A Perfect Day for Bananafish Study Guide

A Perfect Day for Bananafish by J. D. Salinger

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" first appeared in the January 31, 1948, issue of the *New Yorker* and was collected as the first piece in *Nine Stories* (1953). The story is the first concerning a member of the fictional Glass family Salinger created, whose members figure in much of his work.

Seymour, the oldest of the Glass children, is Salinger's main character in one of his most elusive pieces of writing. The reader of "Bananafish" learns that Seymour, a veteran of World War II, has had trouble readjusting to civilian life—an understandable problem that thousands of soldiers had to face. However, his suicide in the story's final paragraph shocks most readers and then leaves them scratching their heads, trying to understand why, exactly, Seymour pulled the trigger.

This apparent lack of motive is at the heart of the critical debate on the story. Some readers find Seymour's wife, Muriel, partially to blame, as her self-interest seems to overshadow what should be her wifely concern for her troubled husband. Others view Seymour as something of a guru, a man wise enough to know that his world can only corrupt him and who, therefore, escapes from it. Also plausible is the idea that Seymour is like the bananafish he describes: a man so glutted (with horror or pleasure) that he can no longer survive. Multiple interpretations are possible, which makes the story's meaning ripe for debate, a much-disputed point for both professional critics and casual fans. Regardless of what specific motive a reader assigns to Seymour's suicide, he or she is sure to be involved in Salinger's elaborate game of symbols, colors, and other indirect means of storytelling.

Author Biography

Jerome David Salinger was born in New York City on New Year's Day, 1919. His father, Solomon, was a Jewish cheese importer who hoped that his son would eventually learn his business; his mother, Marie Jillich, was an Irish Catholic whose parents disowned her when she eloped with Solomon. In 1932, the family moved to Park Avenue (as a result of Solomon's success) and Salinger was enrolled at the McBurney School, a private school in Manhattan where he (like his most famous creation, Holden Caulfield) managed the fencing team, wrote for the school newspaper and acted in some drama productions. His failing grades, however, prompted his parents to send him (in 1934) to Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania, where he edited his class's yearbook and from which he graduated in 1936.

After a brief tour of Europe, Salinger enrolled in Ursinus College in the fall of 1938. After only one semester, however, he dropped out. The following year, he took a course at Columbia University taught by Whit Burnett, the editor of *Story* magazine; Salinger's first piece of fiction, "The Young Folks," impressed Burnett, who published it in a 1940 issue of *Story.* Salinger then sold a number of stories (many now uncollected) to magazines such as *Collier's, the Saturday Evening Post and Esquire* before he was drafted by the United States Army in 1942. Salinger served with the Army Counter-Intelligence Corps before participating in the 1944 DDay invasion, where he landed at Utah Beach. In 1945, Salinger suffered some sort of breakdown or illness as a result of the war (the details are unclear) and spent some time at an Army hospital in Nuremberg. That same year, he married his first wife, Sylvia, a woman about whom very little is known. They divorced eight months later, after Salinger had brought her to the United States; she returned to Europe, where she practically disappeared from later biographers.

Despite his failed marriage, Salinger's career as a writer now gained momentum and he enjoyed a long relationship with the *New Yorker,* the magazine that would publish a number of his stories and longer works: "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" was first published in the January 31, 1948 issue. Other works that followed were the stories "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut," "The Laughing Man," and "For Esme—With Love and Squalor," all of which were later collected in the book *Nine Stories* (1953). In 1950, the first (and only) film treatment of a Salinger work premiered: a version of "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" renamed *My Foolish Heart.* Salinger hated the film and, to this day, there have been no major film (or stage) adaptations of his work. In 1951, Salinger's most famous work, *The Catcher in the Rye,* was published. He moved to Cornish, New Hampshire in 1953; a year later, he married Claire Douglass, who bore two children, Margaret Ann and Matthew, before her divorce from Salinger in 1967.

Other literary successes followed *The Catcher in the Rye,* in the forms of further narratives concerning the Glass family: *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963). At some point after the appearance (in *The New Yorker*) of the story "Hapworth 19, 1924," Salinger stopped publishing his works, granting interviews and cooperating with would-be biographers. His intense desire for privacy, however, made him even more famous when (in 1987) he

had his lawyers challenge the publication of Ian Hamilton's *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life* on the grounds that Hamilton quoted unpublished letters that he had read at university libraries. Salinger won the case and Hamilton's book was eventually released in a revised form. Since his deposition for the Hamilton case, Salinger has made no public statements of any kind. In 1997, a rumor began purporting that a small publishing house would re-release "Hapworth 19, 1924," but as of 2002, no such book has appeared and Salinger still lives in Cornish, reportedly writing without publishing.

Plot Summary

The story begins in a Florida hotel room, where newlyweds Seymour and Muriel Glass are staying for their vacation. During the first half of the story, however, Seymour is lying on the beach while his wife talks on the telephone to her mother in New York. Muriel's mother repeatedly asks Muriel if she is "all right," which begins to irritate Muriel; her mother's concern arises from a past incident where Seymour apparently tried to kill himself (and possibly others) by driving his father-in-law's car into a tree. When Muriel tells her that Seymour drove to Florida, her mother is naturally anxious; but Muriel says that Seymour "drove very nicely" and avoided any "funny business." This does not, however, placate her mother, who asks more questions about Seymour's behavior. Muriel says that Seymour has dubbed her "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," and she tells her mother of Seymour's annoyance that she had not yet read the book of German poems he had bought her (most likely by Rainer Marie Rilke).

Muriel learns that her father had recently spoken to Dr. Sivetski, their family physician, about Seymour's odd behaviors, behaviors which Salinger leaves cloaked in mystery: "That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lively pictures from Bermuda—everything." Dr. Sivetski told Muriel's father that the Army should not have released Seymour from the hospital and that there is a "very *great* chance" that Seymour "may *completely* lose control of himself." Worked into a near panic, Muriel's mother begs her daughter to return. Muriel refuses on the grounds that this has been the first vacation she's had in years. The two then talk about a psychiatrist who is also staying in the hotel: Muriel explains that they spoke about Seymour in the hotel bar, but it was too noisy for them to engage in an in-depth conversation. The talk then shifts to trivial matters of fashion and dinner guests until Muriel's mother asks her once more to come home. Muriel refuses and hangs up.

Meanwhile, the napping Seymour is awakened on the beach by Sybil Carpenter, a little girl of six or seven years who has struck up a friendship with Seymour since his arrival at the hotel. Seymour tells Sybil that he loves her blue bathing suit, despite the fact that it is yellow—a point she vehemently makes as she points to it. She accuses Seymour of favoring Sharon Lipschutz, another little girl at the hotel, since he allowed Sharon to sit next to him on the bench as he played the piano. Seymour calms her by saying, "I pretended she was you" and the two of them walk to the ocean.

As Sybil floats on her raft (which Seymour keeps from going out too far), Seymour tells her about the bananafish of the story's title. "They lead a very tragic life," he explains, for they swim into a hole where there are a lot of bananas and then eat as many as they can; however, they then get so fat that they cannot swim back out of the hole, so they die there of "banana fever." After Sybil says that she saw one, Seymour kisses the arch of her foot and brings her raft back to the shore. Sybil then says "Goodbye" and runs to the hotel.

In the elevator he takes to his room, Seymour scolds a woman for looking at his feet (whether or not she actually was looking is unclear). Offended, the woman exits the elevator on the next floor. When the elevator reaches his floor, Seymour exits, enters his room (where Muriel is asleep), takes a hidden pistol from his suitcase, sits down, looks at Muriel and shoots himself in the head.

Summary

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish," a short story written by novelist J.D. Salinger, was first published in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1948. The story takes place during the afternoon, detailing tand the perception and reality of one man, who has just come back from World War II. The running themes are mystery, symbolism and unexplained details.

The story begins in a hotel in an unnamed city. There are ninety- seven men in advertising from New York City staying in the hotel. This which means that the girl staying in room 507 has to wait several hours for a free telephone line. She passes the time by reading a woman's magazine, grooming herself, and caring for her garments. Finally, the operator calls her to tell hersay that a line is free. She is in the middle of painting her nails and takes her time carefully capping the bottle and picking up an ashtray before answering the call.

The girl sits elegantly in her white silk dressing gown, as the operator addresses her formally as Mrs. Glass and announces that her call to New York City has gone through. With that, the operator clicks off the call and the voice on the other end calls out, "Muriel." The girl affirms to her mother that it is indeed her. Muriel's mother is very worried about her daughter, as she has not called, but the girl brushes off her concerns saying that the telephone lines were busy and that she did call twice the evening before. Muriel does tell her mother that she is awfully hot, as Florida is experiencing a record high. The girl's mother does not hear Muriel's explanations, as she frequently interrupts her daughter.

Muriel's mother asks once again if she is alright and, once again, Muriel tells her she is fine. She tells her mother that they got to Florida early Wednesday morning, and that he drove very carefully the entire way. Her mother is quite upset at this revelation, and Muriel has to promise once again that he drove very nice, staying close to the white line and away from the trees. She then asks if her father had the car fixed and that Seymour would like to pay for the damages.

The mother changes subjects by asking her daughter if Seymour still insists on calling her that horrible nickname. Muriel assures her mother that he has started calling her something different, although she is hesitant to reveal exactly what her husband calls her. After some prodding, Muriel laughs and says that he now calls her, "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948." Muriel's mother thinks this is a horrible name for a husband to call his wife, but her daughter insists that she finds it funny. She then starts to ask her mother if she remembers the book that Seymour had sent her from Germany. Muriel has been trying to remember where she had left it, because her husband has recently asked if she had read it. Her mother interrupts by telling her that the poems where in German and that, anyway, it was at her house. Muriel shares the fact that Seymour had thought that she should have read the poems anyway, by buying a translation book or even learning German. Muriel's mother takes this as further proof that perhaps Seymour is not well.

She elaborates by saying that her husband has talked to Dr. Sivetski about Seymour. She says that that they now know everything about the trees, window, the pictures from Bermuda, what he had said to Granny, and everything else. The doctor also said that he did not think Seymour was ready to be released from the Army hospital, because there is a chance that he will still go completely crazy. To this, Muriel assures her mother that there is a psychiatrist at the hotel, and she has already spoken to him. However, under her mother's careful prodding, she confesses that they did not speak about Seymour, . Rather, rather they shared a drink at the noisy bar, while Seymour planned piano. The psychiatrist did ask Muriel if her husband was sick, but she just brushed that off as a reaction to his paleness.

Muriel's mother is not satisfied with her daughter's responses to her questions and once again asks if she would like to come home. The girl responds by saying that she very much would like to continue her vacation with her husband. The two women briefly change the subject by talking about the wardrobes of the fellow inhabitants of the hotel. In the middle of an inquiry over the length of a dress, Muriel's mother once again tries to change her daughter's mind about coming home, but to no avail.

The daughter then tells her mother that they should hang up as this phone call, as it is quite expensive, and Seymour could return soon. Muriel explains that he is at the beach, to which her mother asks if he can be trusted to be alone at the beach. The girl does not like how her mother portrays her husband as a lunatic and assures her that he is fine. She tells her mother that Seymour just lays on the beach with his bathrobe on. Muriel's mother thinks this is mad, since Seymour is so pale and would benefit from some sun. However, Muriel insists he is fine and has told her that he doesn't want anyone looking at his tattoo. The mother asks if he had gotten a tattoo in the army, to which Muriel answers that, no, he did not.

Before they hang up, Muriel's mother makes her promise that she will call at any sign that Seymour is not acting right. Muriel promises that she will, however she is not afraid of her husband, and her mother's worries are unfounded. With that, she tells her mother to give her love to her father and hangs up.

The setting of the story moves from the hotel room to the beach. A very young girl, Sybil Carpenter, is saying "see more glass," over and over as her mother applies sunscreen. Her mother tells her to be quiet and stop wiggling around. Once Mrs. Carpenter is finished, she tells her daughter to go play, as she goes to the bar for a martini, promising to bring her back an olive. As soon as her mother lets her go, Sybil takes off running down the beach, until she is soon out of the designated area for hotel guests.

Sybil stops at a young man lying down, whom she calls see more glass, and asks if he is going to go into the water. The man rolls over to look up at the young girl and greets her by names, asks how she is this afternoon, and tells her that he was waiting for her to go into the water. Sybil tells Seymour that her father will be arriving the next day, and then asks where the lady is. Seymour tells the little girl that the lady could be anywhere, perhaps she is getting her hair done or helping the children of the world. Seymour then looks at Sybil and tells her that she has a lovely blue bathing suit on. To this, Sybil is

confused and replies that her suit is yellow. Seymour replies, saying that of course she is right, and continues to ask how she is.

Sybil changes the subject by telling him that Sharan Lipschutz, another little girl, had said that she was allowed to sit on the piano bench with Seymour. The man assured Sybil that he had not asked Sharon to sit with him. W, what was he supposed to do? The young girl told Seymour that he should have pushed Sharon off the seat. At this, Seymour laughed and explained that he could not do that, but he did pretend that Sharon was her. Sybil is satisfied and again asks to go into the water.

Seymour stands up to remove his robe, revealing blue swim trunks, and suggests they try to catch a bananafish. She doesn't know what this is and, since he does not believe her, he asks where she is from. At first, Sybil says she does not know, until he teases her that even Sharon Lipschutz knows where she lives. Sybil tells him she lives in Whirly Wood, Connecticut, and then Seymour asks if that is near Whirly Wood, Connecticut. Sybil is confused, as she clarifies that that is indeed where she is from.

The young girl and man begin to walk down to the water. Sybil is asking him various questions, such as whether or not he has read a certain story, or if he likes wax and olives. She then asks if he likes Sharon Lipschultz to which he replies that he does, mostly because she is never mean to dogs. He explains that he has seen other little girls torture little dogs in the hotel lobby. This makes Sybil quiet for a moment, until she once again talks about wax and candles.

The pair wades out into the water, and then Seymour puts Sybil on his partially deflated raft. Together, they look for the fish that Seymour calls bananafish. He tells her that the fish swim into a hole beneath the water that is filled with bananas. Then, they eat so many bananas that they are unable to swim back out of the hole, and they die from banana fever. Suddenly, a wave comes and Sybil laughs with glee as the water splashes over her face. Just then, she exclaims that she saw a bananafish and that he had six bananas in his mouth. Seymour laughs and kisses the arches of Sybil's little wet feet. After that, he announces that swim time is over and pushes the raft onto shore. Once on dry land, Sybil runs off waving goodbye.

Seymour puts on his robe and collects his towel and raft before making his way back to the hotel. He gets in the elevator on his way up to his room, when a young woman enters. After the elevator starts to move, Seymour tells the young woman that he knows she is looking at his feet. The woman is startled and assures him that she is merely looking at the floor. Seymour does not believe her and tells her that the least she could do was not be sneaky about looking at his feet. The woman quickly asks the elevator operator to be let out immediately. Once the woman is gone, Seymour rides the rest of the way to the fifth floor in silence. After getting off the elevator, he walks to room 507 and uses his key to let himself in. He looks at the girl sleeping on one of the beds before he goes to his suitcase and fishes out an automatic revolver. Seymour sits on the empty bed, taking one last look at the sleeping girl, and shoots himself in the temple.

Analysis

The introduction, or exposition, begins by describing the activities of a young woman, as she waits for a free telephone line. The hotel location, her age and name, and the person she is calling are unknown. The attempt to keep these details hidden is a deliberative plot element used to create suspense and intrigue. Finally, her call is put through. Details and details, such as her name, location, and marital status, are revealed through her conversation with her mother.

More significantly, the concern of Muriel's mother for her daughter's welfare slowly begins to reveal itself raising the anticipation level. The reason for her concern, however, is not fully explained, but it does involve "he," which is soon revealed to be Seymour, Muriel's husband. Her mother is quite scared, when she hears that Seymour drove down to Florida and needs to be assured that he stayed close to the middle white line. This detail is the beginning of a plot twist and a rising action, as the characters show the first sign of conflict. It also infers that Seymour had recently had problems driving and had perhaps run into a tree. This suspicion is proved correct, when Muriel then asks if her father had gotten the car fixed. The mood of Muriel's mother is that of suspicion towards Seymour, as if she does not believe it was merely an accident.

A further idiosyncrasy in Seymour's character is the fact that he insists on calling his wife pet names, which sound a little demeaning. Muriel brushes it off as funny, which leads to conflict between her character and her mother's. Rather than internal conflict, it is a conflict of ideals and belief in Seymour. Muriel sees his behavior as somewhat exocentric, while her mother sees it as dangerous. These feelings are elaborated upon, as her mother reveals that they know of Seymour's problems from a psychiatrist. Now more of Seymour's back story is coming out. He is a former soldier in the Army, who came back from the war with a very different personality. He began doing things out of character, yet the full details of these occurrences are never explained, which leaves the infinite possibilities of mystery and suspicion.

Without a scene description, the setting suddenly changes to the beach. A young girl is saying the three words see more glass, which are an obvious reference to Seymour Glass. Her mother, however, is more concerned with her martini and allows her daughter to run off without an explanation. She soon finds herself at the feet of Seymour in his robe, as mentioned before by Muriel.

Upon meeting, it is apparent that Sybil has met Seymour before, and they are friends of sort. It is also apparent that the young girl has a bit of a crush on the young man. It is here that more of Seymour's character is revealed through his interaction with Sybil. First, he mentions that Sybil is wearing a lovely blue swimsuit, when in fact it is yellow. He also shows what may be construed as an inappropriate interest in the young girl, playing into her crush. There is also the oddity of Seymour repeating the hometown of the young girl, asking if it is anywhere near itself. Since she is a child, Sybil brushes off the inconsistencies in Seymour's conversation and behavior.

Finally, the pair goes into the water in search of what Seymour describes as bananafish. The description he gives of the fable fish is symbolic of how Seymour feels about himself and his life. The bananafish get into trouble and then suffocate, because they cannot get out of the hole alive. Seymour may feel that he himself is suffocating under the weight of his psychiatric disorder caused by the war. Perhaps, he had witnessed so many bad things during his stint in the Army that he could not process it. After Sybil pretends to see a bananafish, and they laugh as a wave soaks them, Seymour kisses the arch of her feet. This can be interpreted as either inappropriate or an innocent gesture.

During the elevator ride back to his hotel room, Seymour once again displays odd behavior. He accuses the woman riding with him of staring at his feet. This is symbolic of the fact that he feels out of place and different thefromn everyone else. It is also mentioned earlier that he does not like to take his robe off at the beach for fear that others will stare. The story ends suddenly and dramatically, as Seymour kills himself. This is symbolic of the fact that he can no longer cope with what is going on in his head. The way he calmly looks at his wife shows that he believes himself to be different and apart from others in his life.

Characters

Mrs. Carpenter

Sybil's mother appears briefly: after applying suntan lotion to her daughter's back, she tells her to "run and play" on the beach while she goes back to the hotel for a martini. Like Muriel, Mrs. Carpenter is more interested in her own pleasures than in truly making contact with the innocent person whom she has been placed in charge.

Sybil Carpenter

As her first name suggests, Sybil is a seer or prophet-like character, who is able to "see" the bananafish that Seymour describes to her during their swim. Her opening words ("See more glass") also suggest her ability to perceive the deeper meaning of experience, a quality that many of Salinger's child characters possess—and one that many of his adult characters lack. (Her mother's reaction to her precocious insight is to tell Sybil things like "stop saying that" and then leaving her for a martini.) Her innocence acts as a tonic for the troubled Seymour and her "sighting" of the imaginary bananafish confirms, for Seymour, the degree to which the adults around him are unable to "see more" of the world's innocence (her last name may, in part, suggest her "constructive" role in Seymour's enlightenment). Seymour's kissing of Sybil's foot is a gesture of obeisance and a recognition of those qualities in Sybil not found in characters like Muriel, Muriel's mother, and the woman he meets in the elevator.

Muriel Glass

Muriel Glass, Seymour's wife, is a shallow young woman who faces pressure from her parents to leave her husband in Florida and return to New York by herself. In the story's opening paragraph, the narrator pokes fun at Muriel's annoyance at the long-distance lines being "monopolized" by the advertising men staying in her hotel. Her activities while she waits for her mother to call (tweezing a mole, removing a spot from a suit, moving a button on her Saks blouse, polishing her nails) suggest her preoccupation with her own appearance. Her answering the telephone only on the "fifth or sixth ring" again accents her vanity.

Muriel's "defense" of Seymour while talking to her mother also suggests much about how she views her husband. Her telling her mother that she let Seymour drive suggests a faith in her husband and a willingness to put his past indiscretions (or worse) behind her. When she speaks of the psychiatrist she met in the hotel, however, she reveals what seems to be a lackadaisical attitude toward Seymour's problems: she does not recall the doctor's name ("Rieser or something") and says that she did not really discuss Seymour's troubles with him because the bar was too noisy. The ease with which she then shifts into a conversation about this year's fashions and her hotel room (which is "just all right") suggests a lack of empathy with her husband's plight.

Seymour Glass

With his almost nonchalant suicide at the story's end, Seymour has become one of American literature's most enigmatic characters. "Why did he do it?" is a difficult question with which many readers and writers struggle; an overview of the story, however, suggests a few possible routes of inquiry about Seymour's past and present problems.

The reader learns (from Muriel's conversation with her mother) that Seymour served in the United States Army and spent an undisclosed amount of time in a veteran's hospital, presumably for psychiatric evaluation or recovery. Since the story was first published in 1948, the reader can assume that Seymour (like his creator) saw action in World War II that affected him in terrible and unspoken ways. The reader also learns that Seymour tried to crash his father-in-law's car into a tree, attempted some "business" with a window (also presumably selfdestructive), said "horrible things" to Muriel's grandmother about "her plans for passing away," tried to do "something with Granny's chair" and harmed "all those lovely pictures from Bermuda." Obviously, Seymour is preoccupied with death, a preoccupation that becomes a reality in the final paragraph.

Seymour's war experiences have left him so badly shaken that he searches for some form of purity in what he sees as a dangerous and corrupt world. Thus, his only two friends at the hotel are Sybil and Sharon: two little girls whose innocence amuses and refreshes Seymour. His parable of the bananafish serves as a possible metaphor for Seymour's troubles: like the bananafish, he has glutted himself full of war and death to the point that he can no longer "get out of the hole again." (This, however, is only a partial explanation for the meaning of the bananafish story: another possibility is that Seymour has been so moved by the purity of Sybil that he can no longer return to a world of Muriels and psychiatrists.) His kissing Sybil's foot is a gesture of respect, a gesture that she (in her innocence) cannot understand, and his suicide is an even more dramatic one that, presumably, his wife will not understand.

Muriel's Mother

Like her daughter, Muriel's mother is a woman concerned with Seymour and his problems, but aloof at the same time. On one hand, she voices concern over Seymour's problems and her daughter's safety; on the other, her proposed solutions to these problems involve Muriel abandoning her husband and taking a "lovely cruise" by herself. (Her adding that Muriel's father is "more than willing to pay for it," suggests she feels that solutions to psychological problems can be bought.)

Dr. Sivetski

Dr. Sivetski is Muriel's family physician. Muriel learns that her father spoke to him about Seymour's mental illness and that Dr. Sivetski warned that Seymour may "com*plete*ly lose control of himself."

Woman in the Elevator

When Seymour leaves the beach, he takes an elevator to his room. During the elevator ride, he sees a woman whom he accuses of gawking at his feet. After his accusation, the woman says she "happened to be looking at the floor" and gets off at the next floor. Presumably, this woman is treated so roughly by Seymour because (unlike Sybil) she hides her emotions and thoughts behind a silly excuse.

Themes

Alienation

Almost everything (and everyone) in Seymour's world is tainted by shallowness, vanity, or violence. The most obvious example of this state of affairs is the war, which destroyed a part of Seymour that he is only able to recognize in the two children he befriends at the hotel. Muriel is almost completely self-absorbed: all of her actions in the story's opening paragraph have to do with her appearance (moving a button, cleaning a skirt, polishing her nails, washing her comb and brush, tweezing a mole); when asked by Seymour to read the poems of Rainer Marie Rilke, she mocks Seymour's enthusiasm and instead flips through a brainless article titled "Sex Is Fun—or Hell." (Presumably she has to be told the answer to this riddle.) Despite Seymour's past indications that his mind was collapsing, she brushes aside her mother's concern because this is "the first vacation" she has had "in years." Her coat is of equal concern to her as her husband's troubled mind, and the reader is invited to believe that she let Seymour drive to Florida not out of any great faith in him but because she is not the kind of girl who would drive herself (as the reader is told, she is " a girl for who a ringing phone dropped exactly nothing").

Despite the fact that he married her, there is nothing in the story to suggest that Seymour can make any kind of real contact with his new wife: Salinger never puts them in the same scene until the very end, when Seymour (significantly) *does* not wake her up before killing himself. The characters with whom Seymour does connect, however, are Sybil and Sharon. Sybil's mother reminds the reader of Muriel, for she, too, is more concerned with herself than in protecting her daughter. Seymour can only speak to Sybil because of her innocence and freedom from what he sees as the corruption and phoniness of the world. (This is why Seymour resents the woman in the elevator lying about looking at his feet: a child would simply look at someone's feet without any unease or desire to hide the fact.) After his conversation with Sybil (from which she runs "without regret," leaving the scene without any compunction or need to engage in the kind of false manners that marks the conversation of Muriel and her mother), Seymour quite possibly realizes that such innocence and freedom from the hypocrisy of adulthood has vanished from his own life—which leads to his decision to forsake that life, in favor of a better one elsewhere.

Suicide

Like *The Catcher in the Rye's* Holden Caulfield, Seymour Glass is a person whose essential innocence marks him as unfit for the world in which he finds himself; while Holden retreats into bouts of near-insanity before his final emotional collapse, Seymour takes much more drastic (and final) action. *Why,* exactly, he takes such drastic action is the central question of the story.

One reason (discussed above) could be that Seymour feels such despair at the thought of his own fall from innocence (a fall made more apparent by his activities in the war) that he kills himself to prevent his soul from becoming more tainted. Seen in this light, Seymour's troubles are a magnification of those felt by millions of veterans who return from any war with the images of its horrors still fresh in their minds. Another possibility is the obverse: Seymour (like the bananafish) has glutted himself with too much sensory pleasure and feels such selfdisgust that he commits suicide out of shame after speaking to Sybil. He does not want to become like the self-consumed Muriel, so he kills himself to prevent this from happening. (Of course, if the bananafish story is applied in this way to Seymour, one realizes that it is the nature of bananafish to eat too many bananas, just as Seymour feels it is the nature of humans to glut themselves with sensory pleasure.) A third possibility is that Seymour is, at heart, a child—but a child who (unlike Sybil) demands attention from his loved ones, to the point where his suicide is something like a temper tantrum at the injustices of the adult world. (This accords with his outburst in the elevator, his last spoken words to another person.) However, Salinger's leaving the meaning of Seymour's suicide open to such wide avenues of interpretation suggests the ultimate impossibility of fully fathoming the mind of any person who willingly destroys him or herself. (Such fathoming is what Buddy Glass, Seymour's younger brother, attempts to do in Salinger's later fiction.)

Style

Every symbol (in life and in literature) is composed of two parts: the symbol (the actual picture, such as a skull and crossbones) and a referent (the thing for which the symbol stands, such as poison). Writers use symbols as a matter of course: things like the river in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Hester's "A" in *The Scarlet Letter* allow readers to better grasp the meanings of each work as a whole.

However, part of what makes "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" so intriguing is Salinger's use of symbols where the referents are highly ambiguous. The most notable example of this is the story of the bananafish itself. Seymour says that these imaginary fish lead "very tragic" lives, since they are "very ordinary-looking fish" until they swim into the banana hole, where they eat so many bananas that they get banana fever (a "terrible disease") and then die. This symbolic story of Seymour's is grounds for confusion about the nature of its referents. The bananafish may be symbolic of all people, who (in their fallen state) gorge themselves so much with sensory delights that their souls (or capacity to understand the innocence of someone like Sybil, for example) are figuratively killed by "banana fever." (The sexual symbolism of the story adds weight to this interpretation.) The bananafish may also be symbolic of Seymour himself, who (like many young men) was lured into the "banana hole" of war and figuratively consumed so many of the war's horrors that he is now unable to come out of the hole and reintegrate himself into the world of non-combatants. Either way (or even along other routes), Salinger deliberately leaves the referent of Seymour's symbols open for debate.

Other symbolism occurs in Salinger's use of the color blue. Like the bananafish, however, the symbolic importance of these colors is often ambiguous. Blue is a color often associated with innocence and spirituality (hence, for example, the blue material in which the Virgin Mary is often depicted in religious paintings). Here, Seymour wears a blue bathing suit (and tells Sybil that "if there's one thing" he likes, it's a blue bathing suit) and swims with Sybil in the blue waters of the Atlantic (where, presumably, he is moved by the spiritual purity of his young companion). The fact that Sybil's bathing suit is yellow, however, does not faze Seymour, who tells her, "That's a fine bathing suit you have on," and feigns stupidity when Sybil corrects him about the color; to him, Sybil's bathing suit may as well be blue, in light of the innocence she embodies.

Another symbol is found in the story's frequent mention of sunburn. Muriel is burned so badly that she "can hardly move," Sybil's mother is first seen putting suntan lotion on her daughter's back, Seymour keeps his robe closed tightly while he lies on the beach, and the woman Seymour accosts in the elevator has zinc salve covering her nose. All of these examples symbolically suggest that as humans attempt to shield themselves from the dangerous rays of the sun, they likewise have varying degrees of success when they attempt to shield themselves from corruption and superficiality, two aspects of the modern world that are as common as sunlight. Thus, Muriel is the most sunburned because she is the most vain and superficial; the innocent Sybil never burns; the elevator woman's nose is protected, but not her whole self (as seen in her lying to Seymour); and Seymour keeps his robe clenched tightly—Salinger's suggestion that

Seymour subconsciously fears the corrupting influences of the world as he fears the damaging rays of the sun.

Historical Context

The Birth of American Postmodernism

The Birth of American Postmodernism Literary movements rarely begin on clear and set dates; the postmodernist movement was no exception. Loosely defined, postmodernism is an artistic movement that experiments with (and often destroys) traditional modes and methods of characterization and narrative. Postmodernists characteristically believe, for example, that what we see and hear is nothing but an artificial structure that does not represent the world accurately. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," published in 1948, is an early example of a postmodernist story in which the key element of the plot (the motive for Seymour's suicide) is conspicuously missing—it challenges the very idea that a writer can enter the mind of a character and make the workings of such a mind understood by a reader.

American Literature and World War II

On September 2, 1945, Japan's formal surrender to the United States ended World War II, a conflict to which authors and filmmakers continue turning today. Norman Mailer's powerful debut The *Naked and the Dead* (1948), published the same year as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," made its author a celebrity and sparked a new era in which writers attempted to illustrate the devastating effects of the war on those who served in it. Other works, such as Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* (1948), John Hawkes' *The Cannibal and James Jones' From Here to Eternity* (1951) explore similar themes. Like Salinger's story, they often depict the veteran as a man scarred by what he has seen and, in some cases, unable to reintegrate himself into civilian life.

The American Short Story and Magazines

The 1940s saw a number of magazines become more prominent as a result of their satisfying readers' desires for short stories. Magazines such as *Collier's, the Saturday Evening Post, Harper's and Good Housekeeping*ered their readers countless stories by both "hacks" and masters of the craft: writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O' Hara, and Ernest Hemingway all appeared in popular magazines during their careers.

Two magazines esteemed for their fiction were *Esquire* and (although it had a smaller readership) Story. A writer whose work appeared in one of these publications could feel proud of his or her achievement, so impressive were these magazines' reputations. Salinger's first story, "The Young Folks" was published in *Story's* March-April 1940 issue: a small triumph, considering Salinger's age (twenty- one) and the degree to which the magazine's editor, Columbia University's Whit Burnett, was esteemed. Salinger's next magazine appearance was in the July 12, 1941 issue of *Collier's:* his story, "The Hang of It" confirmed Salinger as an author to watch. More magazine success followed: "The Heart of a Broken Story" in the September 1941 issue of *Esquire,* "The Long

Debut of Lois Taggett" in the September-October issue of *Story,* and "Last Day of the Last Furlough" in the July 15, 1944 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post.* Many other stories appeared in these and other, lesser-known magazines.

While Salinger had conquered the "slicks" (as some writers and editors derisively called massmarket magazines), his work had yet to appear in what fiction writers regarded as the Holy Grail of magazines: the *New Yorker.* The magazine had accepted his story about Holden Caulfield, "A Slight Rebellion Off Madison," in 1941 but had not suggested to him when (if ever) the story would appear. However, Salinger did break into the pages of the *New Yorker* in the December 21, 1946 issue with his (by then) five-year-old story. Its publication marked the beginning of Salinger's long relationship with the magazine: "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" appeared in the January 31, 1948 issue, followed by "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" the following March, and "Just Before the War with the Eskimos" in June. For the remainder of his publishing career, Salinger's work (including his novellas) appeared in the *New Yorker* until his last published work, "Hapworth 16, 1924" appeared in the June 19, 1965 issue.

Critical Overview

In his controversial biography, *In Search of J. D. Salinger,* Ian Hamilton calls "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" "spare, teasingly mysterious, withheld" —surely a deliberate understatement in light of the great deal of ink the critical community has spilled over the story. In his essay "A Critical Perspective on the Works of J. D. Salinger" (collected in Harold Bloom's 2002 *J. D. Salinger,* part of the Bloom's BioCritiques series), Clifford Mills remarks that Salinger's stories may be read as "riddles without any obvious solutions" and points of departure for "thinking, questioning" and "meditating." Knowing the degree to which readers yearn for a solution to the story's mystery, Mills concedes that Seymour's suicide is "one of the central riddles of Salinger's later fiction." In his famous essay, "J. D. Salinger: 'Everybody's Favorite'" (also collected by Bloom), the renowned critic Alfred Kazin praises Salinger's having "done an honest and stimulating professional job" in his stories, which project "emotion like a cry from the stage" and reveal their author's "almost compulsive need to fill in each inch of his canvas, each moment of his scene." However, Kazin also remarks that Salinger is guilty of "cute" characterization and writing laden with "self-conscious charm and prankishness." Still, he admits that "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" does possess a "brilliantly entertaining texture."

There are almost as many opinions about why Seymour kills himself as there are readers of the story, which is why a combination of praise and puzzlement is found in many critical appraisals. For example, in his essay, "J. D. Salinger: Seventy—Eight Bananas" (collected in Harold Bloom's 1987 collection *Modern Critical Views: J. D. Salinger*), William Wiegand attempts to "solve" the riddle of Seymour's death when he argues that Seymour is "a bananafish himself," who has "become so glutted with sensation that he cannot swim out into society again." Wiegand further argues that Seymour's suicide is not the fault of any other character (such as Muriel), but that "the bananafish diagnosis" applies to many of Salinger's characters. Like Wiegand, Warren French (in his book *J. D. Salinger, Revisited*) writes that Seymour is not upset with "the insufficiently appreciative Muriel" as much as with himself for "succumbing to materialistic temptations." Similarly, in Bernice and Sanford Goldstein's appraisal, "Zen and *Nine Stories"* (also collected in Bloom's *Modern Critical Views*), Seymour is described as "the enlightened man rejected by the non-enlightened world," a world he flees through his suicide. In his *J. D. Salinger: A Critical Essay,* Kenneth Hamilton even contends that Seymour kills himself for Muriel's sake and that his suicide is "his way of allowing the true Muriel to escape from the banana hole where she has become trapped through her attitude to marriage." To Hamilton, Seymour "dies physically in order that she may again live spiritually"—a strained conclusion, perhaps, but one that illustrates the degree to which critics will try to wrestle a solution from the story.

Other critics shy away from clear-cut solutions and instead focus on the ways in which the story dramatizes Zen and Buddhist thought, a different manner of thinking than that to which a Western reader is accustomed. In his book, *J. D. Salinger,* James Lundquist quotes the Zen koan that Salinger uses as an epigraph for *Nine Stories* ("We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?") and argues

that, like the *koan,* the story urges its readers to ponder profound Buddhist issues such as the degree to which a person can truly know him or herself and the ability (or inability) for a person to reach *satori,* a "sudden and intuitive way of seeing into themselves." Lundquist ultimately argues that the story urges its readers to "vomit up the apple of logic" and realize that, in Buddhism, suicide lacks the stigma that it carries in Christianity. Other writers, such as Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (whose essay "One Hand Clapping" appears in Henry Anatole Grunwald's *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*) concur with Lundquist, generalizing (as Gwynn and Blotner do) that Salinger's stories reflect Zen thought to make the reader "aware that the tales present problems which he may or may not solve for himself by supersensory perception." Further application of Zen thinking to Salinger's work has continued over time, as more critics have examined Salinger's later works about the Glass family.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an instructor of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran argues that Salinger's story trivializes the very subject it is meant to explore.

If suicide isn't at the top of the list of compelling infirmities for creative men, the suicide poet or artist, one can't help noticing, has always been given a very considerable amount of avid attention.—Buddy Glass, discussing his older brother in *Seymour: An Introduction*

Partly because of the shock value of its ending and partly because Salinger is an author whose withdrawal from the world gives all his work the stamp of "serious art," "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is often puzzled over by students and critics with all the reverence of the faithful. Not "getting" why Seymour kills himself is, according to many of Salinger's fans, the whole point, or at least part of the point. Suicide, they contend, is an obscure and intimate business: not everyone kills him or herself like Romeo, Othello, or Willy Loman, with their reasons known to both the readers and themselves. The reader is unprepared for Seymour's suicide, so when it comes, he or she is shocked, which, of course, is part of Salinger's plan. Salinger is then praised for his brilliance in not offering a "traditional" motive (love, despair) for suicide, but for depicting it as it "really is."

If that were the case, however, Salinger's story would be markedly different. As it stands, the reader is invited (if not roughhoused) into going back through the story after the report of the pistol. After Seymour pulls the trigger, Muriel, of course, awakens, sees her dead husband and—eventually, readers can assume—begins traveling on the same train of thought as the reader: Why did he do it? What was the origin of this terrible event? Did it just sneak up on him, or was it a long time coming? A reader cannot imagine that Seymour killed himself for reasons unknown, nor will Muriel be able to brush off her husband's death with the same logic. Readers go back over the story and look for what clever critics would call "foreshadowing" or what psychologists would label "cries for help."

As Henry James said, "All reading is rereading," so the second time around, the reader notices more apparent "clues" that might help him or her solve what comes to feel more and more like a murder mystery, as opposed to an examination of a suicide. The first batch of clues comes from the story's number-one suspect: Muriel. Before the first-time reader reaches the end of the story, the scene with Muriel on the telephone with her mother reads like tame, *New Yorker*-brand social satire. The second time, however, the reader is inclined to view Muriel in a harsher light, a light cast by Salinger himself:

There were ninety-seven advertising men in the hotel, and the way they were monopolizing the phone lines, the girl in 507 had to wait from noon till almost two- thirty to get her call through. She used the time, though. She read an article in a women's pocket-sized magazine, called "Sex Is Fun—or Hell." She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit. She moved the buttons on her Saks blouse. She tweezed out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole. When the operator

finally rang her room, she was sitting on the window seat and had almost finished putting lacquer on the nails of her left hand.

Muriel's "using the time" reflects her own shallowness and vanity and all her activities as she waits for the operator to "finally" ring her room suggest the degree to which she loves herself and her appearance. Salinger's repeated use of "She" followed by a verb draws attention to her actions in order to highlight their apparent meaninglessness. All of her attention is turned inward and the reader begins to suspect that Muriel's shallowness has something to do with Seymour's suicide. (His looking at her before he pulls the trigger adds to the suspicion.)

Other parts of the opening scene invite the reader to look down his or her nose at Seymour's bride. She does not, for example, even recall where she *left* the book Seymour gave her of (presumably) Rilke's poems (the "only great poet of the century," according to Seymour) and instead "uses her time" reading brainless magazine articles like "Sex Is Fun—or Hell." She complains that her room is "All right," but "*Just* all right, though." She refuses her mother's wish to return to New York not because she wants to show her mother how much she trusts Seymour but because she "just *got*" there and this is the "first vacation" she has had "in years." She apparently was not interested enough in Seymour's troubles to pursue a conversation with a psychiatrist staying in the hotel. She complains about her sunburn as if that were worse that the unspecified troubles afflicting her husband. Finally, the faculty with which she moves from the topic of Seymour's mental illness to ones concerning fashion ("You see sequins—everything") cements the reader's opinion of her as "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948." Yes, the reader thinks, with that nickname, Seymour is definitely "onto something."

After all, he can *see more.* If Muriel seems somehow blameworthy on a second reading, Seymour seems less so. Knowing that he is going to kill himself causes all of his actions to arouse more sympathy. The same reader who, at first, wondered whether or not Seymour was a pedophile now dismisses his or her initial impressions (and even feels guilty for forming them). Now he or she thinks that Seymour talks to Sybil (and Sharon) because they are more honest and "real" than Muriel. Seymour is now a dead man talking and the reader naturally harkens to everything he says, again hoping to find some clue that will explain Seymour's actions at the end.

What he says is, of, course, a collection of puzzling things masquerading as wisdom, the first of which involves Sybil's bathing suit. "That's a fine bathing suit you have on," he tells her. "If there's one thing I like, it's a blue bathing suit." After Sybil corrects him ("This is a *yellow*"), Seymour brushes off the joke—but the reader is left wondering why Seymour made the joke in the first place. He or she then thinks of where else in the story the color blue is found, and remembers that Seymour's own bathing suit is "royal blue," that Muriel's coat (from which she had the padding taken out) is also blue, and, of course, that Seymour and Sybil swim in the blue Atlantic. Then the reader recalls what he learned in his or her Introduction to Literature course about colors: red is traditionally associated with passion or blood, white is usually a sign of purity, and blue often suggests innocence.

At this point, one can hear the collective "Ahas!" of a generation of readers. Yes! Seymour's bathing suit is blue because he is innocent—that's why he can only talk to children! And that's why he swims with Sybil in the ocean: it is the sea of innocence, where (like an equally innocent dolphin) Seymour belongs, instead of the corrupt hotel room that smells of Muriel's "new calfskin luggage and nail-polish remover"). That's why Seymour tells Sybil that she is wearing a blue bathing suit: it may *literally* be yellow, but Seymour can *see more* and perceive Sybil's essential innocence. As for Muriel's blue coat, she had the padding taken out, so she is *less innocent.*

Once this kind of thinking begins, there is almost no way to stop it. The whole story becomes a cipher that the reader is meant to decode. But who can blame him or her? Salinger has loaded it with seemingly symbolic words and things, the most obvious being the bananafish story itself: is Seymour the bananafish who has glutted himself with the simple pleasures of life (like swimming with an innocent child) but who then must die because such rapture cannot be sustained? Or is he *afraid* of becoming like the bananafish, making his suicide his only solution for forsaking the sensual pleasures of the world? Salinger purposefully poses these questions and places clues his characters' names: Seymour, as noted, "sees more" than the average person and, like glass, is easily broken. The name Sybil suggests the female prophets of classical mythology: are Sybil's words meant to portend the death of Seymour? Of course, the name Carpenter calls to mind the carpenter who is at the heart of many literary allusions and who, like Seymour, died an innocent man with only a handful of people aware of his divinity: Jesus Christ.

Such reasoning could continue for pages and there are other elements of the story (the various characters' degrees of sunburn or the kissing of Sybil's foot, for example) that could be treated in the same way. But the above paragraph illustrates well enough that Salinger lures the reader into a literary guessing-game of which only Salinger knows (or pretends to know) the answer. Anyone who questions Seymour's actions is placed in the same category as Muriel: a philistine who cannot ponder the big questions that are, presumably, running through Seymour's mind. Seymour is intended to stand as the embodiment of a romantic soul, and the reader is supposed to take his essential and absolute innocence on faith; he is too foolish for this awful world and his suicide is meant to be read as a protest against the shallowness of Muriel, the horrors of World War II, or the state of fallen man who must, inevitably, succumb to his desires—take your pick. Seymour must die because he sees more; he must die because he is too tender; he must die because the world is too corrupt.

Fans of the story tirelessly point out Muriel's self-indulgence, but what could be more self-indulgent than Salinger's authorial activity in this story? To use something as horrifying and distressing as suicide as a forum for showing off one's ability to manipulate symbols and pseudo-philosophical parables is much more self-indulgent than moving a button on a blouse or tweezing a mole. Like a child who has just written his or her full name for the first time and wants his or her parents to hang it on the refrigerator, Salinger constantly calls attention to himself and his precocious intellect. Such activity, of course, only *trivializes* the subject and makes it the occasion for an exhibition of Salinger's powers.

In his exhaustive study *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), Irving Babbitt notes that when a romantic such as Seymour discovers that his ideals are incompatible with the real world, he does not blame himself; rather, he "simply assumes that the world is unworthy of being so exquisitely organized as himself." The result of the romantic's ability to "see more" is that he is "at once odious and unintelligible to the ordinary human pachyderm." No reader, of course, wants to count him or herself among the "ordinary pachyderms" (such as Muriel), so, instead, he or she views Seymour's suicide as a very meaningful event instead of the sham that it is.

At another point in his book, Babbitt quotes an observation of Goethe's that might be applied to Seymour: "weakness seeking to give itself the prestige of strength." What a reader not taken in by Salinger's shenanigans sees in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is self-indulgence seeking to give itself the prestige of profundity. And what would one call an author who willfully (and enthusiastically) manipulates his readers, luring them into guessing games about a subject of awful importance? To borrow the favorite phrase of Salinger's most famous creation: a phony.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace explores the mysteries Seymour Glass struggled with on the day before his death.

In some ways, J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is a mystery story. Its protagonist, Seymour Glass, is married to a beautiful woman. He is on vacation at a tropical resort. He has just spent the day on the beach, having a playful nonsense conversation with one of the hotel's child guests. Why, then, would he end his afternoon by putting a gun to his head?

Some clues can be found in Salinger's other writings, *Franny and Zooey and Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction,* which concern the Glass family, a group of precocious siblings of which Seymour is the eldest. Each of these other stories is in some way about Seymour as well—the other siblings consider him the genius of the family. In fact, it becomes clear from the other stories that Seymour takes it upon himself to educate the family's youngest children in his own special program of readings and meditation, deeply affecting the way they think for years to come. Because Seymour is a larger-than-life figure in the family, his suicide is a constant topic in the rest of the Glass cycle. Was his death an act of cowardice or completion? Should the rest of the siblings follow his example as they followed his other teachings? And, more simply, why did he do it?

Salinger's other Glass writings seem to give clues. Elsewhere in the cycle, Salinger reveals, for instance, that Seymour's wife, Muriel, looks very much like another precocious young girl whom Seymour knew, and presumably loved, as a child, which might explain his attraction to a woman with whom he seems otherwise very badly matched. And, in *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* Seymour's younger brother, Buddy, describes Seymour and Muriel's wedding; Seymour and Muriel do not actually attend, electing to elope instead. While the guests are waiting, however, Muriel's family's disapproval and Seymour's eccentric behavior are described in detail, through their comments.

The rest of the Glass Family cycle offers more details, but no true answers. Seymour is too sensitive a man not to have noticed the difference between his childhood love and Muriel long before "A Perfect Day for Bananfish," and probably long before their wedding—that revelation alone cannot be the reason for his death. Salinger gives ample evidence of both Muriel's parents' doubts about Seymour and Seymour's strange habits, within "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" itself. Not only that, but Seymour does not actually appear in any of the other Glass Family stories—he is always a topic, but also always absent: spoken about, thought of, but never really there. So the solution to the mystery of "A Perfect Day for Bananfish" must be within the story itself, the only published story in which Seymour gets to speak for himself.

Salinger sets the stage for his readers through the conversation between Muriel and her mother. In the opening paragraphs, he reveals that Muriel is beautiful; that she is active,

as she uses the time she spends waiting for her phone call for all sorts of organization and grooming; that she is married, and, very quickly thereafter, that her mother disapproves of the match and even fears for her daughter's safety with her husband. Muriel is also shallow.When the conversation is in her control, she speaks to her mother mostly about banal details, and she responds to her mother's pleas to leave her husband not with a declaration of fidelity, but by saying that she is not leaving yet because this is the first vacation she has had in ages.

On the other hand, Muriel is by no means a monster. Despite her concern with surfaces, she shows some spark of her own, sarcastically telling her mother that a psychiatrist might be competent even though her mother had never heard of him. Muriel is even capable of loyalty and steadfastness: her mother reveals that Muriel waited for Seymour all through the war, while other women were less faithful to their husbands. And unlike her mother, Muriel seems largely unruffled by Seymour's implied shenanigans: it may not be exactly appropriate, but her response to Seymour nicknaming her "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948" is a giggle, not a display of wounded vanity. Several times she defends Seymour against her mother's fears, and she declares that she herself is not afraid of him.

It is Seymour himself, actually, who appears to have the deeper problems. Although Muriel's mother is clearly a hysteric, his behavior, especially the suggestion that he is dangerous to himself and others when driving, is somewhat frightening, as is the suggestion that he had been released too soon from an Army hospital, for an ailment that is clearly mental.

Readers are given a chance to judge for themselves between the two in the story's next segment, in which Seymour is finally seen speaking for himself. What they find is a man in some ways perfectly suited to society, and in others completely incapable of fitting in, a man who both deeply desires and deeply fears love—a mass of contradictions who is at the same time extremely ill-equipped to deal with the contradictions he finds in others and in society in general. His unhappy marriage to Muriel is just a symptom of these larger issues, which will eventually kill him.

From the onset, Seymour's interaction with Sybil is both brilliant and strange. When the very young girl arrives, he greets her as if she were a similarly aged companion, even flirting with her, gently. This, in itself, does not make him crazy; kids love to be treated like grown-ups, so it is a natural way to play with them. But, Seymour's imitation of adult talk, directed at Sybil, has an unmistakable ironic edge. And it reveals something else: although, according to Muriel and her mother, he has been doing a bad job at getting along in society, in a situation in which it is not exactly appropriate, he proves he has actually got all the equipment needed to be a great success in almost any social circle.

He also reveals, for the only time, his thoughts on his wife, in response to Sybil's question about what Muriel is doing. "Having her hair dyed mink," he says. "Or making dolls for poor children, in her room." Seymour's analysis of Muriel is similar to the one that could be gathered from her earlier conversation with her mother: Muriel may not be deep, but she is capable of acts of goodness, and even selflessness. Seymour does not

present this as an accusation. Instead, he seems to be struggling with his own ambivalence about her contradictions.

"Ask me something else," he suggests to Sybil, to get off the subject, and immediately he launches into his first bit of nonsense, which can either be interpreted as childish word-play, or as a glimpse into his own slightly mad vision: he tells her how much he likes her blue bathing suit. But her bathing suit, in fact, is yellow, and Sybil is having none of it. She insists on reality as she knows it, repeating twice that what she is wearing is "yellow." In response, Seymour capitulates, then slips back into what would be socially acceptable conversation, if he were in the company of others his age. "I'm a Capricorn," he tells her, launching into one of the oldest pickup lines in the book, and then continues on with a string of eerily grownup responses to her jealousy about his friendship with another little girl. His responses, which sound strikingly like an adult trying to explain a small infidelity, are now thick with irony. Although Sybil does not notice it, for the adult reader, they serve less to throw Seymour's sanity into question than to undermine the sanity of society in general, by pointing out how closely their conversation, if they really were adults, would verge on childish nonsense. But once again, Sybil the pragmatist is unconvinced by his arguments: next time, she says, Seymour should push the other girl right off the piano bench.

Seymour quickly veers away from the adult back into imagination again, however, telling Sybil that he's got a new idea: they should go looking for bananafish. Sybil goes with him down to the water, but she is still staunchly resistant to his nonsense, insisting on her address, even when he playfully tries to destabilize it, and calling him on his lie that he has read "Little Black Sambo," by reminding him that there were only six tigers in the book, instead of the multitudes Seymour claims to have seen. Sybil remains recalcitrant even in Seymour's opening gambit about bananafish, refusing to join in the game by insisting that she does not see any. Seymour presses on, telling her a lengthy story about the nature of bananfish, who swim into small holes and gorge themselves on bananas, meeting their deaths when they find themselves too sick from "banana fever" to swim back out.

The story is interrupted by a large wave which is about to break on the beach. Sybil points it out nervously, and Seymour responds with yet another line that would function perfectly well in polite society: "We'll ignore it. We'll snub it." With this line, he effectively turns the societal graces that would make him functional in his mother-in-law's eyes into total nonsense, employing them against a force of nature that can be neither snubbed nor ignored. In so doing, he points out the ridiculousness of "snubbing" itself and the society that allows it. And on a deeper level, he speaks to a great tragedy—the sense that the two of them are employing tools that are at best imaginary to beat back a danger with all the force and infinitude of the sea.

For the moment, however, they are successful: the wave crashes over Sybil, but safely, and she screams with pleasure. And, for the first time, she joins Seymour in his nonsense, announcing that she has just spotted a bananafish. She even borrows from the reality she was so attached to before, in order to embellish her imagined sighting, adding that it had six bananas in its mouth, the same as the real number of tigers she

contradicted Seymour with earlier. For the first time, she has stepped into Seymour's world with him. In response, Seymour draws the interview to a quick close. A romantic might suggest he does this in order to preserve a perfect moment. But the story allows for, even insists on, several other explanations: that Seymour is troubled to have the girl so close, and perhaps wary of drawing her into his own madness.

His nonsense dialogue with Sybil, however, has had its effect on the way readers now experience "sane" dialogue. Are Sybil's non-sequiturs about eating wax really any different from Muriel and her mother's strange intermingling of fashion gossip with whether Muriel will leave her husband? And this new trouble with "appropriate" interaction is further highlighted by Seymour's encounter with the woman in the elevator on the way back to his room. "I see you're looking at my feet," he says—a direct, childlike statement that would have been perfectly appropriate only minutes ago, with Sybil. Here, however, it throws the woman into a huff— and Seymour's clever inversion of appropriate and inappropriate conversation leads the reader, initially, to side with him, looking at the woman's confusion as somewhat ridiculous.

In the elevator, for the first time, it is not clear whether Seymour is really in control of the confusion: is he teasing the woman, or has he made a true misstep—confusing his two worlds to the extent that he thought his statement really was acceptable adult conversation? In either case, the "sane" woman who shares the elevator with him is, for some reason, affronted, and finally frightened by his simple statement. In response to her fear and bluster, Seymour finally cracks, swearing at her, somewhat cruelly, that she should not be "such a . . . sneak." And after she disembarks, Seymour's next statement cuts to the heart of his trouble: "I have two normal feet and I can't see the slightest . . . reason why anybody should stare at them," he says. But people who do not have a fear that they are not normal do not go around asserting that they are, and Seymour's outburst does more to reveal his fears that he is not normal, and that people can see it, than it does to save the honor of his feet.

Seymour, it seems, is acutely aware that he is different from the rest of society and caught in what feels to him to be an unbearable tension. He has a great deal of pride, and even joy, in his unique vision. At the same time he is full of loneliness and despair that he may never find someone to share it. And very deep, perhaps entirely buried in the text, lies a fear that he may, in fact, be insane; and finding someone to share his vision would entail dragging him/her with him to insanity—which is why he ends his conversation with Sybil so quickly once she begins to see things as he does, and why he takes such enormous offence at the suggestion that his feet are unusual enough to take a second look at. Seymour is baffled by the contradictions in his wife's character, yes, but his true disease eats much deeper. On the most basic level, he is baffled by, and even fearful of himself, which is a far more desperate situation.

Why does Seymour pull the trigger on returning to his room? To a certain degree, it remains a mystery, which is part of the reason that "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is such a successful story: instead of providing easy answers, it raises, and refuses to answer, all the same haunting questions any suicide leaves behind him in reality. But the initial sense that nothing in Seymour's life on "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" should

have driven him to suicide holds true even on close examination. Nothing in the world around Seymour is really sufficient to drive him to such a tragic act of violence. Instead, Seymour chooses death because he is unable to deal with the mysteries inside him.

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Cotter shows how the poetry of German poet Rainer Maria Rilke informs the actions of Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish."

Critical Essay #4

J.D. Salinger's short story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," employs the traditional device of a surprise ending. Seymour Glass returns to his Miami hotel room, glances at his wife asleep on her bed, takes from his luggage a heavy-caliber German automatic, sits down on his bed, looks again at Muriel, and fires a bullet through his head. Not even Richard Cory's suicide has provoked more critical commentary. Why does Seymour shoot himself?

The number of reasons proposed for this denouement attests to the effectiveness of the surprise. Is Seymour no longer able to cope with the everyday world represented by Muriel and her mother? Is this act a gesture of despair brought on by sexual frustration? Does Seymour want revenge on Muriel and hope by his suicide to win her lost attention? Or does he kill himself because of an inability to reach ideal spiritual perfection? Perhaps, on the other hand, his death is a religious act performed on the perfect day for attaining nirvana? May it not be an heroic deed of self-sacrifice liberating Muriel to her own life at last?

Obviously, the risk of resorting to guesswork pays off with diminishing returns. Turning to Salinger's later work for possible explanations also takes the chance of second-guessing. Whatever evidence exists for Seymour's death must be found within the story. With the reader's indulgence, let us imagine the immediate aftermath of the suicide. Muriel will follow her mother's last instructions: "'Call me the *instant* he does, or *says,* anything at all funny—you know what I mean.'" Mother will probably feel vindicated that her fears were well founded: Seymour proves himself a threat, but to himself and not to her daughter. Muriel, for all her selfish aplomb, will suffer genuine shock. While her mother, like the lady in the elevator, cannot see beyond the nose on her face and may even express relief at the outcome, Muriel loves Seymour enough to look for reasons for his act. Since he left her no suicide note, she must seek elsewhere for some clue. Recently he has again asked her to read a book of German poems which he had sent her from overseas. Both the book and revolver are war souvenirs: perhaps they are connected in Seymour's mind. Muriel has looked for the poetry, but her mother had not packed it in the luggage. She found room, however, for the useless suntan lotion.

These poems have been written, in Seymour's words, "'by the *only great poet of the century.*'" Because they are in German, his wife must find a translation or learn the language, a logical demand that elicits from Mother a typical reaction: "'Awful. Awful. It's *sad,* actually, is what it is.'" She is wrong about so many things in her conversation with her daughter that Salinger obviously intends to whet the reader's curiosity. Muriel has one advantage denied to his audience: possessing the book, she knows its author and title. Whether or not she understands and loves Seymour enough to carry out his wish is at best doubtful. But the volume is her husband's last will and testament for her.

Critics generally agree that the poet referred to is Rainer Maria Rilke. Besides listing him as an author who influenced his development, Salinger sometimes mentions him in his stories. More importantly, some critics discover in Rilke's poem, "The Carrousel," the

key to the concluding scene of *The Catcher in the Rye.* The same use of allusion may be at work in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Only one critic, until now, has picked up the scent. Gary Lane has suggested that the book involved is the *Duino Elegies.* The parallels he draws, however, are less convincing than those found in an earlier volume of Rilke's, *The Book of Images,* and in one poem in particular, from "The Second Book, Part II": "The Song of the Suicide." This "Song" is one of a series of ten poems entitled *The Voices: Nine Pages with a Titlepage.* In the second part of this paper the question of Salinger's indebtedness to the whole sequence will be examined.

The poem reads first in its original version and then in translation: . . .

The Song of the Suicide
Well then, another minute yet.
Again and again they manage to cut
my rope.
Recently I was so well prepared,
and there was already a little eternity
in my entrails.
They hold out the spoon to me,
that spoonful of life.
No, I don't want, I don't want any more,
only let me vomit.
I know life is well-done and good,
and the world is a full pot,
but with me it doesn't get into my blood,
it only mounts to my head.
Others it nourishes, me it makes sick;
you understand one spurns it.
For at least a thousand years now
I shall need to diet.

In Salinger's story Seymour is literally fed up with the nauseous phoniness of those around him. Like the six tigers in *Little Black Sambo,* people are the victims of their own gluttony and pride. Or, to use his own image, they are like bananafish that are overly greedy. As Seymour explains to his friend and pupil Sybil: "'They [the fish] lead a very tragic life . . . They swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary-looking fish when they swim in. But once they get in, they behave like pigs.'" Ordinary people in a Miami or Americandream setting overexpose themselves to the good life: too much sun, drinking, phoning, buying and selling in the midst of their pleasure. Ninety-seven New York advertising men occupy part of the hotel; Muriel is "'so sunburned [she] can hardly move;'" the psychiatrist holds forth "'in the bar *all* day long;'" and Sybil's mother has more time for a Martini than she does for her child.

Despite his mother-in-law's foreboding: "'Seymour may *completely* lose control of himself'"— she repeats it for emphasis—he alone possesses self-control, protecting himself against the sun, playing the piano in the bar instead of drinking, and finding time for profitable conversation with Sybil. He manages the rubber float and his own suicide

with equally efficient regard for detail and with dispatch. Even his effrontery toward the woman on the elevator shows a similar economy of behavior. If the woman refuses to look him in the eyes, she must be gazing at his feet, and he reprimands her for her dishonesty, just as he corrects Sybil (more subtly, to be sure) for her treatment of the toy bulldog in the hotel lobby. Like Rilke's Suicide, he will not let life get into his blood because he lives consistently in his head. He can "see more" than anyone else in the story.

But how real is Seymour's control? Is Muriel's mother paranoid or is she justified in worrying about her daughter's wellbeing—even life? Her emphatic references to her son-in-law's behavior in the past indicate an erratic pattern on his part: he has endangered Muriel by his distracted driving, damaging the car while paying more attention to the trees than to the road. Mother summarizes Seymour's problems: "'The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away. What he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda—everything.'" She says that Seymour has also tried to do something to Granny's chair. Her conclusion is that the Army released Seymour prematurely from the hospital. How is the reader to take these "sad" and "awful" horrors?

Surely the mother-in-law's list is not meant to be taken seriously. Muriel offers the correct perspective toward Seymour when she answers: "'Mother, I'm not afraid of Seymour.'" Since Muriel is not threatened by Seymour, the reader too should not be intimidated or drawn into the supposedly normal view of him as expressed by the mother and the psychiatrists. If we suspect that his final gesture in reaching for the gun and preparing to fire it has anything at all to do with a threat to Muriel's life, then we have completely missed the point of Salinger's story. Seymour is in control of his fate. All the trivial details of his previous behavior may add up to what a psychiatrist calls a death wish but what a Buddhist believes is nirvana. At the end, he "fired a bullet through his right temple." The echoes of a religious act in a sacred place must be deliberate on the author's part. Like the Suicide of Rilke's poem, Seymour doesn't "want any more" of this nauseating existence. A phony life only makes him vomit. Muriel's mother finds that the topic of death is a horrible thing to mention to Granny. But Seymour has his own "plans for passing away." For Granny and for everyone—even the mother—such plans are entirely appropriate and necessary. Only Seymour carries his out.

Seymour exercises dietetic self-control by wanting no part of the world's appetite for "a full pot." Through a series of references to the stomach, Salinger establishes this theme. We first meet Seymour on the beach: "He turned over on his stomach, letting a sausaged towel fall away from his eyes." The image of the sausage cleverly fits in with the eating metaphor. Sybil next "looked down at her protruding stomach" and, later, "resumed walking, stomach foremost." In the water, "the young man picked her up and laid her down on her stomach on the float." As a receptive child, Sybil has yet to taste the avarice that fills most grown-up lives; she too can turn away from the spoon held out to her. As Teddy tells Nicholson in the final story of Salinger's collection, people are "'a bunch of apple-eaters.'" The apple represents the archetypal object of man's greed. Teddy says: "'What you have to do is vomit it up if you want to see things as they really

are.'" "Only let me vomit," Rilke's Suicide begs. Those who hunger now may yet be satisfied.

The bananafish, on the other hand, do not throw up the forbidden fruit. Seymour relates their fate to Sybil: '"Naturally, after that [eating as many as seventy-eight bananas] they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again.'" As a result, they die of banana fever —"a terrible disease" because those who suffer from it cannot escape their own craving; they '"can't fit through the door.'" Not even death offers them hope of delivery since they remain trapped in the cave, modern counterparts of Plato's prisoners.

In contrast, Seymour's death, which like Teddy's is merely physical, means deliverance and even reincarnation. Since bananafish nourish their bodies but not their souls, their "tragic" death is by rights spiritual and irrevocable. Teddy describes mere dying: '"All you do is get the heck out of your body when you die. My gosh, everybody's done it thousands and thousands of times.'" Like the Suicide of the poem, Seymour is also ready for a thousandyear diet. He too spurns a materialistic life. When Sybil sees the bananafish with six bananas in its mouth, the young man kisses her foot in gratitude because her vision no longer comes from earth but from within. She shares his non-material view. Sybil's diet of candles and discarded olives has already won Seymour's approval: '"Olives and wax. I never go anyplace without 'em.'"

Since he has now communicated the essential meaning of Rilke's poem—not, unfortunately, to his wife but to another mother's daughter—Salinger's hero proceeds straight to his death. Having "already a little eternity / in [his] entrails," Seymour Glass, with his accustomed sense of purpose and self-control, acts according to his hidden schedule without "another minute" lost.

Source: James Finn Cotter, "A Source for Seymour's Suicide: Rilke's Voices and Salinger's *Nine Stories,"* in *Papers on Language and Literature,* Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 1989, pp. 83-98.

Critical Essay #5

the following essay excerpt, Lane finds the framework of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and the key to Seymour's suicide in Rilke's Duino Elegies.

The Suicide of Seymour Glass in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" has troubled readers and critics alike; despite the considerable attention paid it, its meaning has remained uncomfortably uncertain. Seymour, it is sometimes suggested, "unable to tolerate the everyday sensations of his tiresome, postwar life," has simply "lost his mind." This theory, however, emphasizes unduly the Seymour we hear about from other characters—the kind and gentle man we actually meet on the beach seems eccentric but eminently sane—and fails to explain convincingly, among other things, the clearly allegorical tale of the bananafish. Other critics feel that Seymour, for all his obvious intelligence, remains a child, that he "does many things—intentionally or unintentionally—to disrupt others' composure" and to gain thereby their attention. "He has tried in increasingly conspicuous ways to upset [Muriel, and] . . . finally, as with the child so desperate for the desired attention that it will risk injury, there remains but one thing he can do—he can shoot himself. Then she will have to pay attention; then her iron composure will be disrupted. She will cry and run hysterically about the hotel room—or so he hopes." Again, though, Muriel is given too much credit; surely the psychotic exhibitionist posited here would spend his vacation at the hotel bar, not on the beach by himself. Closest to the truth, still others suggest, is a more complex position: Seymour's suicide is not "merely a rejection of this world of crass superficiality, but it is also—and more significantly—a rejection of the mystical life itself." This explanation, however, derives largely from hints in Salinger's later work—its proponents offer little evidence from "Bananafish" to support it—and thereby leads us somewhat astray. We will do better, I think, closer to home. Indeed, there is within the story an important though oblique reference, which, tracked down, may tell us a good deal about Seymour Glass, and in the process help show "Bananafish" to be tighter and more careful than has been supposed.

The reference occurs during the story's opening scene. Muriel, on the telephone with her mother, inquires suddenly about "that book he sent me from Germany . . . those German poems." The book is on Seymour's mind: "he *asked* me about it, when we were driving down. He wanted to know if I'd read it." And, since poetry matters to Seymour—we will note later how telling is his wry allusion to "The Waste Land"—he must feel very close to it, for he considers its author "the *only great poet of the century.*" I submit that the poems in question are Rilke's *Duino Elegies.* These last and greatest poems of Rilke, though diverse and difficult, are informed by a basic thematic lamentation over the insufficiency of man and pervaded by a symbolic Angel, the reminder, in his transcendence of human limitation, at once of man's aspiration and necessary failure. The poems are thus reflections about precisely the problems that, as we shall see, oppress Seymour. Indeed, several passages from the *Elegies* correspond so exactly to situations in "Bananafish" that, corroborating other evidence, they furnish a kind of explicative gloss to the story.

We first meet Seymour through the dramatically subjective observations of his wife and mother-in-law. The story begins by introducing us to Mariel, and, significantly, we learn at once that she has been reading an article entitled "Sex Is Fun—or Hell." Far from indicating, however, some sexual problem of Seymour's, this fact gives us an introductory perspective on his wife. As the telephone dialogue unfolds her character, our initial indication is reinforced and amplified; we come to see that, for all her *chic* and poise, Muriel is basically simple— and basically corrupt. She possesses the undisciplined mind of a child, equating things of unequal importance, skipping indiscriminately among conversational topics, and perhaps even expecting to learn something about sex from the knowing writers of women's magazines. Further, she is bored with her mother and her life, baffled but bored with her husband, and complacently, simple-mindedly unconcerned with everyone. It is through this rather dense filter that our first light on Seymour passes, and we must allow for a certain amount of refraction when we hear it implied that Seymour is confusing, crude, and dangerously near the brink of mental unbalance. Of greater importance are the book he has sent Muriel and the fact that he will not remove his bathrobe on the beach, and, as will become clear, the former is a key to the latter.

When Muriel's phone call is finished, the scene abruptly shifts, and the import of the change, from hotel room and gossip of Seymour to the beach and the man himself, is heralded at once: here, as the unconsciously oracular Sybil unconsciously announces, we will find the real "see more glass." The man on the beach is kind and brilliant, ironic and questioning, but quite sane. His encounter with the child, during which the decision for suicide is made final, calls to mind first this passage from Rilke's *Fourth Elegy:* . . .

Who'll show a child just as it is? Who'll place it
within its constellation, with the measure
of distance in its hand? Who make its death
from grey bread, that grows hard,—or leave it there,
within the round mouth, like the choking core
of a sweet apple?. . . Minds of murderers
are easily divined. But this, though: death,
the whole of death,—even before life's begun,
to hold it all so gently, and be good:
this is beyond description!

Seymour, in the story, experiences the same poignant perception of the nearness to death, and hence infinity, that the child's imaginative and selfsupporting world attains. To see Sybil in her innocence is to see the incomprehensible goodness of the child, who carelessly allows death to live beside it. Yet even in this goodness, which Seymour loves for its simplicity, there are suggestions of imperfection: on the one hand, it is easily corrupted; on the other, it exists unaware of complexities.

For Sybil, after all, is no Rilkean Angel; the clearer our—and Seymour's—perspective on her, the more visibly does the tarnish on her innocence spread like the sun-tan oil down "the delicate, winglike blades of her back." Jealous and possessive, she instructs Seymour, should Sharon Lipschutz again sit by him at the piano, to "Next time, push her

off." "Ah, Sharon Lipschutz," he replies; "How that name comes up. Mixing memory and desire." Like the polymorphous narrator of *The Waste Land,* Seymour looks longingly back to a time that can no more exist, a time before he understood that Sharons, "never mean or unkind", turn soon into Sybils, who "poke . . . little dog[s] with balloon sticks", and that Sybils, at least spontaneous and honest, grow thence to Muriels. Besides, Sybil's bathing suit is *yellow* and she *lives* in Whirley Wood, Connecticut. Seymour's apparently irrational statements about these things are his ironic recognition that the child's simple, sure mind, if more comfortable than his own, is no more infinite, no more transcendent; it is the very failure to understand that keeps the child close to death. The remarks are the *Kläge* of the *Elegies,* laments for man's mortality, for Seymour, like Rilke, in knowing much becomes inextricably entangled in the divine web that the limited mortal must try to spin.

The symbol of this aspiring but defeating mortality, the constant reminder that . . .

Yes, the springs had need of you. Many a star
was waiting for you to espy it. Many a wave
would rise on the past towards you; or, else, perhaps,
as you went by an open window, a violin
would be giving itself to someone. All this was a trust.
But were you equal to it? Were you not always
distracted by expectation, as though all this
were announcing someone to love?

is for Seymour his tattoo, his body. And, though he explains to Muriel that he "doesn't want a lot of fools looking at his tattoo", it is a lonely part of beach he is on, and, as he says to Sybil, "What a fool I am"! It is Seymour himself who does not wish to confront the symbol of what his mind cannot surmount. When at last he removes the robe, faces squarely the insoluble problem of himself as man, Seymour decides that fully realized love is not to be found in life. He has loved Sybil for her bright, child's being, but, realizing her inadequacies, seen in her the seedling of a future Muriel. The remaining way is that which Rilke calls the "less illuminated" side of life, death. The bananafish story is Seymour's parable of his defeat in life and decision for death: Seymour, coming into the world with a rare capacity for love, takes too much aspiration to it, becomes trapped by man's imperfect mortality, and must die.

We can see now why Salinger devised the careful and ominous structural parallel between the second scene and the first. In both we begin with a girl and her mother—each, appearances notwithstanding, basically uninterested in the other—who talk, without communicating or understanding, about Seymour; in both we end with a severed connection and a girl, unregretful and alone. We see clearly the differences between the implied psychotic of scene one and the actual man on the beach, but the structure warns us not to overlook the similarities of the women involved. For when we understand those similarities—and recognize that they represent not Holden Caulfield's adolescent and self-excluding conception of a world of phonies, but the sad and adult realization that all humanity, Seymour selfconsciously included, is limited and corruptible — we can see the *cul de sac* from which Seymour would escape.

Salinger emphasizes the universality of this condition with his choice of names. Seymour Glass is the Emersonian poet, the man who "turns the world to glass" and, like Seymour in Florida, "must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season"; he is the sensitive barometer of the weather of human possibility, and the conditions he reacts against are irreversible. Perhaps he is as well Wallace Stevens' "impossible possible philosopher's man,"

The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in million diamonds sums us up.

Sybil, bright with innocence but already tarnishing, symbolizes for Seymour the human condition: like the sibyls of old, she is the unconscious oracle through whom prophecy is revealed, the instrument of truth; what she reveals to Seymour is the finality of that unbridgeable gap between human aspiration and human possibility. Seymour's suicide is his summing up.

In part, he would escape the pain that his tattoo, his finite human body, invokes. For this reason Salinger emphasizes it in the final elevator vignette; the lady with the zinc salve on her nose, like Sybil's and Muriel's mothers and like the daughters themselves, is, however worldly, simple in her failure to suffer. And Seymour, who cannot resent this in a child, is understandably offended when the childwoman rudely reminds him of his pain. But the suicide is also a freeing of the self, for death has its Rilkean, life-extending properties. Seymour's final glance at Muriel—with its echo of a relationship that has failed for him because . . .

One thing to sing the beloved, another, alas! that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.

—confirms the hopelessness of his mortal plight; for to love as a man is merely to remind oneself of the limitations of that love. Yet the glance may offer a kind of hope, for perhaps on that shadowy, darker side of life—death—human limitation will give way to infinite possibility. There is little, really, for Seymour to lose. So "he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple."

Source: Gary Lane, "Seymour's Suicide Again: A New Reading of J. D. Salinger's 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. X, No. 1, Winter 1973, pp. 27-34.

Topics for Further Study

Research Sigmund Freud's ideas of the *id,* the *ego* and the *superego.* To what degree do Seymour's actions reflect these different parts of the mind asserting themselves?

Locate a contemporary casebook that details some of the more commonly diagnosed reasons for suicide and apply some of these reasons to Seymour. Can you explain his suicide in clinical terms?

There is some debate among Salinger scholars concerning the degree to which the Seymour of "Bananafish" resembles the Seymour of Salinger's later Glass family fiction. Read some of the other Glass stories and decide if the Seymour that appears in those pages acts and talks like the Seymour in Salinger's original story.

Despite Salinger's desire to live as a recluse, a number of biographers have offered theories as to why Salinger, at the height of his popularity, decided to stop publishing his work. Research and compare some of these theories. Do any of them seem psychologically credible, or are they merely sensational conjecture?

Compose a story that begins the moment after Seymour pulls the trigger. What runs through Muriel's mind when she awakens? What happens to her later in life? How might Seymour's suicide affect her values and assumptions?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Magazine fiction is a hot commodity: a nation of readers seeks entertainment in the pages of periodicals like the *New Yorker,* the *Saturday Evening Post,* and *Esquire.*

Today: Although the *New Yorker* still stands as the premiere source for cutting-edge short fiction, more and more short story writers find their work first published in specialized literary journals.

1940s: The psychological toll of war on a person's mind is called "shell-shock" or "battle fatigue;" some of those suffering from it are labeled cowards by their superiors or the public.

Today: What is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder is widely recognized by psychologists and other doctors as a terrible, but treatable, mental illness.

1940s: J. D. Salinger is known by readers of the *New Yorker* and other magazines as an up-andcoming talent.

Today: Approximately forty years since Salinger stopped publishing his work and withdrew into private life in Cornish, New Hampshire, his name has become a household word and *The Catcher in the Rye* still sells more than 250,000 copies every year.

What Do I Read Next?

The Catcher in the Rye (1951) is Salinger's most famous work. The novel follows Holden Caulfield, a disaffected prep-school dropout, as he meanders in New York City for three days. Like Seymour, Holden feels alienated from those around him and toys with thoughts of suicide.

Salinger's two novellas *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963) are both narrated by Buddy Glass, Seymour's younger brother. *Carpenters* tells the story of Seymour and Muriel's wedding, while the *Introduction* is Buddy's attempt to make the reader appreciate his brother's more elusive qualities.

Franny and Zooey (1961) is another of Salinger's extended examinations of the Glass family. While these two novellas do not directly concern Seymour, they do add to the overall literary universe of which Seymour is undoubtedly the center.

T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922) is quoted by Seymour; as Salinger's story explores the destruction of a single soul, Eliot's poem explores the destruction in an era and civilization.

The British poet John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" (1813) explores the "wakeful anguish of the soul," an anguish that Seymour surely feels.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) contains some of the playwright's most moving and introspective soliloquies; Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy can certainly be read as an argument about suicide and Hamlet himself (with his shifting moods and rejection of those around him) resembles Seymour in a number of ways.

Like "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Ernest Hemingway's story "Soldier's Home" (1925) details the inability of a combat veteran to reintegrate himself into society. Here, the protagonist is returning from World War I.

For those readers who find Seymour's suicide motivated by his love for the world (rather than his revulsion at it), Emily Dickinson's poem "I Died for Beauty" (1890) may be appropriate, since it addresses the same viewpoint.

Like Seymour, the title character of Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" (1897) kills himself for reasons about which the reader is left to speculate.

Further Study

Alexander, Paul, *Salinger: A Biography,* Renaissance Books, 1999.

This recent biography is based on newly released material from the Salinger archives; in it, Alexander explores the reasons for Salinger's withdrawal from the public eye and whether it was based on a sincere desire for privacy or an attempt to generate publicity.

Hamilton, Ian, *In Search of J. D. Salinger,* Random House, 1988.

Hamilton's controversial book is partly a biography and partly the story of Hamilton writing the biography: at the last minute, Salinger's lawyers challenged Random House's right to print Hamilton's book and eventually argued their case in federal court.

Kotzen, Kip, and Thomas Beller, eds., *With Love and Squalor: 14 Writers Respond to the Work of J. D. Salinger,* Broadway Books, 2001.

This is a collection of essays in which contemporary authors offer their opinions of Salinger's work and reminisce about what his work has meant to them as students, readers, and artists.

Salinger, Margaret A., *Dream Catcher: A Memoir,* Washington Square Press, 2000.

This much-publicized memoir by Salinger's daughter offers a glimpse into the mysterious author's role as a father and some of the ways his artistic concerns affected his family.

Bibliography

Babbitt, Irving, *Rousseau and Romanticism,* Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919, pp. 215, 308, 319.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *J. D. Salinger,* Bloom's BioCritiques series, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, pp. 50-51.

French, Warren, *J. D. Salinger, Revisited,* Twayne Publishers, 1988, pp. 66-67.

Goldstein, Bernice, and Sanford Goldstein, "Zen and *Nine Stories,"* in *J. D. Salinger,* edited by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 86.

Gwynn, Frederick L., and Joseph L. Blotner, "One Hand Clapping," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait,* Harper & Row, 1962, p. 110.

Hamilton, Ian, *In Search of J. D. Salinger,* Random House, 1988, p. 105.

Hamilton, Kenneth, *J. D. Salinger: A Critical Essay,* William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1967, p. 30.

Kazin, Alfred, "J. D. Salinger: 'Everybody's Favorite,'" in *J. D. Salinger,* edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's BioCritiques series, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, pp. 68-73.

Lundquist, James, *J. D. Salinger,* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979, pp. 78-79.

Mills, Clifford, "A Critical Perspective on the Writings of J *. D. Salinger,*" in *J. D. Salinger,* edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's BioCritiques series, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, pp. 50-51.

Salinger, J. D., *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction,* Little, Brown and Co., 1963, p. 141.

Wiegand, William, "J. D. Salinger: Seventy-Eight Bananas," in *J. D. Salinger,* edited by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 8.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535