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Abstract

This paper discusses disciple figures found throughout J.D. Salinger's short-story cycle, *Nine Stories* (1953), and how their prophetic status is used as a means to guide other characters towards enlightenment by steering them away from the consuming forces of materialism in the post–World War II American wasteland. Throughout the cycle, there are various instances of characters seeking answers to their trauma outside of the consumerist culture and resolution is attained through a childlike faith taught by the disciple figures. The first of the characters to take on this role is Sybil from "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," as she provides Seymour Glass with a "pure" perspective on life and in turn, he realizes how corrupt his existence has become. Following this story is "Just Before the War with the Eskimos," which exemplifies the "perfect servant" figure through Franklin, who guides Ginnie away from consumerism by helping her recognize the significance of creating meaningful connections. The final story discussed is "Teddy," which features the most direct example of a prophet figure in the short-story cycle. The titular Teddy is mentally and spiritually advanced beyond all who surround him and, thus, takes on the role of a mentor to Bob Nicholson by showcasing his achieved enlightenment and providing the "answer" on how to do so.

Keywords*:* J.D. Salinger, Short Story, Prophet Figures, American Literature, 20th Century

J.D. Salinger's short story cycle, *Nine Stories* (1953), gives the reader an insight into the American wasteland, which is caused by war and materialism. By framing America as a wasteland, Salinger asserts that consumer culture has tainted the spiritual attunement of individuals. A lack of spirituality in favor of materialism can be seen throughout the cycle, predominantly in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948), "Just Before the War with the Eskimos" (1948), and "Teddy" (1953). In the case of Seymour Glass, he is unable to come to terms with the psychological trauma caused by his time in the war. His suffering primarily stems from his inability to connect to those around him and create meaningful relationships. The only relationship he is able to form that gives him any semblance of comfort is that with Sybil, a young child who acts as a disciple figure for Glass. Through their encounters, Seymour is able to gain perspective from a "pure" lens, which in turn forces him to confront the deep-rooted corruption of his own life. For Ginnie Mannox, her current lifestyle is shown to have an emphasis on appearances. She has a lack of meaningful connections, shown by her false relationship with Selena Graff and distant relationship with her sister, Joan. However, upon meeting Selena's brother, Franklin, Ginnie gains a more profound understanding of the consuming nature of materialism and begins to recognize her need for deeper attachments. Through their confrontation, Franklin guides Ginnie to this conclusion and opens her up to the possibility of forgoing materialism and partaking in a childlike sense of faith. Teddy, the titular character, is the most direct variation of a prophet in the cycle. He is significantly advanced for his young age, shown through his conversations with the adults surrounding him, as they lack the spiritual advancement he possesses, due to being consumed by the materialistic wasteland. In his conversation with Bob Nicholson, who he becomes a spiritual mentor to, Teddy demonstrates that he has reached the enlightenment sought by all of the other characters throughout the cycle. The three disciples of Salinger's *Nine Stories* all serve different purposes for those they guide, but ultimately give them the knowledge needed to begin their journeys towards spiritual enlightenment. Many of the characters struggle living in the American wasteland and the answer to their trauma can be found in this childlike faith taught by the disciple figures.

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," protagonist Seymour Glass struggles with his trauma caused by his time in the war, which is negatively amplified by his wife, Muriel's, materialism. The husband-and-wife duo serve as an example of the contrasting desires of Americans following the war. Seymour's internal struggle stems from a desire to indulge in spirituality, shown through his disgust with consumer culture. One example of this is shown through Muriel's conversation with her mother. The two talk about how Seymour sent Muriel a book of poems in German. Muriel makes fun of Seymour for this act, showing how deep rooted her vanity is. The poems being in German shows Seymour's desire for a worldly view on life and his attempt to connect with his wife on a ground beyond materialism. Muriel is the picture of someone who is consumed by her materialism, and is unable to see the value of anything outside of status and appearance. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Seymour suffers due to vanity and consumerism because of his inability to divulge from this path. James E. Bryan states that, "Seymour sees his marriage to worldly Muriel Fedder as a bridge back to mundanity of the world which, as a poet, he has rejected" (228). Muriel's rejection of Seymour's poetry book reveals her materialistic ways and the disconnect that now plagues the couple. Because of

Muriel's consumerism, Seymour has no choice but to symbolically reject her as well in order to make any kind of spiritual advancement.

Muriel is a personification of American consumerism during the time period, shown by her primary motivations, all of which concern vanity and false appearances. For example, Muriel takes great care in her outward appearance, shown in her "tweez[ing] out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole" and "putting lacquer" on her nails (1). She also wears mules, a fashionable shoe, while in her hotel room. By obstructing her feet from the ground, Muriel is unable to form any meaningful connections outside materialism, which is the quality that Seymour is disgusted with and why he has begun to isolate himself from her. Within the story, a character's connection to their spirituality can be seen through their shoes, or lack thereof. Both Sybil and Seymour contrast with Muriel in this manner, as they are both barefoot when introduced. The bare feet symbolize the spiritual attunement each individual possesses. Compared to Muriel, who is only shown as wearing her mules, even when inside, the duo has a higher understanding. Clothes have significant meaning within the story, especially concerning Muriel, as they are a direct reflection of her inner beliefs and lack of spirituality. Brad McDuffie points out the personification of Muriel's blue coat, stating that Salinger doing so "dramatizes the absurdity that [he] sees in a culture obsessed with appearances" (21). Muriel and her mother continue discussing clothes, her mother personifies clothing once again in asking how they are as a collective. Muriel's response is that the clothes are "terrible" while also being "out of this world" (7). These two conflicting ideas offer insight into Muriel's mind, as it shows that despite not being enthused by the latest fashions, she is trapped in her materialism and feels an obligation to praise them. Her inability to diverge from the common thinking within popular culture reveals how consumer culture has consumed her. Seymour looks to Muriel desperately for some form of connection but he is unable to find it with her because of this disconnect from spirituality rooted within her fixation on self-image. Seymour's suffering comes from his inability to connect to others on a spiritual level, except for Sybil, who acts as a disciple figure for him.

The primary tension of the story occurs at the beach, between Sybil and Seymour. Both characters are notably barefoot; Sybil because she still retains her childhood innocence to the world and Seymour who has regressed into a state of childlike behavior as a means to cope with his trauma. James Finn Cotter positions Sybil as a "Christ-like figure" because of her divinity which stems from this childhood innocence (123). Although Seymour is trying to recapture this perspective, he is unable to do so successfully due to his trauma and thus, his ability to understand the materialistic nature of American society. On the other hand, Sybil is able to view the world through an uncorrupted lens due to her childlike naivete and lack of experience in the all-consuming American wasteland, which positions her as a disciple figure. Cotter further argues that Salinger's child figures throughout his stories possess this divinity and therefore, it makes them "specifically incarnate, not amorphously abstract" (123). Therefore, her status as a disciple is one that is with purpose and not merely coincidental. Sybil acts as an example for what Seymour is trying to regain and achieve as a means of coping.

His attempt to cope is evidenced in his disconnection from reality, shown through different points throughout the story. Because Seymour is removed from a realistic worldview, it begs the question of whether or not he has been totally consumed by the wasteland

ideologies. Seymour's disconnection from reality occurs throughout the story and is a result of his trauma, therefore even with the guidance of Sybil, he is unable to reach enlightenment. The trauma of the war has corrupted him far beyond salvation, even with the assistance of the prophet figure.

The first occurrence of Seymour showing that he is disconnected from reality is when he says to Sybil that her bathing suit is the color blue. In actuality, it is yellow. From a literary perspective they are opposites in terms of emotion. Yellow is the color representative of Sybil, which symbolizes happiness, joy, and freedom. Blue is the color that represents Seymour and is associated with the opposite emotions, sadness and repression, showing how the duo are an opposing force. The yellow represents Sybil's childhood innocence and her ability to be enlightened because she has not yet been corrupted by the materialism of the world. McDuffie asserts that Seymour's mistake of the swimsuit color is due to him beginning to "transcend the material world" as evidenced by his eventual suicide (32). By mistaking the colors, Seymour has begun to reject the material world, as he refuses to see things for what they are, preferring to escape to a fantasy world of his own creation. This is further evidenced by the mythical bananafish, which he tells Sybil about. Seymour recounts how the fictitious creatures eat so many bananas that they are unable to escape the hole they have swam into because of their engorged size. By telling Sybil about these, he is attempting to bring her into the fantasy world he has constructed as a coping mechanism. After Sybil claims to have spotted a bananafish, Seymour kisses the arch of her foot. By doing so, it shows how he is trying to form this connection with her and therefore, attempting to bring her into his world. After this encounter, the two part ways. Because Sybil runs away, it evidences her disconnection from his world and how he has failed to make a connection even with the disciple figure. Because he has failed to make a spiritual connection with someone, Seymour gives up integrating into the world post trauma. Bryan makes a connection between Seymour and the bananafish, saying that the one Sybil sees is representative of him: "the bananafish primarily suggest a surfeiting with corrupt adult experience, a "tragic life" of biological gorging at the expense of the soul" (229). Seymour as a bananafish makes sense, as he is also trapped in the world and unable to free himself due to over-indulgence. Glass' over-indulgence comes from the trauma and rejection he is subjected to, along with his futile attempts in dealing with it. William Weigand also classifies him as a bananafish, stating that Seymour has "become so glutted with sensation that he cannot swim out into society again" (6). Weigand also argues that Seymour is at fault for his overconsumption and Muriel is "inculpable" for his "condition" (7). However, Seymour is notably traumatized by the war which is the primary reason for his inability to rejoin society and his desire to obtain a childlike innocence once again. Seymour is metaphorically a bananafish due to his inability to rejoin society; however, he is not the one to place blame on. The American wasteland is the true assailant of Seymour and societal corruption is what has tainted him; this is an outside force that Glass is powerless against. Muriel's materialistic nature is simply one of many factors that drive Seymour to suicide. He is unable to connect with her nor anyone around him due to the extent of his trauma and therefore, suicide becomes his only escape. Through his suicide, his worldly body is erased, although there is hope that he may reach a sense of enlightenment through reincarnation which is suggested in "Teddy" by Teddy himself.

In “Just Before the War with the Eskimos,” Ginnie is a self-centered teenager who has begun to indulge in the materialism of the world. Although she seems to have a relationship with Selena, it is quickly shown to be based on convenience and not true connection. The falsity of their relationship is shown through Ginnie’s hostility towards Selena because she has not split the cab fare with her for the past month. Selena’s justification is that she provides the tennis balls. However, this does not satisfy Ginnie because Selena’s dad makes them, making it an unfair trade in her eyes because she gets them for free. Although there is a sense of balance between these interactions, Ginnie is not pleased by this. Instead, she wants more, demanding a cab fare from Selena and telling her how she has kept track of what she owes. Selena refutes this by saying she will have to wake her sick mother in order to get the money. However, Ginnie does not budge and accompanies Selena into her house to wait for the money. While waiting, Selena’s brother, Franklin comes in and talks to Ginnie. Notably, Franklin offers Ginnie the other half of his chicken sandwich, revealing his hospitable nature. The offering is more impactful when looking at the context of the scene. Franklin has just cut his finger and is bleeding, but he prioritizes offering hospitality to Ginnie over dealing with his wound. As mentioned on the first page of the short story, this encounter sets Franklin up as the “perfect servant” (36). By realizing Franklin as a perfect servant, it can also be inferred that he will act as a prophetic figure and assist Ginnie in her own spiritual awakening. The two continue to converse and get onto the topic of Ginnie’s sister, Joan, whom Franklin had feelings for in the past. He refers to Joan as a “snob” because she never responded to any of his eight letters. Franklin also views Joan this way because she is marrying someone with a high rank in the military. The detail of Joan’s fiance’s rank shows her focus on image, which is a detrimental aspect in terms of materialism, because it places image on a pedestal and negates the importance of genuine connection with others. The same material image has begun to encapture Ginnie, but through Franklin’s tutelage she will be able to overcome indulging too much in materialistic values.

Franklin is a perfect servant, shown by his hospitality. During their encounter, Franklin comes in bleeding after cutting himself on some razor blades found in the wastebasket. The choice of “wastebasket” refers back to the wasteland that society has become due to materialism. Despite his injury, Franklin still offers Ginnie half of a chicken sandwich. By doing so, it shows his innate hospitality and generosity because of his concern with those other than himself. Furthermore, revealing a nature that is outside of materialistic gain helps Ginnie to understand the importance of spiritual connections and places less emphasis on those without. Although Ginnie is reluctant to accept the sandwich, she eventually relents because of Franklin’s persistence. She finally accepts his generosity when he says, “take it, for Chrissake'' (47). By implementing this direct connection to Christ, Salinger is inferring that Franklin takes on the role of a disciple figure. James E. Bryan states that the use of this phrase has “transfigured a mundane situation into the Holy sacrament” (228). The utilization of communion brings Franklin forward as a solidified disciple figure for Ginnie. The sandwich acts first as a means of hospitality, but is inferred to have a deeper meaning as a sacrament. Bryan continues analyzing the communion by bringing up the tomato juice mentioned at the beginning of the story and how it can also be taken as “sacramental” because of the “red liquid and white solid” (228). Through this communion, the two have begun to form a spiritual connection and this interaction is the first of Franklin’s teachings for Ginnie to begin following.

Another aspect of their encounter is Franklin's smoking in "French-inhale" style (44). Franklin smoking in a style that is French, despite him being American, connects back to Seymour's German poems. Both of these aspects show the two characters' desire for connections beyond material by their interest in other artifacts outside their own culture. By transcending this cultural binary, the two show their worldly perspective and therefore, their desire to connect beyond their immediate peers.

At the conclusion of the story, Ginnie has the sandwich in her pocket. On her way home, she passes a wastebasket; the inclusion of this being a direct callback to her introduction to Franklin. The sight triggers a childhood memory for Ginnie in which she found a dead Easter chick in a wastebasket. She recalls how she did not dispose of the baby chick until three days had passed. The inclusion of a three-day time period and that it was an Easter chick is a direct reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection being her last thought shows how Franklin has influenced her and reveals a transition away from materialism into newfound faith that concerns itself with hospitality and genuine connections with others.

In "Teddy," Teddy is the most direct reference to a disciple figure in *Nine Stories*. The premise of the short story deals with Teddy who is figuratively and spiritually "outside" the wasteland. The first introduction to this is when he is shown with "his face considerably more outside than inside" (164). By being "more outside," he is illustrated as knowing far more than the adults who surround him. The image of him and the porthole is recurring, emphasizing the importance. As the story continues, Teddy is more secure in his knowledge and faith. The idea of this is shown when he "thrusts his whole head out" and recounts the orange peels in the ocean to his parents (167). By retelling what he sees in a perspective beyond those surrounding him, Teddy is portraying a spiritual message and cements his position as a prophet figure. The orange peels floating in the ocean take on a spiritual message through Teddy's dialogue. Notably, he makes statements about existentialism and creation through the orange peels. However, he continually is cut off before he can reach a full point and let those around him reach his level of enlightenment. His parents are a prime example of those who have succumbed to materialism. Although Teddy tries to enlighten them, they are too far gone. An example of this is when Teddy's father inquires about his camera before his daughter's well-being, all while ignoring Teddy's message. By placing his concern on the material object of the camera, he has revealed that he prioritizes its safety over his daughter's well-being, showing how he values consumerism over genuine relationships.

Anthony Kaufman argues that Teddy's death is a purposeful suicide and that his motivations behind this are to "inflict guilt feelings on his family and the adult world that has violated him" (132). Although it is strongly inferred that Teddy dies at the end, it is not due to malice. The ambiguity surrounding his death is meant to serve as an example of someone who has lived egoless and therefore, no longer has a life purpose. Teddy has reached the end of his spiritual enlightenment and has simply rejoined the cycle outside of his mortal self. There are also no instances throughout the story where Teddy wishes to purposely harm his parents; instead, he makes attempts to teach them a way to escape the materialism that he sees actively consuming them. He also does not act in a manner that would infer that he acts with malice, instead he acts as a provider and shows great empathy towards others.

Teddy provides hospitality to his father by offering him a pillow despite his refusal to indulge his son. His selflessness further amplifies his position as a disciple by aligning him as a perfect servant, like Franklin. Later, Teddy delves into his journal entries that contain different aspects of his everyday life. One of the more notable of these is when he writes to remind himself to send a "condolence letter to Dr. Wokawara about his nephritis" (177). On the same page, Teddy lists "nephritis" as a word to look up. The entry shows his unbridled compassion even in matters that he does not yet understand. However, the main objective of the story is brought up in the conversation between Teddy and Bob Nicholson.

After approaching Teddy, Bob Nicholson is mentored by him through their religious conversation. When asked about his last "incarnation," Teddy answers that he wasn't a "holy man" but "just a person making very nice spiritual advancement" (185). By referring to himself as "just" a person, he allows Nicholson the opportunity to understand that enlightenment is not out of his reach and can be achieved through deep spiritual faith. Teddy even refers to America as a wasteland by his statement of how it's "very hard to meditate and live a spiritual life in America" (186). By directly inferring that the materialism of America is what makes it a "wasteland," Teddy shows his understanding of what it takes to achieve enlightenment, which is through a rejection of materialism and emphasis on genuine connection with others. Teddy also critiques Nicholson for being logical and therefore, asserts that the only way to reach spiritual enlightenment is through faith, not logic. Prior to his death, Teddy prophesied the events that will cause it to Nicholson. To Teddy, death is nothing more than a part of the cycle of life and reincarnation. Therefore, death does not inspire fear within Teddy; instead, he is accepting of it as a crucial part of his journey to achieve true enlightenment. At the conclusion of the story, Teddy is inferred to have died exactly as he predicted. Due to the nature of his conversation with Nicholson, it can be argued that Teddy has reached enlightenment and no longer needs to be reincarnated. James Bryan states that Teddy's death is representative of this "transcendence" (18). Bryan also writes that Bob Nicholson going after Teddy following their conversation and right at his death is an instance in which "his concern is misplaced" (17). Teddy acts as a disciple figure for Nicholson, however, his attempt to prevent Teddy's imminent death reveals that he has not fully understood what Teddy has tried to teach him. His concerns are misplaced because he doesn't comprehend that death is not something to fear when one is empowered by spirituality.

Salinger's *Nine Stories* discusses multiple different spiritual journeys framed through various narratives. The disciple figures found in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," "Just Before the War with the Eskimos," and "Teddy" all represent different aspects of the journey to enlightenment. Sybil acts as a representative of the purity and innocent outlook on life that Seymour desperately craves. Franklin is the perfect servant that teaches Ginnie hospitality and reignites her childlike faith. Teddy is a prophet who has gained spiritual awakening and attempts to share how to do so with those around him to no avail. Overall, the disciples all provide the information needed to those willing to seek enlightenment in the American wasteland; the answer is to forego materialism and vanity in favor of spiritual connections with others and true egolessness.

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