Hapworth 16, 1924 Short Guide

Hapworth 16, 1924 by J. D. Salinger

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Characters

Although Seymour's letter constitutes almost the entire story, other Glass family members must be noted, particularly his five-year-old brother and fellow camper, Buddy Glass, who receives considerable mention. Seen also as a forty-six-year-old writer, Buddy introduces the reader to the world of his late brother, in a headnote to the letter, dated May 28, 1965. He explains that his mother, Bessie Glass, sent him the letter after he had informed her he was working on a story about a very significant party he and Seymour, Bessie and Les (her husband and the father of the five Glass children) had attended on a certain night in 1926. He intends, Buddy adds, to type up this letter exactly as written. Hence child Seymour's extravagant outpouring from Camp Simon Hapworth, Hapworth Lake, Hapworth, Maine. The letter is addressed to his parents, Bessie and Les Glass (professional stage entertainers), who serve as foils for his cloyingly patronizing remarks, and to his young siblings: Beatrice (Boo Boo), Walter, and Waker. Various camp characters (fellow campers, personnel, a young camper's mother) are discussed by Seymour, with pity, contempt, forbearance, or—in the case of some of the women—a lively sexual response.

Social Concerns

This narrative takes the form of a verbose, supercilious letter running to 28,000 words, supposedly written by a seven-year-old boy at camp, to his parents at home. The epistle, if it is to be taken at face value, shows the dangerous communication gap that develops between a precocious child and the average-minded parents, who may lack understanding of their child's statements, needs, and psychological danger signs.

The letter also points up the likely difficulty such a wunderkind has in trying to adjust to a world not inclined to receive its enlightenment and guidance from the mouths of babes. This specimen of premature intellectual advancement refers to his periodic "appearances" on earth, as well as to his unhealthy mental condition referenced in examples such as: "a vein of instability" running through him "quite like some turbulent river," his having "left this troublesome instability uncorrected in [his] previous two appearances," and his self-reference to his parents as "your crazy son, Seymour Glass." All this in addition to his prophesying his eventual death and that of his five-year-old brother Buddy, after they "have fulfilled [their] opportunities and obligations"; he gives his "word that [they] will depart in good conscience and humor for a change, which [they] have never entirely done in the past."

Techniques

Salinger appears to have departed from the traditional mode of narration here.

Buddy actually introduces or presents Seymour's long letter with its account of his own psyche and his experiences at camp, and of his and Buddy's literary productions. First-person narration notwithstanding, there is such a degree of authorial self-indulgence in the story that Salinger seems not to have kept in mind the needs of his common readers. Seymour's discussion of his life and activities, his opinions and his arrogant "talking down" to his parents and siblings are all too preposterous to be taken at face value. Seymour's letter from camp does not even seem to represent wishful thinking, stream-of-consciousness fantasy, metafiction, or satire.

Warren French is also critical of the excesses and bombastic pretentiousness of the Seymour letter. He suggests that Salinger, because of his self-imposed isolation from the general public, had lost his touch and (just as when he had earlier mishandled a speaking engagement) had "gotten carried away by his own enthusiasm and [attendant] tensions," and could no longer handle his material. A more plausible explanation seems to be that Salinger knew his material all too well— since some of his own mystical philosophy was apparently transferred to his story characters—and felt that despite his popular success, the audience would never really understand what he was getting at, and therefore he might as well write to please himself, so long as his editors remained receptive. The story is challenging, however, because it is so far-fetched and because of a "pompous display of erudition" that, according to Warren French, "many commentators" considered "simply unreadable."

Themes

The seven-year-old Seymour in his letter reveals the strong influence on his beliefs of Indian religious mysticism, particularly the Vedanta branch of Hinduism. In this connection a functioning belief system becomes evident as the infant terrible matter-of-factly prophesies future events in his life and the lives of certain other Glass family members, especially Buddy. Foreknowledge and predestination, reincarnation (e.g., Seymour's allusions to his "appearances"), and revelation help shape the oracular, egocentric world view by which he lives.

For all his very high-and-mighty manner, young Seymour acts as if he were under the spell of a very powerful being; an element of madness happens to accompany his tendency toward religious mysticism.

While his sexual awareness and responsiveness to female allure are given considerable attention in this story, much more is made of the child's literary interests and proclivities. He mentions his having written a considerable amount of poetry.

But he mentions also five-year-old Buddy's having written six stories about an adventurous Englishman. Seymour speaks familiarly about great writers (for example William Blake and William Wordsworth) and certain academic scholars (possibly fictitious), and he requests that his parents obtain for him, from the Manhattan library, an enormous amount of serious reading matter. This includes the Victorian novelists, Tolstoi, Cervantes, Conan Doyle, Goethe, material about "the colorful and greedy Medicis" and "the touching Transcendentalists," as well as a selection of obscure periodicals of the mid-nineteenth century.

Hardly less important than the literary theme in Seymour's life is the idea and practice of prayer. Nondenominational Christianity is reflected to some degree in Seymour's treatment of the idea and practice of prayer, considered as separate from any specific religion. However, in line with his strong attachment to Eastern religious mysticism, he retains a fondness for Eastern forms of prayer. One of the other books he requests of his parents is "The Gayati Prayer, by unknown author."

Another thematic element, in connection with Seymour's childhood and his self-absorption, is that of death, which to him is simply a recurring phase of existence, like its opposite, the "appearance" on Earth once again. Though Seymour in his letter does not use the word "reincarnation" when speaking of his or Buddy's "appearances,"he clearly has in mind an ongoing sequential process of death and rebirth of the individual, whereby the grave has no victory and death has no sting. Hence Seymour's references to, or visions of, his coming death are neither sad nor fearful; rather, they tend in general to be accepting, somewhat like that of William Cullen Bryant in his famous vision-of-death poem "Thanatopsis" (1814). Before informing his parents that he will live thirty years or more, Seymour indicates that he has not always been good-humored about departing this Earth.

Key Questions

Hapivorth 16, 1924 and Salinger's other fiction published in book form have long resonated in the minds of readers, particularly adolescents, younger adults, and others sympathetic to the American "youth culture" of the post World War II period. They tend in general to reflect a mystique of the helpless child, and often the gifted child, who is seen as terribly vulnerable to danger. This child is a precious creature set aside for a special destiny, a precocious and charismatic young person possessing mysterious powers; he/she may soon meet death. This idea was interestingly foreshadowed in his first book The Catcher in the Rye (1951; see separate entry) through Holden Caulfield's speech to his young sister Phoebe.

He describes his vision of "thousands of little kids" playing in a large rye field, with no large person around, except him, "standing on the edge of some crazy cliff," and it's up to him to catch them if they fall over the edge. This is the only thing he is compelled to do.

Herein lies the basis of Salinger's appeal to the sensitive "young at heart" of whatever age: a blend of fantasized heroics, the existentialist mystery of the precarious human condition, (implied) spiritual transcendence, an affinity for extreme situations, a kind of catharsis through the evocation of pity and terror, and a vicarious self-realization. The Holden Caulfield who expresses this "catcher in the rye" vision has a good deal in common with the wonder-working Teddy in the story bearing his name, and the extraordinary wunderkind S. G. (Seymour Glass), who writes that memorable "Hapworth" letter home to his family from camp.

1. How does Hapworth incorporate philosophy, Eastern religions, abnormal psychology, and literature?

2. How is camp life for Seymour different from camp life as you have experienced or imagined it?

3. Forgetting for a moment the unlikelihood of such a child's having the literary tastes and interests shown in the narrative, what do you make of Seymour's choices in literature and his critical opinions on literary matters?

4. What does Seymour think of himself? Assuming that his judgment is not called into question, does there seem to be adequate justification for his supreme self-confidence and self-approval?

5. How would you summarize Seymour's religious belief system and its attendant practice?

6. Explain what Seymour means when he writes that he has "no confidence whatsoever in go-betweens, personal opinion, and unassailable, respectable facts." Does he believe

in God? What is his attitude toward predestination, considering his visionary gifts? What does he have to say about Jesus?

7. What importance does Seymour attach to prayer? Explain his concept of prayer and its function for the "believer."

What does Seymour expect to accomplish with prayer? What is the significance of "the Gayatri Prayer, by unknown author," which Seymour writes out for his three-year-old sister Boo Boo?

8. In the final analysis, is Hapworth 16, 1924 effective? Entertaining? Instructive?

Is it too far fetched to be taken seriously?

Literary Precedents

Seymour's prescience brings to mind D. H. Lawrence's character Paul Cresswell, the small boy in "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1933), who is able to pick horse-race winners by receiving secret messages from his toy rocking horse, after mounting and riding it. The boy's death in that story, following his overtaxing his already weakened condition by furiously urging his horse on, to divine the name of the winning racehorse in the upcoming Derby, suggests an ancient and widely-held folk belief that is relevant here. Simply stated: attempting to gain hidden, "off-limits" information or knowledge that relates to the inner workings of the scheme of things we live under, is a taboo, punishable by a severe penalty, because the divine or supernatural order is violated by this unlawful en try. However that kind of "forbidden fruit" intelligence is obtained, there is generally too high a price that is exacted for the offense. This then requires that a closer look be taken at Hapworth 16,1924.

The character Seymour of Salinger's Hapworth 16, 1924 seems to have little in common with D. H. Lawrence's Paul Cresswell, particularly since Seymour's complicated life experiences here were expanded in certain other stories by Salinger, and since Salinger is using as an underlying belief system the esoteric (to most Westerners) form of Eastern religious philosophy, Vedanta Hinduism. But it seems more than coincidental that Lawrence's and Salinger's clairvoyants—and Seymour is not Salinger's only such character—are marked for an early, or fairly early, death.

Seymour is preceded, in fact, by a tenyear-old boy named Teddy McArdle (in the 1953 New Yorker story "Teddy"), a passenger with his parents and six-yearold sister Boozer on an ocean liner, who not only believes he exists within a system of reincarnations, but also has clairvoyant powers. Teddy does not predict future events, though, from the story, he apparently could if he chose to do so. He only predicts times and places when people should exercise extreme care, and he can also predict selectively what they might be well advised to do. Yet Teddy gives some indications that his final end is not too far off. At one point, after finding himself in the middle of his parents' bitter arguments, he leaves their cabin, saying that after he goes out the door, he "may only exist in the minds of all [his] acquaintances." Then, writing in his diary on October 27, 1952, he states that "it" will happen either on that day or when he is sixteen, on February 14, 1958.

Not long after, he speaks with a stranger who has heard about his precocity and his claims regarding reincarnation and the ability to foretell someone's death.

Among other things, he tells this man that his little sister, who does not like him much, might happen to push him into an empty swimming pool to his death. As if to keep his readers forever guessing about this matter, Salinger ends this tale with a terribly loud and long-drawn-out scream, coming from a small girl in the vicinity of the ship's swimming pool. Was it from Teddy, falling to his doom, or was it from his sister Boozer watching this happen, or perhaps falling herself?

Related Titles

Aside from his New Yorker story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (January 31, 1948), Salinger wrote four longer fictions between 1955 and 1959—all published in the New Yorker—having something to do with Seymour Glass and the various other members of the Glass Family: "Franny" (January 29, 1955), "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" (November 19, 1955), "Zooey" (May 4, 1957), and "Seymour: An Introduction" (June 6, 1959). Brooding over these stories ("Franny" is the exception) is the unseen and sometimes seen presence of Seymour, Buddy's genius, rare poet, saint, spiritual guide, source of inspiration, and nonpareil hero—who in 1948 shot himself to death in a Florida hotel room where he and his wife Muriel were staying. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," which describes the suicide, concerns among other things Seymour's unpredictable behavior, his wife's parents' concern for her safety, and his encounter with a small girl on the beach, whom he regales with a tale about a sea-trap for catching bananafish. This strangely resonant story was published less than five months before the New Yorker's all-time sensation, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (June 26, 1948).

From his concise suicide-drama, Salinger developed a mystifying saga of an alter-ego figure who throughout most of his thirty-one years of existence cast a giant shadow over the rest of his family, which Salinger has apparently made his own.

Franny and Zooey are two more Glass Family siblings, born somewhat later than the youngest of the first group of (five) Glasses. "Franny" concerns a young college girl's emotional and spiritual crisis, and potential nervous breakdown, brought on by her academic stresses and her emotional insecurity in the face of her lover's fading support. "Zooey," her older brother who is a television actor and leading man, continues the examination of her disturbed state, and provides some kind of conflict resolution for her.

As pointed out by at least one commentator on Salinger's literary methods, "Zooey," like the other Glass Family stories, makes extensive use of such narrative devices as letters, diary entries, and other inserts. In this way Salinger is able to add to the emerging picture of his never-to-be-forgotten Seymour. Seymour, it is revealed, had obtained a Ph.D.

when he was as young as most Americans graduating from high school. And Zooey, arguing with his mother, in an effort to dissuade her from calling in a psychoanalyst to deal with Franny, asks her to think about "what analysis did for Seymour," the implication being that it might somehow have led to his committing suicide.

Then, Franny comments on her brother Zooey to her mother: Zooey is a monster, she charges, he is bitter about television and religion, even bitter about his mother and his brother Seymour, claiming they made freaks out of him and his sister (Franny herself).

The provocative title, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," suggesting the sixth-century Greek poet Sappho, is taken from a message by Seymour's sister Boo Boo, intended for Seymour at the time he was supposed to get married.

Although Buddy, the narrator, worshipfully approves of Seymour (as apparently Salinger does also), Seymour's instability and tendency toward irrational behavior are brought out clearly here. There is the prior matter of his having thrown a rock at a little girl (when he was a young boy) because she was too beautiful. Now there is his reluctance to attend his own wedding, set for June 4, 1942. It is revealed in the course of the story that: (1) he felt too happy to get married, and (2) he wanted Muriel, his fiancee, to go off with him and get married privately, because he was "too keyed up to be with people."

Much of this story is concerned with events surrounding the wedding day.

Seymour does not show up at the church, the humiliated bride, and her family and friends are left to go back home, and Buddy winds up dealing as best he can, with a small group of left-over wedding guests, including the hostile Matron of Honor and her husband. Then they re ceive the news that Seymour was actually waiting for Muriel to return to her apartment, and when she did, persuaded her to pack her things and elope with him.

"Seymour: An Introduction," narrated also by Buddy Glass, is a seemingly endless glorification of Seymour the supreme saint (no matter what harmful things he has done on various occasions, and no matter his hard-to-explain suicide), consummate poet and writing instructor, and paragon of goodness and wisdom. There is so much attention, even, to minutiae of his physical features that it becomes abundantly clear that when Salinger wrote this story he was hopelessly obsessed with the mind, soul, and body of this strange, antisocial, unpredictable family guru: the Seymour Figure of the ages, who long ago had had a second coming and who would continue to come and go throughout the ages. Hapworth 16, 1924, with its seemingly ridiculous superboy character of Seymour the Camper, clearly fits into the biographical pattern Salinger has been fashioning for a protagonist whose life he has traced (with occasional inconsistencies in matters of detail) over almost three decades, to its tragic, or glorified, conclusion in a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

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