

The difficulty of true communication essay sample

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Throughout “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” characters struggle to communicate with one another, and each attempt is fraught with difficulty. Muriel and her mother engage in a haphazard conversation in which Muriel never really hears her mother’s worries and Muriel’s mother never really hears Muriel’s reassurances that she is fine. The two women talk at rather than with each other, and neither woman succeeds in truly communicating her thoughts to the other.

When Muriel attempts to talk with the psychiatrist at the resort, their communication is hindered by the noise around them. Seymour is entirely unable to communicate with other people at the resort, preferring to sit alone playing the piano or spend time at the beach rather than try to enter into a society in which he feels like an outsider. Sybil’s mother fails to communicate with Sybil clearly, believing that Sybil says “see more glass” when she is actually talking about Seymour Glass. Only Sybil and Seymour seem able to communicate effectively, although their discourse is on a child’s, not an adult’s, level.

Though Muriel and Seymour do not speak with each other in the story, their communication is so fraught as to be nonexistent. Muriel has no idea what is really going on in Seymour’s mind, and Seymour seemingly has no desire to explain to her how he feels. The most tragic lack of communication is Muriel’s mistaken certainty that Seymour’s mental health is fine. Seymour’s violent suicide is, perhaps, the one truly successful act of adult communication in the story, the one gesture that cannot be misread or ignored.

The Futile Search for Innocence

Seymour hovers uncomfortably between the world of adult sexuality and world of childhood innocence. Scarred from his experiences in the war and suffering from psychological distress, Seymour finds refuge in children. Innocent and simple, they exist in a world that is free from adult suffering and greed. Unlike Muriel, who is fixated on appearances and class, Sybil can communicate with Seymour in a way that calms him. By speaking Sybil's language, Seymour may hope to reconnect to or return to a childlike, innocent state. Children and their world seem to hold the possibility of redemption.

A return to innocence proves to be impossible for Seymour. Though he is clearly distanced from Muriel emotionally, she is very much physically present. Their hotel room is suffused with the scents of her calfskin luggage and nail polish remover, and the physical space they share—in the car as they drove to Florida, in their hotel room, and at the resort—is small. Seymour's self-isolation is temporary at best, as he opts out of parties to play the piano or retreats to the beach. The world of childhood innocence has long been lost for Seymour, and he chooses suicide as an escape from the oppressive adult world in which he must otherwise live as an outsider.

Motifs

Materialism

Salinger is critiquing the shallowness of materialism through Muriel and her world of wealth. Each time we see Muriel, she is luxuriating in wealth—she

wears a white silk dressing gown, fixes her Saks blouse, meticulously paints her nails, and uses fine leather luggage. Seymour tells Sybil that Muriel may be getting her hair dyed “mink.” These suggestions of a luxurious lifestyle demonstrate the divide between Muriel and Seymour. She reads women’s magazines while Seymour reads poetry. She is more concerned with her clothes and the current fashion trends than with her husband’s emotional and psychological problems. Even when she and her mother are discussing Seymour’s erratic, dangerous behavior and unstable mental state, the talk keeps floating back to fashion and idle gossip. Muriel’s obsession with material goods alienates Seymour from Muriel and her world, just as Mrs. Carpenter’s indulgence in martinis and gossip shuts out Sybil.

Seeing

The idea of seeing permeates “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Seymour’s name sounds like “see more,” a confusion that Sybil’s mother falls prey to when Sybil talks to her about “see more glass.” Sybil’s name also references seeing; in Greek mythology, a sibyl was a seer. Seymour, or “see more,” suggests that Seymour is literally able to see more than other people. Because of his traumatic experiences in the war, he has a greater understanding of life and can recognize the materialism and superficiality of the world around him. Like Seymour, Sybil can see what others cannot, though her openness is a function of her childishness rather than of trauma and regret. She easily sees the imaginary bananafish that Seymour tells her about and is therefore able to “see” Seymour in a way the adults in his life cannot.

Symbols

Bananafish

Bananafish, the imaginary creatures that gorge themselves on bananas and then die of banana fever, represent Seymour and his struggles to reengage with society after returning from the war. Seymour, an outsider in a world that seems to be guided by materialism, greed, and pettiness, has no real outlet for the complicated emotions he carries around inside him. He has been psychologically damaged by the war and, having been released early from the Army hospital, is clearly not getting the care he needs. Muriel and her family exist in a world he does not understand, and his behavior in that world is inappropriate, disturbing, and dangerous. His devotion to Sybil and other children reveals his heartbreaking yearning for innocence and clarity, feelings that have no outlet in the adult world. Just as the bananafish become too fat to leave their holes, Seymour is “ fat” from the overflow of painful emotions he cannot express. At the end of the story, he, like the bananafish, dies.