

Summer 2020

# Nine Stories and the Society of the Spectacle: An Exploration into the Alienation of the Individual in the Post-War Era

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*NINE STORIES* AND THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE: AN EXPLORATION INTO  
THE ALIENATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE POST-WAR ERA

by

MARGARET ELIZABETH GEDDY

(Under the Direction of Olivia Carr Edenfield)

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the thematic links between three of J. D. Salinger's short stories published in *Nine Stories* ("A Perfect Day for Bananafish," "Down at the Dinghy," and "Teddy"), ultimately arguing that it is a short-story cycle rooted in the quandary posed by the suicide of Seymour Glass. This conclusion is reached by assessing the influence of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" on these stories, something that is understood through the Marxist frame of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*.

INDEX WORDS: J. D. Salinger, *Nine Stories*, Society of the Spectacle, World War II, Materialism, Consumerism, Isolation, A Perfect Day for Bananafish, Down at the Dinghy, Teddy

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2018

M. A., Georgia Southern University, 2020

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

COLLEGE OF ARTS & HUMANITIES

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Electronic Version Approved:  
July 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would never have been able to complete this work without the support of my committee, family, and friends. I am eternally grateful for your unwavering confidence in me, especially when it was hard to find within myself.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“I have heard the key  
 Turn in the door once and turn once only  
 We think of the key, each in his prison  
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison”  
 (“The Waste Land,” T. S. Eliot 412-15)*

Few authors introduce the main character of their fiction with their suicide, yet this is the way J. D. Salinger chose for post-war America to meet the tragic hero of the Glass family, Seymour. “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” is set in Florida, where he and his wife, Muriel, are vacationing for their sixth anniversary. The story begins with a phone call between Muriel and her mother concerning Seymour’s recent erratic behavior; while this discussion is taking place, Seymour is lying alone on the beach far from the hotel. After a peculiar conversation with a young girl named Sybil, Seymour returns to the hotel room where Muriel is asleep; there, he removes a pistol hidden in his luggage, looks at her, and shoots himself in the temple. Shocking and controversial, critics have puzzled over its conclusion since Salinger originally published it in the *New Yorker* on January 31, 1948. Not only is it one of his most well-known pieces aside from *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), “Bananafish” is one of the first short stories he ever published successfully, and its enormous popularity led to his exclusive contract<sup>1</sup> with *The New Yorker*.

The same year Salinger withdrew from the public eye of New York City and moved to his Cornish home, “Bananafish” resurfaced as the first of the ambiguously titled *Nine Stories* (1953). Salinger’s only collection of short fiction, it features the stories he considered his best in the order they originally appeared in print.<sup>2</sup> Since each one can be read as a self-contained work, much of the criticism on *Nine Stories* treats it as a group of disconnected narratives, but there are others who argue that it is a short-story cycle,<sup>3</sup> united thematically and linguistically. Ruth

Prigozy defines one of its main concerns to be “the plight of sensitive outsiders alienated by a society unable or unwilling to recognize and value their special qualities” (92), a concept epitomized by Seymour’s suicide. This alienation he feels from the people around him is expressed through his quotation of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land,” laying the thematic foundation for the rest of the cycle. J. Gerald Kennedy argues that the connection “between two conjoined narratives [in a short story cycle] ... generates supplemental meanings distinguishable from the collection as a whole” (16-7); although each piece in *Nine Stories* demonstrates how the materialism of post-WWII society led to the isolation of the individual, considering the relationship between “Bananafish,” “Down at the Dinghy,” and “Teddy” provides another way to understand Seymour’s suicide.

## CHAPTER 2

## RECOGNIZING THE SPECTACLE:

## “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”

Seymour Glass feels disconnected from those around him and adrift in an alien world after returning home from World War II, an isolation Salinger expresses through his allusions to T. S. Eliot. While on the beach with Sybil, Seymour casually quotes “The Waste Land” when he says, “Ah, Sharon Lipschutz... How that name comes up. Mixing memory and desire” (19), causing critics to theorize about the meaning behind this line.<sup>4</sup> Brad McDuffie discusses its importance in his chapter on this story, stating that one of “the central ways that Salinger invites the reader to ‘see more’ in ‘Bananafish’ is through the allusions he makes to ‘The Waste Land’” (23). Through Salinger’s reference to Eliot’s poem on the emptiness the poet felt in the wake of the First World War, the text reveals how to “see more” (15) of what Seymour cannot stop seeing: the gluttonous consumerism that began at the conclusion of World War II. Joseph Thompson supports this reading, noting that “at the advent and conclusion of the Second World War, the horror had not yet subsided or altered, proving the persistence of the waste created by these new modern wars” (212). The desolation Eliot expresses in “The Waste Land” was not solved with the Second World War, but was instead advanced by it, and out of this waste came the society of the spectacle.

*The Society of the Spectacle*, a controversial work of social theory published in 1967, is a useful framework for understanding how Seymour’s world operates. Written by French cultural theorist Guy Debord, it is a Marxist critique of capitalism and the negative toll it takes on modern society. He opens his argument with the statement, “life in societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*” (12).

An integral aspect of modern society, Debord defines the spectacle as “that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated – and precisely for that reason – this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness” (12). While the spectacle mediates social relationships through images, Debord explains that it is best understood as “a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force” (12-3). This results in a constant feeling of alienation from participants as they become reliant on this fabricated *weltanschauung* to construct their reality; Debord argues that the more a spectator recognizes their “own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less [they] understand [their] own existence and desires,” causing them eventually to realize that they feel “at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere” (23). This description of a society that is focused more on appearances than its reality aligns perfectly with the materialistic world in which Seymour has found himself, detached and suicidal.

Muriel is an excellent example of someone who fully participates in the society of the spectacle. She is introduced in the opening scene, where she is trying to place a call to her mother. There are “ninety-seven New York advertising men in the hotel... monopolizing the long-distance lines” (3), and Muriel must wait almost two and a half hours for her call to go through. Salinger specifies that she “used the time though” (3), implying that time would have been wasted were she not keeping herself busy during her wait. Prigozy remarks that “the opening paragraphs... define Muriel with withering precision” (94); after reading an article in a women’s magazine titled “Sex is Fun – or Hell,” she “washed her comb and brush... took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit... moved the button on her Saks blouse... [and] tweezed two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole” (3). All actions focused on her appearance, this is a depiction of Muriel as superficial and self-absorbed, which is confirmed the second the phone

rings. Described as a “girl who for a ringing phone dropped absolutely nothing” (3-4), she paints her nails while the phone continues to ring, “accentuating the line of the moon” before she finally picks it up on “the fifth or sixth ring” (4). This behavior shows that she is concerned with herself and her priorities above those of anyone else, something she makes obvious in the following conversation with her mother.

Debord explains that the spectacle is rooted in “the oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of *power*... [through which] the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise” (17-8), an idea that is validated by Muriel and her mother through their demonstrated classism. When attempting to explain what a psychiatrist staying at the hotel said to her about Seymour’s appearance, Muriel gets side-tracked by gossiping about his wife to her mother. She describes the woman as “horrible” and wearing “that awful dinner dress we saw in the Bonwit’s window,” even though she was “all hips” (11). This rude statement underscores Muriel’s interest in appearances over reality, while simultaneously showing how she sees herself: as a member of the social class who dictates what is considered “fashionable.” When her mother asks about the hotel room in which she and Seymour are staying, Muriel complains to her that “we couldn’t get the [one] we had before the war” (12). She goes on to say that the “people are awful this year. You should see what sits next to us in the dining room. At the next table. They look like they drove down in a truck,” to which her mother responds “it’s that way all over” (12). McDuffie notes how this “discussion of clothing and social class in Florida... is an almost exaggerated depiction of their materialism – their less than healthy obsession with the ‘meaning’ of material things” (21). Muriel and her mother are appalled at the idea that working-class people can suddenly go on vacation to places like Florida and shop at stores like Bonwit’s, experiences that were available only to the bourgeoisie before

the war. The fact that people who “drove down in a truck” can participate in the spectacle in a similar way to Muriel distresses her because she does not want to be confused for someone who is not of the upper class.

Muriel’s materialism is broadcast through the objects she chooses to value as important. As Gary Lane observes, the “telephone dialogue unfolds her character, [and] our initial indication is reinforced and amplified; we come to see that... Muriel is basically simple – and basically corrupt” (29). When she is speaking with her mother about Seymour, Muriel is vague about his behavior and seems unwilling to talk about his deteriorating mental health or hear what her mother has to say. In response to her mother’s concern over Seymour’s driving and behavior in the car, Muriel tells her that he “drove very nicely... and was even trying not to look at the trees” (6) before giggling about his newest name for his wife: “Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948” (7). Although the way her mother is talking about Seymour makes it sound like he is about to “completely lose control of himself” (9), this is not something Muriel wants to hear; her interest lies in answering her mother’s questions about how her “blue coat” is doing or how “the clothes [are] this year” (11). When her mother suggests that she come home before anything happens, Muriel’s response reveals everything necessary about her view of her marriage: “I just *got* here, Mother. This is the first vacation I’ve had in years, and I’m not just going to *pack* everything and come home” (9). Although they are in Florida to celebrate their sixth wedding anniversary,<sup>5</sup> Muriel sees it as a trip for herself, especially since she has not been away in so long because of the war. This point of view also indicates that she looked at his service in the war as more of a vacation than a traumatic and life-altering event, demonstrating her fundamental misunderstanding of Seymour and illuminating a potential source of the distance in their marriage.

Although he is discussed by Muriel and her mother in the first scene of the story, Seymour himself does not appear until the second scene. It opens with Sybil's question to her mother, "[s]ee more glass... did you see more glass," to which her mother responds "Pussycat, stop saying that. It's driving Mommy absolutely crazy" (14). Foreshadowing their conversation about the bananafish, Sybil's phonetic pronunciation of Seymour's name is a potential indicator that this child is different than the other people around her; McDuffie suggests that this distinction is "between what Sybil learns to see "up close" from her mother... and from Seymour Glass, who will teach her to "see more"" (23). After her mother releases her to go and play, she has to walk quite a ways before she finds Seymour on the beach – when she finally does, she asks him, "are you going in the water, see more glass?" (16). She repeats this two more times before they get up to go to the water, signifying that Seymour can also "see more" than those around him. One of the first things she asks him is where "the lady" (16) is, and he responds that she "may be in any one of a thousand places. At the hairdresser's. Having her hair dyed mink. Or making dolls for poor children, in her room... Ask me something else" (17). In contrast to all the gossip from Muriel and her mother in the first scene, this is all Seymour has to say about his wife in the entire story. His unwillingness to talk about her makes it clear that he does not feel a connection with her whatsoever, especially when considering this comment in conjunction with Muriel's obvious lack of interest in his mental health.

Seymour's isolation is reflected in Sybil's relationship with her mother. She ignores her daughter's repeated attempts to talk to her in favor of listening to a friend explain how someone tied "an ordinary silk handkerchief" (15). Like Muriel, Sybil's mother is consumed with an interest in material items, as evidenced by her allowing Sybil to play on the beach by herself while she goes "up to the hotel [to] have a Martini" (15). Unlike her exchanges with her mother,

when Sybil talks to Seymour, he listens and responds meaningfully instead of talking to her in a patronizing way. Because Seymour treats her like a person instead of a “pussycat,” Sybil feels comfortable and special around him, which is why she sees fit to share something personal about herself. When she inquires if he likes “wax” or “olives,” his affirmative response that he “never goe[es] anyplace without them” (21) emboldens her to ask him if he also likes Sharon Lipschutz, another child staying at their hotel. Having already expressed her jealousy over his letting Sharon sit next to him on the piano bench when she told him to “push her off” (19) next time, he uses this second mention of the child to try and help Sybil grow past her envy and tendency for violence, replying that what he likes “pariticularly about her is that she never does anything mean to little dogs in the lobby of the hotel...she’s never mean or unkind” (22). In the few days he has been in Florida, Seymour has already seen a glimmer of the kind of adult Sybil could become: one who is jealous and mean to those who cannot defend themselves.

When they get to the edge of the water and begin to make their way towards the waves, Seymour sees the perfect opportunity to impart his worldview to Sybil before he leaves behind the spectacle. Even though she is only a child, Seymour recognizes that she will listen to what he has to say in a more meaningful way than Muriel ever will. After warning her to keep her eyes open for bananafish because it is a “perfect day” for them, he tells her that they have very peculiar habits and lead tragic lives. Sybil doesn’t understand what Seymour is talking about, so he explains:

Well, 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. (23)

With this allegory, Seymour offers Sybil a simplified explanation of the birth of the materialistic society that he has witnessed in the wake of the war. Thompson agrees with this analysis, arguing that the “bananafish they seek are determinately metaphorical so that Seymour can express and diagnose the greedy, gluttonous consumption he sees after he returns from the war” (McDuffie 216-17). Everyone with whom Seymour is associated seems to be overtaken by this mindset, and so when Sybil reports that she saw bananafish after he dunks her underwater, he is overjoyed because he knows she has understood his lesson. James Finn Cotter states that Seymour knows this because she celebrates seeing six fish, which relates back to their earlier discussion of *Little Black Sambo*. He points out that like “the six tigers... people are the victims of their own gluttony and pride” (86), something that Sybil understood through the frame of reference of that story. Caught up in a rare moment of excitement, Seymour picks up one of her feet and kisses the arch before telling Sybil that it is time to head to shore. While critics disagree on what to make of his bizarre behavior in this scene,<sup>6</sup> his choice to express his joy physically instead of verbally echoes the transcendental moment with the “hyacinth girl” (36) experienced by the speaker of “The Waste Land,” suggesting that her comprehension of his lesson renders Seymour temporarily incapable of speech. As Sybil runs back to her mother “without regret” (25), it is unclear whether or not she will retain this lesson or impart it to her banana-obsessed mother, as the story ends shortly after with Seymour’s suicide.

Seymour ends their conversation before this pure moment of connection can be spoiled perhaps because he has expressed to Sybil all that she could ever understand about why he is going to kill himself, and now there is nothing more he can say. William Wiegand comments<sup>7</sup>

that “a bananafish himself, [Seymour] has become so glutted with sensation that he cannot swim out into society again,” and that the “perfect day” is “when the bananafish is able to end all of his suffering by killing himself” (7). Sybil might be an ordinary-looking fish right now, but there is nothing he can really do to stop her from participating in the society of the spectacle and becoming a bananafish like her mother, or Muriel, or even himself. Lane observes the “ominous structural parallel” between these first two scenes, in which a girl and her mother “talk, without communicating or understanding, about Seymour,” something he argues “warns [readers] not to overlook the similarities of the women involved;” as suggested by her name, Sybil “symbolizes for Seymour the human condition... [revealing] the finality of that unbridgeable gap between human aspiration and human possibility” (32). Muriel’s conversation with her mother suggests he has come to Florida with his suicidal ideations in mind and that he is merely distracted from his thoughts about it when Sybil finds him lying on the beach. When she locates him and asks if he is going in the water, he starts and says, “Hey. Hello, Sybil” (16). Although he recovers quickly, his dismissal of her question about Muriel just a few lines into their conversation could imply he was thinking about her before Sybil found him. When her jealousy over Sharon Lipschutz prompts Seymour to quote “The Waste Land,” he gets to his feet “suddenly” (19) and changes the subject to catching a bananafish, indicating both that he had been thinking about this poem before Sybil showed up and that he did not want to continue that train of thought with her. McDuffie observes that Salinger associates Seymour with the Fisher King of Eliot’s poem by placing him on the beach so far from everyone else, and that while in this role, his “parable of the bananafish reveals the division between the spiritual and material worlds in the story” (27). The quote is from the opening section of the poem, which focuses on the motif of death. It is followed by a section about failed relationships, which is probably why Seymour suddenly

changes the topic; as this conversation will become his final one in this life, giving Sybil lessons about the world in this way offers him an opportunity to distract himself from his suicidal thoughts for just a while longer.

Early critics identified repressed pedophilia, sexual impotency, or lack of sexual drive<sup>8</sup> as motives for Seymour's suicide, focusing largely on his actions on the beach to support their arguments. However, Salinger cast another light over his decision with the novella *Seymour – An Introduction* (1963), in which Buddy Glass takes credit for writing "Bananafish" as a way to cope with his brother's suicide. While some critics such as Eberhard Alsen use this admission to analyze this story, along with other information about Seymour dispersed throughout the other Glass stories, Cotter's argument that "whatever evidence exists for Seymour's death must be found within the story" (84) is also valid, particularly when considered alongside Salinger's extensive editorial process with "Bananafish"<sup>9</sup> and its immediate popularity. Anthony Kaufman agrees that Seymour's suicide is premeditated, stating that shooting himself "while sitting close to the sleeping Muriel is [a] supremely hostile action, and one that he has planned in advance; he has brought the gun with him to Florida" (133). His recent erratic behavior should be indications of Seymour's intentions, but instead it is viewed by his wife as nothing more than a burden on her vacation. One of the only exchanges between Muriel and Seymour in the story is relayed by Muriel to her mother; on the way down to Florida, Seymour asked her if she had read a book of German poems he had sent to her while overseas, and when she tells him that she hadn't, his response was that they "happen to be written by the *only great poet of the century*" and that she should have "bought a translation or... *learned the language*" (7-8). Critics agree that Seymour is talking about the poet Rainer Maria Rilke,<sup>10</sup> and Cotter points out that Muriel must look for answers somewhere else since Seymour does not leave a note, commenting that both "the book

and revolver are war souvenirs – perhaps they are connected in Seymour’s mind” (84). The fact that Muriel could not be bothered to understand why her husband sent her a book of German poems when Seymour was there to invade that very country should tell him everything he needs to know about his wife and allow him to make up his mind. His suicide is not the act of a “child so desperate for the desired attention that it will risk injury” (83) as Warren French argues; it is a definitive act of self-removal from an isolated and misunderstood existence.

Seymour’s experience in the war and the isolation he felt upon returning home have made him into a spectacle at which to be gawked, a reading supported by Kaufman: “Seymour... is the object of examination by all those who surround him... He is considered special, puzzling, something of a freak” (133). While Muriel treats Seymour like just another boring topic of conversation with her mother, her mother and the psychiatrist treat Seymour like a subject of interest in an experiment, not a traumatized and suicidal war veteran. Just because Seymour does not hear their conversations about him does not mean he is unaware of them. Instead of playing Bingo with his wife and other patrons of the hotel, Seymour has spent both nights in “the Ocean Room, playing the piano” (10); his choice to keep himself separated from the epicenter of the spectacle at their hotel represents his conscious decision to reject the society that has allowed his war experience to create him into a specimen to be dissected over dinner. That is the reason he swears at the woman who gets on the elevator with him on his way up to his room; it does not matter if she is looking at his feet<sup>11</sup> or not; he is on his way to commit suicide, and her presence in that confined space is just another reminder that people are watching him, talking about him, seeing him, but not understanding him.

The conclusion of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” should not leave readers feeling satisfied or in agreement with Seymour’s decision; instead, the unsettling feeling the critics

reference is appropriately disquieting, which McDuffie explains “is meant to wake up Muriel (and the reader) to the material and spiritual wasteland of the modern world” (30). When Seymour enters room 507, Alsen observes that he “is met by the smell of ‘new calfskin luggage and nail lacquer remover,’ the smell of Muriel’s banana fever” (16) and of her spectacular *weltanschauung*: yet another reminder of the vast distance between the values of society and his own. He chooses to remove himself from a life where he does not make sense, one with a wife who would rather gossip about her husband than try to re-connect with him. Thompson argues that Salinger’s use of “The Waste Land” as a framework for this story “challenges the reader to understand the suicide as righteous,” asserting that the “thundering bang of Seymour’s Ortgies automatic signals in one syllable three virtues that determine the morality of his suicide: DA” (McDuffie 219-20). Cotter agrees with this understanding of Seymour’s suicide, saying that he “exercises dietetic self-control by wanting no part of the world’s appetite” (88). Seymour no longer wants to exist in a world where Germany will be known for its pistols instead of its poets, and so he does as the thunder commands him to in “The Waste Land” and releases himself from the ever-present gaze of the society of the spectacle.

## CHAPTER 3

## NAVIGATING THE SPECTACLE:

## “Down at the Dinghy”

A few months after obtaining his publishing contract, J. D. Salinger wrote what would eventually become the centerpiece of *Nine Stories*. One of only two stories he published in 1949, “Down at the Dinghy” was sold to *Harper’s* by Salinger after being rejected by *The New Yorker*. His compliance with their request to shorten the piece with very little argument demonstrates that his desire for the story’s wide circulation outweighed his artistic pride, unlike with many of his other pieces. Although this persistence in getting this specific story published reflects the same attitude with which he approached “Bananafish,” “Down at the Dinghy” did not achieve the same level of popularity, and Michael Renganeschi observes that it “has received considerably less critical attention since its publication” (316). The main character of the story is Boo Boo Tannenbaum, a young mother who is attempting to understand why her son, Lionel, has run away from home again. Through their conversation, it is revealed that Boo Boo is Seymour’s sister Beatrice and that the story takes place after his death; the more she speaks to Lionel, the more it becomes clear that she recognizes her brother in her son, allowing their ultimate connection to serve as a retroactive salve for Seymour’s suicide.

Just as Seymour is introduced through Muriel’s phone call with her mother, the first impression readers are given of Boo Boo and Lionel comes from a cryptic exchange between Sandra and Mrs. Snell, two women who work in the Tannenbaum house. The story opens in the kitchen, where some “fifteen or twenty times since noon, Sandra... had come away from the lake-front window in the kitchen with her mouth set tight” (111). While she paces and fidgets with the “apron strings... [on] her freshly uniformed body” (111), Mrs. Snell calmly sips her tea

at the table while waiting on her bus. As a reminder that she is no longer on the clock, she is wearing her hat with the “Hattie Carnegie label still inside,” the same one that she had worn “through record heat waves, through change of life, over scores of ironing boards, over the helms of half a dozen vacuum cleaners” (112). The first words spoken are from Sandra, who announces for the “fifth or sixth time” that her mind is made up and she is “not gonna worry about it” (112). Mrs. Snell reassures her that she wouldn’t worry about it if she were in Sandra’s position before requesting her purse be handed to her – described as a “leather handbag, extremely worn, but with a label in it as impressive as the one inside [her] hat” (112). These details highlight the main difference between these two women and reveal the source of Sandra’s hostility toward Mrs. Snell – as someone who lives in the city and merely commutes to the Tannenbaum’s for work, Mrs. Snell is in a very different position than Sandra, who lives at the house and is characterized by her status as live-in maid. After taking cigarettes and “a folder of Stork Club matches” (112) out of her purse, Mrs. Snell lights one and tells Sandra that she should “stop worryin’ about it... [because] either he tells her or he don’t” (113). Renganeschi argues that their conversation is “defined by the same sort of indifference and isolation with which Sandra views Mrs. Snell” (318), revealing an undercurrent of tension that exists in the house before its main occupants are even introduced.

Sandra has obviously made some sort of mistake, the nature of which is unclear. However, she sheds light on who “he” is when she replies that it drives her crazy “the way that kid goes pussyfootin’ all around the house,” emphasizing her point by adding that she recently “almost stepped on his hand [while] he was sittin’ right under the table” (113). While her grievances seem initially rational for a family’s maid, her complaint that “ya gotta weigh every word ya say around him” (113) indicates that her issue is not with the child, but instead the

restrictions his presence places upon her behavior. This becomes obvious when Mrs. Snell mentions that he is an attractive child in passing, a statement that causes Sandra to snort and reply that “he’s gonna have a nose just like the father” (114); uncertain if the “kid” is in the room or not, Sandra is unable to make snide remarks about her employers like these, lest he hear and tell his parents. McDuffie points out that by “associating [the workers] with labels that represent what they wear on the ‘inside,’ Salinger seems to confer a level of superficiality upon them” (McDuffie 108), something Mrs. Snell epitomizes when Sandra inquires as to what she would do in her shoes. Slipping into the question “as if it were an ermine coat,” her advice that Sandra “look around for another [job]” (115) indicates that whatever she let slip in front of Lionel is enough for her to be fired. Opening the story with this conversation demonstrates the fact that Boo Boo and Lionel cannot escape from the society of the spectacle as it has found its way into their home in the form of hired help.

Boo Boo is a perfect foil to the materialism expressed by Sandra and Mrs. Snell; with her “styleless, colorless, brittle hair pushed back behind her ears,” she is casually outfitted in “knee-length jeans, a black turtleneck sweater, and socks and loafers,” depicting the “lady of the house” (115) to be unconcerned with outward displays of her obvious wealth. Devoid of anything ostentatious, her laid-back appearance juxtaposes Mrs. Snell’s pride in her designer labels as well as Sandra’s confinement in her work uniform. Boo Boo does not offer a greeting to the women when she comes into the kitchen and instead makes a beeline for the refrigerator, where she stands for a moment and whistles “unmelodically... [in] time with a little uninhibited, pendulum action of her rear end” (115). This entrance causes the women to fall silent, emphasizing both Boo Boo’s power in this situation and her relation to them as outsider in her house. Addressing Sandra first, she inquires if there are any more pickles left she could use to

“lure him out of that boat;” in contrast to her worrisome attitude before Boo Boo’s arrival, she looks up “alertly” and “report[s] intelligently” (116) that he ate the last two before he went to bed last night, information which demonstrates that one of her chief roles in the house revolves around Lionel. Boo Boo moves from the refrigerator to the lake-front window and acknowledges Mrs. Snell with her back still to both women, telling her, “I left your check on the hall table... thank you” (116); her body language in this scene indicates not just her concern for Lionel, but also hints at the fact that she is fully aware of how these two women talk when she is not around.

Unlike Sandra’s marked shift in behavior, Mrs. Snell maintains her superior attitude, snuffing out her cigarette “unhurriedly” when Boo Boo appears and responding to her expression of gratitude with a simple “O.K.” (116). She announces that she heard Lionel was “supposeta be runnin’ away” (116), and when Boo Boo neutrally confirms this fact, her retort that “at least he don’t run *far* away” (117) before laughing dismissively implies that she is not concerned by his behavior. Renganeschi notes that “Mrs. Snell’s condescension... of Lionel’s actions not only highlights the division between [their] two worlds, but also stands in stark contrast to her earlier advice that Sandra run away from her problems” (320), a hypocritical suggestion from someone who thinks it is acceptable for a grown woman to escape but not a four-year-old boy. Her distaste for Boo Boo and Lionel is rooted in the power the ruling order has over the labor class in the society of the spectacle; her obsession with labels indicates her desire to present like someone of the upper class but her reality is that she must ride the bus to clean their houses instead of living as one of them.

In stark contrast to Mrs. Snell’s lack of interest in Lionel’s behavior, Boo Boo demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the nature of his exploits, spending the rest of her time in the kitchen detailing several past incidents. She tells them that “he’s been hitting the road

pretty regularly since he was two” (118), but the reasons behind his sudden departures are never clear. Admitting that it is all “slightly over [her] head” (118), she explains that once it was because another kid told him “you stink” (118), while another time it was because his friend “told him she had a worm in her thermos” (119). Renganeschi points out how Salinger often “uses descriptive details to create a distinct separation between characters, casting them as figures from two opposing worlds: a material world defined by pretension and a spiritual world defined by sincerity” (317), something he does for Lionel through his mother’s recitation of his behavior. His sensitivity in the face of a judgmental world aligns him with the spiritual, as does his desire to withdraw from it, while Sandra’s disrespect and Mrs. Snell’s arrogance show them to be part of the material. Her gaze fixed on Lionel near the lake, Boo Boo’s back has been to the women for the entirety of their conversation, signifying how she has turned away from their world and is focused solely on the spiritual one of her son.

The second half of the story begins when Boo Boo goes outside to talk to Lionel, leaving the society of the spectacle behind her in the kitchen. As she stands with the “glaring, late afternoon sun at her back,” her eyes take a moment to adjust to the sunlight before spotting him about “two hundred yards ahead of her... sitting in the stern seat of his father’s dinghy” (119). Pausing for a few minutes to savor the image, she finds “it queerly difficult to keep Lionel in focus” (120). McDuffie considers this an important detail, stating that even though “she is beyond the glass of the window, she still does not see [him] clearly, an indication that she will have to see the world from his perspective” (112); although she has stepped outside and briefly escaped the spectacle, she still is unaware of how its classism and racism has permeated her home and affected her young son. When she arrives at the end of the pier where the dinghy is tied, she squats down and greets Lionel, saying “Ahoy... Friend. Dirty dog. I’m back” (121).

Obviously not her first attempt to coax him out of the boat, her son ignores her and keeps “his eyes exclusively on the deck” (121) while half-heartedly playing with the tiller. Boo Boo tries again, declaring that she is “Vice-Admiral Tannenbaum. Nee Glass. Come to inspect the stermaphors” (121), a statement that finally elicits a reply from Lionel. He retorts that “you’re not an admiral. You’re a lady” (121), citing his father as his source of this information when she asks how he knew that about her. She persists in proving the authenticity of her nautical guise until Lionel flatly asserts again that “You’re not an admiral. You’re a lady all the time,” after which there was “a short silence” (122). Too upset to have fun with his mother, Boo Boo will have to figure out another way to connect with Lionel and identify the source of his hurt.

Lionel is incorrect about his mother’s involvement with the armed forces, as other Glass stories reveal her to have been an ensign in the Waves during the war,<sup>12</sup> but Boo Boo is undeterred by his jabs. She admonishes Lionel as she takes out a cigarette, saying, “I’m almost never tempted to discuss my rank with people. Especially little boys who don’t even look at me when I talk to them” (122). Standing “unreasonably erect” and making an “oval out of the thumb and index finger of her right hand” (122), she “sounded something like a bugle call” (123) before saluting off into the distance and squatting back in front of her son, whose “mouth fell open” (123). Salinger describes her moving with “maximum regret, as if she had just been profoundly moved by one of the virtues of naval tradition closed to the public and small boys” before she discloses to him that it “was a secret bugle call only admirals can hear” (123), prompting Lionel’s command to “do it again” (123). Her response that it is “impossible...[because] there’s too many low-grade officers around” reminds him who has the authority in their situation, something she attempts to levy to her advantage by conceding to “blow every secret bugle call for you I know... if you’ll tell me why you’re running away” (124). He remains unmoved and

refuses her entry to the dinghy, quietly explaining that “nobody can come in... because they’re not allowed,” a mindset in which he perseveres even after his mother expresses her loneliness “in the house all day without anybody to talk to” (125). Instead of absently swinging the tiller around as he had been, he examines “the grain of wood in the its handle” and tells her that she “can talk to Sandra” (126), a subtle hint that she is the reason for his isolation.

Alsen argues that these stories “develop their meaning in terms of subtle inner changes in the central characters” (81), something that is evidenced in the behavior of both Boo Boo and Lionel in this crucial scene. Finally abandoning her air of playfulness, she requests that her son explain from the boat “why you’re running away... after you promised me you were all through” (126). His answer to this question is to use the toes on his right foot to toss a “pair of underwater goggles...overboard [which] sank at once” (126), an act of destruction that recalls to mind his young age. As Boo Boo watches and “dragged on her cigarette,” she remarks that those goggles once “belonged to your Uncle Seymour,” replying “I see that you don’t” (127) when Lionel tells her he doesn’t care. Gwynn and Blotner argue that his flipping Seymour’s goggles overboard is a rejection of “a world of facts he unconsciously does not want to see, whose doors he does not want to open” (27), but it is actually the reverse; Boo Boo’s subsequent actions imply that she realizes that just as they were to Seymour, the doors to this world are flung wide open for him, enabling him to see the society of the spectacle for what it is: materialistic and prejudiced. In her analysis of this scene, Joyce Caldwell Smith states that his actions are a rejection of “literal objects or linguistic terms serving symbolic functions no longer workable for him;” although Seymour’s goggles “previously seemed a prized possession and... in the past might have functioned metaphorically to help him see more clearly” (488), he must now rely on Boo Boo to bring the world into sharp focus.

Not only does this exchange clarify the nature of Boo Boo's relationship to Seymour, it potentially makes her recognize some of the similarities between her sensitive four-year-old son and her suicidal brother; afterwards, she is momentarily lost in thought and forgets about her cigarette until "it burn[s] dangerously close to one of her knuckle grooves" (127) and she throws it in the lake. This action symbolizes her total departure from the world of the spectacle and indicates she is ready to understand his conception of the world. Pulling a nicely wrapped package from her pocket and showing it to Lionel, she tells him that there is a key chain inside "just like daddy's [but] with a lot more keys on it" (127). Clearly a professional when it comes to handling her son, she ignores his demands that she toss it to him and instead proposes flinging it in the lake, throwing his earlier response of "I don't care" back at him when he pleads that it belongs to him. Lionel sits back down in the face of his mother's indifference and waits for her next move, his "eyes reflecting pure perception as his mother had known they would" (128). McDuffie notes that "both the goggles and the keys are representations of the material world and only have significance because of the people that Boo Boo and Lionel care about" (114), and so she tosses him the keychain as a test, only to watch as he "flicked it – sidearm – into the lake" before looking at her with "eyes filled not with defiance but tears" (128). Whatever has caused him to hide out in the dinghy is serious enough that a present will not placate him, but he is still too upset to explain what has happened. Gingerly rising to her feet "like someone whose foot had gone to sleep in theatre" (128), Boo Boo finally enters the dinghy and gathers up Lionel in her arms to soothe her distressed child and get down to the root of his behavior.

For the first time in the story, Boo Boo is physically on the same level as her son, allowing her to console him as only a mother can while he reveals the source of his hurt. Falling back into their earlier game, she explains to her crying son that "sailors don't cry, baby... Only

when their ships go down [or] when they're shipwrecked" (128-9), only to be stopped short when Lionel explains at last what caused him to run away. Through tears, he tells her "Sandra – told Mrs. Snell – that Daddy's a big – sloppy – kike" (129). The last word causes her to flinch "just perceptibly" before "holding him between the two vises of her arms and legs" (129) to ask if he knows the meaning of that word. McDuffie points out that while in the same position as her son, "Boo Boo could... try to explain what a kike is to Lionel, but instead she allows him to define the word for her" (114), highlighting why she is successful in connecting with her child where other mothers in *Nine Stories* are not. His response that "it's one of those things that go up in the air... with a string you hold" (129) reveals he has taken the unfamiliar term to be analogous with the only other word he knows that sounds similar: kite. Although he does not comprehend the full meaning behind this term, he can feel its derogatory implication and uses his imagination to fill in the blanks. For Lionel, the worst thing he can think of is losing his father the way a kite can snap off its string and float into the sky, a concept made all the more real when he overhears Sandra's offensive comment to Mrs. Snell.

Already cast in a negative light by the rudeness of her earlier remark about Lionel's nose, this tearful disclosure to his mother exposes what some readers might already suspect: that the dislike expressed by Sandra, and by extension Mrs. Snell's, is rooted in anti-Semitism. This prejudice also reframes everything that has happened thus far, in particular Boo Boo's previous interaction with the two women. Although Lionel is unaware that "kike" is a racial slur, he reacts to Sandra's tone when using the term in relation to his father, just as he has before when he was insulted by a peer. McDuffie suggests these seemingly innocuous comments that resulted in his past escapades are actually children's internalization of their parents bigotry, contending that "Lionel's translations of the racial slurs suggests that even though he does not understand the

words, he understands the meaning behinds the words” (110). Unable to figure out why he gets excluded, he isolates himself pre-emptively to avoid any more attacks; unfortunately for him and for his parents, the Tannenbaum’s cannot escape the society of the spectacle, as it has found its way into their home through Sandra and Mrs. Snell.

Critics like Smith who consider anti-Semitism to be a relevant theme cite Salinger’s documented study of the ethnic cleansing policies of the Nazis just before writing this story<sup>13</sup> as evidence for the story’s message. Debord argues that “spectacular consumption preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations” (136), an idea that is exemplified by the rampant anti-Semitism in America at this time. Smith observes that “children perceive and reflect what is going on in the larger world even when they do not have the language or the power to express it, and in Lionel’s world anti-Semitism plays a large role” (479). She goes on to note that “one-third of the respondents to a poll [in 1944] said they would join with or at least sympathize with an anti-Semitic political campaign” (479). This statistic most likely includes the woman the Tannenbaum’s have hired to help take care of their son, which highlights how the spectacle adversely impacts individuals. Debord argues that its main goal is to “reconstruct a complex neo-artistic environment out of flotsam and jetsam” so that capitalism can “remold... the fragmented worker into ‘a personality well integrated into the group’” (137). Through his characterization of Sandra and Mrs. Snell, Salinger exposes this “flotsam and jetsam” of post-war American society to be comprised of classism and anti-Semitism. Therefore, James Bryan is incorrect when he concludes that the “prominence of such details as Mrs. Snell’s Stork Club matches and the impressive labels in her battered and probably hand-me-down hat and purse [do not] advance the main concerns of the story” (176). In fact, a book-length study of the Stork Club discloses it to have been “the venue

for social ratification from the late 1930s to the mid 1950s, with the owner restricting minority patrons to specific numbers while conferring either his blessing or rejection on those wishing to belong to the ‘in’ crowd” (Smith 485). These details serve as a subtle reminder of the omnipresence of the spectacle within these characters’ daily lives.

Hope for the future is expressed through Boo Boo’s response to her son, as their positive connection cuts through the clouds cast on the cycle by Seymour’s suicide. After pushing him slightly in front of her “to better look at him” (129), she “put a wild hand inside the seat of his trousers, startling the boy considerably, but almost immediately withdrew it and decorously tucked his shirt in for him” (130). A somewhat strange action reminiscent of Seymour’s kissing Sybil on the foot, Bryan considers it her “clutching after the baby Lionel has been – and his surprise indicates that the gesture is now foreign to a growing little boy” (178), while tucking in his shirt is also a reminder of how she must prepare him to face a world dictated by outward appearance. In his study of the parallels between this story and Dante’s *Inferno*, Renganeschi observes that it “is not until Lionel goes through a process of repentance similar to the one Dante must go through before entering into Paradise with Beatrice that he is able to truly perceive his mother, communicate with her, and continue his journey into adulthood” (326), indicating the role she will play for him as he matures. Mother to a sensitive boy who reminds Boo Boo of her late brother, she has realized that she must keep Lionel from falling into the same bananahole as Seymour, something the story hints she will have success with through the reversal of the ending of “Bananafish;” while Sybil ran “without regret in the direction of the hotel” (25) and left Seymour alone on the beach, Boo Boo and Lionel “didn’t walk back to the house; they raced [and] Lionel won” (130), reflecting the importance of parent-child connection in a world that shuns the individual. Out of all the parents depicted in *Nine Stories*, Boo Boo is shown to

understand “that in Salinger’s modern inferno, communication, empathy, and understanding... are the key to living rightly” (Renganeschi 321), a lesson she will impart to Lionel as she helps him navigate the perilous waters of the society of the spectacle.

## CHAPTER 4

## REJECTING THE SPECTACLE:

## “Teddy”

Five years to the day that Seymour was introduced to the world by way of his suicide, the last piece in the *Nine Stories* sequence was published in *The New Yorker*. Named for its main character, “Teddy” concerns a precocious ten-year-old boy as he goes about his day on a ship back from Europe with his family, ending with his shocking death witnessed by his young sister. It is not Salinger’s most popular story; Slawenski states that he was “instantly flooded by mail from readers...[in which] most of the reaction was outrage” (245), while William Boyle notes that it has become “a sort of whipping boy story for critics of Salinger” (394). This response is due in part to its didacticism, as Teddy’s interest in mysticism and adherence to the Vedantic theory of reincarnation can seem to overshadow the plot with its religiosity, but nevertheless largely to the ambiguity of its ending. Regardless of its reception, Slawenski notes that Salinger intended “Teddy” to conclude the short-story cycle before he had even finished writing it,<sup>14</sup> something which influenced its construction to “deliberately contrast and complement... [that of] ‘Bananafish’” (236); Salinger’s decision to end *Nine Stories* in this way brings unexpected closure for Seymour’s suicide, as Teddy’s view of death allows for an alternate understanding of his decision, while also offering a way to see through the lies of the society of the spectacle.

Although he began working on this story toward the end of 1951, Slawenski points out that it took the better part of the following year for Salinger to “regain his writing stride, enabling him to complete the manuscript by November 22,” causing it to differ from the structural precision and tightly-controlled language of the other stories in the cycle and “have a distinctly looser feel” (235) than his usual work. One immediate distinction is the early introduction to its

main character, the person to whom its opening words are directed. Teddy's father warns him, "I'll exquisite day you, buddy, if you don't get down off that bag this minute. And I mean it," issuing threats from his bed as he lies "supine, in just the trousers of his pajamas, a lighted cigarette in his right hand" (253). Described as "looking for trouble" when he asks his son, "What the hell do you think I'm talking for? My health?" (254), Teddy presents a calm contrast to his father's agitation as he stands "on the broadside of a new-looking cowhide Gladstone [to] better see out of his parents' open porthole" (254), far enough that his "face was considerably more outside than inside... [but still] well within hearing of his father's voice" (255). Caught in a liminal space between the expansive world of the outside and the affected one of his parents' cabin, Teddy is shown from the beginning of the story to be someone who can exist in both worlds, albeit for a short period of time. An actor in "no fewer than three daytime radio serials," Mr. McArdle's voice is "functionally prepared at a moment's notice to out-male anyone in the same room with it, ... even a small boy" (255) in need of a haircut and wearing an "incongruously handsome, black alligator belt" (254) with dirty, oversized clothes. Teddy's disheveled appearance makes his father's insecurity seem misplaced until the son finally turns in his father's direction "without changing the vigilant position of his feet on the Gladstone [to give him] a look of inquiry, whole and pure;" Salinger describes him to be "just [slightly cross-eyed] enough to be mentioned...only in the context with the fact that one might have thought long and seriously before wishing them straighter, or deeper, or browner, or wider set" (256), hinting there is something special about him that threatens his father. This depiction suggests a difference in priorities also implied by his treatment of the Gladstone bag, which McDuffie considers illustrative of "Salinger's use of these surface details to contrast Teddy's vision of the world with

his father's" (187). Mr. McArdle is a proud participant in the society of the spectacle, making his son's apparent disregard for it confusing and frustrating.

Unlike the other two stories which explore mother-child relationships, this story focuses on that of a father and son, with the mother acting as a conduit between them. Teddy's mother has been resting quietly up to this point in other bed in the room, ignoring her husband's beratement of their son until she finally interrupts to tell Teddy to "stay exactly where you are, darling... don't move the tiniest part of an inch" as she lies with her face "toward Teddy and the porthole, her back to her husband" (256). Her "very probably nude body" covered by a sheet, she closes her eyes and absentmindedly directs her son to "jump up and down... [and] crush Daddy's bag" (256). She knows full well she is provoking her husband's temper, and after a brief back-and-forth about the worth of the bag, he tells her "I'd like to kick your goddamn head open" (257). This warning prompts her to retort that "one of these days, you're going to have a tragic, tragic heart attack... [and at the funeral] everybody's going to ask who that attractive woman in the red dress is, sitting there in the first row, flirting with the organist" (257). Teddy continues to stare out the porthole from his perch on his father's bag throughout this combative exchange, and his observation that "we passed the *Queen Mary* at three-thirty-two this morning" (258) serves as his foray into the conversation. Bryan notes that his "relationship with his parents, particularly his mother, is extremely subtle and important to the story" (354), something that Salinger demonstrates through how Teddy handles each of them in this opening scene. Although he ignores every one of his increasingly aggressive threats to get off his bag, he still takes the time to "sweep his father's cigarette stubs and ashes into the ashtray...[using] the underside of his forearm to wipe off the filmy wake of ashes from the glass top of the table" (263) before handing over his pillow so that his father can get more comfortable. This action demonstrates not only

Teddy's awareness that he triggers his father's insecurities, but also his desire to help him understand how the society of the spectacle has caused them.

In contrast to his lack of communication with his father, Teddy speaks with his mother quite naturally, exposing the potential root of his father's aggravation through their conversation. Addressing her formally as "mother" (258), he informs her that a man who sits at their dinner table had approached him in the gym to tell him that he had "heard that last tape I made...at a party in Boston just before he went to Europe [because] somebody at the party knew somebody in the Leidekker examining group" (259), something Teddy qualifies as "rather embarrassing" (260). While the nature of these tapes is explained later in the story during his conversation with Nicholson, this statement denotes his status as some sort of child prodigy, the kind that grown men take the time to meet and that perhaps produce feelings of inadequacy in their parents. His mother only retains the bit about the tapes getting played at a party, as she is more concerned with his father's temper and the location of his younger sister, Booper, than she is with how Teddy feels about being an anecdote at some Ivy League professor's dinner party. Interrupting Mr. McArdle's barely restrained countdown to force Teddy off the bag, she reminds him of their swim lesson at 10:30 before lazily requesting him to "tell Booper I want her... [and] give Mother a kiss" (263). Kaufman refers to "her phony display of affection for Teddy" in this scene as "syrupy" (135), an idea reflected in his body language when he is preparing to leave the room; after "perfunctorily [giving her] a kiss on the cheek," he turns away before she can bring "her left arm out from under the sheet, as if bent on encircling Teddy's waist with it" (263), indicating he is well-versed in this game of parental affection and knows how to play his part.

Mrs. McArdle is similar to Sybil's mother not just in her superficiality, but also in how she approaches her relationship with her children. In refusing to acknowledge Sybil's repeated

question about “see more glass” (15), her mother misses a significant opportunity for connection by privileging martinis and gossip over real communication. Ignoring the feelings of alienation that lead her daughter to seek out a suicidal war veteran as company, she chooses to focus on “putting sun-tan oil... over the delicate, winglike blades of [Sybil’s] back” (14-5), projecting the image of a caring mother to any potential observers. Similarly, Teddy’s mother emphasizes external matters when she is speaking to her son, marveling that his tape was played “at a *party*” (259) even though he found it “rather embarrassing” (260). Her interest in appearances results in her dismissal of the most important part of their conversation: his observation about the orange peels. A sudden noise causes Teddy to “thrust his whole head out of the porthole... [before bringing] it in just long enough to report, ‘Someone just dumped a whole garbage can of orange peels out the window’” (260). Spotting an opportunity to both “out-male” his son and get a rise out of his wife, Mr. McArdle sarcastically corrects Teddy’s language, saying “out the porthole, buddy, out the porthole... quick, get the Leiddeker examining group on the phone” (260). Jumping at any opportunity to prove he is more intelligent than his ten-year-old son, his joke demonstrates his jealousy over his son’s status among the academics and exposes the source of his irritation: the fact that he is not the only well-known member of his family.

Unperturbed by his father’s attempt to bully him, Teddy continues to stare at the peels while his parents resume bickering, observing to his parents how “nicely” they float before qualifying his statement further:

I don’t mean it’s interesting that they float... it’s interesting that I know about them being there. If I hadn’t seen them, then I wouldn’t know about them being there, and if I didn’t know they were there, I wouldn’t be able to say that they even exist. That’s a very nice, perfect example of the way – (261).

His first of a myriad of mini-philosophy lessons scattered throughout the story, Teddy's reflection on the floating peels is a perfect way to disprove the human notion that reality is only experienced through sight. Bryan suggests that this statement "not only foreshadows his death but comments upon its significance [since] what his family perceives of him is not reality but *maya* – peelings which have masked the essence" (354). A statement reflective of Teddy's adherence to Vedantic philosophy, *maya* is what is mistaken as reality: in other words, anything that obscures the truth. Bryan continues this concept by using the example of Plato's allegory of the cave, explaining that "essential reality is, for most people, inevitably veiled, and man builds upon what he apprehends as if it were absolute reality and not 'illusion'" (354). Teddy's mother is unfortunately quick to dismiss this conversation to inquire into the whereabouts of Booper, once more missing a chance to engage with her son past the surface level, instead charging him with keeping his sister from "lolling around in that sun again" (261). Clearly used to performing parental duties, Teddy informs her that he ensured she was "adequately covered" when she left before continuing his musings on the floating orange peels; seeing that some have begun to sink, he marvels that "in a few minutes, the only place they'll still be floating will be inside my mind... where they started floating in the first place" (262). His parents remain uninterested in this train of thought and send Teddy away to find his sister before their swimming lesson, losing their last opportunity to connect with their son before his untimely death. Lingering a moment at the threshold of their room, Teddy cryptically warns his parents that "after I go out this door, I may only exist in the minds of all my acquaintances... I may be an orange peel" (265) in what McDuffie interprets as his attempt to "offer his parents advice about how to deal with the possibility of his impending death" (189), advice his parents are unable to recognize through the haze of their own self-interest.

While Teddy seems unaffected by his parents' toxicity, his younger sister, Booper, exemplifies the negative impact such behavior can have on children's development. Locating her on the Sports deck "after some extensive looking," he finds her sorting the shuffleboard discs by color as another child named Myron watches "purely in an observer's capacity" (268). Her command that Teddy look as she "surrounded the two stacks of shuffleboard discs with her arms to show off her accomplishment," shows that Booper desires her brother's validation over that of anyone else, while her attempt to "isolate it from whatever else was aboard ship" (268) implies her own feelings of loneliness. After hostilely addressing her onlooker to "move [his] carcass" (268) from blocking Teddy's view, she demonstrates how early children can internalize their parents' classism when she gestures at Myron and casually tells her brother that "this guy... never even heard of backgammon... they don't even have one" (269). Tristan Donovan discusses how backgammon suffered a sharp decline in popularity that began with the Great Depression and bottomed out in the late 1950s, observing that the game was rarely "played outside the older establishment clubs of the rich, ... linger[ing] on largely out of tradition" (40). This connotation makes Booper's dismissal of Myron a perfect example of how a child can mimic the elitist behavior of their parents before they fully comprehend its implications.

Ignoring his inquiry about the location of the camera, Booper confirms her participation in the spectacle when she informs Teddy that Myron "doesn't even live in New York... and his father's dead" (269), displaying a total disregard for his feelings while simultaneously expressing her digestion of the popular American notion that New York City is the center of the world. When Myron folds his arms and refuses to acknowledge her statement that "if his mother dies, he'll be an orphan," her announcement that he's "the stupidest person on this ocean" (269) is refuted by Teddy, who reassures Myron while diverting his sister's attention back to the subject

of the camera. She continues to be unhelpful to his search, indicating in no particular direction at all when she tells him it is “over there” (269), before exposing the undercurrent of violence stemming from her short experience with her parents’ unstable relationship. Drawing her stacked shuffleboard discs in closer, she tells the two boys that all she needs now is “two giants [who] could play backgammon till they got all tired and then they could climb up on that smokestack and throw these at everybody and kill them” (270). Directing her attention back to Myron, she explains that the giants “could kill your parents,” adding “knowledgably” that if they were unsuccessful, he could just “put some poison on marshmallows and make them eat it” (270). A distressing suggestion from the mouth of a six-year-old that can only be described as uncanny in the Freudian sense, this scene illustrates how detrimental her parents’ behavior is to her development, while also implying the inevitability of her role in Teddy’s death.

With his errand completed, Teddy leaves his sister to decide if she will obey him or not, who expresses her frustration at his comparative freedom by screaming, “I hate you! I hate everybody on this ocean!” (271). Slawenski addresses her parting remarks in a note, suggesting they add “dimension to the...setting, which casts its characters adrift in an environment with no definable borders, no beginning, no end” (238), a depiction that perfectly reflects Teddy’s own conception of human life. Up until this point, his character has mostly been defined through his interactions with his parents and sister; now that he is alone, Teddy provides a glimpse into his internal world by way of his journal. While his precociousness and intelligence are reinforced in his private writings, another side of Teddy is also displayed, one that cares about people more than is indicated by his outward demeanor. The first notation is a reminder to himself to “find daddy’s army dog tags and wear them whenever possible [because] it won’t kill you and he will like it” (274), demonstrating that Teddy wants to improve his relationship with his father through

a connection with his past. However, his most recent entry shows him to second-guess himself, as he states that he “could have asked mother where daddy’s dog tags are but she would probably say I didn’t have to wear them” (276); no stranger to his parents’ unhappy relationship, Teddy clearly does not want further to involve himself, even though he knows the dog tags are on the ship because he saw his father pack them. He concludes his entry with the cryptic statement that “it will either happen today or February 14, 1958 when I am sixteen. It is ridiculous to mention even” (277). Leaving readers unsure of what “it” might be, he “continued to keep his attention on the page... as though there [was] more to come” (277). Teddy seems incapable of writing any further, potentially indicating some doubt about what his future holds for him; it is also the only time he seems at a loss for words in the story, making his prediction all the more foreboding.

Utterly engrossed in his journal, Teddy is unaware of the man observing him from “about fifteen feet forwardship... and eighteen or twenty rather sun-blinding feet overhead” (277) until he walks up and casts “a shadow over his notebook” (278). The fact that the man is standing with his back to the sun and inhibiting Teddy’s ability to write is a subtle metaphor for how academia can often suppress free thought in its attempt to understand it. Without introducing himself, the man greets Teddy and takes a seat by him “with what seemed to be unlimited cordiality” (278). Described earlier to be dressed in “extremely dirty, white ankle-sneakers, no socks, seersucker shorts that were both too long for him and at least a size too large in the seat, [and] an overly laundered T shirt that had a hole the size of a dime in the right shoulder” (254), Teddy presents a stark contrast to the contrived appearance of the young man, who indicates his status as an academic to even the most casual observer with his uniform of “buff-colored woolen socks, charcoal-gray trousers, a button-down-collar shirt... [and] herringbone jacket that looked as though it had been properly aged in some of the more popular post-graduate seminars at Yale”

(279). After introducing himself as Bob Nicholson, he is revealed to be the mysterious man from the gym who approached Teddy about his tapes from the Leidekker examining group. His awkward attempts at small talk failed, Nicholson tells him that he was watching Teddy write from all the way up on the sports deck and that he was “working away like a little Trojan” (280). This statement demonstrates how he epitomizes the Leidekker group’s observation of Teddy, so that even on a cruise ship with his family in between continents, he is still under the constant surveillance of the society of the spectacle. It is through their ensuing conversation that Teddy imparts his worldview just before his life comes to a sudden close to not just Nicholson, but to anyone who happens to pick up this story.

Although Teddy has a surprisingly vast amount of wisdom to impart for a ten-year-old boy, Nicholson is only interested in one aspect: the predictions he made for the professors about when they would die and Teddy’s spiritual inclinations. When Teddy finally engages with Nicholson’s line of questioning, it is to wonder “why people think it’s so important to be emotional,” a statement that Nicholson attempts to turn back on him by asking: “You love God, don’t you? ... Isn’t that your forte so to speak?” (284). His response that “Sure, I love Him. But I don’t love him sentimentally... it’s too unreliable” (284-5) does not hold water for Nicholson, so he attempts to contextualize this idea with his follow-up question, “you love your parents, don’t you?” (285). Teddy’s answer to this particular question provides valuable insight into how he understands his place in the world, particularly in his family. He first replies that “Yes I do – very much... but you want to make me use that word to mean what you want it to mean – I can tell” (285). He then goes on to explain that his love for his parents is more of an “affinity” than anything else; although he wishes good things for them, he realizes that they do not seem to be able to love him and his sister “just the way we are... they love their reasons for loving us almost

as much as they love us, and most of the time more” (285). Teddy recognizes that while they may think they love their children, what they love is their own conceptions of them, not their individual selves.

Just after this exchange, Teddy requests the time from Nicholson to be sure that he does not miss his swimming lesson at ten-thirty. Without checking his watch, Nicholson tells him “you have time” before glancing down to note that “it’s just ten after ten” (286). Even though time is a social construct, Teddy still respects its influence over human life and does not want to leave his sister waiting, even if it might mean his life is swiftly coming to a close. Satisfied with this knowledge, Teddy sits back and informs him that “we can enjoy our conversation for about ten more minutes” (286). Anxious to have the discussion he has been working up the courage to begin, Nicholson puts out his cigarette and neutrally states that as he understands it, “You hold pretty firmly to the Vedantic theory of reincarnation... [and] you’ve acquired certain information through meditation” (286) as a holy man in India in a past life. Teddy interrupts him to clarify that he was “just a person making very nice spiritual advancement” until he met a woman and “sort of stopped meditating” (287). A non-dualistic Indian philosophical tradition<sup>15</sup> aimed at providing “a practical guide to spiritual experience,” the Vedantic spiritual discipline teaches that “one acquires knowledge only in an act of conscious being” (Deutsch 4), something which can be achieved through meditation. Eventually the aspirant will become aware of the *maya* surrounding their conception of reality and be able to distinguish for themselves the essence of what is true and what is false.

Salinger seems to have shared Teddy’s opinion that “it’s very hard to meditate and live a spiritual life in America... [since] people think you’re a freak if you try” (287); Slawenski argues that “most Americans [in 1952] thought their way of life superior to that of Eastern cultures...

[and it] was clear to [Salinger] that his reading audience was not going to accept the notions of mysticism or reincarnation easily” (236). Nicholson embodies this chauvinism in a last-ditch attempt to pick the child’s brain when he asks how Teddy would change the educational system. This inquiry leads Teddy to expand on his earlier statement that “what you have to do is vomit [logic] up if you want to see things as they really are” (291). In one of longest pieces of continuous dialogue in the entire collection, Teddy outlines his understanding of the world to the young doctor; after conceding that “I know I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t start with the things schools usually start with,” he takes a moment of brief reflection before responding that he would “get them to empty out everything their parents and everybody ever told them” (298). He uses grass to illustrate this concept:

I wouldn’t even tell them grass is green. Colors are only names. I mean if you tell them the grass is green, it makes them start expecting the grass to look a certain way – *your* way – instead of some other way that may be just as good, and maybe much better... I don’t know. I’d just make them vomit up every bit of the apple their parents and everybody made them take a bite out of. (298-99)

This approach to education outlined by Teddy is heavily influenced by Vedantic thought, which states that “language has its source in phenomenal experience; hence, it is limited in its application to states of being that are beyond that experience” (Deutsch 11). In his Vedantic reading of Salinger’s body of work, Dipti R. Pattanaik argues that Teddy wants to help other people realize the myth of reality “through the educational system which resembles the Vedantic model of education,” allowing one to “have better control of the immediate, paradoxically, by transcending it” (121). Teddy has developed this idea through meditation, which is also how he has come to the understand that dying is “just get[ting] the heck out of your body” (294). Using

himself as an example, Teddy explains that when he arrives at his swimming lesson in five minutes, it might be the day they are changing the water; not realizing that the pool is empty, his sister might push him in, causing him to “fracture [his] skull and die instantaneously” (295).

While it is implied that this is how Teddy’s death occurs just a few pages later, there is no concrete proof of the accuracy of his prediction, aside from the “all-piercing, sustained scream – clearly coming from a small child,” which Nicholson hears “reverberating within four tiled walls” (302) at the story’s conclusion. Thomas Kranidas aptly observes that the ambiguity of the story’s ending is “a brilliantly contrived obstacle to [its] easy resolution... prolong[ing] our concern for Teddy to the point where we see that the concern is wrong: like Nicholson, our ignorance and this worldly misemphasis has caused the concern” (91). Teddy does not belong in the material world any more than Seymour does, and knowing that they are free from the trappings of the spectacle counterbalances the hurt that arises from their deaths.

Several critics argue that Teddy’s death was not an accident, but an act of suicide. Prigozy states that “if the child knows the future and is aware that the swimming pool is empty, then his insistence upon meeting his hateful little sister at the pool is certainly an act of self-destruction” (101), while Kaufman believes that “his intention [is] to deliberately kill himself by jumping into the empty pool in front of his sister, parallel[ing] Seymour’s shocking death next to that person who most directly represents what he most despises and loathes” (137). Although Teddy’s death can certainly be considered a suicide in the strictest of terms, his understanding of death’s inevitability and observance of the Vedantic theory of reincarnation should eviscerate any belief that he arrived at his swim lesson with malice in his heart. When Teddy expresses his distaste to Nicholson for how poets are “always sticking their emotions in things that have [none],” his gaze is fixed “abstractly towards... the twin smokestacks up on the Sports Deck”

before suddenly telling Nicholson ““nothing in the voice of the cicada intimates how soon it will die”” (282); the only other character associated with the smokestacks is Booper, indicating that Teddy thinks about his impending death throughout the entire exchange while also using it as a platform to justify his attendance of the ill-fated swim lesson.

In his exploration of the various heroes of Salinger’s works, Paul Levine argues that they “attempt not to compromise between the pure spiritual world and the corrupted mundane world, but rather to disaffiliate themselves from the public world and flee to the private because they have confused [it] with the soul” (96). While this might be a fitting statement for other Salinger heroes, it is not applicable to Teddy, who understands better than most the distinction between public and private worlds. Instead of “compromis[ing] the basic Western principle of social responsibility” (Levine 96), he is extending it to all those who read his story, acting as a Vedantic guru and laying out exactly what the “fundamental distinction between Reality and Appearance is... in terms of *maya*” (Deutsch 107). If he were to resist his fate on the Sports deck or try to change it, he would be falling victim to the false pretenses of appearance; Wiegand is in agreement, suggesting that Teddy “withdraws... from the boorish concerns of a society represented by his father and sister in order that he may be invulnerable... and be able to do good in return” (13), something he does through his conversations with Nicholson. In the hours leading up to his death, Teddy is able to teach the teacher how to see through the *maya* caused by the spectacle, helping readers and scholars alike in the Sisyphean task of dispelling the illusions created by post-war society.

## CHAPTER 5

## SURPASSING THE SPECTACLE:

*The Cycle of Nine Stories*

Critics who consider *Nine Stories* to be a short-story cycle have varied opinions on the elements tying the works together, though most cite the Zen koan epigraph<sup>16</sup> as the key to the puzzle. Prigozy explains that a koan is a “problem that defies rational, intellectual solution, the answer having no logical connection to the question,” its purpose being to present the disciple with the “central problem of life in an intensified form” (91). This quandary is immediately presented through Seymour’s quotation of “The Waste Land” and his subsequent suicide, challenging any fixed solution; rather, the answers are found in the additional eight stories and their connections to one another. With “Bananafish,” “Down at the Dinghy,” and “Teddy” forming a foundation upon which the cycle can be analyzed, the text offers a guide for the individual to endure the society of the spectacle. The fact that Seymour references the section titled “The Burial of the Dead” is indicative of the fact that he never progresses past this part of the poem, relegating him to wander endlessly in society’s materialistic void. In spite of his moment of connection with Sybil, his alienation and experience in Germany during World War II has made him a part of the “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” (56), one of the many souls who “flowed over London Bridge... [exhaling] sighs, short and infrequent” (62-4). Consumed by the *weltanschauung* of the spectacle, Seymour serves as a vivid example of how it “erases the dividing line between self and world,” overwhelming the individual while simultaneously obliterating the “line between true and false [in order to] ... maintain the organization of appearances” (Debord 153). When he reaches this conclusion, his condemnation to a “passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality” drives him to “entertain the illusion that he

is reacting to fate” (Debord 153). Individuals like Seymour become alienated in the *maya* created by the racism, classism, and materialism of the society of the spectacle, and can eventually be lost forever if they are not shown a way out before its too late.

In choosing to republish “Bananafish” as the opening to *Nine Stories*, Salinger reframed Seymour’s struggle by its relationship to the work as a whole, illustrating how to avoid the trap of the bananahole through the progression of these three stories. Smith observes that while “Lionel is more perceptive than Sybil [since he has] encountered and recoiled from verbal insults since he was two, he lacks the advanced language ability and the spiritual transcendence that the older Teddy has acquired” (480), making “Down at the Dinghy” the perfect linchpin for this collection. All of the grief Boo Boo has experienced in the wake of Seymour’s suicide only makes her a stronger mother, helping her to recognize her brother’s sensitivity within Lionel and guide<sup>17</sup> him through the treacherous waters of the spectacle toward Teddy and his rejection of the apple-eaters. Boyle believes that Teddy is the real hero of *Nine Stories* “because he is humble, because of his mystical understanding of loss and human communion... because of his *detachment*” (397), suggesting that “only through *emptying out* can we begin to *see* like Teddy” (401) and finally reject the false ideals of the spectacle.

For a short-story cycle, *Nine Stories* achieved a notably wide audience. Slawenski discusses how the “reading public snatched [it] up faster than it could be placed on shelves” after its release in April of 1953, rising to “ninth place on the *New York Times* best-seller list” within three weeks of publication and “remain[ing] in the top twenty for the next three months” (248). Salinger ignored its reception entirely,<sup>18</sup> setting the tone for his slow retreat from the literary world and raising more questions than answers about his body of work. Myles Weber suggests that Salinger critics should “consider not the content but the form of [his] published works... and

recognize the logical relationship that their form has to the author's subsequent silence" (219). As his only short-story cycle and one of the last things he published before his withdrawal from the public eye, this work can be understood as his final commentary on the human condition and how one might surpass it; through his meticulous construction of the *Nine Stories* cycle, Salinger demonstrates the extremes of the "negative human restlessness" (Debord 94) brought on by the society of the spectacle. In the conclusion of his social critique, Debord suggests that anyone who wishes to surpass "the spectacle must know how to bide its time," as well as understand that "individuals are directly bound to universal history" (154). One way these three stories suggests to bide time is through genuine connection; Seymour spends the last hours of his life conversing with and teaching Sybil, Boo Boo dedicates her day to understanding Lionel and helping him learn to navigate the world, while Teddy attempts to connect with his family members before imparting his worldly wisdom to Nicholson and moving on from this life. Teddy's remark about the transience of the orange peels echoes an idea from Eliot's famous meditation on time, "Burnt Norton" (1935); he writes that "to be conscious is to not be in time / but only in time can the moment in the rose-garden... / be remembered" (87-91), reminding us that moments of connection such as these can only exist if we experience time. While we are caught in this human form, Salinger's cycle insists that our mission must be to rid ourselves and others of the *weltanschauung* created by society and recognize instead the power of our universal history; only then will we be able to see through the *maya* of the spectacle and achieve "the peace which passeth understanding."<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. Slawenski states that after the publication of “Bananafish,” *The New Yorker* was “suddenly anxious to retain Salinger’s talents after years of snubs... offer[ing] him the most coveted of contracts, one that kept him on retainer and paid him an annual salary for the privilege of being the first to review his works” (166).
2. Aside from his insistence that “Teddy” be included in the collection despite the fact that it wasn’t finished, Slawenski notes that “Salinger applied the same controlling attitude to [its] title... cho[os]ing nine of his best pieces... [and refusing] to consider any title such as *A Perfect Day for Bananafish – And Other Stories*” (245).
3. In addition to Prigozy’s article analyzing the zen koan and its relation to the cyclical elements of Nine Stories, McDuffie’s book *Teaching Salinger’s Nine Stories* offers an in-depth look at how Christianity can also serve as a uniting theme for the cycle. John Wenke, Paul Kirschner, and Warren French also discuss an interconnectedness between all the stories in their various articles, but do not take their analyses to the same lengths that Prigozy or McDuffie do.
4. While almost every single critic who has written on this story has mentioned or analyzed Seymour’s quoting of “The Waste Land” in this scene, McDuffie is one of the only ones to argue its importance in relation to Seymour’s suicide. Although John M. Howell hints at the relevance of this quote in his article “Salinger in The Waste Land,” he focuses mainly on how he sees Eliot’s influence in *The Catcher in the Rye*.
5. Charles Genthe explains that readers know it is their sixth anniversary because of knowledge provided by other Glass stories in the canon. He relates it to the fact that Sybil sees six bananafish in the water with Seymour, saying that by “using the number six as both a focal point

and a point of departure, Salinger has created a Seymour who must destroy his physical being as the “bananas” have destroyed his soul” (171).

6. Daði Guðjónsson also discusses this strange action in his psychoanalytic reading of Seymour’s character throughout Salinger’s canon. He explains that kissing a person’s feet is shown as a sign of humility in the Bible, citing the story of the repentant woman kissing the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:38. For Metcalf and Gwynn & Blotner’s analysis of this part of the scene, see note #8.

7. McDuffie makes a similar point, commenting that Seymour acts out the story of the bananafish “by walking back into the hotel where he appears to be in the midst of the living dead who have swum into the bananafish hole; there amongst the dead, he dies” (29).

8. Frank Metcalf interprets Seymour’s suicide to be an act of self-control in reaction to his repressed pedophilic inclinations, saying that the “nearly conscious desires expressed in his bananafish story and in his erotic pretense with the girl are made fully conscious to him by Sybil’s innocent responses to his story and to the kiss on her foot” (246). In their reading of this story, Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner discuss how some of the imagery used by Salinger suggests that Seymour’s inability to perform sexually is why he kills himself. They support this interpretation by pointing to the sexual overtones of his conversation with Sybil and his actions while in the ocean with her, saying that “Seymour is destroyed by his own hypersensitivity pathetically heightened by lack of love” (19). James Bryan reads Seymour’s lack of sexual drive with Muriel to be the driving force behind his suicide, saying that his “psychotic urge to knock down trees does not seem a frustration of impotence but rather a manifestation of his struggle to transcend sex entirely... if there are sexual connotations in the central symbol of the gluttonous bananafish gorging themselves, they are of a regretted potency” (229).

9. Slawenski posits that the “effort involved in completing [this story] demonstrates not only the intense cooperation between Salinger and *The New Yorker*’s editors, who consulted him over every detail, but also the extent to which Salinger sharpened the story. Since he worked on the piece for a whole year, we can be sure that he scrutinized each word” (159).

10. Lane and Cotter both discuss the importance of Rilke’s poetry to understanding Seymour and his decision; Lane focuses on the *Duino Elegies* while Cotter draws from Rilke’s earlier volume, *The Book of Images*.

11. John Russell discusses Seymour’s outburst in the elevator in relation to his spiritual progress, arguing that if “all ground is Holy ground, holy feet must walk it; if spiritual progress is always defined in terms of a Way, way-knowing feet must follow it. It has come home to Seymour that he is the bananafish, that his wife is the hole, and that through this combination he has lost his Way” (311).

12. Smith notes this fact in her discussion of *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, as well as the background information Salinger provides in it for the other seven Glass children. She states that Boo Boo was “an ensign in the Waves” and that all of the children were involved in the war effort in some way or another (487).

13. Slawenski observes that while on vacation in July 1948, Salinger began “to take notes on some reading materials he had brought with him: a chilling endorsement of ethnic cleansing contained in the Nazi treatise *New Bases of Racial Research* and a May 1 article from *The New Yorker* entitled ‘The Children of Lidice’” (173).

14. According to Slawenski, Salinger began writing “Teddy” after “De Daumier-Smith’s Blue Period” was rejected by *The New Yorker* in November 1951, reworking an old story he had never

finished that took place on a cruise ship, but did not start working on it in earnest until autumn of the next year (235).

15. Eliot qualifies this distinction by explaining that vedantic thought is “concerned to show the ultimate non-reality of all distinctions – that Reality is not constituted by parts, that in essence it is not different from the Self” (3). For an in-depth understanding of this philosophical tradition, see his book *Advaita Vedanta*.

16. In his study of Salinger’s short fiction, John Wenke also bases his understanding of the cycle on the zen koan, discussing how it creates holes in the narratives and how to interpret them (32).

17. Renganeschi discusses this concept in his exploration of the influence of Dante on this cycle, saying that a “complete understanding of the ‘Inferno’ of *Nine Stories* depends on reading *Boo Boo* through the lens of Dante’s Beatrice” (321).

18. Determined “to ignore the book’s reception,” Slawenski states that Salinger actively avoided “newspapers and magazines for weeks after [its] release... [saying] he feared being unbalanced by the attention and explained that scrutiny distracted him from work” (248).

19. In the notes he provided for “The Waste Land,” Eliot defined the poem’s closing word of *Shantih* as being a formal ending to an Upanishad, saying that ““The Peace which passeth understanding’ is a feeble translation of the conduct of this word” (50). Dealing primarily with meditation, philosophy, and spiritual knowledge, the Upanishads are a part of the Vedas; for more information about how the Vedantic school of thought stemmed from these texts, see Deutsch’s book *Advaita Vedanta*.

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