He is afraid to go home and let his parents know he has been kicked out of school, so he ends up taking a room at the sleazy Edmont Hotel. He spends the night watching "perverts" in the opposite wing of the hotel, thinking about calling up old girlfriends (but deciding he's "not in the mood"), and going to bars seeking companionship. In the bars he finds only pitiful, boring, or "phony" people, so he eventually returns to the hotel, where an encounter with a teenaged prostitute and her pimp gets him beaten up. He then leaves the hotel and goes to Grand Central Station to eat breakfast, where he meets a pair of nuns on their way to teach school and discusses *Romeo and Juliet* with one of them. (Religion and literature are frequent subjects for Holden's commentary.)

Holden spends the rest of the day wandering along Broadway and around Central Park. It is on Broadway that he observes the scene which gives the book its title: A family is walking home from church—"a father, a mother, and a little kid about six years old." The boy is walking in the street, next to the curb, singing a song that Holden hears as "if a body catch a body coming through the rye": "The cars zoomed by, brakes screeched all over the place, his parents paid no attention to him, and he kept on walking next to the curb and singing 'If a body catch a body coming through the rye.'" It is not until Holden sneaks home to visit his sister Phoebe, near the end of the book, that he explains the significance of the scene:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy.

It is here that Holden expresses most clearly what is bothering him: the inevitable loss of innocence involved in growing up. Other than children, the only people Holden respects completely (outside of books) are the two nuns, who have managed to remain unstained by the world. Holden realizes that it is nearly impossible for a child to grow up in the world and remain innocent, so his greatest wish is somehow to protect all children from the danger of going over the "crazy cliff" of adulthood. For Holden, the passage to adulthood proves to be a crazy cliff indeed.

FRANNY AND ZOOEY

First published: 1961

Type of work: Novella

An introduction to the Glass family, in which the youngest member recovers from an emotional breakdown with the help of her brother's explication of love.

Franny and Zooey is actually a compilation of two long stories first published separately in *The New Yorker*, and it indicates an increasing tendency of Salinger to create stories more as vehicles for the expression of religious and philosophical ideas than as pieces of dramatic fiction. The first story, *Franny*, describes the emotional collapse of the youngest member of the Glass family, several other members of which appear repeatedly in Salinger's work. Franny Glass, an honors student in English and drama at a New England women's college, goes to visit her boyfriend Lane at his Ivy League school on the weekend of the Yale game. Lane takes Franny to a fashionable restaurant for lunch, but as soon as they sit down she begins criticizing English professors, poets, actors, and almost everyone she and Lane know. When Lane seeks an explanation for her sudden peevishness, Franny begins talking about a book she has been reading called *The Way of a Pilgrim*, in which a nineteenth century Russian peasant learns to "pray without ceasing" by discovering the secret of the "Jesus Prayer." Lane dismisses the story as "mumbo jumbo," whereupon Franny leaves the table and collapses in the middle of the restaurant floor. At the end of the story, Franny is lying in the manager's office staring at the ceiling, "her lips . . . forming soundless words"—evidently practicing the Jesus Prayer.

Zooey picks up Franny's story at the Glass family home, where she has been brought to recuperate in the care of her mother Bessie and brother Zooey. Zooey is five years older than Franny, and both he and Franny, as well as their five older siblings, were regular contestants as children on a radio quiz show called "It's a Wise Child." Both were also influenced by their older brothers Seymour and Buddy to study a wide variety of religious and philosophical literature at a very early age. Zooey is now a successful television actor, however, and is convinced that Seymour's and Buddy's program of education has ruined him and Franny for the purposes of living in the actual world. (Franny got *The Way of a Pilgrim* from Seymour's old desk, which has remained undisturbed in the Glass apartment since his suicide.)

In contrast to Franny, Zooney, Buddy, and Seymour, Bessie Glass is every bit a creature of the actual world. She always appears in the story dressed in an old kimono with pockets sewn on front to serve as "the repository for the paraphernalia of a very heavy cigarette smoker and an amateur handyman." These pockets are stocked with a hammer and screwdriver "plus an assortment of screws, nails, hinges, and ball-bearing casters—all of which tended to make Mrs. Glass chink faintly as she moved about." Bessie's idea of a cure for Franny's breakdown is chicken broth. Zooney responds to Bessie's suggestions with sarcasm and ridicule, but in her plodding way Bessie gets to the root of Franny's and Zooney's problem: They do not "know how to talk to people you don't like. . . . Don't love, really." Though Zooney fails to acknowledge Bessie's insight here, at the end of the book he confirms Bessie's diagnosis with a prescription of an all-encompassing love as the solution to Franny's cynicism and despair.

Zooney leads up to his prescription by relating how Seymour used to tell him to shine his shoes "for the Fat Lady" before going on *It's A Wise Child*. Zooney had formed a mental picture of the Fat Lady "sitting on the porch all day, swatting flies, with her radio going full-blast from morning till night." Franny remembers that Seymour had told her to "be funny for the Fat Lady" and she had formed an almost identical mental picture. Zooney then proclaims, "I'll tell you a terrible secret—Are you listening to me? *There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. . . .* And don't you know—*listen* to me, now—*don't you know who that Fat Lady really is? . . .* It's Christ himself. Christ himself, buddy." Zooney is here rephrasing Seymour's advice to him in a letter written years earlier to "Act . . . when and where you want to, since you feel you must, but do it with all your might," with the added thought that any act must be done out of love to be worthwhile and that any act done out of love toward a human being is an act of worship, an act offered up to Christ himself. Franny's response to Zooney's message is to lie quietly "smiling at the ceiling," before falling into a "deep, dreamless sleep," a sure sign, in Salinger, that a cure has been effected.

A PERFECT DAY FOR BANANAFISH

First published: 1948

Type of work: Short story

While vacationing with his wife at a Florida resort, a disturbed World War II veteran commits suicide after an enigmatic conversation with a little girl.

A Perfect Day for Bananafish, published first in *The New Yorker* and later in the collection *Nine Stories*, is one of Salinger's best-known and most puzzling stories. Although a few generally accepted themes can be identified, critics are widely divided as to the significance of the title, symbolism, and climax of the story.

The story opens with Muriel Glass, the wife of Seymour, oldest of the Glass

children, waiting for a telephone call to be put through to New York. When the phone rings, the party on the other end of the line is Muriel's mother, who is extremely concerned about Seymour's state of mind and Muriel's safety. Muriel's mother is afraid that Seymour will "lose control of himself"—evidently with good reason. Seymour has recently driven a car into a tree, among other alarming acts that Muriel's mother relates: "That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda . . . what he tried to do with Granny's chair." During the course of the conversation the reader learns that Seymour was in Europe during the war and afterward was placed in an Army hospital, presumably as a psychiatric case. The Army apparently decided that Seymour was well enough for release, but his behavior remains erratic, at least by Muriel's mother's account. Muriel herself does not seem overly concerned, but she promises to call her mother "the *instant* he does, or says, anything at all funny" (as her mother puts it) before she hangs up.

The scene then shifts to the beach outside the hotel, where Seymour is lying on his back in his bathrobe. Sybil Carpenter, a little girl Seymour has befriended, approaches him and says, "Are you going in the water, see more glass?" Sybil is fascinated with Seymour's name, and she keeps repeating it like some kind of incantation: "Did you see more glass?" After some seemingly disconnected banter about the color of Sybil's bathing suit and the lack of air in Seymour's rubber float, Seymour takes Sybil down to the water. As they begin to wade in, Seymour tells Sybil, "You just keep your eyes open for any bananafish. This is a *perfect* day for bananafish." Bananafish, explains Seymour,

lead a very tragic life. . . . They swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary looking fish when they swim *in*. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas. . . . Naturally, after that they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again. Can't fit through the door.

Sybil asks what happens to the bananafish after that. "Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die . . . they get banana fever. It's a terrible disease." Just then a wave passes, and Sybil says, "I just saw one." "My God, no!" Seymour exclaims, "Did he have any bananas in his mouth?" Yes, says Sybil: "Six." Delighted with Sybil's answer, Seymour kisses her foot. He then returns her to the beach, goes back to his room where Muriel is sleeping, pulls "an Ortgies calibre 7.65 automatic" from his suitcase, and "fire[s] a bullet through his right temple." There the story ends.

As previously mentioned, critics have suggested a wide range of interpretations of *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, but some of the most convincing look at the story in its relationship to Zen Buddhism. The epigraph to *Nine Stories* is the Zen koan, or paradox, "We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?" There are numerous allusions in the story to the Buddhist concept of the "wheel of life," the ceaseless round of daily existence from which it is the goal of Buddhism to escape. During Seymour's conversation with Sybil, the girl asks

him if he has read "Little Black Sambo," in which six tigers chase one another around a tree until they melt into butter; Sybil also informs Seymour that she lives in "Whirly Wood, Connecticut," another possible reference to the wheel of life. Sybil's reading of Seymour's name as "see more glass" may reflect the Zen emphasis on self-knowledge and insight. And the bananafish themselves, whatever else they represent, seem to symbolize the danger of being trapped in the world of physical appetite, from which the only escape appears to be death.

Seymour's death is the most puzzling element of the story, coming as it does immediately after what appears to be a moment of great joy. This paradox has caused some critics to see Seymour's suicide as a moment of triumph, of having finally escaped from the wheel of life to some sort of nirvana. Others see it as an act of surrender, in which Seymour is destroyed by the oppressiveness of daily existence, a victim of "banana fever." Salinger has left no definitive clues by which either interpretation can be proved or disproved—in this sense the entire story may be seen as a Zen koan, intended to aid the reader in approaching truth, rather than to present the truth itself. In Zen, truth cannot be imparted by one person to another; one must achieve enlightenment on one's own. Whether or not Seymour achieved it Salinger leaves to the individual reader to decide.

Summary

The stories of J. D. Salinger present complex characters—brilliant, sensitive, and prone to nervous breakdowns and suicide—struggling to retain a belief in innocence, goodness, and truth in an increasingly corrupt and artificial world. Through a combination of vividly realistic dialogue and meticulous description of personal characteristics and mannerisms, the people in Salinger's stories take on a life of their own and occupy a permanent place in the minds of readers who come to know them.

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