

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Danielle Kristine Herb for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 1, 2015.

Title: In Defense of the “Ringding Mukta”: The Later Work of J.D. Salinger.

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

David M. Robinson

My thesis explores the later work of author J.D. Salinger, including two narratives featured in *Nine Stories*, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” and “Teddy,” and *Franny and Zooey*, “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” and “Seymour: an Introduction.” Through my analysis I argue that the religious nature of Salinger’s fiction has been cast aside far too quickly, and the lack of discourse concerning his later work is a devastating oversight. My defense is simple: the religious elements are in fact key to understanding and appreciating these stories—to overlook the spiritual (albeit complicated) essence of his work, is to miss the whole thing—not even *Catcher* would work without it. Moreover, I venture to display and further analyze the evolution of Salinger’s spiritual quest, and by doing so I argue for the centrality of religion in the construction and development of Salinger’s art. The role of the spiritual inherent in Salinger’s story-telling is also used to lead us to what I argue is one of Salinger’s greatest, yet most dismissed, works, “Seymour: an Introduction.” Therefore, my defense is not only of the author and his work, but also of the author’s most infamous creation: Seymour Glass. I believe that my exploration of Salinger’s later fiction emphasizes that the very aspects of Salinger’s fiction that people find fault with, are in fact the qualities that make it noteworthy.

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In Defense of the “Ringding Mukta”: The Later Work of J.D. Salinger

by  
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 1, 2015  
Commencement June 2015

Master of Arts thesis of Danielle Kristine Herb presented on May 1, 2015.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Danielle Kristine Herb, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without my enthusiastic major adviser, Dr. David Robinson, who was there with me every step of the way. Thank you to Dr. Neil Davison and Dr. Peter Betjemann for their sincerity and kindness, and to Dr. Courtney Campbell for graciously agreeing to serve as my Graduate Council Representative. I am grateful to the Oregon State community for another wonderful two years, and my family—who sadly had to put up with hearing about that “Salinger guy” pretty regularly. Lastly, thank you to my incredible husband, Dustin Herb.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines what I term as the “later” work of J.D. Salinger—an equally celebrated and condemned author—whose work has nevertheless become a touchstone of 20<sup>th</sup> century American fiction. When one attempts to conjure up the image of J.D. Salinger, one may envision a man turned hermit who was driven mad by the war. Or perhaps a chauvinistic being who through his disgust with the world, attempted to shield himself behind the guise of morality and religion. Over the years, many readers have liked to impose certain meanings and symbols onto a man who was unofficially elected as chief spokesman of youth and rebellion for the post-World War II generation. However, much of Salinger’s positive representation stems from his first major hit: *The Catcher and the Rye*. Unfortunately, much of his later work has been seen as inferior to *Catcher*, and, at times, downright abysmal.

Furthermore, Salinger’s “silent years,” and his modest withdrawal from society in order to have some “peace and quiet” away from the maddening crowd, was perceived as an aggressive affront, and was in turn met with hostility, much like the hostility towards the Glass family that his fiction portrays. Due to the presumed decline of his art and his life, most of the scholarship concerning his later work is dismissive and unenthusiastic, which in turn has created a muteness around Salinger in the realm of academic study. As Ross Posnock notes, the “strangest feature of Salinger’s current standing is the void where his literary reputation should be” (Posnock par. 8). Scholarship on *The Catcher in the Rye* is abundant, but, sadly, there is scarce beyond that: “Of the two major scholarly journals of American literature, *American Literary History* and *American Literature*, one has yet to publish a single article on him and the

other has published only two in 60 years” (Posnock par. 8). Is Salinger’s fiction really that defective? What was it about his fiction that critics despised so much?

For example, when “Franny” and “Zooney” appeared in book form in 1961, the critical reception was unified into inflamed, disgruntled vexation. Alfred Kazin, in an essay entitled “J.D. Salinger: ‘Everybody’s Favorite,’” said, “I am sorry to have to use the word ‘cute’ in respect to Salinger, but there is absolutely no other word that for me so accurately typifies the self-conscious charm and prankishness of his own writing and his extraordinary cherishing of his favorite Glass characters” (Kazin par. 7). Likewise, John Updike, though perhaps more kind than Kazin, mocked Salinger for his rendering of a character who is “just one of the remote millions coarse and foolish enough to be born outside the Glass family,” and charged Salinger with portraying the Glasses “not to particularize imaginary people but to instill in the reader a mood of blind worship, tinged with envy.” “Salinger loves the Glasses more than God loves them,” Updike wrote, “he loves them too exclusively. Their invention has become a hermitage for him. He loves them to the detriment of artistic moderation” (Updike par. 7-9).

The animosity towards Salinger’s Glass family would only deepen. Much of his writing centers on the mystic, unbalanced Seymour Glass, who is the most striking religious figure found in his fiction. Through Seymour and his religious musings, Salinger “bids farewell to the tightly disciplined short story form and delves into a construction of free narrative, which neither caters to conventionality or linearity” (Posnock par. 12). This, cites his harshest of critics, was Salinger’s ultimate literary downfall. One of the authors of the new biography (and documentary) *Salinger*, David Shields, targets Salinger’s service in World War II and his supposed post-traumatic stress disorder as the reason behind his construction of the Glass family. He claims that Salinger was “pulling an immense blanket over himself,” and from now on he



would keep himself “warm by the heat of this impossibly idealized, suicidal, genius alternative family,” this, Shields claims, became Salinger’s “mission”: “to disappear into the Glasses” (Shields, 179). However, Shields’ assertion requires a deeper analysis.

Despite the veracity or limitations of the claim, Shields also insists that the Glass family may have “comforted” Salinger, but they ultimately destroyed his art: “Suffering from PTSD, and searching for meaning and God, he made religion his art” (Shields, 180). Salinger “was no longer a novelist per se,” instead “writing ‘wisdom literature’—metaphysical uplift ... ‘translation’ and ‘popularization’” ultimately became his task. In other words, “the war broke him as a man and made him a great artist; religion offered him postwar spiritual solace and killed his art” (Shields, 182). Likewise, Salerno claims, “the isolation of that bunker and his complete immersion in Vedanta destroyed his art” (Salerno, 382). What differs from both of their accusations is that Shields sees war as the root of Salinger’s genius, while Salerno couples it with Vedanta, and therefore his demise.

Like Shields and Salerno, Thomas Beller, author of the relatively new book on Salinger entitled *J.D. Salinger: The Escape Artist*, disapproves of the role of Zen Buddhism in Salinger’s life and work. He, too is disappointed when he reads Salinger’s recently released letters to his spiritual guide Swami Nikhilananda: “Absent are the absurd, bizarre digressions and impersonations” that enliven his other letters (Beller, 174). “I was confronted,” Beller explains, “by my various ambivalences and even antipathy to the role of Zen Buddhism in his life and work” (Beller, 174). Beller calls the religion present in Salinger’s life a “corrupting influence” (Beller, 175), but spends very little time evaluating or analyzing it. He simply closes that chapter on Salinger’s life without even reading it, and continues on to the Salinger he most wants to represent. The problem with this, however, is that it omits a rather large chunk of not only

Salinger's existence, but also much of the inspiration *behind* his art. In many ways, we can thank Salinger's pursuit of the spiritual for giving us much of the literature he produced, which I will examine throughout my study.

As a result, Salerno and Shields equate all of Salinger's "bad story-telling" to that of his spiritual life, and are thoroughly convinced that certain incidents in his stories, such as Seymour Glass' suicide, are "so saturated with war damage that sociopaths can see it, as if with X-ray glasses" (Shields, 200). However, as my analysis will show, there is really no explanation for Seymour's death, and it certainly cannot fully be attributed to violence. Furthermore, Seymour and his siblings have also been confined, like much of Salinger's work, to certain assigned spaces. Many times they are seen as one-dimensional characters who uplift Seymour's sermons without extensive inspection. However, my exploration of the religious dimensions of his work suggests that Seymour's siblings do not accept their brother all that lightly, and that they "messily and angrily grieve" over him (Posnock par. 20). It is true that they show dissatisfaction with the world around them, but they are also shown through their own limitations to nevertheless love and respect others. It seems that Shields, Salerno, and Beller are investigating only one small facet of Salinger's creations. Salerno claims that Salinger "lost the ability to create characters who are believable and not mouthpieces" (Salerno, 382). Is that truly the case? Perhaps their investigations ultimately overlook key aspects of Salinger's thinking. My argument in turn rests on this assumption: that the religious nature of Salinger's fiction has been categorized too stringently, and the lack of discussion around his later work is problematic. My thesis is my own attempt to nullify this oversight.

Most artists attempt to challenge and evolve their art, whether it be stylistically, or thematically. Salinger did both of these by challenging himself and his art with religion, like

many artists have done before and after him. My defense is simple: the religious elements are in fact key to Salinger's artistic achievement—to overlook Salinger the spiritual (albeit damaged) quester, is to miss the whole thing—not even *Catcher* would work without it. The very aspects of Salinger's fiction that people complain about are the qualities that make it notable.

For the purpose of this paper, I chose to focus on key texts in Salinger's "later work," including two narratives featured in *Nine Stories*, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and "Teddy," and his later books, *Franny and Zooey*, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," and "Seymour: an Introduction." Through my exploration of these stories, I venture to display and further analyze the evolution of Salinger's spiritual quest, and by doing so I argue for the centrality of religion in the construction and development of Salinger's art. The role of religion inherent in Salinger's story-telling is ultimately employed to lead us to what I argue is one of Salinger's greatest works, "Seymour: an Introduction."

Through my illustrations of the importance of the function of the religious elements in these stories, I will attempt to position Salinger's religious quest at the forefront of his work. Despite Salerno and Shields' claim that "Franny" got it just right: 80 percent story and character, "20 percent religion and lecture" (Shields, 80), I would contend that by transcending this constrictive formula of what makes a "good" story, Salinger's fiction achieves something great, and perhaps this may in turn initiate some kind of praise of his "religious" work that has been long overdue. My defense is not only of the author, but also of the author's most beloved creation: the notorious Seymour Glass.

## Chapter One: *Nine Stories*

“What this reader loves about Mr. Salinger's stories is that they honor what is unique and precious in each person on earth. Their author has the courage—it is more like the earned right and privilege—to experiment at the risk of not being understood.” –Eudora Welty’s review of *Nine Stories*

J.D. Salinger has forever been seen as a counter-figure to social culture, and a prophet to the lost, post-World War(s) generation. Through his use of spirituality in his fiction, Salinger seems to be exposing and criticizing the despondent nature of American culture at this time, and the “religious” questions he raises are his deeply felt reactions to his country’s emptiness. Salinger proposes an alternative spiritual path that deviates from the traditional American spiritual systems in *Nine Stories* by evoking other forms of consciousness from the East, and by also reshaping or reimagining Western belief-systems, specifically Judeo-Christian traditions. Though Salinger’s defense of the spiritual life seems clear in *Nine Stories*, the character of Seymour Glass, though supremely “religious” he may be, will ultimately become a mystical, paradoxical riddle that clashes with Salinger’s sermon throughout his work.

Though the narratives featured in *Nine Stories* are, as I will argue, filled with spirituality and mysticism, the spiritual dimensions of the stories appear to defy adherence to any one set of religious principles. However, a certain type of mysticism, spirituality, or religiosity is undeniably present in *Nine Stories*, and Salinger’s spiritual vision seems to be influenced primarily by Eastern religious traditions, specifically Zen Buddhism and Vedanta. However, many other belief-systems play a role, such as Taoism, Judaism, and Christianity, but no single belief-system seems to be dominant or fully explanatory for the whole of *Nine Stories*. In many

ways, the definition, or in fact the entirety of Salinger's spiritual vision stands alone, but the backbone of his religiosity significantly rests upon, and is supported by Zen Buddhism and the universal Vedanta, with references to his own reformed Judeo-Christian ideologies. Moreover, Western religious symbols are given as much form and existence as his Eastern ones, ultimately forming what seems like some type of syncretic spiritual vision.

Ultimately, Salinger's stories grab the reader, but also make the reader feel a bit disoriented. The atmosphere he creates is one of confusion and supreme mystical bewilderment. In some of these stories, Salinger's utilization of Christianity and other forms of Western doctrine are ultimately employed to "wet the feet" of his Western readers, which further adds to the perplexity of his spiritual vision. Whether his use of Western spiritual notions is meant to eventually point his readers to the East, or instead utilized in order to maneuver, or re-think the teachings that surround Judeo-Christian doctrines, or perhaps unite the two, East and West, into some kind of union, varies from story to story. In her memoir, *Dream Catcher*, Margaret A. Salinger, Salinger's daughter, more or less hits the nail on the head when she says that her father's early work brings forth a sort of "Christianized Eastern mysticism" (M. Salinger, 102).

Salinger biographer Kenneth Slawenski claims that Salinger was at this time "excited by *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*" and he "rushed to present its values through his work" (Slawenski, 236). Sri Ramakrishna was a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian mystic who believed that "all religions are the revelation of God in His diverse aspects to satisfy the manifold demands of human minds... They are not contradictory but complementary,"<sup>1</sup> thus outlining perhaps the origin of Salinger's syncretic spiritual quest. The book, *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*, records conversations of Ramakrishna with his disciples, devotees, and visitors. One of Sri

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<sup>1</sup> From the Vedanta Society of Toronto, 2012.

Ramakrishna's chief disciples was Swami Vivekananda, who later took over Ramakrishna's discipleship and was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the Western world (Georg, 600). Vedanta is immensely significant in Salinger's stories, and its presence will continue to grow throughout his later work. The goal of Vedanta is for the seeker to have a direct connection to his or her true nature, and it is held that each and everyone is skilled enough to have the highest illumination. Though perhaps not apparent in the other *Nine Stories*, "Teddy," the last narrative featured in the collection, is suffused with spirituality and Eastern traditions, and not only was Salinger's spiritual quest embedding itself silently into the other stories featured in the collection, but with "Teddy," his private meditations and religiosity were now blatantly apparent for the first time, and were "shared with readers as duty to his faith" (Slawenski, 236).

However, Salinger, in a sense, tends to lean more towards his own existentialism, or a modern alternative to foundational truths, even through his use of various religious symbols. Salinger does not speak typical, or traditional "religious talk," nor does he overtly specify any doctrines or religious traditions, Western or Asian, in these stories except perhaps in the last story of *Nine Stories*, "Teddy." Salinger seems to be wary of being explicit about religion, because that would possibly ruin the delicate textures of the stories as social observations and character portraits, and would also alienate much of his contemporary readership, who would best be imagined as faithful *New Yorker* readers and other "scholarly" types that were mistrustful of religion (at least in its conventional form) during this time. These are very unreligious stories

on the surface (again except for “Teddy”), whose spiritual dimensions do not arise until subsequent thoughtful analysis is performed<sup>2</sup>.

The epigraph to *Nine Stories* is the Zen koan made famous by Salinger: “We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?” In many ways, an epigraph provides the author with an opportunity to give the readers insight into how to interpret the stories we, as readers, are about to encounter. It seems that Salinger is suggesting that we view these stories through a somewhat illogical Zen-lens, or without the assistance of our Western-based preconceived notions. The sound of one hand clapping will, essentially, produce no sound at all: it exists and it is real, but it is fundamentally a type of untouchable “nothingness.” The use of the koan reflects Salinger’s interest in a Zen philosopher named D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki was a Japanese author of books and essays on Buddhism, Zen, and Shin that were instrumental in spreading interest in both Zen and Shin (and Eastern philosophy in general) to the West<sup>3</sup>. Tom Davis claims that, “Zen is a certain way of thinking about life, of living in accord with reality” (Davis, 42), and that Zen’s influence on Salinger’s art “is not to indulge in cultural chauvinism, but simply to state the Zen’s oneness and detachment are alien to the Western artist’s struggle between love and squalor—the sound of two hands clapping” (Davis, 47).

People are often bombarded with a myriad of sounds and noises, are preoccupied with hurried, perhaps aimless busyness, have constant thoughts and stimulations of intellect, and these disruptions that stem from this specific, Western-type of society get in the way of what Salinger

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<sup>2</sup> This concealment of the spiritual quest in his fiction will soon come to an end in Salinger’s later work. *Franny and Zooey*, “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” and “Seymour: an Introduction” are testaments to this.

<sup>3</sup> Salinger met D.T. Suzuki in 1950. Suzuki was also attracted to the idea of combining Christian mysticism with Zen, which Salinger found appealing (Slawenski, 190).

believes is the essential “sound” of exalted peace: nothingness. Salinger is encouraging a way of thinking, or a type of elevated consciousness, that is undistracted by rationality. It is with this cryptic Zen epigraph that Salinger draws open the curtain, and leads the way into the first of his *Nine Stories*, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Bernice and Sanford Goldstein argue that *Nine Stories* should be studied within the two extremes of the Zen koan experience: that a particular insoluble problem that is beyond the realm of the rational may lead to a mental breakdown, and that the struggle with a problem beyond the guidelines of reason may lead to enlightenment, or satori (Goldstein, 172). Therefore, Salinger’s spiritual vision, as seen through the character of Seymour Glass, is a mystical conundrum: does Salinger’s epigraph koan ruin Seymour, or aid him? However, the Goldstein’s explanation of “Bananafish,” and their attempt to define or explicate its motives, actually shows how Salinger’s vision ultimately precedes any concrete analysis of it.

Nevertheless, with the Goldstein’s argument in mind, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” can then be analyzed and explained in one of two ways. We might, for example, see Seymour’s dilemma as that of the enlightened man rejected by the “non-enlightened world” (Goldstein, 175). He therefore realizes that he cannot live in this type of flawed, phony adult reality, and decides to kill himself. He can no longer sit idly by in a world that was deprived of meaning or essence. If this is true, then Seymour is the opposite of a phony: he is a champion of true essence and authenticity. Or perhaps Seymour is like Teddy (which I will delve into further later on), in that he is simply fulfilling “God’s will.” Gordon E. Slethaug argues that for Seymour, “Each stage is an act in the great evolving drama of human life as controlled by ‘God’ or the ‘divine’” (Slethaug, 119-120), and that Seymour, being the “violent,” passionate man of enlightenment that he is, believes that, “an individual should not object to the course their lives must take”



(Slethaug, 127). He must not fight his divinely ordered fate, and he fully accepts his “spiritual responsibility” (Slethaug, 127). If Seymour is “fulfilling God’s will,” Salinger’s spiritual quest must come under scrutiny. If his fate is a validation of his impossibility to live comfortably in the world, what is Salinger proposing—destiny? Or if Seymour is too much a tenant of the world, and is too preoccupied by it in order to see his true spiritual calling, what then? Either way, Salinger’s spiritual quest ends in a sacrifice of the self, and Seymour’s renunciation of life is a way in which he preserves his soul.

The story of Seymour’s suicide could in fact be read in both ways. On one hand, Seymour, like Salinger, is a veteran of World War II, and his vision of America would have been, much like Salinger’s own, shaped by his wartime experience. The culture that both Seymour and Salinger re-entered into after the bloody, dehumanizing realities of war seems to be filled with endless, pointless trivialities. We see this with Seymour’s own wife Muriel, and the other adult characters featured in “Bananafish.” On the other hand, it is possible that Seymour, despite his wartime experience, is dutifully following the will of God or the divine, as Slethaug suggests.

However, Salinger’s explicit references to Seymour’s somewhat shaky, post-war state in “Bananafish” are there to remind us and further provide us with a possible reason as to why Seymour is largely dissatisfied with the state of present society. Do Seymour’s “religious” convictions stem from his time as a soldier during World War II, or did they exist far before that? At this point in the saga of Seymour Glass this is uncertain, but will eventually be made clear in *Franny and Zooey*, “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters,” and “Seymour: an Introduction.” But for now, and by analyzing “Bananafish” as an isolated text, it seems that Seymour’s “religiousness” may be a result of, or at the very least is shaped by, war. War for

Salinger seems to be at many times a catalyst for many of his character's religious awakenings. Religious experience and death sometimes do go in hand in hand in his fiction (such as in the case of Seymour, Teddy, and Sergeant X in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor"), and one is often indicative of the other. Margaret Salinger explains that an aspect of her father that she understands with "every fiber" of her being is that of "the vulnerability of human beings under fire... There are no atheists in trenches" (M. Salinger, 95). Her ruminations on her father's spirituality and its deep connection to his wartime activities, despite its faulty simplicity, accurately diagnoses a possible motivation behind Seymour, and Salinger's, spiritual quests.

Ultimately then, Seymour, perhaps because of his wartime background, is revealed to be an injured man. We get a sense of just how "unstable" Seymour might be during his wife Muriel's conversation with her mother over the telephone at the beginning of the story. While Seymour and Muriel are at a hotel in Florida, she contacts her worried parents. During their conversation, we find that Muriel's father spoke with a psychiatrist (the new American authority figure) about Seymour's seemingly odd behavior: "In the first place, he said it was a perfect *crime* the Army released him from the hospital—my word of honor. He very *definitely* told your father there's a chance—a very *great* chance, he said—that Seymour may *completely* lose control of himself" (Salinger, 9). Seymour is obviously a man dealing with heavy concepts of morality and human nature, and he is struggling with the first-hand knowledge of the massive cruelty that humankind is capable of inflicting on one another. What exactly *did* happen to Seymour? World War II was obviously a cataclysmic event, strewn with atrocities and enormous amounts of sadism. Margaret Salinger claims that her father told her once that, "You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how long you live" (M. Salinger, 55). Perhaps Salinger's experiences mirrored Seymour's, though the connection

between the two is not necessarily meant to be viewed biographically. Still, one wonders if Seymour's hurt was rooted in the origin of Salinger's own war wounds.

Due to Seymour's post-war outlook, he finds other "problems" or complaints mild and unnecessary. Sybil Carpenter, the child-figure of the story, is present in order to shine a glaring light on the adult characters. Sybil, like Seymour, is not a fan of the adult world. "Did you see more glass?" she asks much to the annoyance of her mother, whose main goal in life seems to be to "gossip and drink martinis" (Goldstein, 177). Sybil, like so many of Salinger's child characters, represents innocence, purity, and a life free from the spoils of reality. Salinger explains that she sat "insecurely on a huge, inflated beach ball, facing the ocean" (Salinger, 15), which suggests that Sybil is not altogether anchored in the world of adults, not yet. Therefore, Sybil's innocence prevents her from fully participating in her mother's adult world. Yet the suggestion of her "innocence" is not meant condescendingly, but rather she has an innate spiritual knowledge that strives for the "essence" of life, not the materiality that encapsulates the essence.

Salinger shows the utmost respect for children, and establishes their point of view as valuable. For Seymour, Sybil's uniquely authentic world is painfully juxtaposed next to the ego-burdened, phony world of adults. Furthermore, children, like Sybil, are not concerned with the laws of reason or rationality, and are therefore not yet tainted by the grown-up world that is filled with earthly logic and blasphemous acquisitiveness. In fact, Sybil is described as having "delicate, winglike" shoulder blades (Salinger, 15), and is, in many ways, like Seymour's own personal angel. Much of Salinger's writings "evidence the opinion that children are closer to God than adults, allowing them to love more perfectly," and since children "enjoy such an elevated position in Salinger's writings, the spiritual purity of his adult characters can be measured by

their closeness to the children around them” (Slawenski, 172). It is this Zen-like, holy world of children that Seymour identifies with and understands (as his name implies, he “see(s) more”), and due to this knowledge, he further recognizes that the society he resides in is, in many ways, spiritually and morally corrupt.

Seymour’s own wife is too materialistic, too concerned with spending money to make herself beautiful, too concerned with a good room in a fancy hotel, and is, in short, too concerned with herself. She is a “spiritual tramp,” and “refuses to attempt a more poetic way of life,” and because she is spiritually inept, “Seymour sometimes can not relate to her” (Slethaug, 126). When Sybil asks Seymour where “the lady” (Muriel) is, he responds in a way that undoubtedly shines an exposing light on his detest for his wife’s affectations: “That’s hard to say, Sybil. 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” (Salinger, 17). Even her seemingly good deeds are condemned by Seymour. To him, her actions are ultimately driven by her ego, and therefore her attempts at sympathy are empty.

Salinger’s daughter explains that due to his increasing interest in Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings at this time, “meeting a woman,” meant that Jerry was “heading in the wrong direction for enlightenment” (M.Salinger, 13). Sex and marriage, as Sri Ramakrishna claimed, were impediments that prevented one from the true, spiritual life. Is this conundrum true for Seymour as well, who, after all, is on a second honeymoon in Florida with his wife, but is not spending much time with her? Moreover, at the beginning of the story, while Muriel is waiting for her mother to call, she is reading an article in a woman’s magazine entitled, “Sex Is Fun—or Hell,” suggesting that this juxtaposition of sex as “fun” or “hell” is somewhat of a problem for Muriel and Seymour, with damning religious implications attached. Seymour, and

possibly Salinger himself, may have, at least in some capacity, taken ascetic vows and practiced celibacy in order to pursue his spiritual quest free from fleshy distractions.

Therefore, Salinger seems to be arguing through the character of Seymour that stresses such as modern warfare, the materialistic, depersonalized mode of 20th-century urban American living, and perhaps earthly desires (such as sex and marriage), cut off our natural access to the divine. Leigh Eric Schmidt points out that the term “spirituality” was usually used as a “theological term in opposition to materiality,” and “*spirituality* sometimes referred to a specific attribute of God—along-side omnipotence or patience—or to the immaterial quality of the soul as opposed to the body” (Schmidt, 4). Through his use of spirituality and his negative portrayal of materialism, Salinger is seemingly condemning modern American society for “obstructing the revelation of spiritual and artistic truth” (Slawenski, 155) through its engrossment with corporeal comforts.

Therefore, due to Seymour’s troubles with the adult world, he turns to the pure, spiritually uncorrupt child. Seymour’s understanding and admiration of children is important, because for Seymour (and for Salinger as well), children are the foremost representation of the divine and elevated soul. Salinger evokes the “non-sequitor world of children, and their logical illogicality” (Goldstein, 176) in order to express that a child’s understanding and view of the world is actually greater than adults’, and they are more able to access that which is true and divine. Their innocence aids them in their objective, yet critical view of the world. Sybil’s “logical illogicality” alludes to Salinger’s paradoxical koan epigraph, and through Seymour and Sybil’s relations, we finally receive a first-hand account of Seymour that presents him in a far different light than what is offered at the beginning of the story.

What is also notable is that Seymour and Sybil's exchange does not happen anywhere near the resort, and therefore their interaction exists entirely apart from the polluting, and suffocating world of adults: "Stopping only to sink a foot in a soggy, collapsed castle, [Sybil] was soon out of the area reserved for guests of the hotel," and on her way to meet Seymour (Salinger, 15). Sybil is leaving the land of castles built on shaky foundations by humans, and is venturing out into the wild, and free nature. Urban life is stifling, and not only is it "stifling," but the atmosphere of society is one lacking in authenticity. Salinger is allusively proposing the idea that "true" artists, "cut themselves apart from the modern world in order to experience and serve [the] truth, much in the same way monks cloister themselves to serve God" (Slawenski, 155).

It is in the ocean, in this "free" space that embodies the natural and the real, that Seymour indirectly hints to his upcoming suicide. Through the story of the fictitious bananafish, Seymour's fate manifests. When Sybil asks Seymour what happens to the bananafish after they eat too many bananas and cannot get out of the bananahole, Seymour explains that, "Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die" (Salinger, 23). Gerald Rosen explains that, "Seymour has taken in so much from outside himself, he is so stuffed, that he is weighted down with the ballast of learning and can't free himself to see in the pre-logical manner which he envies in little children" (Rosen, 37). Seymour's explanation of the bananafish's overconsumption of the bananas, and how it eventually leads to their deaths, is a direct allusion to the fact that Seymour has taken in too much of the Western world.

This once again brings us back to the Zen koan in the epigraph. Rosen also argues that Seymour's death is a Zen metaphor in itself, and he references a famous Zen koan about a university professor who comes to see Nan-in (a Japanese Zen master) to ask about Zen. Nan-in fills the professor's cup until it is full and then keeps pouring. When the professor finally stops

him, Nan-in says, “Like this cup you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?” (Rosen, 36) Rosen makes a good point, and it is possible that in conjunction with Seymour’s wartime experience and his weakness for worldly goods (marriage, for example), and his relationship with children, he has come to understand the daunting notion that he has perhaps taken in too much “cultural data” (Rosen, 36), and therefore he is driven to commit suicide in order to “save” himself.

Sybil is herself a prophetess of Seymour’s death. Her name in Greek literally translates as “prophetess, oracle.” It is no mistake that Sybil’s last name happens to be “Carpenter,” another direct, Christian allusion to Sybil as a divine representative of God (she “sees more,” too). Is she a mouthpiece of God, then? Does Seymour recognize this in her? Does Seymour achieve a type of spiritual enlightenment or release when he commits suicide? Or is he driven insane by the “real” world? In many ways, I don’t necessarily think there is a right or wrong answer here; Salinger crafts the story so that it will generate both readings, which is why he is seen as both a mystic, and a sharp social critic. What is for certain, however, is that in either case, Seymour’s suicide is ultimately motivated by some kind of spiritual calling. He either kills himself because he cannot bear this post-World War(s), “post-religious” society that is not concerned with the “right” and meaningful things in life (he gets stuck in his own kind of bananahole), or he kills himself because it is, in some sense, divinely sanctioned or fated.

However, the point of a Zen koan is not necessarily to find an “answer.” The effort to “solve” a koan is intended to “exhaust the analytic intellect and the egoistic will, readying the mind to entertain an appropriate response on the intuitive level” (Doniger, 644). In other words, a koan does not have a right “answer,” but is used as a tool in order to get the students of the koan to utilize their meditative skills. In much the same way, this is part of what Salinger is attempting

to do with Seymour's suicide (and perhaps the *Nine Stories* collection as a whole). The cause of Seymour's death gives rise to many possibilities: it was fate, he was driven insane by the world perhaps due to his wartime experience, or he could no longer function in society due to his spiritual convictions. With Salinger's epigraph as a guide, our own meditation on Seymour's death is perhaps meant to lead to something other than a definitive answer for it. Just like we as readers hang on to the meaning behind Seymour's suicide, a Zen student "hangs on to their koan" (Rosen, 37)<sup>4</sup>.

The last narrative in *Nine Stories*, "Teddy," can be seen and studied in much the same way as a "Perfect Day for Bananafish." In fact, Slawenski claims that Salinger "intended to include 'Teddy' in the collection before it was actually finished" (Slawenski, 236). *Nine Stories* is then an interconnected collection, a novel of sorts, and this ultimately influenced the story, "causing Salinger to deliberately contrast and complement the collection's intended opening story, 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish'" (Slawenski, 236). Slawenski goes on to argue that,

It seems apparent that Salinger used... Teddy to re-explain the suicide of Seymour from a later perspective in an attempt to embed a spiritual acceptance into Seymour's character that "Bananafish" alone does not supply. In other words, Salinger used "Teddy" to rewrite "Bananafish," or at least to reroute the direction of readers' interpretations. (Slawenski, 250)

While I agree that "Teddy" may be some attempt by Salinger to explain the actions and death of Seymour, I do not think, as Slawenski also somewhat acknowledges, that "Teddy" is necessarily a "rewrite" of Seymour, though the two are undeniably connected. However, I do think that Salinger uses the story of "Teddy" to create further and deeper consideration of Seymour and his suicide.

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<sup>4</sup> The Glass children also hang on to their brother Seymour's suicide, which will be further explained in Chapters Two and Three.



Slawenski's analysis helps to explain why Teddy, like Seymour, is a type of spiritual guru or prophet. Teddy also, most likely, dies at the end of the story, fulfilling his spiritually induced prophecy, or perhaps he commits suicide in order to escape the faulty, uncaring world he lives in. Again, like Seymour's own death, Teddy's supposed death can be viewed in a multitude of ways. "Teddy" is arguably the most blatantly "religious" narrative in *Nine Stories*, and many spiritual notions and mystical conundrums are thoroughly approached and discussed.

The story of "Teddy" is a way in which Salinger makes Eastern religious philosophies palatable to his mostly Western readers. Teddy McArdle is a ten-year-old American boy, who stems from a middle-class, well to-do family, yet he is different, and importantly so. He is highly intelligent, and is ultimately unconcerned with the values most Americans hold onto tightly. Teddy is a seer that is so "far advanced in his spiritual quest for oneness with God that his attachment to the physical world around him...has reached the point of evaporation" (Slawenski, 236). Teddy is a "mystic-savant," and his spirituality and his religious teachings do not align themselves wholly to one specific religion or doctrine, but rather his spiritual vision, much like Salinger's own in *Nine Stories*, is a mixed one, and he alludes to such religions as Christianity, Buddhism, and Indian mysticism. Teddy, it seems, is the "ultimate enlightened child," and a complicated one at that (Teddy, short for Theodore, is Greek for "God's gift").

Like "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," a withdrawal from society is necessary. The whole of "Teddy" takes place aboard a cruise ship, which is also out in the "nothingness" of the ocean, and is free, in some ways, from the constraints and secular influences of society. Though, a cruise ship could be seen as an ultimate of secular materialism, just like the resort featured in *Bananafish*. Nevertheless, here and in "Bananafish," Salinger does "cast its characters adrift in an environment with no definable borders, no beginning, and no end" (Slawenski, 238). It

becomes apparent early on in the story that Teddy is not a typical child (like so many of Salinger's young characters), and he himself is not able to fully communicate or relate to others.

Anthony Kaufman claims that Salinger's "Teddy" is ultimately about the "failure of love," and that "Teddy has reacted defensively to an exploitative adult world by intuitively developing the persona of the mystic and clairvoyant both to gain the love he desperately needs and, paradoxically, to distance himself from his uncaring family and the grown-up world" (Kaufman, 129). It is true that Teddy presents the problem of a wisdom that is, in many ways, disconnected and uninterested in the world he lives in. On the surface this philosophy seemingly has no stakes in anything, and therefore Teddy views everything through the possibly limiting lens of the Zen notion of "impermanence." This makes Teddy a problematic figure.

Is this child hiding a deeper hurt through his dispassionate wisdom? Is the trauma caused by the wisdom he has encountered and internalized? Or does the origin of Teddy's trauma, ultimately, lie somewhere else? I think it would be accurate to identify Teddy as the wise child, but also the disinterested child. However, Teddy's disinterest in the material world is not cause for alarm, suggests Salinger, but calls forth praise and understanding. Teddy is not to be seen as the child that is necessarily injured by the knowledge he has come into contact with, nor do his religious insights stem from his brokenness. Rather I think he has access, through his spiritual prowess and insight, to that which, I believe Salinger is arguing, is ultimately above the pettiness of the "real" world, and therefore Teddy has become spiritually whole, not broken.

With his realization of the "pettiness" of the real world, which was ultimately highlighted by his divine intuitiveness, may, and most likely is the cause of his despondency, Teddy's "gift" or spiritual awareness is ultimately a double-edged sword. However, unlike Seymour, Teddy has potentially learned to "take everything *out*" of his head instead of "putting more stuff *in*"

(Salinger, 297). So while his spiritual knowledge may set Teddy apart, Salinger is constantly venerating Teddy and his heightened spiritual awareness by harshly comparing him to his parents and the other adults aboard the cruise ship: “Salinger’s descriptions of his characters accentuate the differences between them. Teddy’s priorities are spiritual ones, which Salinger values above the “physical world” that surrounds Teddy, and all mankind (Slawenski, 237). Kaufman’s argument further emphasizes Salinger’s unhappiness with the cultural environment he was surrounded by, and how he deliberately employed elements of Eastern and Western religious traditions (specifically Zen and Christianity in this story), to harshly contrast the adult world with the child-like spiritual purity that he consistently praised and worshipped.

Teddy, while he is “enlightening” a man named Nicholson, claims that,

I mean it’s very hard to meditate and live a spiritual life in America. People think you’re a freak if you try to. My father thinks I’m a freak, in a way. And my mother—well, she doesn’t think it’s good for me to think about God all the time. She thinks it’s bad for my health. (Salinger, 287)

It is American society that has killed the spiritual life, and therefore it has damaged Teddy.

Teddy did not become a mystic in order to distance himself from society; Teddy became a student of spirituality because it is, Salinger argues, our true calling. Spirituality is where the ultimate truths lie, and where humanity must ultimately rest. One is handicapping, or limiting themselves if they do not seek this “spiritual vision.” Salinger seems to be illustrating the importance of the “divine illumination that possesses any soul spiritually mature enough to be conscious of the divinity within all things” (Hamilton, 249). Kaufman also claims that Teddy committed suicide to teach Booper (his sister) and his parents a lesson. I don’t find this to be true, and I think to view “Teddy” in such a way is to take away from the spiritual architecture of the story. Instead, I do believe that Teddy’s death is supposed to “teach” us something.

Teddy's mysticism is a way in which Salinger criticizes the post-world war America and the people who inhabit it, while simultaneously broadcasting his "religious" views, just as he did with Seymour in "Bananafish." Margaret Salinger is correct when she argues that Teddy is ultimately seeking "unity with non-being" and the "dissolution of all separateness and personhood" (M. Salinger, 97). D.T. Suzuki explains that one must attain a state of mind called "mushin," which means "no mind," in life and in art, in order to go beyond the "dualism of all forms of life and death, good and evil, being and non-being" (Suzuki, 94). Teddy's death is a culmination of this Zen ideal, and he shows no proclivity to binary systems. In fact, the essence of Buddha himself is nothing. It seems that Salinger has made Teddy's convictions, and the reasons behind them, much clearer than Seymour's. Teddy's foresight into his own death and his acceptance of it is used in order to teach us that the "virtues of attachment and the absurdity of seeking mooring in this life" is just "maya, an illusion" (M. Salinger, 97). Teddy has given up his mind and consciousness to an "unknown power" that comes from "nowhere," but makes one work for the "unknown" (Suzuki, 94).

As he did in "Bananafish," Salinger attempts to diagnose what he sees as the very wrong Western notions of rationality, logic, and knowledge. With "Teddy," Salinger seems to be saying that "logic" needs to, in many ways, be abandoned in order to become an enlightened human being. The main way in which Salinger orchestrates this idea in his stories is through that of the pure, "logical illogical" child figure. Teddy claims that the apple that Adam and Eve consumed in the Garden of Eden was full of logic, which God had forbidden humanity to have. Therefore, one must "vomit up" logic, in order to "see things as they really are" (Salinger, 291). This very Christian story also directly relates to D.T. Suzuki's claim that it is not a quest for "knowledge at

all, but a quest for no-knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> We were never supposed to be this way, to have knowledge and to be corrupted by our intellect, argues Salinger, and he makes his point more fully with his combination of Eastern and Western religious traditions. Due to mankind’s consumption of the forbidden apple, America wants power, and Americans desire “things” (knowledge, I think for Salinger, is a type of materialistic, ego-driven “thing”), and they are seeking to infect others with these unquestioned values instead of desiring that which is genuine and intangible: spiritual wisdom. Teddy attempts to ignore his human desires, and lets “God” or the spiritual life, guide his fate.

Salinger is essentially pointing his readers towards elements of Zen and other alternative interpretations of Judeo-Christian teachings in many of these stories, encouraging a different kind of “spiritual” embrace, that instead directs the gaze of his Western readers towards Eastern traditions and refashioned ideas of Judaism and Christianity, thereby systematically encouraging a release from the traditional American forms of thought and spirituality. If we take Teddy’s advice on the dangers of logic and intellect to heart, then Seymour and Teddy can be viewed as the “perfect Zen image of Western [people]” (Rosen, 37). Teddy is able to take all the unnecessary “stuff” out, while Seymour has perhaps taken in so much from the outside world, he is “stuffed” much like his doomed bananafish.

Salinger begins and ends his *Nine Stories* with death, and all the while he is mapping out a “spiritual path” for the reader to follow. *Nine Stories* is in fact a “chronicle of the steps along the path of J.D. Salinger’s [own] spiritual exploration” (Slawenski, 249). However, Seymour and Teddy are, essentially, alienated souls (whether that is a fault or a virtue is still to be argued), and are somewhat condemned men due to their traumas that were ultimately induced by the damaged

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<sup>5</sup> This is an idea that Salinger revisits in *Franny and Zooey*, and “Seymour: an Introduction,” which will be discussed in more depth later on in Chapters Two and Three.

society they live in. Seymour and Teddy's journeys end in death, and they possess an enlightened spirituality, which is an attribute or knowledge that is rare, and grates against the atmosphere of post World-War II American society. For Salinger to start his collection with "Bananafish" and end with "Teddy" is no mistake. They were "deliberately situated" in that order, and are "symbolic bookends," that were published exactly "five years apart to the day" (Slawenski, 250).

Perhaps Salinger is suggesting that a person of the highest sensibility cannot survive in a world as cruel as this. Or perhaps Salinger is saying that these two individual's values are something to strive for in a society that is lacking in deep, profound meaning. This meaning is to be found, as Salinger makes clear, in the holy innocence of the pure child. America, in Salinger's mind, was utterly at the hands of conformity and "phoniness," and with "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "Teddy," he sought to penetrate American culture with sources of mysticism and spirituality that he believed was innate in all of us, and that is why his children are closer to the divine, because they are not as far removed from what Salinger viewed as humanity's true spiritual nature. As Eudora Welty so aptly described, *Nine Stories* "concern(s) children a good deal of the time," but they are "God's children" (Welty par. 2). Therefore, Salinger's spiritual vision in these selected *Nine Stories* were conveyed through his children of God, and his "gospel" changed from story to story, from religion to religion, sometimes mixing various traditions together. The function of spirituality in these stories is Salinger's way of offering an alternative way of being, living, and ultimately, loving, in a land full of lost souls. And yet, this "alternative" way of life, though spirited as it is, is complicated. What of the adults? Seymour, later becomes Salinger's principal spiritual muse, one who contains a myriad of contradictions. His unease and opposition to the world, which is also Salinger's, is about to be challenged.

## Chapter Two: *Franny and Zooey*

Much of *Nine Stories* presents the world at odds with the pursuit of the holy. Seymour and Teddy especially seem unable to reside in such a cruel, desolate society. Yet, Salinger's stance seems clear on this: the religious life is ideal. However, in the later *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger seems to ricochet between the idea that the "religious" life is the authentic life, the rightful, appropriate one, and the view that the "religious" life, with its struggles, is also the painful, misplaced life of the outsider. Zooey, recalling his brother Walt's view on the hardships of the religious life, explains to Franny that, "the religious life, and all the agony that goes with it, is just something God sick on people who have the gall to accuse Him of having created an ugly world" (Salinger, 154). Ironically, this is what Franny's, and in many ways, Zooey's, struggle is all about. Franny is critical, condescendingly so, of the "phony" people and institutions that control her life. Likewise, Zooey negatively judges the world and many of the people in it. Salinger must have felt, in some way, that the spiritual quest he wholeheartedly believed in was also a kind of tortuous punishment that perhaps originated with his own dissatisfaction with the world.

Also unlike *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey*, which were first published together in 1961<sup>6</sup>, is more upfront with "religion" or spirituality, and though the narrator of "Zooey" claims at the beginning of the tale that this is not a "mystical story, or a religiously mystifying story" (Salinger, 49), it nonetheless presents us with a more overt aim at some kind of spiritual lesson(s). However, I would argue that the narrator, whom we later find to be the second eldest of the Glass children, Buddy, included this defense against the story being a religious one because that is exactly what it is. However, Buddy, or Salinger, does not want his readers to

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<sup>6</sup> "Franny" was originally featured in *The New Yorker* in 1955, while "Zooey" was published by the magazine in 1957.

evade his sermon-like tale. As previously mentioned, Salinger was well aware that, generally, the faithful readers of *The New Yorker* tended to be wary of religion or spirituality, especially in narrative. In fact, while “Franny” was accepted and published without a hitch, “Zooey” was rejected unanimously by *The New Yorker* editorial staff, who found the story to be too “saturated with religion” (Slawenski, 286)<sup>7</sup>.

So important was Salinger’s religious sermon that the way in which the book was packaged and presented to the public was of the utmost importance to the author. In fact, the layout and cover style for the book was a design in which Salinger oversaw with fervor, going so far as to “reject seventeen different shades of white for the cover before Little, Brown, his publisher, sent him a white he found suitable” (Beller, 121). Salinger’s obsession with what kind of white was appropriate for the book’s binding is most certainly tied to the religiously pure pursuit and purpose of the tale, in which Franny Glass and her brother, Zooey, must navigate their way through their own separate spiritual crises, in order to find their own separate paths to enlightenment. Clearly, while Salinger may have gotten away with *Nine Stories* being, on the surface, traditionally “non-religious,” Salinger’s spiritual pursuits had now become so “intertwined with his work that they were now indistinguishable” (Slawenski, 285).

Not only had Salinger’s pursuit of the holy become a major part of his fiction, but the character of Seymour Glass had also come to be imbedded in much of his work. In fact, when Zooey is attempting to help Franny with her suffering, she claims, “I want to talk to Seymour” (Salinger, 151). Salinger did so, too, it seems. Through the character of Buddy, we find out that “Bananafish,” “Teddy,” “Zooey,” “Roof Beam,” “Seymour,” and most likely “Franny,” were all

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<sup>7</sup> Regardless, William Shawn, editor of *The New Yorker* at this time, fought for the story, and had overridden the decision of his editors, determined to publish “Zooey” in the magazine, despite its passionate religious ambitions (Slawenski, 287).



written by him. All of these stories, though they deal with other characters as well, are implicitly or explicitly about Seymour. Even “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor”<sup>8</sup> could, in a round about way, be seen as Seymour’s (and Buddy’s) own experience with war, and “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” is so directly tied to *Franny and Zooey*<sup>9</sup>, another story that ultimately points toward Seymour, which I will discuss further on. Therefore, all of these Salinger stories eventually lead to not only the character of Seymour, but to “Seymour: an Introduction.” In order to fully engage with these texts, we need to come into contact with “Seymour,” but we also need this book in pursuance of understanding not only Seymour and Buddy, but Salinger as well.

“Franny” begins with Lane Coutell, Franny’s boyfriend, waiting for her at a train station. While there, he rests his back against a Christian Science literature rack, and reads a letter she had sent to him earlier. It is interesting that Salinger has placed Lane against a religious literature rack, while he reads Franny’s words, and it is all the more illuminating when one learns that Salinger at this time dabbled in Christian Science himself. Salinger’s daughter claims that her father practiced Christian Science starting in 1955, and that he more or less continued to be involved with the religion (along with others) up until the publication of her memoir in 2001 (M.

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<sup>8</sup> “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” was a story featured in *Nine Stories* about a soldier named Sergeant X, who served in World War II. Many believe Sergeant X was an alternative version of Salinger and his own wartime experiences.

<sup>9</sup> “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” was a story featured in *Nine Stories* that is about a young girl name Ginnie Maddox who befriends her classmate’s older brother, Franklin. Franklin can in many ways be seen as a messiah-figure for Ginnie. After he gives her a half-eaten chicken sandwich, she finds it in her coat pocket as she leaves his apartment. She is about to drop it onto the street, but instead she puts the sandwich back in her pocket. It is then explained that a few years before it had “taken her three days to dispose of the Easter chick she had found dead on the sawdust in the bottom of her wastebasket” (Salinger, 82). As Kenneth Slawenski explains, “In a story strewn with Christian symbolism, the Easter chick had lain for three days before Ginnie finally accepted that it would not rise from the dead. When discarded, it took with it her innocent trust and faith. Franklin has offered her that long awaited resurrection as she once again begins to believe in the value of others as well as her own worth” (Slawenski, 171).

Salinger, 95). Likewise, Roger Lathbury, a publisher who attempted to publish Salinger's last story, also claims that Salinger did in fact practice Christian Science, and that one of the first topics Salinger discussed with him when they had lunch at the National Gallery of Art in 1996 was the work of Mary Baker Eddy (Lathbury par. 8)<sup>10</sup>.

Salinger's specific mention of a Christian Science literature rack so early in the story could be interpreted in a multitude of ways. When reading the story, and then coming to its conclusion (in both "Franny" as a stand alone piece, and *Franny and Zooey*'s ending as a whole), Salinger's deliberate use of the literature rack begins to become somewhat clearer. One of Christian Science's basic teachings is the power of prayer—to heal the sick, mend relationships, help to find employment, and other "personal and global issues," and of course to establish one's basic spiritual relationship with a divine creator ("Basic Teachings" par. 3). Incidentally, we find out that when Franny is in spiritual distress, her interest in prayer and its power is her foremost concern.

Franny, like her eldest brother Seymour (and also like Teddy), exists in the world, but in many ways, does not fully belong to it. Salinger again uses a particular character's dissatisfaction with the world and its apparent secularity as a foil for his characters' "religious" or "spiritual" drama. During her conversation with Lane, she laments that she is sick of, "ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere, do something distinguished and all...It's disgusting—it is, it *is*... I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody" (Salinger, 30). "Nobody" does not mean that Franny wishes for a lesser image of herself, but rather, she wishes for kenosis, the "self-emptying of one's own will," in order to become "entirely receptive to God's divine described will" (Zizek, 256). D.T. Suzuki advocated

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<sup>10</sup> Salinger's last published story was "Hapworth 16, 1924."

for the state of “absolute nothingness,” or the disinterested state of “muga” which means “no self” and he also identifies this with the concept of mushin, which means “no mind.” Suzuki goes on to explain that,

Mushin is one of the most important ideas in Zen. It corresponds to the state of innocence enjoyed by the first inhabitants of the Garden of Eden, or even to the mind of God when he was about to utter his fiat, “Let there be light.” ...munen (or mushin) [is] the most essential element in the study of Zen. When it is attained a man becomes a Zen-man, and...also a perfect swordsman. (Suzuki, 111)

The renunciation of the ego, of the self is, like Teddy’s, Franny’s true quest. The pursuit to “become somebody” is at odds with, what Franny believes, the holy.

Franny, whose name is a play on St. Francis of Assisi, is “frantic,” as her name may also suggest, and she nervously attempts to search for true enlightenment and spiritual understanding. Eventually, she stumbles upon a book entitled, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a religious text about a Russian peasant who has become fascinated with, and determined to fulfill, the biblical appeal to “pray without ceasing,” and he does this by reciting the Jesus prayer over and over, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Franny tells Lane that by chanting this prayer or mantra consistently, it will become “self-active” (Salinger, 37). She goes on to explain that, “Something *happens* after awhile,” and the words become “synchronized with the person’s heartbeats,” which in turn has a “really tremendous, mystical effect on your whole outlook...you do it to purify your whole outlook and get an absolutely new conception of what everything’s about” (Salinger, 37). It is obvious that Franny is, in many ways, genuine about her search for enlightenment. Salinger, however, is also presenting her with some sense of irony by portraying her outlook on spirituality as a bit naïve.

This prayer, Franny further explains, is universal, and can use “any name of God”:

...in the Nembutsu sects of Buddhism, people keep saying ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ over and over again—which means ‘Praises to the Buddha’ or something like that—and the *same thing* happens...the same thing happens in ‘The Cloud of Unknowing,’ too. Just with the word ‘God’...I just think it’s a terribly peculiar coincidence...that you keep running into that kind of advice...In India, they tell you to meditate on the ‘Om,’ which means the same thing, really, and the exact same result is supposed to happen. (Salinger, 37-8)

Paramahansa Yogananda claimed that the way in which to acknowledge and know God is by

“constantly keeping the attention absorbed in His holy vibration, *Aum*” (Yogananda, 311).

Franny’s interest in the prayer is for this reason: her spiritual quest is powered by her desire to be intimately connected with the divine. Furthermore, Salinger’s specific reference to “The Cloud of Unknowing,” an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the latter half of the 14th century, is compelling in its specificity regarding the events at hand. The text in question is a spiritual guide of sorts that delves into the purpose and ability of contemplative prayer. The underlying message of this work proposes that the only way to truly “know” God is to abandon all preconceived notions and beliefs or “knowledge” about God and be “courageous enough to surrender your mind and ego” to the realm of “unknowingness,” at which point, you begin to glimpse God and his, or her, true nature (Hannaford, 229). This allusion to “The Cloud of Unknowing” is compelling because it once again leads us to Salinger’s theme of the total surrender of your mind and ego to detachment, and the embracement of essential “nothingness.” Though the text stems from Christian mysticism, it is also hugely reminiscent of Zen, and Salinger’s Zen koan epigraph in *Nine Stories*.

Lane, as his name suggests, is narrow in his thinking, and scoffs at Franny’s spiritual claims. “What *is* the result?” Lane asks coldly, to which she replies, “You get to see God.

Something happens in some absolutely nonphysical part of the heart—where the Hindus say that Atman resides...you see God, that’s all” (Salinger, 39). At lunch Franny, much to Lane’s

disapproval, orders only a chicken sandwich with a glass of milk. Salinger here has paralleled images from his past work in order to foreshadow her spiritual dilemma. He has gone back and has now aligned “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” with Franny’s plight, and has resurrected the image of the chicken sandwich as “symbolic of Holy Communion” (Slawenski, 259). When Ginnie Mannon of “Eskimos,” is offered half of a chicken sandwich, Franklin, the giver of the food, exclaims: “*Take it, for Chrissake*” (Salinger, 73). Franklin is literally telling Ginnie to take it for “Christ’s sake,” and with that, Salinger has changed this seemingly unremarkable exchange into the Holy Sacrament. This idea of Franny ingesting, or in this case, not ingesting, the Eucharist will be looked at further on in the latter half of the story and in “Zooey,” and her understanding of this plays a part in her spiritual rest at the story’s end.

Franny, in fact, does not eat her chicken sandwich, despite Lane’s urgings. When the waiter comes to take away her plate with the uneaten chicken sandwich, she does not “dare to look up at him” (Salinger, 40), ashamed of her actions. However, she is not aware that the chicken sandwich was the body of Christ, yet; this is a lesson she has not yet learned. In fact, we as readers are not aware of the chicken sandwich’s importance until we begin the latter half of the tale, “Zooey.” Just after her refusal to partake in the symbolic communion, she excuses herself from the table. After her departure, she lowers her head, “bows it,” and then faints. After she comes to she lays “quite still” and her “lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move” (Salinger, 44). Franny, aware that she is in danger, is trying desperately to save herself from spiritual turmoil by reciting what we can assume is the Jesus Prayer.

Franny’s quandary becomes all the more symbolic when we learn in “Zooey” that the copies of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, and *The Pilgrim Continues His Way* (the sequel) that Franny has been poring over used to belong to her now deceased brother, Seymour, and her other brother

Buddy. The whole plot of “Franny,” Salinger proclaims in “Zooey,” ultimately rests upon Seymour. He has not only ignited the spiritual flame within his siblings, but his influence and mystical presence has now permeated Salinger and his art. Yet Buddy, the Glass siblings, and Salinger by connection, as he later explains in “Zooey,” “Roof Beam,” and “Seymour,” are not totally at ease with the magnitude of Seymour’s control over them and their lives. Zooey complains that he and Franny are “freaks” or outsiders, and Seymour and Buddy are solely responsible for their unease: “We’re freaks, that’s all. Those two bastards got us nice and early and made us into freaks with freakish standards, that’s all. We’re the Tattooed Lady, and we’re never going to have a minute’s peace, the rest of our lives, till everybody else is tattooed, too” (Salinger, 139). Yet even Buddy, who is arguably Seymour’s leading supporter, takes issue with Seymour’s hold over him, and he explores this in “Roof Beam” and “Seymour.”

When Zachary<sup>11</sup>, better known by his nickname Zooey, was young he, like Teddy, was “tested by one research group...in Boston, on five separate occasions,” in order to find the “source of Zooey’s precocious wit and fancy” (Salinger, 55). A caller from Boston subsequently contacted the Glass family, and informed them that, “their son Zooey, at twelve, had an English vocabulary on an exact par with Mary Baker Eddy’s” (Salinger, 55). Once again, Salinger has overtly referred to Christian Science. His pairing of Zooey’s intelligence with Eddy’s (a type of “prophet” or religious leader), suggests Zooey’s early relationship with spirituality, and that his intellect goes hand in hand with his spiritual maturity.

Christian Science features prominently in the story, because the religion advocates for spirit over matter, faith over body, and encourages their followers to pray for healing, and not to take conventional medicine or seek medical attention. In a strange way, Christian Science’s

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<sup>11</sup> Zooey is Franny’s older brother, but the youngest male of the Glass children. He is twenty-five years old in *Franny and Zooey*.

mandates correlate with those of Zen, as the Zen faith also believes that the body can fully heal itself, without any assistance from medical professionals. Salinger, who was believed to have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after World War II<sup>12</sup>, openly mocks any and all types of medical professionals in many of his stories, specifically psychiatrists, which suggests that Salinger believed that the mind, like the body, could in fact “heal” itself. Likewise, in a letter to one of Salinger’s editors at *The New Yorker*, Gustave “Gus” Lobrano, who was at the time on his deathbed, he advises Lobrano on what he “should say, or chant, at the exact moment of death for optimal results in the afterlife” (Beller, 166). Dorothy, Gus’ daughter, claims that in the letter Salinger goes on for “two more pages about Zen,” and that the content is about how Gus “should take responsibility for his body, and do this and that” (Beller, 167). This idea that the body is a perfect expression of God and should not be tampered with is harshly contrasted next to Zooey, who, despite his “spiritual maturity,” seems to doubt the power of the divine, and is far too invested with himself and maintaining his ego with external aid.

We are given a glimpse into Zooey’s own preoccupation with himself, his own ego, when Bessie, his mother, recites more than forty items present in the bathroom medicine cabinet. Some of these “golden pharmaceuticals” are, “vitamin capsules...Argyrol, Musterole, Ex-Lax, Milk of Magnesia...two Gillette razors, two tubes of shaving cream...Wildroot hair ointment”, etc (Salinger, 75). Zooey teases his mother by speaking of the bathroom as a “chapel” (Salinger,

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Slawenski writes, “In the summer of 1945, Jerry Salinger’s war experiences, extended service, sudden loneliness, and reluctance to express his pain converged upon him with disastrous effect. As the weeks wore on, his depression deepened and his feelings began to immobilize him. He had seen many cases of battle fatigue on the front, what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder, and recognized the potential menace of his current state of mind. In July he voluntarily checked himself into a general hospital in Nuremberg for treatment” (Slawenski, 135). However, during his time in treatment, Salinger gave “sarcastic answers” to the doctor’s questions, and his stories later indirectly suggest that he found psychiatry ineffective in relation to his own psychological issues.

115). He means it ironically, because his mother comes in to “confess” all her worries and what she may see as her children’s “sins,” and Zooey, like a priest behind the curtain (in this case, a shower curtain), listens and attempts to, albeit in a detached way, assist his mother in trying to pinpoint, or define Franny’s spiritual crisis.

Since the bathroom is described by Salinger as Zooey’s “little chapel,” and Zooey’s own bathing in the tub is reminiscent of a type of religious cleansing practice or ritual, the fact that he has filled his holy space with, on the surface, objects that are “tied to ego” (Slawenski, 293), speaks to the severity of Zooey’s own spiritual crisis. Salinger has used the technique of cataloguing the objects to render the feel of commercialism and materialism, and these particular items exist in direct opposition to this sanctified space, indicating a clash of values within Zooey. Besides demonstrating an ugly commercial society that produces and markets these items, their presence in the story also says something about the emotional and physical health of people who cannot digest food without help, who have consistent headaches, who are removing hair to “fit” in with society, and who seem to need a lot of chemical support to get through the day. People in America are missing something, and their unwavering reliance and blind acceptance of these products is Salinger’s subtle way of informing his readers that their search has lead in the wrong direction, and perhaps their physical needs go hand in hand with their spiritual ones, which draws back again to Salinger’s religious, specifically Christian Science and Zen, references.

Despite Zooey’s own religious struggles, he attempts to help Franny with hers by explaining to her that this preoccupation with the Jesus Prayer is, essentially, going in the wrong direction. One of his problems with Franny’s use of the Jesus Prayer is that it is not directed at the right “person.” Zooey argues that,



“If you don’t understand Jesus, you can’t understand his prayer—you don’t get the prayer at all, you just get some kind of organized cant. Jesus was supremely adept, by God, on a terribly important mission. This was no St. Francis, with enough time to knock out a few canticles, or to preach to the *birds*, or to do any of the other endearing things so close to Franny Glass’s heart” (Salinger, 171).

Her obsessive practice of the Jesus Prayer is only endowed with what she, Franny, has deemed spiritually important. Franny, Zooey argues, is missing the point of the Jesus prayer, by insisting on picking and choosing how and who bestows it, and for whom the prayer graces. She also seems to be just going “through the motions” with the prayer, altering the mystical chant into a dispassionate intonation. This critique of Franny and her misuse of the prayer could also be seen as an exposition of religious institutions, and their dutiful, but indifferent “church go-ers” at this time. Perhaps, according to Salinger, the West, and its standard notion of spirituality, seems to be apathetic and lacking in zeal. Further on, Zooey parallels this with Franny’s ever-growing hate for the “phonies,” and specifically cites her hatred for one of her professors, Professor Tupper,

This is God’s universe, buddy, not yours, and he has the final say about what’s ego and what isn’t. What about...your beloved Emily *Dickinson*? You want your Emily, every time she has an urge to write a poem, to just sit down and say a prayer till her nasty, egotistical urge goes away? *No*, of course you don’t! But you’d like your friend Professor Tupper’s ego taken away from him. (Salinger, 167)

Franny’s use of the prayer has become spiritually chauvinistic, and her lack of appreciation for, or understanding of the substance of the prayer, and how, why, and who it works for, is troublesome to Zooey.

Zooey even goes so far as to suggest that her obsession with the prayer is equal to that of lust for material or commercial wealth. Franny’s desire to see God or to experience enlightenment, Zooey argues, is just a thing to be had, like other, perhaps more corporeal, items: “...you’re misusing the prayer, you’re using it to ask for a world full of dolls and saints and no Professor Tupper” (Salinger, 172). Salinger, too, as an artist, increasingly found fault with the

world, and prided himself on being above it, spiritually and intellectually. Yet, this scene showcases Salinger's knowledge of his own hypocritical existence, and we can see, through both Franny and Zooey, his struggle with it. *Franny and Zooey* thus breaks away from *Nine Stories*, by showcasing another side to Salinger's concern for authenticity. In *Nine Stories* Salinger seems, for the most part, to be suggesting that the divine graces only those who are intelligent enough, and pious enough, to receive enlightenment, but his views on the matter seemed to have changed in this story. In fact, Franny and Zooey's disenchantment with the world and with certain individuals, as we will see, actually goes against the notion of being a spiritually mature person. Perhaps the world Salinger had so much trouble with is less at odds with the holy than Salinger had initially led us to believe. Salinger is constantly battling with his own definition of what is holy, and how a "religious" person should live.

Later on in his argument, Zooey glances out the window and sees a young girl wearing a navy blue pea jacket and a red tam, playing hide-and-seek with her dog. The girl hides behind a tree, and the dog loses sight of her. Sad and confused, the dog runs back and forth, desperately searching for his young master. The dog finally catches the girl's scent and uncovers her. Happy and brought together once again, the pair begins to walk towards Central Park, and out of Zooey's sight. This scene of the little girl and her dog will further foreshadow Zooey and Franny's own awakenings, by aiding them in their discovery of the holy in the ordinary.

The fact that the color blue has cropped up, something that happens many times throughout *Franny and Zooey*, is important. We have seen this with the little girl's pea coat (151), but it is also referred to in many other parts of the book: Franny's suitcase is "navy blue with white leather binding" (8). Blue is also specified as the color of the building Franny is staying in when she visits Lane (42), mother Glass' Japanese kimono (73), the Glass' bathmat

(88), the afghan Franny uses around herself in the living room or her “spiritual tomb” (123-4), and Seymour’s lead pencil (181). This is not something that I believe to be unintentional, as the abundant frequency of the color does not seem to be done without some purpose. Blue is a color that is symbolic for many religions. In the Hebrew Bible (and in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible), for example, the color blue is associated with the commandments of God, the importance of remembering them, and the heavenly calling of those who had been chosen by God to be His people (Numbers 15:38-40)<sup>13</sup>.

Furthermore, after witnessing the scene of the girl with her dog, Zooey laments that, “God damn it...there are nice things in the world...We’re all such morons to get so sidetracked. Always...referring to every goddam thing that happens right back to our lousy little egos” (Salinger, 152). This encounter that Zooey has witnessed has somewhat hardened him again to people and the outside world, but it has also shown him that a common event can be representative of what is divine and holy: beauty and love. The innocent purity of a little girl, an obvious recurring theme in Salinger’s literature, has pointed Zooey to the divine, but has also reminded him that a person’s ego has the tendency to, “obscure the divine beauty so abundant in everyday life” (Slawenski, 296). Again, a child-figure has assisted an adult in his or her own spiritual journey.

During the time of Salinger’s composition of “Zooey,” he was primarily transfixed by a book published by the Self-Realization Foundation. An Indian sage named Paramahansa Yogananda organized the Self-Realization Foundation in 1920 and, in 1954, Salinger read

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<sup>13</sup> Color symbolism can also be found in Zen Buddhism. In Buddhism, the color blue represents tranquility, ascension, the infinite, purity, compassion, and healing. Furthermore, one of the primary colors on the Buddhist flag is blue, and the colors are thought to represent the six colors of the “aura” which the Buddhist’s believe emerged from the body of the Buddha when he achieved enlightenment (Pavey, 12).

Yogananda's book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*. After reading the book, Salinger found that it had reaffirmed his "own religious convictions" (Slawenski, 296). After studying *Autobiography* in depth, and incorporating many elements from the text into his own work, just as he had done with *The Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*, he immersed himself in Yogananda's other writings and teachings (Slawenski, 296). Foremost among Yogananda's other writing was *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*. The religious implications present in this book are ultimately the backbone of the advice delivered by Zooey to his spiritually ailing sister.

Yogananda believed that Jesus was filled with God-consciousness, and that his position as the Son of God implied "holiness but not divinity" (Slawenski, 296). With this view, the Yogi explained that everyone was a child of God, and therefore everyone could awaken the holiness within his or her own self, and this was to be achieved through prayer and meditation:

"When...he will realize the presence of the immanent Christ Consciousness. Then the devotee becomes Christlike; his consciousness experiences, within the vehicles of his expanded Self, the "second coming of Christ"" (Yogananda, 25-6) This is the real resurrection. The second coming of Christ, therefore, is not an event that is meant to take place in the future, but instead he believed that Christ's promise to return could be fulfilled through anyone who understood that God resides in everyone and everything. Zooey even directly references the term, "Christ Consciousness," and explains to Franny that, "The Jesus Prayer has one aim, and one aim *only*. To endow the person who says it with Christ-Consciousness" (Salinger, 172). Yogananda further explains that, "God bestows His wisdom not in proportion to the caliber of their acquired intellectual powers, but with the outpouring of measureless grace that characterizes an all-loving Father. Those that are one with God are God themselves" (Yogananda, 291). Therefore, it is not

through one's intellect that one gains enlightenment, but instead it is the acknowledgement of the presence of God within oneself, and within all.

What is perhaps not made obvious, however, is the fact that Zooey is also beginning to come to terms with this information for himself. He must break his own ego, and find a way to balance his love and drive to act with his pursuit of the holy. Not only must Zooey balance these two seemingly oppositional ways of life, he must recognize the perfect, holy cohesiveness of their union. Earlier in a letter to Zooey, Buddy tells his youngest brother to pursue his dream of acting declaring, "*Act, Zachary Martin Glass, when and where you want to, since you feel you must, but do it with all your might*" (Salinger, 68). Acting, and the little girl and her dog, are, after all, products, or manifestations of creation. They, like the rest of the products of creation, are intertwined with the holy. Yogananda claimed that all creation is a manifestation of, "cosmic delusion," and that its "darkness and fears" were created by the "closing of eyes in spiritual ignorance," which was not due to any "absence of God's light," because God is "omnipresent and thus ever-present" (Yogananda, 312). Salinger is striving to achieve this in his fiction. He is trying to find a way to balance his art with his religious convictions, and is attempting to illustrate the seemingly unholy with that of the spiritual. Buddy also explains in his letter that Seymour told him that, "all legitimate religious study must lead to unlearning the differences, the illusory differences, between boys and girls, animals and stones, day and night, heat and cold" (Salinger, 68). There are no differences here, no really good people, or bad; no one "stone" that is more religious than the other. There is holiness in the everyday. Zooey is coming to grips with this, but Franny has not yet received the message.

Zooey must try again to bring Franny to this truth. In his final attempt, he decides that Franny would better understand his message through Buddy, their eldest brother, and second in

command after Seymour. However, Buddy, a writer-in-residence, is holed away upstate in New York at a girls' junior college. Buddy is extremely private, and does not keep a phone in his current residence, despite his mother's frustrated entreaties. Buddy has, however, kept a telephone in his and Seymour's old room in the Glass' family apartment. Zooey decides to utilize Buddy's phone in the Glass' house to call Franny and pretend to be Buddy, which then changes the vessel (himself) of Zooey's sermon. His belief that Franny would take the advice best through Buddy displays that there is a spiritual hierarchy within the Glass family. Seymour was the major authority, Buddy is second, but this is mostly due to the fact that, given his age, he was able to spend more time with Seymour than the other children. All religious discovery and understanding inevitably leads back to Seymour.

Before he does this, however, Zooey goes into Buddy and Seymour's old room, examining it for clues and guidance only his former gurus could provide. He pulls out a stack of shirt cardboards that contain Seymour's writings. One in particular that he studies was written in February 1938, Seymour's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Towards the end of the transcript, Seymour writes that in the middle of his birthday celebration, "the doorman called up on the housephone and asked if anybody was dancing up there. A Mr. Seligman, on the fourth—"and Zooey abruptly stops reading (Salinger, 182). He sits motionless and deep in thought for half an hour, until he moved, "as though marionette strings had been attached to him and given an overzealous yank...another jerk of invisible strings swung him over to the chair at the second desk in the room—Buddy's desk—where the phone was" (Salinger, 182). Zooey, it seems, has been instructed and then forced to contact his sister via Buddy's telephone by his late brother Seymour. The doorman on the phone recounted in Seymour's diary-like text provided the first clue. Zooey realizes that just

like the telephone that abruptly broke up Seymour's birthday party, and the happy state it was in, so too can it disrupt Franny in her mourning.

Zooey, pretending to be Buddy, calls the Glass' home phone number. Bessie picks up the phone, and tells Franny that Buddy would like to speak to her. Franny, instead of going to the phone closest to her (the hallway), elects instead to walk down the hall and take the call in her parents' bedroom. Franny's walk down the hall is no ordinary journey, however, and the narrator lets us know that she became, "peculiarly transformed as she moved. She appeared, vividly, to grow younger with each step...her handsome tailored tie-silk dressing gown...looked as if it had been changed into a small child's woolen bathrobe" (Salinger, 187). Jesus said in the book of Matthew that, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, NIV). Salinger's children are able to communicate and understand that which surpasses all logic or intellect. Therefore, she must become like Salinger's holy child, and must have "faith like a child" in order to receive Zooey's sermon.

After the niceties, Zooey, aka "Buddy," delves into Franny's problem, with her responses being mostly about her frustration with Zooey and his lack of sympathy. After some time, she figures out that it is in fact Zooey who she is on the phone with, not Buddy. At first she is upset, but then relents, and begins to listen to him. He explains that it is important to note that when she first felt the "call" to say the prayer, she didn't start "searching the four corners of the world for a master," but instead, "[*She*] came home" (Salinger, 195). By doing this, not only does she realize that she needs her family's advice, specifically Seymour's, but also that her search won't be tampered with by "any goddam ulterior motives" (Salinger, 195). "Whatever we are," Zooey goes on, "we're not *fishy*, buddy" (Salinger, 196). Zooey is not only assuring Franny that

her family and their actions are not suspect, but he is also promising her that they are not like Seymour and his doomed bananafish.

After attempting to convince her that they will not meet Seymour's tragic end, he tells her that her quest for the religious is blinded by her lack of openness to the divine. With Zooey's words, coupled with Yogananda's teachings, Franny's own resurrection becomes clearer. He explains to her that her spiritual starvation in many ways stems from her lack of being aware of, and open to, "Christ Consciousness":

I'll tell you one thing, Franny...if it's the religious life you want, you ought to know right now that you're missing out on every single goddam religious action that's going on around this house. You don't even have sense enough to drink when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup — which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings to anybody around this madhouse. (Salinger, 196)

She cannot see the chicken sandwich in the beginning of the story, nor can she see the chicken broth, God incarnate, that her mother puts right in front of her. Everything present in the Glass' New York apartment is divine, and every action is suffused with holy meaning. As in "Just Before the War with the Eskimos," the chicken, though meant symbolically, is a real chicken. However, Franny's ignorance of how its ordinariness is coupled with its holiness has added to her grief. These everyday things are in themselves holy, and the idea of holiness is therefore redefined and extends to all things.

Zooey switches tactics, and in another attempt to get her to recognize this truth, he reminds Franny of how Seymour used to tell them that even if they didn't want to, because everyone in the audience were "morons," to polish their shoes anyway, for the "Fat Lady," which is what Seymour named the type-figure(s) of their radio audience<sup>14</sup>:

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<sup>14</sup> All of the Glass children participated in a children's quiz show entitled, "It's a Wise Child."



...I'll tell you a terrible secret—Are you listening to me? *There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady*. That includes your Professor Tupper, buddy...There isn't anyone *anywhere* that isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. Don't you know that?...*don't you know who that Fat Lady really is?*...Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ himself. Christ Himself, buddy. (Salinger, 202)

Once reminded, Franny realizes that the “Fat Lady” is “Christ.” In short, Zooey teaches Franny that to recognize Christ everywhere is the “precondition of spiritual health” (Hamilton, 248). Seymour's parable has reminded Franny and Zooey that though they may have found the audience “phony” and empty, they were in fact “Christ-like.” Therefore, they must do their best for the Fat Lady because she, and everyone else are holy. In fact, their own mother is Seymour's “Fat Lady.” Zooey often refers to her as “Fatty,” with a capital F (Salinger, 82), and thereby her and her soup are consecrated. Both Franny and Zooey's misanthropic tendencies seemed to have somewhat dissipated, and peace with the world and with the divine, the story suggests, is available to them, though not without struggle.

Seymour's advice on the shirt cardboard, though cryptic and certainly not straightforward, helped Zooey discover the way in which Franny was meant to hear this message. The fact that Seymour's words, holy and lovely as they were, were written on something so materialistic, so worldly as shirt cardboards, further aligns Salinger's argument that that which is worldly is also divine. Even shirt cardboards can be a holy totem, as long as one recognizes their spiritual importance. Therefore, their anger towards Seymour has also dissipated following their spiritual release, for not only can they come to terms with the holy of the everyday, but they have also come to forgive their eldest brother.

The description of Franny's reaction to Zooey's advice offers a glimpse into her spiritual awakening:

For joy, apparently, it was all Franny could do to hold the phone even with both hands. For a foolish half-minute or so there was no other words, no further speech, then "I can't talk anymore, buddy." The sound of a phone being replaced on its catch followed. Franny took in her breath slightly but continued to hold the phone to her ear. A dial tone, of course, followed the formal break in the connection. She appeared to find it extraordinarily beautiful to listen to, rather as if it were the best possible substitute for the primordial silence itself. But she seemed to know, too, when to stop listening to it, as if all of what little or much wisdom there is in the world were suddenly hers...she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. (Salinger, 202)

Franny's descent into sleep is highly reminiscent of the Buddhist tradition that we have witnessed in Salinger's other character's spiritual awakenings, and is ultimately the final piece to her spiritual transformation. This is a Zen, "mushin" or "no mind" moment here. Zooey's voice is, "a part of everything, the whole created world, but what Franny can tune into after hearing the voice is that very essential divine sound, meaningless sound" (Hungerford, 12). This again brings us back to Salinger's koan epigraph in *Nine Stories*. Spiritual value is no longer to be found or assigned to traditional creeds or doctrines, but appears in dial-tones and resides in other ordinary, everyday objects and occurrences.

Though Zooey's words may seem doctrinally specific, they are not. At the beginning of "Zooey," he explains to his mother, after she suggests they should seek out Waker, another Glass sibling, who happens to be a Catholic priest, that she is, "...way off...this thing with Franny is strictly non-sectarian" (Salinger, 95). He knows that an allusion to one specific doctrine is not the cure for Franny's distress, so his advice to her would not fundamentally be attached to any one religious creed. Also, not only is Zooey's advice reminiscent of Christianity, but it is also evocative of a Hindu philosophy found in Vedanta, a henotheistic tradition that teaches that, "God is present in all things," and "God is the ultimate reality" (Slawenski, 232). Moreover, Vedanta accepts all faiths as valid, as long as they lead to the "recognition of God" (Slawenski,

232). Salinger is using Christian figures and terms here in order to not only speak of Christianity (though not the traditional Christianity his Western readers were familiar with), but to introduce his readers to Eastern ideas, through Western ones.

Zooey's (or Seymour's) advice is needed in order for Franny to recognize the supreme significance of the dial tone. Her renewal is due to both the advice and her interpretation of it, because we can see her transformation well before she hears the dial tone, and before Zooey breaks the connection. His advice instigated Franny's reprieve from her spiritual crisis, and prepared her for her paramount discovery of the dial tone, which represents essential divine meaningless sound. The meaningless sound could also be parallel with that of "Om" or "Aum." In the Bhagavad-Gita, it states that: "And murmuring Om, the sacred syllable" which is the emblem of Brahm, "dies, meditating me" (41). Meaning, when one meditates on the "Om," one is meditating on God or the nature of the divine. "Om," therefore, symbolizes the manifestation of God in form (Brahm or Brahma). Franny, in actuality, does not hear Zooey's voice breaking the dial tone in the beginning, simply because she is not the one who had originally picked up the phone, but her mother. She needs to hear the advice from Zooey before she understands that his voice did in fact break the dial tone, as the dial tone was always there (and always will be), in order to piece together the full message.

Therefore, Franny's epiphany is achieved for two reasons. She has now discovered that even what she views as a product of the petty world is, in fact, inseparable from the holy. The second is that despite these manifestations of creation, she is now able to rest with God at the origin with Him before He said "Let there be Light," or reverberated "Om," just as Seymour and Buddy wanted their younger siblings to do. In the letter Buddy wrote to Zooey, he claimed that,

Seymour had already begun to believe...that education by any name would smell as sweet...if it didn't begin with a quest for knowledge at all but with a quest, as Zen would put it, for no-knowledge. Dr. Suzuki says somewhere that to be in a state of pure consciousness — satori — is to be with God before he said, Let there be light. Seymour and I thought it might be a good thing to hold back this light from you and Franny...and all the many lower, more fashionable lighting effects—the arts, sciences, classics, languages—till you were both able at least to conceive of a state of being where the mind knows the source of all light. (Salinger, 65)

Buddy goes on to say that this is why they told them all they knew about “the saints, the bodhisattvas, the jivanmuktas,” because these men all knew “something about this state of being” (Salinger, 66). Franny must move toward a space of no knowledge that represents being with God before all creation, including religion itself. The combination of multiple religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Indian mysticism—the Christ-like “Fat Lady” and the Buddhist dreamless sleep—does lift Franny out of her spiritual distress, but it is also the realization that religion, like all the rest of the world, is a manifestation of creation, and one must find and “rest” in that place, in order to truly achieve enlightenment.

Salinger has exhibited in this story that religious awakening is not necessarily meant to be found only in traditional religious spaces, but through ordinary life. Since there is, “divinity in all things” (Hamilton, 249), all things can offer a pathway to understanding this “truth.” Franny needs to hear “the voice” and see all creation as divine before one can fathom God’s origin. The realization that spirituality is present everywhere (and always has been, and always will be) is needed before Franny can understand that she can tap into this space, and realize that the ultimate goal is to be with God before he said, “Let there be Light.” Both pieces are crucial in accomplishing this spiritual breakthrough and vision.

Though the Glass children, and Salinger as well, find themselves to be “outsiders” in the world, they still battle their own egos and materialistic tendencies, very much like the people

they despise. This notion was apparent in Salinger's own life as well, as he "found himself attempting to live in two separate realities: the "inverted" world of spiritual creativity and the social world of Greenwich Village clubs and poker games" (Slawenski, 153). Like Salinger, the Glass children are caught between having been conditioned by, and inextricably apart of, modern, Western society, while at the same time painfully longing to be "holy," and above or apart from the reality they found themselves in. Perhaps Franny's struggles, and her subsequent spiritual awakening, and Zooey's too, was Salinger's way of coming to terms with the world he found so much fault with, and the hardships of the religious life that pervaded him. *Franny and Zooey* is also a story that ultimately serves as an extension of "Bananafish" in coming to terms with Seymour's suicide. The Glass' struggle (and Salinger's, too) ultimately lies in their misinterpretation of Seymour's religious guidance, and perhaps death, and Salinger felt the need to explore his main guru, and his religious teachings, further. All of his analysis culminates in "Seymour: an Introduction."

Chapter Three: *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters and Seymour: an Introduction*

Salinger's final short story collection, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: an Introduction*, also follows along the outwardly "religious," or mystical lines of *Franny and Zooey*, and for many readers, it is one of the last nails in the critical coffin that is Salinger's late fiction<sup>15</sup>. Its first story, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" evokes the delightfully caustic Salinger that most critics praise, but the second, "Seymour: an Introduction," is widely seen as an unfortunate descent by Salinger into bombastic, ego-stroking drivel. While the tone of "Seymour" continues to be essentially Salinger in a sense, it nevertheless features that particular side of Salinger that many view as nonsensical and ostentatious, and threatens to verge into the category of, if not falling directly into, logorrhea. Margaret Salinger claims that "Seymour" is no longer "secular fiction but hagiography," and accurately declares that this is a genre that is "not concerned with time and place, character development, conflict and resolution" (M. Salinger, 423).

Despite the stories' separate approaches to plot and character, they do share Buddy's struggle to understand his brother through the written word. Buddy, and Salinger by connection, goes back and forth when presenting the image of Seymour and what he embodies. Seymour, Salinger's chief spiritual master, contains multitudes and contradictions, and his portrayal of him and his life can never be fixed as something to be wholly desired or despised. Buddy's fondness and hatred for his brother are intertwined, like in *Franny and Zooey*, and many of Buddy and Zooey's feelings for their older brother seem to epitomize Salinger's view of the holy life in general, and the joys and sorrows that inevitably go along with it. Yet, when Buddy ventures to analyze and decrypt Seymour, we discover that the story becomes less about Seymour and more

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<sup>15</sup> Though the short story, "Hapworth 16, 1924," published in 1965, was in fact the last of Salinger's works to be published in his lifetime.

about Buddy, and finally transforms into the religious quest that is at the center of Salinger's work.

"Raise High the Roofbeam Carpenters" opens with Buddy recalling a night that occurred twenty years earlier, when Franny, who was ten months old at the time, was moved into Buddy and Seymour's room. When she began to cry one night, Seymour calmed her by reading an ancient Taoist tale of a Chinese duke who sends an ordinary vegetable hawker on an impossible quest for the perfect horse. When the hawker is not able to simply determine the horse's color or sex, the duke is appalled. How can this man be a judge of quality in steeds? Yet, when the animal arrives, it proves to be the most superior of horses. Chiu-fang Kao, the vegetable hawker, "looks at the things he ought to look at, and neglects those that need not be looked at," and had thereby chosen the animal by perceiving its "spiritual mechanism," or its absolute essence, ignoring the corporeality of it, which, as the tale suggests, is nonessential when interpreting one's true worth (Salinger, 5).

The narrator, though unknown at this point in the story, is Buddy Glass, and he recites this tale in order to establish Seymour's importance not only to the story, but, more importantly, to mankind. Seymour was very much like the vegetable hawker, he was a "seer" and a "true poet" according to Buddy, and since he committed suicide in 1948, Buddy has not been able to find anyone else to "look for horses in his stead" (Salinger, 5). Not only does this story function as an epigraph of its own for what is to come, but it also, as Kenneth Slawenski points out, reintroduces the reader to two already prominent Salinger characters, Franny and Seymour Glass. This in turn enhances the reader's "feeling of intimacy and comfort with these characters" (Slawenski, 269), and reminds the reader, due to the tale's religious origins, that the events we are about to witness will be mystical, despite its seemingly ordinary people and events. The fact

that Salinger parallels his story with that of a religious one suggests that his inspiration for not only the story, but for his crafting of it, is immersed in the mystical, exotic unknown.

With this Taoist tale, and the reminder of Seymour's death, Salinger begins the story of Seymour's wedding to Muriel Fedder, which takes place during the Second World War, in June 1942. "Roof Beam," is in fact a pre-history of "Seymour," and therefore like the Taoist tale framed "Roof Beam," so does "Roof Beam" set up "Seymour." Salinger's wish to revisit Seymour and his suicide, rather than rewrite it, further troubles the Seymour suicide tale. What is offered is two somewhat oppositional accounts of Salinger's heroic guru, which in turn signifies Salinger's spiritual evolution in his fiction.

When Buddy arrives to the wedding he finds that Seymour has stood up his bride at the altar, claiming that he is "too happy" to get married at the present. Therefore, all guests in attendance are told to shuttle into their cars and to head for the Fedder's home (the reception is still being held, despite the absence of actual nuptials). Buddy's presence there, as possibly the only guest on the groom's side, is awkward to say the least. This is made all the more unpleasant when Buddy is then placed in a car with the bride's aunt, great-uncle, and her matron of honor and her husband (a lieutenant), with the former being, understandably, infuriated with Seymour and his betrayal of her best friend. The crowd is currently unaware of Buddy's relation to Seymour, but the matron of honor suspects as much. She reacts with anger towards Seymour and throws her resentment in Buddy's direction. Buddy's obvious discomfort and the heated circumstances that surround him speaks of the humor Salinger employs throughout his storytelling.

The whole scene is a satirical, humorous critique of the brouhaha that surrounds weddings. Salinger's comedic contributions are entertaining, but they are also a crucial part of



his explicit and implicit commentary on modern society's values. The overcrowded vehicle eventually gets stuck in a traffic jam, and at Buddy's suggestion, the group makes their way to, ironically, an apartment that Buddy used to share with Seymour, that is currently unoccupied, in order to get some much-needed cool air and refreshments. The matron of honor continues to bash Seymour, saying he is mentally unstable, which is what Muriel's mother, who as we know from "Bananafish" has an affinity for psychoanalysis, claimed, and the matron of honor further accuses him of being stunted due to his life as a mini-child celebrity on a quiz show for years: "That's probably what's the matter with that brother of yours... Your brother's never learned to relate to anybody... He's absolutely unfit for marriage or *anything* halfway normal, for goodness' sake" (Salinger, 59).

What is interesting about this passage is the fact that the matron of honor's words echo Zooey's: he believed they were all "freaks" due to their abnormal upbringing and "religious" education. The holy, precocious child turned adult is revered in Salinger's stories, but they are also pitied, because they cannot and do not belong in the actual world. Overall, the tone of Salinger's stories, and Buddy's eventual heated rebuttal, demonstrate that Buddy, and Salinger, are defending the "spiritual," but they also find themselves sometimes agreeing with the Matron of Honor's words. As a result, Buddy cannot help but feel anger and confusion towards his brother and the "religious" life he advocates.

In response to this criticism, Buddy eventually reveals his identity and stands up for his brother when the matron of honor accuses Seymour of having hit a famous actress, Charlotte Mayhew, in the face, causing her to receive nine stitches. By eventually revealing himself and standing up for his brother, Seymour has indirectly aided Buddy in the realization of his own

strained existence in the world<sup>16</sup>. During his defense he claims that no one truly understands Seymour, and no one actually saw his brother for “what he really was,” which was a “poet, for God’s sake” (Salinger, 60). The idea that Seymour’s being a “poet” is an immensely crucial element of his being, and the art of the written word as being of the utmost importance in general, resonated deeply with Salinger. Salinger, who saw himself as a kind of poet, or at the very least, a true artist, struggled with the knowledge that the task at hand, producing art, was a way of life that lead to scrutiny and constant misunderstandings about him and his art. A poet, to Salinger, was a saint-like figure who was an instrument of God. Buddy, or Salinger, will again revisit this idea of writing as a holy demand that enslaves in “Seymour: an Introduction.”

The title of the piece, “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters,” is a line taken from a wedding hymn written by Sappho, a lyric poet from ancient Greece. Buddy sees the poem on Seymour’s bathroom mirror, written in soap by their sister, Boo Boo. The Glass children’s cryptic advice to one another, as seen here through poetry, is distributed through the art of the written word. Not only is the message produced on “glass,” but also its sentiments are expressed in a way that only the Glass children can fully understand. To wish someone a happy marriage by quoting Sappho on a bathroom mirror not only speaks of the Glass family language, but it also helps us to grasp the venerated position that artists, specifically poets, hold in the family. Edith Hamilton argues that in classic Greek mythology, the poet, not the priest, “had influence in heaven,” and that Homer claimed that poets had been “taught [their] divine art by the gods”<sup>17</sup> (Hamilton, 11). Therefore, Salinger specifically used Sappho’s wedding hymn in order to resurrect the ancient mystical understanding that poets are closer to God, and that their talent or

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<sup>16</sup> Just as Seymour did with Zooey.

<sup>17</sup> An ancient Greek poet that Salinger explicitly mentions in *Franny and Zooey*.

art is not controlled or wielded by them, but by a higher being, again an idea Buddy explores later on in “Seymour.”

To come full circle, Salinger chose the word "carpenters" where other translators have used "workmen" or any number of similar nouns, for a reason that was first glimpsed in “Bananafish,” the story that initially introduced readers to Seymour. We know from the character Sybil Carpenter in “Bananafish” that "carpenter" has strong metaphorical implications. The name brazenly calls forth the categorical image of a prophet, or prophetess, a facsimile of Jesus, who was an important spiritual storyteller himself. Salinger has again “mixed” religious doctrines, monotheism with polytheism, and has provided here an allusion to Christianity coupled with an allusion to ancient Greek religion. Salinger’s use of religious syncretism most likely stems from his practice of Vedanta, a sect of Hinduism that believes in the monistic notion of “harmony of religions.” The *Rig-Veda* or *Rigveda*, one of Vedanta’s principle texts, declares that, “Truth is one; sages call it by various names” (46). In other words, there are many paths leading to one truth. Yet Salinger is not only advocating for a type of spiritual democracy, but he is also simultaneously uniting various religious traditions in order to forge a separate, or alternative path to enlightenment, despite also using set religious foundations.

It is also interesting to note that Boo Boo is aligning her brother with that of the Greek god Ares, for the line from the poem that she directly quotes is, “Raise high the roof beam, carpenters. Like Ares comes the bridegroom, taller far than a tall man” (Salinger, 65). Comparing Seymour to that of the God of War Ares is both confusing and troublesome. It could simply be that Salinger is wishing to equate Seymour with that of a god, and yet characterizing him as Ares, a god that represents violence, seems foreboding. Ares was at one time the lover of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, who “stole away even the wits of the wise”

(Hamilton, 33). Though full of sweetness and beauty, her beguiling charms broke down the defenses of even the smartest of men. Is Muriel Aphrodite? Will she eventually lead to Seymour's ruin? With Seymour's eventual suicide looming in the background, Sappho's words haunt the story.

Yet Christianity and ancient Greek religion are not the only religious traditions present in the story. After Buddy's heated diatribe about his brother being a "true poet," Buddy asks where Muriel's great-uncle is, a mildly humorous figure whom Buddy has become to increasingly admire. He is immediately drawn to the bride's great-uncle, who is deaf-mute, even before he knows that this man cannot hear or speak. Buddy finds his lack of dialogue and his indifference in allegiance comforting. He adopts him as a sort of ally, and takes immense joy in the man's demeanor and overall being. The old man embodies the Eastern philosophy of detachment, a topic that Salinger keeps revisiting in his stories, and this is why Buddy takes such an interest in this unusual character. From the Taoist perspective, "the old man resembles the Taoist ideal of the Perfect Man who has no self.... As the Nameless One, he is egolessness and silence incarnate," (O'Connor, 323-4). The great-uncle is, in essence, the physical embodiment of the teachings of his guru-brother Seymour. The great-uncle's detachment from the concerns of the corporeal world reflects Buddy's own spiritual desires.

Detachment is an important concept in many Eastern philosophies – specifically Zen Buddhism—one that Buddy discusses more fully in the short story "Teddy"<sup>18</sup>. For Buddy and Seymour, this means for one to remain socially and emotionally disengaged from the world, due to the realization that whatever life you're currently living or part of is ultimately only one of

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<sup>18</sup> Buddy eventually declares authorship of "Teddy" in "Seymour."

many lives or “incarnations.” Buddy seems to recognize that this spiritual philosophy of separation or dispassion is present in the uncle, and he is fully living a life of complete Zen:

I glanced around at the tiny elderly man with the unlighted cigar. The delay didn't seem to affect him. His standard of comportment for sitting in the rear seat of cars—cars in motion, cars stationary, and even, one couldn't help imagining, cars that were driven off bridges into rivers...If Death—who was out there all the time, possibly sitting on the hood—if Death stepped miraculously through the glass and came in after you, in all probability you just got up and went along with him, ferociously but quietly. (Salinger, 31-2)

The uncle is at peace not only with the delay of the traffic, but he is also in complete harmony with the cycle of life, including his own mortality. Death is viewed by Western and Eastern minds differently, argues Salinger, and the West's notion of death as a great tragedy is not only flawed, but a disgrace to the cyclical unity with life and the divine. The “sublime silence” (Hassan, 8) of the uncle can be seen as the outcome of one hand clapping, which is that of essential silence. Buddy realizes this form of communication, or rather non-verbal meaningfulness, and finds it to be a “voice of solace reaching into his solitude” (Hassan, 8). This is the same message that Franny received through the dial tone. The deaf-mute uncle, like the dial tone, epitomizes Seymour's dogma, which Buddy appreciates, though he himself lacks the essential core and understanding of Seymour's creed. This is somewhat ironic, and in its irony, is again a bit comedic in its nature. Buddy exerts himself to the full extent in order to solve his brother's religious puzzles, and yet the uncle, with no obvious effort on his part, simply and easily lives a life of peaceful detachment. Buddy, despite his close relationship with the guru, cannot convert so easily.

His struggles with Seymour's conflicting guidance begins to erupt towards the end of the story, when Buddy finds Seymour's diary in the bedroom. Upon his discovery, Buddy takes the diary to read in the bathroom, again in the “holy chapel,” where “extensive communication via

the written word” (Salinger, 64) will again offer more clarity and spiritual coherency for Salinger’s players. Seymour’s actions seem callous and cruel, especially his behavior towards the women he claims to love. Yet in his diary, Seymour’s behavior, in some ways begins to become clearer.

The saintly, ego-free diary entries of his brother fascinate Buddy. Seymour writes how he loves the innocent heart of Muriel, and her mother, despite being what Buddy would term as “irritating” and overly “opinionated” (Salinger, 72). Furthermore, Seymour also claims that everyone is conspiring to make him happy, and that he does not feel contempt, as Buddy and others do, for people who are unaware of the spirituality that is present in everything, or who are, “deprived...of any understanding or taste for the main current of poetry that flows through all things” (Salinger, 72). Despite Buddy’s investigation into Seymour’s diary, we find that he is still separated from Seymour’s ideology by a chasm that is yet to be explicitly claimed or identified. Yet it is obvious that Buddy’s struggle to understand his brother is Salinger’s obstacle as well. How can one explain that which transcends logic?

Salinger’s aspirations for Seymour to be “saint-like” are made all the more complicated by his seemingly cruel behavior, suggesting that he represents what is both good and bad about being an “enlightened” individual. Seymour was both the “Lamb” and the “Tiger,” and just as the “darker forces of human nature live side by side with spirituality” (Slawenski, 272), so they do in Salinger’s ultimate sage. This again brings us back to Zooey’s dilemma, which I argue was also Salinger’s own. With the character of Seymour, and, in many ways, with the rest of the Glass children, Salinger is attempting to grapple with the battle between the earthly and elevated self. This is not to say that his actions are inherently “evil,” but just as God, or the divine, is cruel for a purpose, so is Seymour. His “logic” is spiritually driven, just like the vegetable hawker, and

though Buddy and Salinger's readers cannot understand Seymour's choices, we must trust in the end that his judgment is motivated by something cerebral, and therefore, superior to our own man-made logic. Therefore, Buddy must realize, through God-consciousness, the true spirit of Seymour himself, because for Salinger, "true acceptance is based upon faith and not logic" (Slawenski, 273), and Buddy, and we as readers, must follow Teddy's advice and "vomit up logic" in order to see the true spirit that dwells within everyone and in all things.

When it is finally discovered that Seymour had been waiting all the while for Muriel at her home, and that they have eloped together, all but the deaf-mute leave the apartment. Buddy is drunk, and is weighed down by his struggle between the natural, but the sometimes, cruel spiritual connection his brother preaches, and his own battle between the authentic and the inauthentic, the transcendent and the somatic. It is in this mindset that Buddy reveals to the deaf-mute uncle the truth behind Charlotte Mayhew's stitches. Seymour, it seems, had thrown a stone at Charlotte out of pure joy, in order to leave his mark: "He threw it at her because she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo's cat. Everybody knew that" (Salinger, 89). However, Buddy's confession to the old man is a lie: "I looked up at my guest, rather expecting him to dispute me, to call me a liar. I am a liar, of course. Charlotte never did understand why Seymour threw that stone at her" (Salinger, 89). No one understood why Seymour did what he did, not even him.

In one of his diary entries Seymour writes,

I've been reading a miscellany of Vedanta all day. Marriage partners are to serve each other. Elevate, help, teach, strengthen each other, but above all, serve. Raise their children honorably, lovingly and with detachment. A child is a guest in the house, to be loved and respected—never possessed, since he belongs to God. How wonderful, how sane, how beautifully difficult, and therefore true. The joy of responsibility for the first time in my life. (Salinger, 91)

Seymour believed that the true aim of marriage was in order to unite two people's lives so that they could help each other toward divine realization. How, then, do we account for Seymour's, and therefore Salinger's, treatment of Muriel in "Bananafish"? Margaret Salinger claims that her father's views on marriage changed from 1947, when he wrote "Bananafish," to 1955, when he married his second wife Claire and penned "Roof Beam." This modification of his views on marriage was a result of his finding a new spiritual Hindu guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, who seemed to help him reconcile the conflict between "earthly attraction and heavenly renunciation" (M. Salinger, 86).

Yogananda argued in his book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, that marriage could potentially be something holy. During an interview he conducted with the widow of his own guru, Lahiri Mahasaya, who he calls her "prophet-husband," he discovers that the guru's wife was in fact an apprentice of the great yogi, and was therefore not just a wife, but a Shakti of sorts. Therefore their union was considered more or less warranted by God. Yogananda argued that, "Marriage between man and woman is for the purpose of each partner helping to uplift the other in a commitment of divine friendship, love, and loyalty that will move both souls closer to their true nature in the incarnation they share" (Yogananda, 29-30). This is how Salinger placated his spiritual quest with that of his earthly desire for marriage. It is obvious that he saw this as an opportunity for his characters to find peace within the world as well. And yet, Seymour's suicide, written earlier, begs to differ.

After his confession to unhearing holy ears and his reading of Seymour's diary, Buddy passes out, "...I fell, more or less deliberately, on the nearer of the two beds. I was asleep—or, possibly, out cold—before I landed, or so it seemed" (Salinger, 91). Once again, the protagonist of the story must sleep after they have experienced an overwhelming mystical experience. This,



“beautifully difficult,” but “true” advice helps Buddy to understand that the “mark” or “scar” inflicted on Charlotte Mayhew is not a victory wound steeped in a need for violent aggression or power, but rather it is a mark made in time and in history, at a point where Seymour saw love and the divine within this creature. Charlotte Mayhew, and the rest of the Glass clan, were not able to hear or fully bear witness to Seymour’s shout of “I love you,” across the division between reality and the transcendent, but this does not mean that the message was not sent. It was just not understood. Seymour, it seems, threw the rock out of great joy, which, arguably, is a strange reaction to have: why would anyone want to throw a rock at something beautiful? To mark it as their own?

Despite his misgivings about the match between Muriel, who seems egocentric, simple, and materialistic, and his sage-like, intelligent brother, Buddy has come to realize that like the vegetable hawker in the Taoist tale, Seymour’s choice is not based on outward appearances, but on the spirit he sees within. Whatever it is he sees in her, it is good, whole, and pure. Seymour’s judgment, Buddy now realizes, is “superior to his own” (Alsen, 46). After Buddy wakes up later, he reflects that the half-smoked cigar left by the uncle would make a fitting wedding gift for Seymour. As Janet Malcolm points out, the cigarettes and smoking in Salinger are “well worth tracking” (Malcolm par. 2). I would further argue that cigarettes play a huge role in Salinger’s proposed religiosity. For much of the story, the Zen-like uncle’s cigar goes unlit. It is not until Buddy begins to undergo his spiritual transformation, that the cigar is lit. And in “Zooey” another cigarette is “instrumental in the dawning of a recognition” (Malcolm par. 2). Cigarettes and cigars “have lives and deaths...They glow and they turn to ashes. They need attention. They create smoke. They make a mess...Some of them go out for lack of attention. Others threaten to burn the smoker’s fingers” (Malcolm par. 2). Cigarettes, then, are representative of life and

death, of birth and rebirth, the lighting of the spiritual flame that dwells within all. It is this cleansing fire that sparks recognition along with its makers. It is this awakening that Buddy wishes to gift to Seymour, for it was he who helped Buddy to see the light.

Buddy is happy to have discovered this realization, but he has also come upon the knowledge that the spiritual reality his brother represents is a “lonely cross,” that Buddy and the rest of the Glass children must carry (Hassan, 9). Neither he, nor any of the Glass children and their actions, will be able to be fully understood by much of the world. It is almost in desperation then, that Seymour eventually marries Muriel. He knows that he needs “to be strengthened just as much by her simple and natural approach to life as she needs to be elevated by his intellectual and spiritual values” (Alsen, 47), and this further complicates Seymour’s suicide all the more. Perhaps he discovered that there is no true way of combining the two. Or, perhaps, since chronologically “*Bananafish*” came before “*Roof Beam*,” that this was Salinger’s way of mending the rift between the secular world and the religious. It is possible that Salinger had regretted the ending of “*Bananafish*,” and was struggling to justify or rationalize Seymour’s death. It seems more and more clear that Salinger perhaps worried over the story and its implications.

Are we not “hearing” or interpreting Salinger’s sermon correctly, then? Perhaps Salinger’s deaf-mute uncle, who primarily functions as a symbolic character, is not only an allegorical philosophy of Zen, but he also represents the “deaf” audience that Salinger feels he is addressing here. This is not to suggest that Salinger is insulting his readers, claiming that they are “deaf” to his words, but rather that the “hearing” is not essential for the story, as the uncle’s deafness was not a definitive or necessary part of him or his spiritual importance. Perhaps it is not the words or the language that matter here, but rather it is the silence and the unsaid in this

story that we are meant to find meaning in. In fact, Seymour claims that instead of the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln should have shaken his fist at the crowd instead, as that action would have transferred the message correctly without the use of words. The speaker who would have done that, Seymour argues, would have been an “absolutely honest man” (Salinger, 74).

In the same vein, Seymour also argued in one of his diary entries that the “human voice conspires to desecrate everything on earth” (Salinger, 67). We are largely not told why Seymour sometimes does what he does, or why he says what he says. It is again a “Salinger-koan,” that is not meant to be blatantly answered and understood, but rather, it is meant to spiritually instruct. We may never know the reason behind Seymour’s death, and perhaps we are not meant to. His actions transcend all thought and logic. We learn more by wondering than by receiving the definitive answers. Salinger’s dilemma then is that of a devoted artist of words, who then develops a philosophy that seems to make them irrelevant.

Due to its lack of succinct and straightforward prose, it is not surprising that many critics reacted, and continue to react, negatively to the second piece of the collection, “Seymour: an Introduction.” “Roof Beam” is more of a “story,” in the traditional sense, in which the mostly linear narrative has a “beginning and an end, and a mortality, all on its own” (Salinger, 5). “Seymour” is not meant to possess a mortality, unlike the mortal man that originally bore its name. The story is a non-linear, stream of consciousness narrative, and Buddy, the narrator, explains to the reader that his writing here is a diary of sorts, written over several sittings. “Seymour,” is experimental, plot-less, and a meta-fictional narrative about a character that the most avid of Salinger readers are already familiar with.

This particular story may be lacking in plot, and may contain an overwhelming amount of footnotes on poetry, but it may also be the window into which many interested readers and scholars are allowed a glimpse at Salinger's thought process, his approach to writing, and his religious and artistic musings. We are being invited by none other than Salinger himself. In fact, the entire novella reads self-consciously as a writer writing a book, directly communicating with the reader. However, we don't get too close, because when it seems that Salinger has somewhat "revealed" himself, he does so without truly, "spilling a single really autobiographical bean" (Salinger, 148). Salinger is not necessarily encouraging an autobiographical reading of "Seymour: an Introduction," but rather he is attempting to illuminate the reasons behind the construction of his art. Despite the wordiness, "Seymour" doesn't say much, but like "Roof Beam," it is what is not said that we are meant to contemplate. In Salinger's fiction, language and reality are something, "whole, holy, and perhaps as ineffable as silence" (Hassan, 6).

As the title suggests, the story represents an attempt by Buddy Glass to introduce to the public, once again, his older brother, Seymour, who committed suicide in 1948. Salinger demonstrates this notion in his effective summary of Seymour as a haunting shadow, and how his brother is forever a posthumously shoulder-seated voice of spirituality for the members of the Glass family. The book contains many catalogues and anecdotes about his guru-like brother, that are interfused with self-conscious references to works by Salinger, such as "Teddy," *The Catcher in the Rye*, "Bananafish," etc., which Buddy admits authorship. Buddy goes on to say that "his" characters are, "by and large pursued by an Entity that I'd much prefer to identify, very roughly, as the Old Man of the Mountain" (Salinger, 112). It can then be assumed that Salinger's characters are clashing with society because they are driven by an obscure, yet persistent sense of

the divine (Hamilton, 244). This includes Teddy, Franny, Zooey, Franklin, Sergeant X, Holden Caulfield, and many other characters of Salinger's (or Buddy's) creation.

Salinger, or Buddy in this case, also answers rumors about his own life, such as his stay in a sanatorium and a Buddhist monastery. Buddy also explains that the "Seymour" of "Bananafish" was, "not Seymour at all but, oddly, someone with a striking resemblance to,—alley oop, I'm afraid—myself," and he goes on to say that the blame lay wholly on the fact that he was using, "a very poor rehabilitated, not to say unbalanced, German typewriter at the time" (Salinger, 113). If Salinger has already hinted that, at least when it comes to some autobiographical facts, the character of Buddy is, in actuality, his alias, then one can assume that the Seymour in "Bananafish" also represents some aspect of the author himself. Therefore, Salinger's blaming of a "German" typewriter could be an allusion to the fact that Buddy's and his own poor "rehabilitation" could have been caused by his time as a soldier in Europe during and following the aftermath of World War II. This calls into question my original analysis of "Bananafish" and, in turn, Seymour's suicide and the spiritual and metaphorical implications that may or may not go along with it. Salinger's modifications of Seymour could be interpreted as the healing of Salinger, and his character could be seen as the credo for the development of the spiritual turn in Salinger's fiction.

Once this particular "Seymour" is officially introduced, Salinger and Buddy's outgivings of personal information more or less comes to a halt, as the two-in-one grow silent in order to allow their guru center stage. Seymour's Oriental, but also Western, haiku poetry, is also explored here, and Buddy is convinced that his brother's haikus are some of the greatest pieces of poetry of all time. Therefore, he argues, these pieces of his brother's art should be officially artistically and religiously canonized. When discussing Seymour's initial attraction to poetry,

Buddy relays an episode of him and his brother as young children at the public library in New York City, where the two boys were “having a fine time idly swimming around or treading water between the stacks, occasionally doing a little serious fishing for new authors” (Salinger, 122-23). Again we are brought back to Salinger’s motif of water as a free, spiritual space. This time, however, Salinger’s watery spiritual realm exists inside a library, signaling the supreme mysticism that is held between the pages of good art.

“Fishing,” Buddy continues, “in libraries or anywhere else, is a tricky business, with never a certainty of who’s going to catch whom,” and “permanently, from that morning on, Seymour was hooked” (Salinger, 123). It is no accident that our first introduction to Seymour was in “Bananafish,” where Seymour’s death mimics that of fictional fish who are “hooked” on bananas. These poems have never even been published, but the point is that they don’t need to be read or heard for their fundamental message to be “heard,” and they “remain exquisite creations circumscribed by silence” (Hassan, 15). Buddy argues that the “thing to listen for...with a public confessor, is what he’s *not* confessing to” (Salinger, 167). The details behind Seymour’s death and his poetry are largely left untouched and unsaid by Salinger, yet their separate mysterious existences aid in our understanding of the spiritual-ness present in the stories.

Once again, Buddy argues that the artist is a “seer,” the “only seer we have on earth” (Salinger, 104). “See more,” as humorously pronounced and mentioned by Sybil in “Bananafish,” really does “see” “more.” Buddy even addresses that the fact that Seymour was a “seer,” is also what lead to his demise: “...isn’t it plain how the true artist-seer actually dies?...the true artist-seer, the heavenly fool who can and does produce beauty, is mainly dazzled to death by his own scruples, the blinding shapes and colors of his own sacred human consciousness” (Salinger, 105). And, “with or without the suicide,” he was a true “mukta, a

ringding enlightened man, a God-knower” (Salinger, 106). Though Salinger consistently casts Seymour into a positive, heavenly light, it is clear that even Salinger, Seymour’s creator, does not completely understand him or his suicide. This is why Buddy, arguably Seymour’s closest sibling, struggles with presenting Seymour accurately to the world, and why it is so hard for him and the rest of the Glass children to come to terms with their prophet’s suicide. Seymour might be the side of Salinger’s self that he strives for, the purely religious facet of himself, but like Buddy, his acceptance of what Seymour ultimately represents is not a choice made out of rationality or realism, or even full comprehension.

This notion goes hand in hand with Salinger’s argument that a spiritual, “Zen” approach to writing, where one merely writes without aiming, is the only true way of hitting a “target.” Salinger executes his parable of divine, “non-aiming,” by telling a story from Buddy’s youth. When playing a game of marbles with a friend, Seymour says to him from the background, “Could you try not aiming so much?” (Salinger, 202). A fairly lengthy analysis of hyper-self-aware concentration versus the greeting of intuition and fancy-flight ensues: “If you hit him when you aim, it’ll just be luck... You’ll be *glad* if you hit his marble... won’t you?...if you’re *glad* when you hit somebody’s marble, then you sort of secretly didn’t expect too much to do it” (Salinger, 202-3). In Salinger’s earlier success, he notes with this passage, he was in fact “aiming” to hit the mark with audiences and critics alike, but yet his precise focus had, “quite a lot of *accident* in it” (Salinger, 203). Buddy goes on to cite Book XXVI of The Texts of Chuang-tzu and states, “The sage is full of anxiety and indecision in undertaking anything, and so he is always successful” (Salinger, 206). D.T. Suzuki explained that one must remove all “inhibitions there are, intellectual as well as affective or emotional, and to bring out what is stored in the unconscious and let it work itself out quite independently of any kind of interfering

consciousness” (Suzuki, 109). This state of mind, says Suzuki, is known as “egolessness,” in which one cherishes no “egoistic thought of your own attainments” (Suzuki, 127).

This state of “anxiety and indecision,” while also confidently casting oneself out onto the whims of divine fate, is something that Salinger found challenging to practice in his own life, but something he desperately believed in as a student of Vedanta Buddhism. The mind is a tiger, teaches Swami Vivekananda, that one must fight and overcome all one’s life. Sri Adi Shankaracharya, an eighth-century Indian mystic that Salinger read and admired, authored a cautionary tale about letting the mind and self-expression take control: “In the forest-tract of sense pleasures there prowls a huge tiger called the mind. Let good people who have a longing for Liberation never go there” (Shankaracharya, 3). This parable was also alluded to in “Seymour,” in one of the letters Seymour sent to Buddy which was addressed as, “Dear Old Tyger that Sleeps,” and in it Seymour claims that Buddy’s writing at the time contained too much of his own “voice” (Salinger, 157). It was this daily mauling by the vicious “tyger” that perhaps led Salinger to seek some kind of peace between his writing and his faith. By not aiming, and by not writing for anyone else but God, Salinger sought to justify his art as spiritual quest, rather than writing as selfish, calculated vocation.

Some days, Salinger argues, human life has a natural, mystical rhythm that most Western minds spoil with their ego, and with their analytical, over-thinking minds. Salinger is constantly attempting to capture these moments where this inborn state of non-striving, non-thinking, non-aiming is recognized. Rather than fretfully over-thinking the challenging tasks ahead, individuals must find a place inside themselves, an immensely electric yet passing equilibrium, where they can let themselves go and eventually become “just right.” As with the marbles, “Seymour” is Salinger’s “aimless” attempt at writing and art. A “true” artist accepts the “subversion in the



name of a richer art” (Hassan, 14). This “subversion,” as with the marbles and with the whole of “Seymour,” is done not only in the name of art, but also in the name of the divine, two things that Salinger finds synonymous. “All good writing,” for Salinger, is a “celebration or sacrament” (Hassan, 16). Therefore, Salinger’s exploration of this cohesiveness between that of the holy and that of the creative is his laid-out defense for this book. After all, Buddy notes, “the true poet has no choice of material. The material plainly chooses him, not he it” (Salinger, 121).

However, Zen and this way of life and “non-aiming,” has been corrupted by the West, argues Buddy, and has become,

...a rather smutty, cultish word to the discriminating ear, and with great, if superficial, justification. (I say superficial because pure Zen will surely survive its Western champions, who, in the main, appear to confound its near-doctrine of Detachment with an invitation to spiritual indifference, even callousness...Pure Zen...will be here even after snobs like me have departed). (Salinger, 208)

Salinger is aware of his own tendency to poison “Zen,” with his own Western-based notions and value-system. Buddy argues that he is not “Zen...nor a Zen Buddhist, much less a Zen adept” (Salinger, 208). Rather, his and Seymour’s “roots” are actually to be found in the “New and Old Testaments, Advaita Vedanta, and classical Taoism” (Salinger, 208). Their own religious ideologies are found not only in Eastern traditions, but Western ones as well. Though Buddy considers himself no Zen master, he finds that he is “profoundly attracted to classical Zen literature,” and has the “gall to lecture on it,” but his life itself, “couldn’t be conceivably less Zenful than it is, and what little I’ve been able to apprehend of the Zen experience has been a by-product of following my own rather natural path of extreme Zenlessness” (Salinger, 208). Buddy struggles to be “Zen” like his brother, and yet he is unable to cope, in some ways, with the Zen way of life. This is not unlike the Christian pilgrim or “seeker,” who tries constantly to achieve an elusive “purity.”

After taking two months off from writing the narrative due to acute hepatitis, Buddy is frantic after he discovers that his subject has grown enormously. He panics, and like “all the Glasses in their moment of crisis, he turns to Seymour” (Hassan, 16). Buddy reads a memo from Seymour on the subject of writing, where he admits his guilt in having so deeply influenced Buddy (and, in turn, the rest of Glass siblings). Much of the content has to do with Seymour’s writing advice for Buddy, such as,

I feel your censure on all his God-damns. That seems off to me. What is it but a low form of prayer when he or Les or anybody else God-damns everything? I can’t believe God recognizes any form of blasphemy. It’s a prissy word invented by the clergy. (Salinger, 154)

Buddy’s, and Salinger’s, use of the words “God-damn” or “goddam” are now proven not to have been simple expletives, but were rather Salinger’s way of sneaking God into places where much of the Western populace had never seen him: in everyday colloquialisms and events<sup>19</sup>. You cannot, Seymour argues, find in the clergy, a designation and institution created by man, the true nature of God. The divine must be found, it seems, in the everyday language and silence that surrounds us.

Seymour also acknowledges Buddy’s resentment towards him, but asks, “Is it so bad that we sometimes sound like each other? The membrane is so thin between us” (Salinger, 158). Buddy’s resentment mirrors Zooey’s, because he too understands that Seymour’s effect on the Glass siblings (and perhaps on Salinger himself) was at once both valuable and problematic. It allowed them access to important spiritual training and guidance, yet at the same time it distanced them, in many ways, from the rest of humanity, and even put them at odds with certain sides of their own selves. Yet, Buddy again comes back to Seymour’s words. We are never

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<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Holden Caulfield from the *Catcher in the Rye* also uses a plethora of “goddamns,” which, upon close inspection, are not just mere profanities, but instead are calculated indications of the spirituality present within the story.

actually allowed to witness Seymour's point of view when interacting with his siblings, we only get to observe how his posthumous words serve as both comfort and solution to the Glass family problems. Buddy seems to find the answers he is looking for, when Seymour asks him, "When was writing ever your profession? It's never been anything but your religion" (Salinger, 160), and he goes on to claim that,

Since it is your religion, do you know what you will be asked when you die?... You won't be asked if you were working on a wonderful, moving piece of writing when you died. You won't be asked if it was long or short, sad or funny, published or unpublished... I'm so sure you'll get asked only two questions. *Were most of your stars out? Were you busy writing your heart out?* (Salinger, 160)

Seymour is answering these questions for not only Buddy, but for Salinger as well. It did not matter if Salinger wrote what the public viewed as a "good" book, it did not even matter if he actually published his work. His writing was his religion, and therefore it was his direct way of communicating with God. He wrote for God and nobody else. And yet, his publication of "Seymour" proves that Salinger first had to get his final message out to the masses before he was able to write "religiously." In *Nine Stories*, Salinger was still attempting to cater to the intellectual community he seemed more anxious to impress. Even *Franny and Zooey* takes into consideration the *New Yorker* crowd, though with the publication of "Zooey" its mystical leanings were clearer, and therefore more problematic for the magazine. It seems that Salinger, as we can see in "Seymour," began to view his gift as not his to benefit from, and his somewhat conflicting views on this can be seen bubbling under the surface of his earlier writing. But it is in "Seymour" that they come to a final boil.

This pursuit of "unpremeditated" narration does, at times, lead to "stunning revelations" (Hassan, 17). The idea of holy detachment, which, you would assume, Buddy understood previously, he comes to again while he is composing his book about Seymour. But perhaps he

also encountered this idea from a new angle. Maybe Buddy has realized that the aimless marbles scenario he recited is applicable not only to how he lives his life, but also to how he practices his art. He is already practicing this idea, “unconsciously in the random diary form” (Hassan, 17). Buddy, and Salinger too it seems, has discovered and now intends to write as Seymour played marbles: with no conscious aim, but with inattentive fancy. Buddy begins to buckle under the weight of his holy brother, and the book’s form goes along with it. It is as if the “happiness of art” paired with the religious, “lay in the freedom of language to seek some purposeless and inclusive antiform” (Hassan, 18).

Many of these Salinger stories that I have discussed deal with characters who are fighting some kind of spiritual or emotional battle that either results in some kind of sleep or death at the end. We have seen this when Seymour commits suicide while his wife sleeps on one of the twin beds in their hotel room; when Franny falls into a “dreamless” sleep after their subsequent releases from spiritual purgatory; and when Buddy falls asleep, after his own religious epiphany aided by his memories of his brother-guru: “Seymour once said that all we do our whole lives is go from one little piece of Holy Ground to the next. Is he *never* wrong? Just go to bed, now. Quickly. Quickly and slowly” (Salinger, 213). Salinger’s use of sleep following some type of religious realization may simply be the outcome of exhaustion due to the spiritual turmoil that these characters go through. However, sleep in these Salinger stories may also signify a required symbolic re-birth of the character. It may also perhaps represent a state of natural being, where logic is lacking or altogether absent, suggesting that sleep is reminiscent of meditation, where the mind goes blank and the body falls into a natural rhythm. Sleep then also speaks of the return to the unconscious as a source of wisdom, as Suzuki described.

At the story's close, before Buddy's sleep, he recounts the lesson that he has now learned from his dead brother:

This is too grand to be said (so I'm just the man to say it), but I can't be my brother's brother for nothing, and I know—not always, but I know—there is no single thing I do that is more important than going into that awful Room 307. There isn't one girl in there, including the Terrible Miss Zabel, who is not as much my sister as Boo Boo or Franny. They may shine with the misinformation of the ages, but they shine. This thought manages to stun me: There's no place I'd really rather go right now than into Room 307. (Salinger, 212-13)

Much of Buddy's illustrations of Seymour and his advice again reminds us of the essential lesson of Zooey: that the students that Buddy teaches and despises are no less his siblings than Seymour, Boo Boo, Franny, Zooey etc. Salinger's religiosity "participate[s] widely in the world we know" (Hassan, 19), and all life is godly, all the time. The two forces present in Salinger's fiction are worldliness and holiness, the said, and the unsaid. Salinger's chief cause for this book is to mimic the "movement of holiness in the everyday life," and to stress that the, "sacred and profane are always interfused" (Hassan, 19). In many ways Salinger is attempting to combine the two into a holy union. Buddy argues that people who look down their "thoroughly unenlightened noses at this splendid planet where...Kilroy, Christ, and Shakespeare all stopped" (Salinger, 98) are failing to recognize the holiness present in everything, despite the world's ugliness.

Yet at the same time, Salinger does at times vocalize his dissatisfaction with the world and the people who inhabit it, and at times they reek of a "phoniness" that ultimately deter one away from the spiritual necessities of life. Nevertheless, I believe that Salinger is arguing that it is that which reveals the divine to the viewer that is to ultimately be treasured, despite its "phoniness." Seymour, in life and death, is helping Buddy and Salinger come to this truth. "Love the phonies" Seymour urges in direct opposition to Holden Caulfield, because they are divine manifestations of creation, too. Nevertheless, the lines between the two are further blurred, as

Salinger and his characters both covet and resent the holy life, but push through due to the persistent insistence of the divine that surrounds them. Buddy laments that he, “played a semi-private, strenuous, losing game of turning into a good mixer, a regular guy, and I had people in frequently to play poker” (Salinger, 196). Salinger too, attempted to be a “regular guy” and wrote some of his fiction as such. Yet, “Seymour” is, in many ways, Salinger’s declaration of the somewhat painful, yet nevertheless holy, pursuit of the divine in life and art.

## Conclusion

“Seymour,” and the rest of Salinger’s later work, leaves a complex—albeit strained—legacy. “Seymour” is often viewed as Salinger’s greatest failure. Yet, through my investigation, I believe that “Seymour” is an immensely vital text in Salinger studies. In fact, all of the work that Salinger produced was leading up to this story, making “Seymour,” and therefore Salinger’s spiritual quest, central to his life and his fiction. His beloved Seymour, and the rest of the Glass siblings, are quite different from the family that Shields and Salerno (among others) describes. Despite its inaccuracy and shortcomings, Salerno and Shield’s bad opinion of Salinger’s later work was also the general view that most critics held at the time the Glass family stories were published, and it is still the dominant consensus in scholarship today.

I therefore have oriented my thesis to display that a different analysis of these texts will demonstrate how Salinger’s religious concerns actually add a crucial dimension to his storytelling. This recognition counters the dismissal of his late fiction today. Posnock accurately argues that, “Buddhism didn’t kill his work; it helped him abandon the rigidity of the Hemingway/*New Yorker* aesthetic” (Posnock par. 23). In other words, Salinger turned away from the expectation for linear narrative development, with a strong emphasis on plot. Therefore Salinger’s later fiction, including its religious dimensions, can be seen as his way of successfully breaking away from the strict, hubristic brackets that the *New Yorker*, and literati society in general, were attempting to corral and keep him in. It is fatal negligence if scholars and readers alike continue to mourn Salinger and his art. These texts should be taken more seriously, because they eventually escaped outdated idealisms and forged a new model of creativity and technique. Salinger’s craft had not dwindled over time. It had altered, yes, but not suffered. He re-imagined his own dichotomy of the authentic versus the inauthentic, and destabilized the binary notions

that surround the secular and the holy, “good” art and “bad,” constructed language and the discourse of silence.

Moreover, to denounce his later stories because they have religious currents flowing through them is to miss the way that the religious dimensions contribute to the beautiful and engaging vignettes of a family who is mourning the loss of their brother. It does not take away from the general portraits of love and human connection, or from the humor, the squalor, or the criticism, but instead it supports and insists upon them. These have all been apart of Salinger’s fiction, from *Catcher* to “Seymour.” The implicit presence of spirituality and the ethical life does not take away from them, but instead enhances their aesthetic richness. We are limiting Salinger and ourselves when we fail to recognize the importance of his later work, and abandon the stories in scholarly discussion. Religion, though we may never know for certain, did not necessarily destroy Salinger the man, either. Yes, he wanted privacy and denounced fame. Was this for religious reasons? Possibly. But this is not necessarily proof that his religious musings destroyed his life. Perhaps it enriched it, like his fiction, but we may never know for certain.

Salinger’s hermit-like seclusion is almost as notorious as his fiction, and therefore can be seen as a somewhat logical extension of the spiritual elements of his writing. Did he come to the place, spiritually, at which he recognized that publishing, fame, the competitive literary world, were no longer necessary or relevant to him? Was his “disappearance” itself a spiritual act? In a conversation with a *New York Times* reporter, Salinger explained: “There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It’s peaceful. Still. Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure... I pay for this kind of attitude. I’m known as a strange, aloof kind of man.” This “peace” in not publishing that he appreciated has two sides. For Salinger, publication was not simply the auctioning off his solitude and



privacy, it was also an aim, as with Buddy and Seymour's marble game, and as such, something that inherently thwarts the achievement of artistic perfection. In fact, publication is one of the things that principally divides Buddy and Seymour as authors. Buddy, who is best thought of as Salinger's fictitious alias, and Seymour, his perfect "ringding mukta," are reflections of Salinger's own internal spiritual struggle. Should he continue publishing his work and forsake his soul, or should he put an end to, once and for all, his ego-driven "aiming"? Is the spiritual life the ultimate one?

Yet his beloved Seymour, who evolves in these successive retellings, from a suicidal man into a genius, a sage, even a saint of sorts, reflects the fact that Salinger's use of religion is never something that is static, but rather it is always in a state of shifting and re-defining, thereby lending itself to multiple explanations. On the surface, his fiction suggests that the world is divided between the phony and the genuine, and he seems to insist upon the holy life and its virtues. Mary McCarthy, in her scathing review of *Franny and Zooey* wrote: "Again the theme is the good people against the stupid phonies, and the good is still all in the family, like a family-owned 'closed' corporation.... Outside are the phonies, vainly signaling to be let in" (McCarthy par. 7). McCarthy's view, which is also Salerno's, Shields's, and Beller's, fails to recognize the limitations they put on a very complicated, conflicted epistle. To label the entirety of Salinger's fiction this way misdiagnoses his overall message.

It is not even clear at times if Salinger is championing his spiritual quest or criticizing it. We should recall Buddy's own struggle with his brother Seymour and his spiritual quest. Buddy wants to decipher and follow his brother, but simply does not fully understand how to do so. We must remember Seymour's teachings of the Fat Lady and universal love, and Zooey's admission that he and Franny are the anomalies, the freaks (and Buddy's admission of this, too). We must

not forget Seymour's insistence on humanity's movements from "one little piece of Holy Ground to the next." Yes, it is obvious that Salinger had problems with the world, especially in some of his earlier stories. But his *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey*, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," and "Seymour: an Introduction," all display the world's faults, and yet, at the same time Salinger emphasizes that his characters, despite their painful existence, love the world and the people in it, including all of the Professor Tuppers and the girls in that awful Room 307.

Moreover, Salinger's discussion of the holy is, at many times, coupled with the ordinary. Everyday objects, such as Seymour's shirt cardboards, Bessie's chicken soup, the bathroom "chapel," and the deaf-mute uncle, are they themselves holy, and the idea of holiness is therefore redefined and extends to all things. Spiritual value cannot solely be located in any one traditional creed or doctrine, but instead it appears in the most common of items, people, and places. Salinger's fiction itself, though it contains average events and locations, is always permeated by the mystical. The physical world and the sacred, incorporeal world become more and more intertwined throughout his stories. Therefore, Salinger's stories actually subvert the theme of the "good people" versus the "stupid phonies," and instead offer a more nuanced understanding of what and who defines "holiness."

In the end, my analysis may not provide full justice to the complexities of the religious nature that surrounds all of Salinger's work and life. Though I intended to leave out *Catcher* as a way of forging a new path in Salinger studies, I most certainly could have included more stories from the *Nine Stories* collection, and of course his even earlier works, and his last published story, "Hapworth 16, 1924." All of these hold unique reflections on the religious quest that Salinger sought, and may bring about a litany of discussion. Nevertheless, I believe my analysis leads to further dialogue about how we can bypass or grapple with these somewhat harmful

assumptions that surround the status of Salinger's work today. As scholars, I hope our thoughts on the role of religion in Salinger's fiction can begin to change, and we can in turn set about radically grappling with its significance and intention.

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