

Jd salinger – analysis of nine stories



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Analysis: Nine Stories by JD Salinger For those like me who couldn't find any insightful analyses about this collection on the Internet: You're welcome. I have finally figured out what this is about (I think). So the fancy book club met a couple weeks ago to discuss Nine Stories by JD Salinger. Much despair was had because of our varied and confused insights into Salinger's stories. Was Seymour a pedophile? What's up with the random last line in " Just Before the War with the Eskimos? " How should we interpret Nine Stories?

And although I haven't answered most of these questions, I can at least answer the last. So for those of who don't know how to absorb the collection, here's a little solace: All of these short stories are about the loss of innocence and the attempt to gain it back. The characters are stuck between innocence and adulthood. And, interestingly, nearly all of the stories feature an interaction between a child and an adult, the child generally being an ideal or a tool for the adult to regain innocence - but not always.

In some, even the child is struggling with the loss of ideals. Seymour Glass is the main character in " A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and he's recently returned from the war with mental wounds serious enough to require psychiatric help. The first half of the story shows a telephone conversation between his new wife, Muriel, and her mother. Their discussion revolves around Seymour's problems, and - when compared to our firsthand experience with those problems - we realize how little they grasp and how little either of them has invested in his well-being.

In the second part of " Bananafish" Seymour speaks with a young girl named Sybil about catching (mythical) bananafish - a fish whose quest for food leads to its demise. The encounter is a bit disturbing - sexual language abound -

and we get a feel for Seymour's anguish, although specifics are murky. Salinger uses every word to his advantage - in a very subtle way - and, needless to say, the encounter is quite unsettling. We have that distress confirmed when, at the end of the story, Seymour retires to the hotel room - where his wife is sleeping - sits next to her, and shoots himself.

The significance of the bananafish is, of course, Seymour's alignment with it. The fish's quest for food translates to Seymour's quest for innocence. His quest, like the fish's, ends in death. Sybil represents Seymour's ultimate goal, which is why their interaction is so unnerving. It seems, on the outside, like he's preying on her (like the bananafish does its food), but he's actually after what she represents: innocence. He gets his fill and bloats so that he can't fit back into a world where people like his wife and mother-in-law rule. They are Sybil's antithesis, and Seymour is caught between the two different existences.

It's in this limbo where Seymour - and many of Salinger's protagonists in *Nine Stories* - perish. Eloise and Mary Jane are former college roommates who reconnect in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" (my personal fave). Mary Jane visits Eloise at her house, and thus ensues a night of drunken revelations. Immediately, Eloise appears unhappy to the point of severity, and Mary Jane takes a back seat to Eloise's readily apparent issues. We learn that Eloise lost the love of her life in the war (a common villain in *Nine Stories*) and has resigned herself to a lackluster, unwanted marriage.

She's so unsatisfied with her life and her past that she takes it out on everyone, especially her daughter Ramona who has an imaginary friend - symbolic of dreamy innocence and also indicative of a void she's trying to fill

(the lack of compassion from her mother). In one poignant scene in " Uncle Wiggily," Eloise berates Ramona with incredible rage. In the end - after a LOT of alcohol - Eloise admits her weakness: transposing her anger onto others. She resents the loss of her first love, resents her loss of innocence, and resents the people who still have it.

It's really an agonizing story about lost hope, the recognition of no longer having hope, and the desperation to - if nothing else - remember what it's like to have hope. She's trapped in a sort of external realm, watching herself, aware of her circumstance, and yet not being capable of moving forward. " Just Before the War with the Eskimos" is about a frugal young girl, Ginnie, who comes into her friend, Selena's home to collect a cab fare and encounters her brother, Franklin, a grubby Holden Caulfield-type of character. " Eskimos" really eludes any obvious meaning, but it's in there ... somewhere. Okay, here goes the larger theme is war. It's the backbone of most of Nine Stories. Franklin was not drafted, because he has a bad heart, and he and Ginnie talk about this briefly, but long enough for Ginnie to connect it with what they are subconsciously discussing: rejection. From the get-go - with her demanding to be reimbursed for the cab fare - Ginnie appears to be a girl who takes things for granted; she gets everything she wants. Ginnie's not deliberately mean, but she doesn't accept things as they are, but rather demands that they be how she wants them and easily dismisses things/people she doesn't care for.

She wants to throw the furniture in Selena's home out the window, for example. Then, in walks Franklin, who is boldly himself. Their conversation begins with his rejection from the draft, then moves to his rejection by

Ginnie's sister, then Ginnie's rejection of the sandwich he offers her. Ginnie is connecting with a person who has been rejected his whole life by people like her and the types of institutions that she represents. Unconsciously, Ginnie links her behavior with the behavior of war, and in the end, decides to keep the sandwich - a growth in character.

The sandwich is sort of symbolic of the rejection Franklin has experienced in the past(his loss of innocence), and it parallels the dead Easter chick (death= death of innocence/hope) in the last line. I may be stretching it, but the story is so tightly wound that it's hard to unravel. Ginnie is undoubtedly changed for the better because of her interaction with Franklin. Her taking the sandwich may have given him hope for future acceptance, and he gave Ginnie forgiveness and a little child-like compassion. Eh? " The Laughing Man" - Yeesh. This story is a mind-squeeze if I ever saw one, but I think I've got it figured out.

The premise is that a college-aged guy takes a bunch of young boys on little " field trips" - to the baseball diamond, for example (What are his motives? Where are these boys' parents and how do they feel? I don't know, but alas ...) During these outings, The Chief - as he's called - narrates a fable about The Laughing Man, a sort of creepy-roguish-Robin Hood character with a deformed face, a sense of adventure, and an Inspector Clouseau type-of-character after him. " The Laughing Man" may or may not be narrated by Buddy Glass, a member of Salinger's Glassfamily. The boys-only outline comes to a halt when The Chief's girlfriend, Mary Hudson, starts tagging along, presumably because of dentists' appointments she has in the city. With the entrance of Mary, the Laughing Man's fate takes a turn for the

worse. The narrator notices frustration between Mary and The Chief, and in the end, the Laughing Man meets his maker and the boys never see Mary Hudson again. "The Laughing Man" is primarily a story about lost innocence. The Chief, a college student, spends his afternoons with relatively young boys - questionable, but without a doubt, an attempt to sustain his youth.

Immediately, with the entrance of Mary Hudson, the narrator senses stress between her and the Chief. The Laughing Man symbolizes boyhood and innocence, and when Mary Hudson arrives, the Laughing Man's fate becomes less certain. Thanks to Wikipedia, a plausible explanation would be that Mary Hudson is pregnant and is actually coming into the city for doctor's visits, not dentist appointments. (Who has frequent dentist appointments?) This is most likely the case, but it's irrelevant. The moral of the story - and what the Chief is teaching the boys through the Laughing Man's story - is that boyhood ends. Innocence ends.

Kind of depressing, but there it is, consistent with the rest of Nine Stories. "Down at the Dinghy" opens with two house servants discussing Lionel, the son of Boo Boo Glass (their employer). (Another Glass appearance - woohoo!) We gather from their conversation that Lionel has a penchant for running away. One of them is also concerned that Lionel will repeat something she said (apparently, he has a penchant for that as well). Thus, after Boo Boo arrives at the house, speaks with the women for a moment, and goes down to the pier to see Lionel, he's trying to sail away. Where the Wild Things Are? anyone?

The rest of the story is devoted to Boo Boo's attempt to entice Lionel back to shore, as it were. She tries to go with him, tries to find out why he's leaving

(one of the house servants called his dad a kike), and then finally challenges him to a race back to the house. (Lionel wins.) " Down at the Dinghy" is so understated that it seems like a " day-in-the-life. " But Salinger isn't a " day-in-the-life" kinda guy. Sooooooooooooo I'm gonna squeeze this baby open. Two instances in this story are noticeably darker than the rest: the housekeeper calling Lionel's father a kike and Lionel wearing Seymour's goggles. Seymour was Boo Boo's brother). Now, Lionel's problem isn't as shallow as " a boy with a penchant for running away. " These two instances are more significant than the anatomy of " Down at the Dinghy" would lead you to believe. This young boy has recently (I'm assuming) lost his uncle, and additionally, he believes that other people think poorly of his father. It's a double-blow, and Lionel reacts by running away. What seems like a story about a kid just being a kid, read from this perspective, transforms into a story about a person grappling with the loss of ideals.

Lionel is realizing that the world is not as it seems; there's more going on. I believe he feels blindsided. Lionel throwing Seymour's goggles into the water is so significant, because he's disposing of distractions from the truth. Finally, Boo Boo coaxes him back into being a kid, distracts him from his disillusionment. So there is Lionel, another of Salinger's characters who is straddling the line between innocence and adulthood. " For Esme - with Love and Squalor" is one of Salinger's more obvious stories. During the war, Sergeant X recollects his brief but impressionable meeting with Esme, a young girl in a restaurant before the war. Esme" is totally simple, thus it doesn't need to be dissected; I don't even need to give you a rundown of their interaction. Basically, Esme represents innocence for Sergeant X during

the war, a time of "squalor" and adult concerns. Innocence and squalor both constitute the sergeant's existence. "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" relates a phone call between Lee and Arthur. Arthur believes his wife, Joanie, is having an affair, while we're led to believe that the woman with Lee is in fact Joanie. Arthur's life appears to be in shambles (lost a court case, wifecheating on him, etc. , but soon after the two men hang up, Arthur calls Lee back and makes up a story about Joanie coming back home even though she's still with Lee. Arthur is, for all intents and purposes, a man who prides himself on having a trophy job and a trophy wife, two naive ideals. When those ideals are torn down - in a sheer act of childish pride - Arthur pretends they still exist. This would generally go unnoticed, but is readily apparent to Lee and Joanie, hence why Salinger chose to tell the story through their points of view. "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" is about a pretentious young man (De Daumier) who fakes his way into a professorship at an art school. Once there, he reviews his pupils' work and is struck by a religious painting by a nun. That's basically it. De Daumier-Smith is a wayfarer, devoid of spirituality and ideals, extremely pretentious and this piece of art forces him to question his convictions. "Blue Period" is about a man who pretends to be a complex "adult" but is stripped of his pretensions through an artist who evokes spirituality and idealism. "Teddy" is a boy genius/profit who has an existential conversation aboard a ship with Nicholson, a curious grad student. Teddy believes in past lives and karma, and - from what I know about Salinger - represents his spirituality du jour. Salinger, in every one of his Nine Stories, is painting innocence the protagonist and adulthood the villain but is concerned with those characters torn between the two. "Teddy" rounds out the collection nicely, because its main character lives and dies by

his ideals. Teddy is the martyr of Nine Stories and he's meant to be the example for its characters, readers, and even its author.

More analysis: Moon By Chaim Potok