

Healing innocence



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In J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*, the author forces his readers to think and reflect, and to avoid simply taking any story at its face value. This is exemplified by the Zen koan he places at the very beginning of the book. Though we are never actually meant to solve the mystery behind every story (just as we aren't meant to solve the koan), we can certainly make observations and explore the rich ideas set before us. For one, Salinger juxtaposes the innocence of childhood with the corruption of adulthood, creating a powerful recurring theme in *Nine Stories*. In this manner, he elucidates the sad reality that the world in which we live is a breeding ground for the corrosiveness of adult preoccupations (such as war, material possessions, and racism), a corrosiveness that eats away at the purity and innocence of childhood. "Perfect Day for Bananafish" starts off in the world of materialism, consumerism, and sex. The first scene depicts 97 New York advertising men staying in a hotel where a girl wearing a Saks blouse is reading a magazine article titled "Sex is Fun-or Hell." Within moments, war is introduced: we learn from the girl's phone conversation that her husband, Seymour Glass, was a soldier in World War II and suffered extensive psychological damage; he was hospitalized and released, but the girl's mother remarks that Seymour would drive with "funny business around the trees" (5) and still "may completely lose control of himself" at any time (6). We are subsequently introduced to Sybil Carpenter, a young girl whose family is staying at the same hotel. Seymour tells Sybil a story about bananafish (very likely a reflection upon his own past experiences in WWII), saying that "They 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...they're so fat they can't get

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out of the hole again” (15-16). Seymour himself is the “bananafish” in this story: upon entering the abyss of war, he witnessed the animalistic savagery of men (and probably had to take part in this savagery himself), and now realizes that he has seen and done too much to ever be able to escape from that experience. Sybil, young though she may be, is already showing signs of adulthood. When she learns that Seymour allowed Sharon Lipschutz to sit with him on the piano seat, she declares that he should have pushed Sharon off of the seat. She also asks Seymour whether he likes Sharon, and after he says that he does, she immediately falls silent. This silence confirms that, like any female adult, Sybil is envious that another female is receiving attention from her male companion. Shortly thereafter, Seymour returns to his room, retrieves his gun, and shoots himself. This final act of desperation seems to spring from his realization that the war has taken a part of him-his innocence-and that he can never be the same again. It is also possible that he realizes that his young friend Sybil is, in a way, beginning to lose her innocence as well. These inevitable and irreversible losses prove too overwhelming for Seymour, precipitating his untimely demise. In “Connecticut”, Uncle Wiggly also deals with corruption-and particularly the corruption caused by materialistic desire. Eloise is obviously well-to-do-she sports a camel’s-hair coat and employs a maid-but even with these material possessions at her disposal, she is still unhappy: “There isn’t one damn pillow in this house that I can stand” (23). She has a markedly condescending attitude towards the black maid, and accuses her of being lazy: “She’s sitting on her big, black butt...” (22). All of this tension seems to stem from the fact that Eloise is dissatisfied with her marriage: her husband is a pretentious man whom she probably married only because he was rich.

Her true love was a good-humored soldier named Walt who always made her laugh, but he was killed in the war. Over time, Walt became idealized in her mind as the one perfect companion for her-the perfect companion she would never be able to have. This reality haunts Eloise, and she tries to escape her pain by chain-smoking and drinking herself into oblivion. Eloise even develops animosity towards her own daughter, Ramona, whom she constantly critiques, ordering her to stand up straighter and not scratch herself. It is possible that this profound sense of discontentment is the consequence of Ramona's physical flaw-she has heavily impaired vision-but it is more likely attributed to the fact that Ramona has an imaginary friend. That night, when she sees Ramona sleeping on the edge of her bed (in an effort to leave room for her imaginary friend), Eloise, in a half-drunken rage, forces her daughter to sleep in the center of the bed and effectively destroys Ramona's fantasy. After some thought, Eloise realizes what she has done: she has stolen away the innocence of her child. When she tearfully pleads to Mary Jane, " I was a nice girl, wasn't I?" Eloise essentially admits that she has been corrupted by her material surroundings: her clothes, her home, and her alcohol. She knows that she is unhappy with her life, and she knows that she forced this unhappiness upon her daughter, thereby taking away her innocence. " Down at the Dinghy" also focuses on the scourge of materialism, but the corruption in this story is the direct result of racism. Sandra, one of the household maids, says to Mrs. Snell about their boss's son Lionel: " Only, it drives ya loony, the way that kid goes pussyfootin' all around the house...I mean ya gotta weigh every word ya say around him" (75). Sandra then proceeds to make an anti-Semitic remark: " He's gonna have a nose just like the father" (76). Lionel has been known to run away and hide whenever he is

in distress since the age of two-and-a-half, for reasons ranging from finding out that there is a worm in his friend's thermos bottle to being told that he stinks. He has now run away again, and his mother Boo Boo finds him hiding in his father's dinghy. Boo Boo pretends that she is an admiral and tries to come into the dinghy with Lionel, but he refuses to let her in, explaining simply that "nobody can come in" (84). When Boo Boo threatens to throw his keychain into the lake but finally gives it to him, Lionel breaks down into tears. He reveals the secret which has been bothering him so much: "Sandra-told Mrs. Smell-that Daddy's a big sloppy-kike" (86). Boo Boo comforts her son and races him home, thereby helping him to win. It seems as if Lionel has lost his innocence after witnessing anti-Semitism firsthand. However, since he doesn't really know what exactly a "kike" is, he is not affected to the degree he might have been were he older; he merely perceives the negative associations of the word in Sandra's tone of voice. The situation is further ameliorated by Boo Boo, who helps heal this wound, taking Lionel's mind back to a place of childhood innocence and freeing him from the burden of what he has heard. Boo Boo essentially restores Lionel to his former self, helping him retain his previous innocence. In Salinger's *Nine Stories* there is a constant juxtaposition of adult corruption and childhood innocence. In Sybil Carpenter's case, her adult feelings of envy arise independently of Seymour's own loss of innocence, while Ramona's innocence is taken away by her corrupted mother. Quite the opposite situation occurs between Lionel and Boo Boo: Lionel is on the verge of losing his innocence, but his mother helps pull him back by taking his mind away from the corruption and returning him to the childhood realm of innocence. Perhaps Salinger is suggesting that although adult corruption may be

powerful in its destructiveness, childhood innocence can be even more powerful, and can prevail in its ability to heal and rebuild.