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“Rampant Signs and Symbols”: Artifacts of Language in J.D. Salinger’s “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” and Glass Family Stories

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“Rampant Signs and Symbols”:
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and Glass Family Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

“RAMPANT SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”: ARTIFACTS OF LANGUAGE IN J.D. SALINGER’S “FOR ESMÉ—WITH LOVE AND SQUALOR” AND GLASS FAMILY STORIES

By Courtney Sviatko, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

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This thesis explores the use of language in J.D. Salinger’s “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor,” “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*. It establishes a narrative pattern in which sensitive individuals such as Seymour Glass and Sergeant X are isolated by the insensitivity of the superficial modern world, attempt to communicate their concerns to others through an exchange of language in material forms, and ultimately find relief in silence. By analyzing various examples of linguistic artifacts and the impact they have on both sender and receiver, this thesis identifies criteria for successful communication as well as reasons for the failure of language which may be useful for the study of these and other works by Salinger. This thesis also considers the intersection of binaries such as silence and noise, and the ways Salinger presents them both thematically and formally.

“Rampant Signs and Symbols”:

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and Glass Family Stories

1. Introduction

In “J.D. Salinger’s Linked Mysteries,” Ruth Prigozy argues that “*Nine Stories* heralds that period in our nation’s history that has been since characterized as frighteningly conformist, spiritually bankrupt, and intellectually adrift—the American 1950s” (118). In Salinger’s fiction the materialism and superficiality that plague modern society create barriers between individuals, causing loneliness and isolation. Sam S. Baskett believes that, although Salinger devotes much of his fiction to exposing these and other problems of a post-war consumerist society, he “ultimately refuses to accept a naturalistic world in which the American dream has turned into a nightmare” (61). Salinger’s fiction explores alternative ways to navigate the modern world, through sensitive and intellectual characters such as Esmé, Sergeant X, and the Glasses who “wholly commit themselves to leading a meaningful life in it” (Baskett 61). In order to transcend the squalor around them, these characters often seek spiritual or emotional solace in written words and utilize tangible objects of language, such as books and letters that can be held in one’s pocket or packed into a suitcase, as tools to express their intellectual concerns, resolve feelings of loneliness, and convey love and empathy to those around them. Although “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor”¹ suggests that this method of communication can be successful, other short stories from Salinger’s Glass family saga, particularly “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” reveal that when language itself becomes a physical commodity it rarely enables healthy

¹ Although “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” is not always considered a Glass family story, it is often discussed in conjunction with these works because of the resemblance between Sergeant X and Seymour Glass. Though I do not intend to argue that these two characters are in fact the same individual, I believe the similarities between “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” and “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which will be explored in this thesis, justify my inclusion of this non-Glass story.

communication. This idea continues to evolve throughout Salinger's many Glass family works, and in later novelettes such as *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, both the form and content of his fiction demonstrate how the act of creating or consuming material objects of language further alienates individuals and intensifies the problems of a squalid modern world.

Described by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner as Salinger's "major fictional victory" (4), "For Esmé with Love and Squalor"² provides what is perhaps the only wholly positive example of language that is successfully transferred from one character to another through a tangible object. The protagonist of this story, a World War II soldier identified simply as Sergeant X, experiences many failures of language before eventually receiving an unexpected gesture of love; a letter and broken wristwatch from a young acquaintance named Esmé, which help the sergeant overcome feelings of loneliness and combat the psychological trauma of his wartime experience. In order to examine these failures of communication and X's eventual recovery more thoroughly, Gwynn and Blotner break the story down into four narrative movements: the opening scene which takes place in the present day 1950s when the protagonist, Sergeant X, receives an invitation to Esmé's wedding; X's accidental meeting with the child Esmé in 1944 while training in the army; the wartime itself, when X finds a book written by Joseph Goebbels in which he inscribes a quote from Dostoevski; and finally May of 1945 when the traumatized X receives a letter from Esmé containing her father's broken wristwatch. Gwynn and Blotner argue that within each of these sections, an element of squalor is counteracted by a gesture of love. Most critics generally find the fourth and final symbol of love, "Esmé's gift of

² This thesis analyzes "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" as examples of Salinger's early fiction, but it should be noted that "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" was published in 1948, two years prior to "For Esmé." Rather than presenting my analysis of these stories based on chronology, I have chosen to use "For Esmé" as my first chapter because it contains the most striking example of a successful exchange of language, and because the clear distinction between positive and negative modes of communication in this story helps to establish criteria for evaluating examples in the other two works.

her father's watch" and "formal, precise, infinitely moving letter," to be the most significant because it appears to enable his recovery (Prigozy 125). After reading this letter and examining the fractured face of the wristwatch, Sergeant X falls asleep and the story concludes. Warren French believes, as most critics do, that it is Esmé's "unexpected act of unadulterated affection" which "redeems the Sergeant from his private hell and enables him to go to sleep; he feels he may yet come through the war with his 'faculties intact'" (100).

While most critics have focused on the powerful impact of Esmé's letter, John Wenke instead looks carefully at the many failures of communication in the story. In "Sergeant X, Esmé, And the Meaning of Words," Wenke argues that Esmé's letter is the only positive example of language in a story full of failed attempts at expression. The silent and compulsive letter-writing by the soldiers, the meaningless exchanges between X and his wife, and the appalling written request for war souvenirs from X's brother, each of which will be analyzed closely later in this thesis, fail to counteract the squalor of war. Instead they "create (or continue) rather than alleviate the emotional vacuum in which most of the characters live" (Wenke 252). Although Esmé's loving gesture eventually does enable Sergeant X to escape his "emotional vacuum," providing the reader with one ideal model for this method of communication, similar attempts in Salinger's other fiction typically fail to counteract the insensitivity of the modern world and characters must seek another way to escape from their "emotional vacuum."

Several scholars have made connections between "For Esmé" and the first of Salinger's Glass family stories, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," because of the resemblance between Sergeant X and Seymour Glass, the protagonist of "A Perfect Day" and central figure of the Glass family. Eberhard Alsen and Tom Davis, among others, hypothesize that Sergeant X and Seymour are in fact the same person. In "New Light on the Nervous Breakdowns of Salinger's

Sergeant X and Seymour Glass,” Alsen claims that “Like Sergeant Salinger,” both characters “served in the European Theater of Operations and suffered nervous breakdowns... The two stories take on new dimension if we assume that Sergeant X and Sergeant Seymour Glass shared Sergeant Salinger’s concentration camp experience” (110). Davis also believes that “Salinger’s characterization of Sergeant X and Seymour Glass reveal too many parallels to be accidental” (263). Because of these similarities, critics like Davis and Alsen use Sergeant X’s experiences to help decipher Seymour’s strange behavior and find explanations for his suicide at the end of “A Perfect Day.” Although the similarities between these two characters are striking, frequent attempts to align Sergeant X and Seymour have resulted in speculative and sometimes misguided criticism that treats Salinger’s works as individual pieces of a puzzle or episodes in a mystery series. Such criticism often fails to recognize the broader and more significant structural and thematic parallels that could be drawn between these texts.

Considered together, these two stories establish a narrative pattern in which consumerism, a culture of excess, and the squalor of war alienate sensitive individuals like Sergeant X and Seymour from the rest of society. To overcome their isolation, such characters attempt to communicate through a material form of language such as a letter or book of poetry. In “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” Seymour reaches out to his materialistic wife Muriel by giving her a book of German poetry. Unlike the correspondence between Esmé and X, however, Seymour’s material gift of language ultimately fails to help him connect with his wife Muriel for a number of reasons. The most immediate problem is that as a material object, the book can be misplaced. Muriel is also unable to read the poetry because she does not understand German, and therefore cannot respond to Seymour’s gesture. Having been unable to effectively convey his

feelings or create a space for himself in society, Seymour chooses to escape the squalid world and condemns himself to eternal silence by committing suicide in the final lines of the story.

Many critics of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" focus on finding a reason for Seymour's suicide, but they come to very different conclusions. Several critics, among them Charles V. Genthe, believe that his unhappy marriage to Muriel is one of the primary causes. Eberhard Alsen goes so far as to state that "Seymour's decision to kill himself is the resolution of a conflict between Seymour and his wife Muriel" (81). Theodore Gross makes a similar, but more complex argument, and believes that the suicide "stems from a conflict with his vapid wife" and "an ideological conflict with a world in which his extraordinary, poetic, and ideal character can find no suitable place" (264). Lyle Glazier also identifies Seymour as a hero and poet who is unsuited for this world. As he writes in "The Glass Family Saga: Argument and Epiphany," "Seymour's standards are too high for anyone, even himself, to live by" (248) and therefore he "has no way to demonstrate his integrity except through self-annihilation" (249). Others believe that the conflict lies within Seymour himself, more so than with the outside world. As Warren French argues, "Seymour recognizes that he has been trapped by some impulse within himself and not by snares laid by others" (84). In "Salinger's Seymour's Suicide," James E. Bryan claims that "Seymour is troubled by some sort of guilt peculiar... to adults; and at least part of that guilt is sexual" (226). The ambiguity within the text allows for multiple interpretations of Seymour's death, and therefore any of these theories could be valid. However, in their attempts to explain Seymour's motives suicide, very few critics have considered that the mode through which Seymour attempts to communicate his feelings may be more worthy of our attention than the feelings themselves.

In “A Source for Seymour's Suicide: Rilke's Voices and Salinger's *Nine Stories*,” James Finn Cotter states that since Seymour does not leave a suicide note, Muriel “must seek elsewhere for some clue” (84). He focuses on the unnamed book of German poems as Seymour’s “last will and testament” for both Muriel and the reader (84). While other critics have identified the poet as Rainer Maria Rilke, only Cotter explores the potential significance of this object. As I will explain in more detail later in this thesis, he believes that Seymour’s reason for wanting to end his life can be found through close analysis of Rilke’s poems. When focusing on the role of language in Salinger’s text, however, the reason itself is not as pertinent as the method through which Seymour attempts to deliver it.

The amount of criticism on the topic proves that Seymour’s suicide is undeniably a defining moment in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and, as many critics point out, in the lives of all the Glass family characters. David Seed claims that the suicide is a “crucial reference-point within the Glass family,” and that “Once the suicide has been assimilated into the Glass family mythology a longer narrative form is needed so that the members of that family can ruminate over this appalling event” (77). Following the same logic, Baskett argues that “In a sense, each of the Glass stories has been an approach to an understanding of Seymour” (52). Many other critics share this view, and choose to evaluate each subsequent work as a continuation of, or expansion upon, the earlier stories about Seymour and the Glasses. By contrast, other critics, such as Warren French, argue that readers should view each story independently of the rest. French writes that it is “difficult to think of a more foolhardy practice in literary criticism” than to assume that the Seymour of “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters” and the Seymour of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” are one and the same, and that “Even Salinger himself warns readers from considering the two stories jointly” (149). Regardless of how Salinger intended the

many Glass stories to relate or not relate to one another, readers must recognize that they do share a common thread: characters in each story employ an object or objects of language to communicate feelings of loneliness, to strengthen relationships with one another, or to reach an understanding of Seymour.

Originally published more than seven years after “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* carries the reader backwards through time to depict the unusual events of Seymour and Muriel’s wedding day. Since Seymour himself does not appear in the story, readers instead learn about the day’s events, and some earlier moments in Seymour’s history, through the narration of his brother, Buddy. David Seed explains that *Raise High* “devotes a lot of attention to the transmission of information between the members” (82). Much of this transmission occurs through written word and material objects which Buddy “collects” and then conveys to the reader “—from his sister Boo Boo’s letter about the marriage through to the messages scrawled on the mirror in Buddy’s flat to the excerpts he reads from Seymour’s diary” (Seed 82). Rather than providing comfort to Buddy as he attempts to understand Seymour’s behavior, these objects of language cause him further distress. Although the diary, for one example, provides some insight into Seymour’s love for Muriel, it also adds to Buddy’s frustration and confusion because he has no way to engage Seymour in a true dialogue about what he has read. Furthermore, the excess of language in its many forms overwhelms Buddy. As the story approaches a close, Buddy’s head is spinning with thoughts about Seymour. He falls asleep in the apartment, alone except for Muriel’s deaf and mute relative whose presence implies that silence is more comforting than words could possibly be.

The vast amount of information which overwhelms and confuses Buddy poses similar problems for Salinger’s readers, who must also contend with an excess of language in its many

forms: replicated letters and journals entries, long stretches of dialogue, intertextual references, and Buddy's many asides to the reader. Because of this complicated and verbose method of storytelling, *Raise High the Roofbeam*, *Carpenters* and other novelettes focused exclusively on the Glasses have drawn negative criticism from scholars, many of whom prefer the more concise narration of Salinger's earlier, tightly structured works like "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Warren French, for one, comments that in *Raise High* and *Seymour: An Introduction* Salinger seems "drunk with the fascinated contemplation of his own characters" (148) and chooses to "abandon objective storytelling altogether" (155). However, when considering the role of communication across the body of Salinger's work, it becomes apparent that the shapelessness and ungainly length of these later stories are not flaws, but rather structural extensions of his thematic concerns. By placing the reader and Buddy in similar positions, and forcing them to navigate a seemingly endless flood of information, Salinger further illustrates the challenges of communicating through written constructed modes and the problems that arise when language exists in excess.

A thorough analysis of *Raise High the Roofbeam*, *Carpenters*, as an example of Salinger's later fiction, along with two of his earlier short stories, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," reveals how Salinger's ideas about communication have evolved over time. In each of these works, sensitive outsiders turn to tangible objects of language with the hope of relieving their sense of isolation and finding a way to effectively communicate within the squalid, materialistic world. Though rarely successful, transferring language in these forms can initiate a two-way exchange between characters, allowing them to empathize with one another. However, when these works are considered together, it becomes increasingly apparent that these objects of language not only fail to support

real communication, but intensify the problems of materialism, excess, and isolation. As his characters explore ways to expose and overcome these problems and convey information to one another, Salinger himself employs new ways to both reveal and withhold information from his reader, through increasingly complex narrative forms and a nuanced understanding of silence and noise.

2. “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor”

In order to thoroughly analyze the role of language in Salinger’s works and the challenges of communication faced by the sensitive individuals, this thesis will first explore one of the few occasions in which characters effectively convey empathy through a tangible object of language. The sixth work in Salinger’s *Nine Stories*, “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor,” provides the most recognized, if not the only, definitively positive example of this method of communicating. In “Salinger’s *Nine Stories*: Fifty years Later,” Dominic Smith claims that “Thematically, *Nine Stories* landed somewhere between hope and despair, between what Salinger termed ‘love and squalor’” and identifies “For Esmé” as “the flagship story for this contrast” (640). In this story, as in many of Salinger’s other works, elements of squalor must be counteracted by some loving gesture. The loving gesture often appears as a verbal expression of empathy, an offering of wisdom, or some other manifestation of language. In this story, the protagonist-narrator, identified only as Sergeant X, desperately needs to express feelings of loneliness and despair in order to recover from the psychological trauma he experiences in war. Recognizing the need to communicate, he turns instinctively to books, letters, and other physical pieces of language, but these objects fail to provide any relief or stop his “trigger finger itching” (88). Instead, his constant letter-writing and reading limits opportunities for meaningful discourse and further contributes to the squalid nature of his experience. Eventually, the sergeant

receives an unexpected package from a young girl named Esmé, containing a letter and broken wristwatch. Unlike the other correspondence X receives, these two items grant him hope and enable him to begin mending his fractured psyche through much needed sleep. Although the conclusion to this story is an unusual or idealized example, it does demonstrate that material objects of language such as letters can be effective vehicles through which Salinger's characters may express feelings of loneliness or despair and also convey empathy for one another, thereby counteracting the destructive forces of the modern world.

To fully appreciate the healing impact of Esmé's gesture and recognize its unique position in Salinger's body of work, readers must explore the many failures of language that precede this rare moment of triumph. Comparing the failures and success in this story will also help readers recognize the problematic aspects of communication in other works like "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, where there are no victories. John Wenke explains that "For Salinger, failures of language advance the horror, vacuity, and despair of modern life. Throughout the narrative, Salinger reflects his concern with exploring the validity of language by persistently alluding to such indirect, constructed modes of discourse as letters, books, or inscriptions" (252). Throughout the story there are numerous examples of Sergeant X's attempts to use tangible pieces of language to occupy idle time, to calm his nerves, to distract him from the hostility of wartime, or to comfort him when his loneliness becomes unbearable. This method is generally unsuccessful because these objects of language, or "constructed modes of discourse," magnify problems of the squalid world such as consumerism, a focus on superficial or material worth, and excess.

The challenges of communicating are apparent very early in the story, as Sergeant X begins narrating his experiences during a "pre-invasion training course" in England during 1944.

He describes the sixty or so American soldiers in the course as “essentially letter-writing types” (88) who read and write obsessively to family or friends at home, but rarely engage in any real dialogue with one another. As he explains, “When we spoke to each other out of the line of duty, it was usually to ask somebody if he had any ink he wasn’t using. When we weren’t writing letters or attending classes, each of us pretty much went his own way” (88). Wenke claims that “These letter-writing types, living in a self-imposed limbo, pen their letters in order to avoid human contact” (253). Even X recognizes the unsociable nature of this activity and refers to the constant scratching of pens as “uncomradely” (88), yet he continues his solitary letter writing and reading out of habit. As a “constructed mode of discourse” (Wenke 252), letter writing fails as a form of expression because it isolates Sergeant X from the people who could most easily empathize with him, and prevents the soldiers from behaving as a supportive community. Rather than alleviating their loneliness, the perpetual reading and writing intensifies the “emotional vacuum” (Wenke, 252) in which they live.

As X prepares to leave behind the “uncomradely scratching of many fountain pens on many sheets of V-mail paper” (88) and venture outside the soldiers’ quarters, he pulls on a raincoat and his “overseas cap” which he wears “slightly down over both ears” (89). While the detail may seem rather inconsequential, the narrator calls attention to this by adding, parenthetically, that he wears the cap “at an angle all my own” (89). The unusual positioning of the cap *over* his ears, though it may simply be a reaction to the weather, symbolizes X’s unwillingness to really communicate. He is prepared to absorb words in all their visual and tangible forms, but not to participate in the living discourse around him.

Walking through the town, Sergeant X is pleased to encounter another object of language: a bulletin board posted outside a church. He explains that he feels drawn to the board

“mostly because the featured numerals, white on black, had caught my attention but partly because, after three years in the Army, I’d become addicted to reading bulletin boards” (91). This moment is significant because X himself calls attention to the thoughtlessness of his action. For him, reading letters and bulletins is a compulsion, not a way to engage the world around him. X and his fellow soldiers treat writing and reading as mindless physical exercises, which they perform routinely without really understanding why. X’s interest in the bulletin board also offers readers an example of the importance he and the other characters in Salinger’s fiction place on material features. Just as his narration of the letter writing emphasizes the type of pen and paper, his description of the board focuses first on aspects such as color and font, and secondly on the words themselves. This is one minor example of how attributing value to pieces of language based on their formal or technical qualities may potentially detract from the significance of the content, and problematize such modes of communication.

Prompted by the notice on the bulletin board, Sergeant X enters the church to watch the children in choir practice, and is fascinated by their “melodious and unsentimental” voices. As he says, “I had never heard the hymn, but I kept hoping it was one with a dozen or more verses” (90). Just as his descriptions of letters and bulletin boards emphasize material elements such as the kind of paper or the visual appeal of the font, this description of the children’s song emphasizes a similarly superficial aspect: the number of verses. Although it would be natural for anyone who found pleasure in the music to desire more, for X, this is yet another example of his self-professed addiction. He consumes language in excess and constantly craves more; more letters, more books, and more verses, though a surplus of words does little to relieve his frustration or to stop his “trigger finger itching” (88).

Leaving the choir practice, X enters a teahouse and as he speaks to the waitress, he realizes, “It was the first time all day that I’d spoken to anyone” (91). When he recognizes the loneliness he feels and how isolated he has become from the people around him, he instinctively turns to his letters, physical objects of language, for comfort. As he tells us, “I then looked through all my pockets, including my raincoat, and finally found a couple of stale letters to reread” (91). This line once again emphasizes the material properties of the letters and the emotional significance that X, prefiguring some of Salinger’s other characters, mistakenly attributes to tangible pieces of language. The letters are physically “stale” or worn from age and constant handling, and have likely deteriorated from being stored in a wet raincoat. “Stale” also suggests that X has been constantly reading and rereading his letters, which reminds the reader of his “addiction” to bulletin boards and desire to hear a “dozen or more verses” (90). Despite the deteriorating condition of the letters, and the number of times they have been read, X mistakenly believes that they will help him fight his loneliness and make him feel more connected to the world. It is the tangibility of letters in his pocket, their physical presence right at his fingertips, which appeals to X, not their content. In fact, the contents of these letters offers little solace to the protagonist, and actually contributes to his feeling of isolation.

The letters that X pulls from his pocket in this scene cannot possibly provide any real or lasting relief, since their content expresses the purely superficial and selfish concerns of the senders. X describes the letters as follows: “one from my wife, telling me how the service at Schrafft’s Eighty-eighth Street had fallen off, and one from my mother-in-law, asking me to please send her some cashmere yarn first chance I got away from ‘camp’” (91). These superficial comments about sub-standard restaurant service and cashmere yarn demonstrate, first, that their primary concerns reflect those of the materialistic consumer society around them. Although the

space they occupy in the world may be much different from the space that X inhabits, it is equally corrupt and therefore these reports from home cannot grant X any relief. Secondly, the letters show that X's wife and mother-in-law have little, if any, ability to empathize with his experiences in the army. The mother-in-law refers to the army training facility as a "camp," as though the sergeant was merely taking a vacation from the city. She cannot imagine the type of trauma that X will later experience, and shows no desire understand his emotional state. As the conclusion to the story demonstrates, material objects of language such as letters may in fact mitigate loneliness, but only if they can convey some degree of empathy. Finally, the content of the letters represents a failure of communication because both the wife and mother-in-law make self-centered comments or selfish requests. They do not, as far as the reader knows, inquire about X's well-being or present an opportunity for X to express himself in return. He cannot respond in any significant way, beyond sending the requested cashmere. In this example, letter writing falls short of a true discourse, and is ultimately meaningless.

It is at this point in the story that the young British girl named Esmé, whom he had first seen at the choir practice and been fascinated by, approaches X in the tea room and initiates a conversation. Prior to this point, a close analysis of "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" reveals only the difficulties of communicating in a hostile environment, with no suggestion of how a sensitive outsider like X may overcome this challenge. This initial conversation between Esmé and X establishes certain criteria which the reader may use to identify successful or meaningful communication. Many of the positive features of this face-to-face exchange are also recognizable in their later correspondence, which must occur through constructed modes such as letter and story writing. When Esmé first approaches the soldier, he pulls up a chair for her and decides rather quickly that he is "more than willing to hold up my end of a conversation" (93). This

comment not only shows X's eagerness to connect with another human being and his fascination with the young Esmé, but also signals a different kind of communication than X has been used to: a true exchange with both parties contributing equally. X's recovery at the conclusion of the story can be attributed, in part, to the fact that Esmé offers him the opportunity to respond to her letter.

As the conversation continues Esmé explains that "I came over purely because I thought you looked extremely lonely. You have an extremely sensitive face." Esmé's ability to recognize X's loneliness implies a mutual understanding which has been missing from his other relationships and caused many of his attempts at communication to fail. Unlike X's wife and mother-in-law, Esmé understands the horrors of war firsthand. She explains that she and her younger brother Charles live with their aunt, since their mother is dead and their father "was s-l-a-i-n in North Africa" (97). Though she does not express her grief directly, she does talk about her father very fondly and at length. She praising his humor, his intelligence, and his kindness, among other things, and says that "Charles misses him exceedingly" (98). Through her discussion the reader can infer that Esmé herself also misses her father terribly. Although this trauma, which she experiences as a result of the war, is different from what X will endure in combat, it does allow her to empathize with the sergeant. The empathy they share will be essential to X's recovery at the end of the story.

Esmé continues to explain that in an effort to keep her father's memory alive, she has saved a number of his possessions, including an "enormous-faced, chronographic-looking wristwatch" and several of his beautifully written letters which she is collecting "for posterity" (99). The act of preserving these material objects is a practice which she likely learned from her father, who she previously indicated was "an archivist—amateur, of course" (98), and also a

reflection of the consumerist society in which she lives, since the act of collecting inevitably places value on these letters as material artifacts. In this sense Esmé is again similar to Sergeant X: both are avid users and collectors of language in many material forms. Unlike X, however, Esmé seems to understand, if only subconsciously, that the letters are meaningful because they preserve the memory of the father whom she adores and misses. Her personal archive provides a valuable link to her family, unlike X's pocketful of stale letters, which provide no meaningful connection to his wife or mother-in-law and only deepen his feeling of loneliness.

In addition to imitating her deceased father by creating her own archive of his work, Esmé also tries, "through words, to surmount the stunning loss of her father" (Prigozy 98). One way she does this is by trying to emulate his "extraordinary vocabulary" (Salinger 98) and live up to his reputation as a skilled writer. She brags to X, "I'm quite communicative for my age," and claims to write "extremely articulate letters" (101). For a girl her age Esmé is indeed very articulate and has a large vocabulary, but her manner of speech is obviously studied. She occasionally speaks in French in order to seem more sophisticated, and her desire to show off her adult vocabulary is extremely transparent. She tells X, "Usually, I'm not terribly gregarious" and then looks over to see if he "knew the meaning of the word" (95). While some critics take this as an indicator of her undeniably youthful and innocent character and are charmed by her self-conscious attempts to impress the American soldier, others, like John Hermann, find her manner of speaking obnoxious. In "J.D. Salinger: Hello Hello Hello," Hermann writes: "Silly-billy parrots' the choir director had said of those who mouth words without knowing their meanings. She is talking about Esmés" (264). This viewpoint links Esmé even more closely to Sergeant X, who constructs language mindlessly as he writes letter after letter home, and points

out how the problem of superficiality in the modern world negatively impacts the way individuals communicate.

The conversation between Esmé and Sergeant X also exposes how the squalid, consumerist world that Salinger's work portrays corrupts the process of communicating by placing language in the context of economic function. When X compliments Esmé's singing voice, she tells him that she plans to be a professional singer, and intends to "sing jazz on the radio and make heaps of money" (93). For Esmé, singing is primarily a means to wealth, not a mode of artistic expression. Later in their conversation X informs Esmé that before entering the army he considered himself "a professional short-story writer" (99). In response, Esmé nods politely and asks what X refers to as "a familiar but always touchy" question: "Published?" (99). As X indicates, the question about publication is a common one, and Esmé's view on this subject reflects the concerns of a society that is constantly focused on monetary value. Like Esmé's lovely singing voice, X's stories are worth little unless someone would be willing to pay for them. Regardless, Esmé requests that X write a story especially for her, and offers to write to X as well. The promise of this future exchange suggests that although language has been compromised by the squalid, consumerist world, causing X's previous correspondences to fail, there is still potential for meaningful communication to occur through constructed modes.

As Esmé leaves the tea shop with her brother, she turns to wave at Sergeant X. He returns the wave, and says of this exchange that "It was a strangely emotional moment for me" (102). X seems unaware of why this moment is emotional for him, although the reader may have the necessary perspective to understand why. Sergeant X has not engaged another human being in a meaningful or honest way for some time; therefore the experience was unfamiliar. Rather than isolating himself from his fellow soldiers and numbing himself through the constant rereading of

old letters, X was pushed to express himself to someone who showed genuine interest and asked personal questions about his life. The moment is also strange for X because after not truly engaging with another person for some time, he likely did not expect to form an emotional connection to two young children with their own traumatic experiences of war. He regrets the end of their conversation because when Esmé and Charles leave, X is once again thrown into silence and must contend with his returning loneliness.

After the children exit, the section breaks and X states, “This is the squalid, or moving, part of the story, and the scene changes” (103). This portion of the story is meta-fictional, and is written literally “For Esmé” in fulfillment of her request. After this opening paragraph, where X explains the scene-change, the narrative changes from first to third person. Just before this shift, Sergeant X states “I’m still around” but “I’ve disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me” (103). The change in point of view is not only a product of the story-within-a-story format; it is also a way for Salinger to signal, through language, how fragile X’s psyche has become. His instability prevents him from being able to express himself in the first person, and therefore X uses the third person as a way to distance himself from his own disturbing memories. Furthermore, X avoids narrating the most traumatic pieces of his wartime experience by referring to the events that took place during actual combat only indirectly, through obscure bits of conversation. Despite the distance he creates between himself and these events, the process of composing this story for Esmé is beneficial for X because it allows him the opportunity to express himself in a way that is meaningful for both sender and recipient, and to acknowledge the tremendous impact of the war.

From his third person perspective, the “disguised” narrator describes the setting as a civilian home in Bavaria, “several weeks after V-E Day” where Staff Sergeant X is struggling to

recover both mentally and physically from some unspecified war-related trauma. Just as he did during his training in Devon, X routinely seeks out objects of language such as books and letters for comfort, but finds no relief in them. As the scene opens, he is sitting “at a small, messy-looking writing table, with a paperback overseas novel open before him” (103-4). He explains that “for more than an hour he had been triple-reading paragraphs, and now he was doing it to the sentences” (104). His inability to comprehend what he reads is the first of many indications that X “was a young man who had not come through the war with his faculties intact” (104). As the section progresses he reveals that he has bleeding gums as a result of constant chain smoking, has lost a significant amount of weight, and had been hospitalized for two weeks in Frankfort. X also describes the abrupt yet familiar experience in which “he thought he felt his mind dislodge itself and teeter, like insecure luggage on an overhead rack” (104). He presses his hands to his temples “to set things right” (104), and then automatically turns his attention toward another tangible piece of language to find some relief.

X’s increasingly tenuous relationship with language provides evidence of his deteriorating mental health, but is also partially to blame for the delay in his recovery. The cyclical nature of this problem is apparent in the earlier sections of “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor,” as X buries his head in a book or letter to avoid loneliness but instead isolates himself further, yet in this section the results are far more extreme. The book that X selects after releasing his head exemplifies an object of language that will not only fail to relieve his mental anguish, but will add to the corruption of language around him. X narrates:

When he let go of his head, X began to stare at the surface of the writing table, which was a catchall for at least two dozen unopened packages, all addressed to him. He reached behind the debris and picked out a book that stood against the wall. It was a book by

Goebbels, entitled “Die Zeit Ohne Beispiel.” It belonged to the thirty-eight-year-old, unmarried daughter of the family that, up to a few weeks earlier, had been living in the house. (105)

In this passage, the “debris” of two dozen unopened packages creates a literal form of squalor that thwarts the act of communicating by crowding the writing desk and also symbolizes the problems of consumerism and excess that threaten language. The book that X pulls out of this debris, *Die Zeit Ohne Beispiel* or *The Unprecedented Era* by the chief Nazi promoter of racist ideology Joseph Goebbels, is a more extreme representation of squalor. In *The Fiction of J.D. Salinger*, Gwynn and Blotner explain that in addition to being a force of anti-Semitism behind the Nazi regime, Goebbels was responsible for the burning of thousands of books in 1933 and had written of his deep seated hatred for humanity itself. As they argue, “To make any kind of contact with Joseph Goebbels is to be overwhelmed by the very type of psychotic hatred for everything weaker or more human than itself” (5). X, who has likely seen the horrific results of Nazi anti-Semitism in person, is more vulnerable than most to the impact of this squalid text.

Fortunately, he finds something else inside this book which counteracts its presence in his room: “Written in ink, in German, in a small, hopelessly sincere handwriting, were the words ‘Dear God, life is hell’” (105). This message, written by the low ranking Nazi woman whom X himself had arrested, successfully conveys emotion and bridges the divide between writer and reader in ways that the many other objects of language have failed to do. While she may not have intended this inscription to be read by anyone else, her “hopelessly sincere” message “communicates to him the shattering experience of a German in the war against the Allies” (Gwynn and Blotner 7). Staring at this inscription, X tries “against heavy odds, not to be taken in” (105). Although he empathizes with the emotion in her statement, as someone who has also

been through the hell of war, the sergeant wants to avoid dwelling too long on this utterly despairing thought. Instead, he takes the opportunity to respond with something that conveys his own feelings, and “with far more zeal than he had done anything in weeks... wrote down under the inscription, in English, ‘Fathers and teachers, I ponder “What is hell?” I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love’” (105). By adding his own inscription, this quote from Dostoevski, X puts himself in conversation with the German woman and “equates himself with her simply as human beings against the total war they have suffered in” (Gwynn and Blotner 7).

In this way, the paired inscriptions create something akin to true discourse in which both parties contribute to a deeper understanding of their shared experience. More importantly, replying to the woman’s message allows X to counteract the hopelessness of her statement with something that, while not exactly hopeful, is more positive. The assertion that hell is the inability to love also implies the opposite: that if one is capable of love, life does not need to be hellish. This action illustrates one of the primary goals of this story and of language in Salinger’s fiction, which is to balance squalor with love, despair with hope.

Although this action was a positive step toward meaningful expression, he has not fully recovered mentally or physically from the trauma which impairs his ability to communicate effectively. He looks down at the quote from Dostoevsky and notices “with fright that ran through his whole body—that what he had written was almost entirely illegible” (105). Recognizing his own infirmities throws X back into despair, and to distract himself he once again selects an object from amidst the pile of debris: a letter from his brother in Albany which he “loosely resolved to read the letter straight through” (106). He quickly realizes that this letter will only exacerbate his hopelessness and “stopped reading after the words ‘Now that the g.d. war is over and you probably have a lot of time over there, how about sending the kids a couple

of bayonets or swastikas’” (106). This barbaric request for war souvenirs and the vulgar language that his brother uses show a complete lack of sensitivity to the suffering that X endured during the war. It resembles the letter from X’s mother-in-law asking that he mail her some cashmere yarn. Though a request for swastikas or bayonets is certainly more extreme than a desire for yarn, and the reader might assume that X has dramatized this for the purposes of his short story, both examples demonstrate how these modes of discourse fail to communicate love and intensify the feeling of loneliness. As John Wenke writes, “his brother’s letter accentuates distance, fails to provide relief, and moves X closer to an absolute loss of reason” (257). After tearing up the letter and throwing it in his wastebasket, X describes feeling “rather like a Christmas tree whose lights, wired in a series, must go out all at once” (106). At this point in the story X desperately needs to connect with someone who will empathize with his suffering and convey love in a way that these books and letters fail to do; however, the people around him seem even less prepared for this task.

In the penultimate section of “For Esmé,” X narrates a conversation between the “disguised” version of himself and his jeep partner Corporal Z, which provides a further example of communication that is insensitive, inauthentic, and ultimately squalid. Corporal Z, also called Clay, is a belching, obtuse, and all around boorish individual who enters X’s room to invite him to listen to the radio. During their conversation he makes observations about X’s condition which, although they are not highly astute, provide the reader with a necessary portrait of X’s mental and physical state post-hospitalization. He comments about X’s shaking hands and corpse-like appearance, and informs him that “the goddamn side of your face is jumping all over the place” (109). As X’s jeep mate and companion throughout combat, Corporal Z should have the insight needed to empathize with X, and yet “because of his insensitivity, Clay cannot

comprehend the extent and cause of X's emotional deterioration" (Wenke 257). In place of empathetic understanding, Clay relies on a diagnosis from his girlfriend Loretta who is majoring in psychology and who writes to him "fairly regularly, from a paradise of exclamation points and inaccurate observations" (108). Clay reports Loretta's belief that "'nobody gets a nervous breakdown just from the war and all. She says you probably were unstable like, your whole goddamn life'" (109). According to Wenke, Clay and Loretta's "lack of self-awareness and moral introspection," revealed by their seriously flawed interpretation of the war, "is not merely contemptible, but actually a succinct embodiment of those very forces... which create and sustain the absurdity of war" (253-4). For X, the obvious lack of understanding from the person he spent the most time with during the war pushes him even further away from recovery. After Z insists that he must have been unstable his "whole goddamn life," Sergeant X shields his eyes with his hands, since "the light over the bed seemed to be blinding him" (109).

The correspondence between Loretta and Clay not only reveals their insensitivity to the suffering of others, but also the inauthentic and somewhat perverted way that men and women communicate with one another during times of war. Wenke refers to their letters as a "perversion of romantic language" which makes "their courtship an exercise in mutual self-delusion" (253). The sergeant explains that "All through the war, Clay had read all Loretta's letters aloud to X, however intimate they were—in fact, the more intimate, the better" (108). By "intimate," X does not mean deeply personal. Instead, he implies that the letters are graphic or sexual in nature, and that Clay takes pleasure in performing readings of material that Loretta intended to be private. Neither Clay nor Loretta has a true understanding of loving intimacy, nor do they know how to communicate love in an authentic way. The narrator reveals that "It was his custom, after each reading, to ask X to plot out or pad out the letter of reply, or to insert a few impressive words in

French or German” (108). Clay does not attempt to express himself honestly to his girlfriend, but enlists X to plan out more sophisticated responses in order to impress her. His concerns about these letters reflect those of the superficial society around him, which has corrupted language and made sincere expressions of love nearly impossible.

After consuming this series of squalid texts (the book by Joseph Goebbels, his brother’s absurd letter requesting souvenir swastikas, and the insensitive communication between Clay and Loretta diagnosing his condition), Sergeant X is left completely exhausted and overwhelmed. He reaches a breaking point when Clay asks him, “Remember that time... we got shelled for about two goddamn hours, and the goddamn cat I shot jumped up on the hood of the jeep when we were layin’ in that hole?” (110). Sergeant X begs him to stop talking about it and yet he continues with another one of Loretta’s psychological explanations, attempting to justify his barbarism. The frustrated X poses his own obviously sarcastic explanation for why he shot at the cat in order to silence Clay. He suggests that the cat must have been a German spy disguised as a cat, ““So there was absolutely nothing brutal, or cruel, or dirty....”” Corporal Clay, who repeatedly fails to recognize the insincerity of his own speech, interrupts X by shouting ““God damn it!...Can’t you ever be *sincere*?”” (110). Following this accusation, “X suddenly felt sick, and he swung around in his chair and grabbed the wastebasket” (110). The hypocrisy of Clay’s accusation is too much for X to swallow, especially after being confronted with the insensitive request for swastikas from his brother and a hopeless declaration from a Nazi official. By vomiting in the wastebasket, on top of his brother’s shredded letter, he purges some of these negative ideas that have been weighing heavily on his fragile psyche.

After Clay leaves, the section breaks. In the final scene of the story, Sergeant X is once again alone, trying to cope with his feelings in the usual way by composing a letter. He picks up

his typewriter to write an old friend, hoping “there might be some quick, however light, therapy in it for him. But he couldn’t insert the notepaper into the roller properly, his fingers were shaking so violently now” (112). His need to communicate is dire, but he is physically unable to do so. Exhausted, he rests his head on the table and closes his eyes. When he opens them again a moment later he sees a small unopened box that he had accidentally unearthed from the pile on the writing desk, containing a letter and an object wrapped in tissue paper. This unexpected letter, from the young girl he met in the tea room, is unlike any other that is sent or received by X during the story. Instead of intensifying his loneliness through superficial or insensitive words, Esmé’s message conveys the love and empathy that X needs to begin healing, just when he needs it the most.

Esmé writes that in the thirty-eight days since meeting X in the tearoom she has thought of him frequently, and her letter expresses the same genuine interest that she showed during their first conversation as well as a sincere concern for his wellbeing. Esmé tells X that she and Charles are both very worried about him and writes, “We hope you were not among those who made the first initial assault upon the Cotentin Peninsula” (113). Esmé is obviously interested and well informed about the progression of events, but more importantly, she shows an intuitive understanding of how war impacts humanity. She politely informs X that she and Charles are “tremendously excited about D Day and only hope that it will bring about the swift termination of the war and a method of existence that is ridiculous to say the least” (113). Esmé’s recognition of the absurdity of war reminds X and the reader that she has also endured a personal loss as the result of this “ridiculous” method of existence, and shows that despite her youth, Esmé can empathize with Sergeant X’s suffering. Unlike the messages from the sergeant’s wife, mother-in-law, and brother, which show absolutely no understanding of the horrors of war and leave him

feeling utterly alone, Esmé's letter provides a personal connection that X desperately needs in order to begin recovering.

In the post-script of her letter, Esmé notes that she has enclosed her wristwatch for X to keep and says, "I am quite certain that you will use it to greater advantage in these difficult days than I ever can" (113). The addition of this watch works to further lift X's mood and hasten his recovery for a number of reasons. First, this gift works to counteract the hostility and insensitivity of war because Esmé offers the watch as a selfless gesture of love. She has chosen to sacrifice her father's watch, an item she previously wore around her own slim wrist in remembrance of her deceased parent, because she recognizes that X's needs are greater than her own. The watch is not merely a valuable consumer product that she thought X might be able to use, although she does point out attributes such as its ability to calculate velocity. Esmé invites X to "accept it as a lucky talisman" (113), suggesting that the real value is symbolic, not material. Furthermore, the purely monetary value of the watch declines significantly when X removes this from its box and "saw that its crystal had been broken in transit" (114). The damaged condition of the watch actually increases its symbolic value for X. He may find comfort by recognizing that even something "extremely water-proof and shock-proof" (113) can be broken, and that his own fragile condition is not something to be ashamed of. Broken or not, the watch serves as an effective reminder of Esmé's care and concern, and should help him to endure the remainder of his time at war.

Also in the post-script, Esmé adds: "Charles, whom I am teaching to read and write and whom I am finding an extremely intelligent novice, wishes to add a few words" (113). He contributes a long list of "HELLO HELLO HELLO," followed by "LOVE AND KISSES CHALES" (113). This string of hellos resembles the series of meaningless letters sent by X's

wife: a stack of greetings followed by love and kisses, with nothing of substance in between.

However, while the wife's letters represent a failure of communication, Charles's message has a great deal of potential. Warren French claims that the string of hellos is a "victory" because it "marks the beginning of an ability to communicate successfully" (101). Recognizing this potential gives X hope for the future, and proves that meaningful and loving communication is possible, even during the absurd mode of existence called war.

The addition of Charles' message creates uncertainty in the minds of several critics, who disagree about the role it plays in X's recovery. While many overlook this contribution from the novice writer and credit Esmé exclusively, others, like John Hermann, argue that it is "Charles' final, spontaneous, and insistent Hello, Hello, Hello... that brings Sergeant X's F-A-C-U-L-T-I-E-S back together" (262). He claims that unlike Esmé, Charles composes his message "without thought, without knowledge, without statistics, but with compassion and affection" and that he is the one "who knows... the riddles of the heart" (264). What Hermann overlooks, however, is that without Esmé's instruction, Charles would not be able to express this affection to X. In his brief article, "Salinger's FOR ESMÉ—WITH LOVE AND SQUALOR," Mike Tierce responds to Hermann's argument, and although he agrees that Charles's message has a profound impact on X, he writes, "Actually, it is the combination of the two—Esmé and Charles—that saves Sergeant X" (57). To prove this claim, he references a riddle that Charles told X during their initial conversation in the tea shop: "What did one wall say to the other wall? ... Meet you at the corner!" (Salinger 98-9). The two converging walls in this riddle must negotiate their shared space in the same way as Esmé and her brother do within their letter, because as Tierce writes, "Esmé represents the world of science, rationality, and materialism and Charles represents the world of emotional spontaneity" (57). These two very different children "personify the two poles

of life with which X must come to grips,” and therefore the combination of their two voices in this one object of language “illustrates the exact nature of X’s reconciliation of opposites” (57). In order to come through the war with his faculties intact, X must balance despair with hope, squalor with love, and insensitivity with sensitivity, analysis with empathetic emotion. In this story and others, Salinger suggests that objects of language like this letter have the potential to help characters like Sergeant X establish this necessary balance, and successfully navigate a hellish existence such as war.

After receiving this outpouring of love from both Esmé and Charles, and examining the broken face of the wristwatch, Sergeant X “suddenly, almost ecstatically” feels sleepy. The story concludes: “You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *always* stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact” (114). The unexpected and unselfish outpouring of love from Charles and Esmé, two children who remind X of the innocence and possibility of childhood but who can also empathize with his traumatic experience of war, enables X to fall into the restorative sleep he needs to repair his fractured psyche. However, *receiving* this love and empathy is not all that X needs to fully recover and move on with his life; he also needs the opportunity to express himself in return. Esmé grants him that opportunity when she asks Sergeant X, at the very end of her letter, to “Please write as soon as you have the time and inclination” (113). As the reader knows, X does not actually reply until nearly six years later, when he receives a wedding invitation and takes the time to jot down “a few revealing notes on the bride as I knew her” (87) which become “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor.” Although it takes X years to compose the story, when he finally does, he writes about his experiences thoughtfully and expressively. Therefore two successful acts of communication occur in this elliptical story: Esmé conveys her empathy to Sergeant X and enables him to sleep,

and X responds with a squalid and moving story through which he edifies and instructs (87) his audience about the horrors of war.

The aspects of Sergeant X's communication with Esmé which make their exchange successful also grant this example of communication a unique status within the larger framework of Salinger's fiction. The empathy and genuine concern that Esmé expresses in her letter and the opportunity for reciprocity that she presents, features which directly contribute to X's healing, are not only missing from the sergeant's earlier correspondences, but also from the correspondences of similar characters in Salinger's Glass family works. Analyzing both the positive and negative aspects of language in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" provides necessary insight into the challenges of communicating in the squalid world and may also enable readers to better understand why similar attempts to communicate through constructed modes, in works such as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, are generally unsuccessful.

3. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"

The materialism and insensitivity that prevent Sergeant X from communicating effectively in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" also pose a significant threat to language and thwart the intellectual and spiritual growth of characters in Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." In this story, Salinger paints a vivid portrait of the post-war American landscape, where overwhelming consumerism and superficiality create destructive emotional distance between individuals. Unlike those in "For Esmé," however, these characters cannot overcome the challenges of the squalid landscape, and attempts to communicate feelings of loneliness, frustration, or concern through objects of language ultimately fail due to a lack of empathy or understanding between characters and an inability to reciprocate.

Bearing a striking resemblance to Sergeant X, the protagonist of this story is also a sensitive and literary army veteran who experienced an unspecified trauma during the war. Several years after returning home, Seymour Glass is appalled by the insensitivity and gluttony he perceives in American society and struggles to communicate his frustrations to those around him, particularly his extremely composed and materialistic wife Muriel. Like X, Seymour tries to reconnect with his wife by utilizing a tangible object of language, and makes a final and desperate attempt to bridge the distance between them by offering her a book of German poetry. Unlike Esmé's compassionate letter, which enables Sergeant X to recover by inviting him to express his feelings in return, Seymour's gesture fails to initiate healing communication. As the defeated hero, Seymour commits himself permanently to silence by shooting himself in the final lines of the story. This tragic ending is antithetical to the uniquely positive conclusion of "For Esmé," and reveals Salinger's concerns about the value of language in this society and the hazards of communicating through material artifacts.

In the first few pages of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Salinger establishes the setting of the story as a beach hotel in Miami, where Seymour and his wife are vacationing for their second honeymoon.³ Although physically this space is drastically different from the wartime setting of "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," Salinger presents it as a similarly unhealthy environment where consumerism and the culture of excess pose a significant threat to communication and isolate the main characters from one another. The opening lines describe a "girl," later identified as Muriel Glass, who is waiting to use the phone because the "ninety-seven New York advertising men in the hotel... were monopolizing the long distance lines" (3).

³ Kenneth Slawenski explains that Salinger added this opening scene of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and created Muriel's character after his initial manuscript, titled "The Bananafish," was rejected by the *New Yorker* in 1947. He revised the story multiple times to suit the preferences of editors Gus Lobrano and William Maxwell before it was published with its new title, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," by the magazine on January 31, 1948 (159).

This opening line signals several things about the environment which contribute to its quality of squalor. First, the many advertising men seem to monopolize not only the telephone lines, but the hotel itself, indicating that the main priority in this consumerist space is an exchange of material goods for monetary profit. Their overwhelming presence also implies that there is no room in this space for men like Seymour Glass, who live to pursue spiritual and intellectual goals rather than monetary ones. This opening line also defines communication, in the context of this story, as a function of the economy. The ad men use the phone lines to engage in their business, and there is a fee attached to this method of communication. Finally, by opening the story this way, Salinger establishes a pattern in which communication occurs through indirect modes such as by telephone, and across long distances, rather than through face-to-face dialogue.

As an occupant of this hotel, a space governed by the exchange of material goods, Muriel is irreparably associated with the squalid forces of consumerism and superficiality. Her actions in the opening scene reinforce this idea, and paint an unflattering portrait of her. While waiting the nearly two and an half hours to use the phone she “read an article in a woman’s pocket-size magazine, called ‘Sex Is Fun—or Hell.’ She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of her beige suit. She moved the button on her Saks blouse... almost finished putting lacquer on the nails of her left hand” (3). Muriel performs each of these tasks casually but with precision and care, suggesting that she is not simply occupying idle time as she waits for the phone to become available, but completing a regular and valued routine of self-maintenance. When she is finally able to use the phone she is careful to keep “the fingers of her left hand outstretched” to keep the fresh lacquer from smudging or ruining her “white silk dressing gown” (4). To most readers these likely seem to be frivolous tasks, and Muriel appears as a hopelessly shallow and

vain individual. When considering the consumerist environment of the hotel and the norms of this post-war society, however, her behavior is understandable.

Muriel's actions in this opening passage not only show how dedicated she is to maintaining her physical appearance, in accordance with the standards of this environment, but also reveal how these concerns take precedence over the exchange of ideas. The narrator describes Muriel as "a girl for who a ringing phone dropped exactly nothing" (3). Indeed, when the phone does ring, she first calmly finishes painting the nails on her left hand before picking up the receiver on "the fifth or sixth ring" (4). The narrator indicated that Muriel had been waiting two hours to use the phone, and during her conversation she also claims to have tried using the phone during the previous two nights without being able to get through. In this situation, the reader might expect her to jump up and immediately answer when it finally rings. Her unhurried response to this call, and her later difficulty communicating, can be partially explained by the narrator's statement that "She looked as if her phone had been ringing continually ever since she had reached puberty" (3). Just as Sergeant X considers a pile of "two dozen unopened letters" on a desk to be "debris" (105), Muriel must find it difficult to view any conversation as significant when her phone has been ringing relentlessly since puberty. This again demonstrates how an excess of communication can be problematic and cause language to lose value. Through this comment about Muriel's appearance the narrator also implies that the majority of her phone calls have been from men who are attracted to her physical beauty, and that conversation between adult, or nearly adult, men and women is usually within the context of a romantic or sexual exchange. This minor peek into Muriel's adolescence provides another clue to help readers understand why meaningful communication is difficult in this society.

Critics of this story typically fail to account for the influence of this squalid environment, and react very negatively to Muriel because of her actions in these opening passages and the subsequent conversation with her worried mother. Gary Lane offers a particularly harsh critique of her character in “Seymour’s Suicide Again: A New Reading of J.D. Salinger’s ‘A Perfect Day for Bananafish.’” He argues that when Muriel finally does answer the ringing phone, after taking her time with her nails, the reader’s initial reaction is “reinforced and amplified” (22). He writes:

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 ... Further, she is bored with her mother and her life, baffled but bored with her husband, and complacently, simple-mindedly unconcerned with everyone. (22)

Indeed, as Muriel’s mother attempts to engage her daughter in a serious discussion about Seymour’s odd behavior and expresses concern for her safety, Muriel seems almost indifferent to her mother’s worry. She denies that anything is wrong with her husband and repeatedly stalls the conversation with her materialistic and snobbish observations about fashion and the hotel guests. However, a closer analysis of their conversation suggests that Muriel’s attitude is not a result of indifference, but of deeper problems with communication itself.

From the very beginning of their phone conversation, meaningful expression is hindered by certain problematic features of the language itself. When she first picks up the line, “A woman’s voice came through” asking, “‘Muriel? Is that you?’” (4). She immediately “turned the receiver slightly away from her ear” and then answers, “‘Yes, Mother. How are you?’” (4). Her mother proceeds to ask if she is alright, and Muriel again “increased the angle between the receiver and her ear” before saying, “‘Mother, darling, don’t yell at me. I can hear you just fine’”

(4). Her mother's attempt to communicate comes across as uncomfortable noise and causes Muriel to recoil. As her mother proceeds to ask "Are you alright" for the third time, Muriel reacts negatively to the repetition of the question in addition to the volume. Muriel replies, "I'm fine. Stop asking me that, please" (4). Together, the volume of her mother's voice and the repetition of her questions indicate an excess of language that, instead of conveying the sincerity and depth of her concern, makes her worry feel like an attack, from which Muriel instinctively retreats.

Muriel continues to avoid her mother's intrusive questioning as she begins her inquiry about Seymour: if he drove responsibly, if he behaved himself in the car, and if he behaves himself on the beach. Although Muriel repeatedly insists that everything is fine and that Seymour is absolutely harmless, her mother reports that Muriel's father has spoken with a psychiatrist who believes there is "a very great chance... that Seymour may *completely* lose control of himself" (6). Again, Muriel's mother conveys an extreme level of concern, whereas Muriel herself seems not to be bothered. The reader cannot determine which viewpoint is correct, since their discussion of Seymour's actions throughout the conversation is continually vague. The mother reports that her husband told the doctor "everything ... The trees. That business with the window. Those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away" (6). These ambiguous references to Seymour's prior misconduct and their deference to the opinions of men like Muriel's father and various male psychiatrists show that these women lack the knowledge or experience to communicate about such problems effectively. Furthermore, their conversation about Seymour is repeatedly interrupted as Muriel skips indiscriminately among more frivolous topics (Lane 22). For example, when Muriel tells her mother that there is a psychiatrist in the hotel who inquired about Seymour's health, she begins explaining, "after

Bingo he and his wife asked me if I wouldn't like to join them for a drink. So I did'" (8). Rather than continuing to relate the doctor's comments, Muriel inserts an unnecessary judgment about the doctor's "horrible" wife, and asks her mother, "You remember that awful dinner dress we saw in Bonwit's window? ... She had it on. And all hips'" (8). Also scattered throughout the conversation are remarks about Muriel's blue coat that she had padding taken out of, her terrible sunburn, the sequined fashions this year, and the guests in the dining room who "'look as if they drove down in a truck'" (9). This meaningless and often snobbish chatter shows that these materialistic concerns are always in the foreground of their minds. To some readers, this may confirm Lane's belief that Muriel is "basically corrupt" (22) and that she and her mother care very little about the real cause of Seymour's problems.

An alternative reading of this conversation proves not that Muriel is indifferent or uncaring, but that she purposefully steers the conversation toward this kind of frivolous chatter about clothing in order to deflect attention away from Seymour and protect him from her mother's harsh judgment. Warren French claims that while Muriel may be "gossipy and overly concerned about trivial material things," she is certainly not corrupt or uncaring (80). The conversation with her mother reveals that she is loyal to her husband, has waited for him throughout the war, and is "willing to defend vigorously both herself and Seymour from her parents' meddling" (French 81). Muriel's irrelevant insertions about dinner dresses and sequins may be her only mode of defense, since her constant insistence that she everything is alright and her very direct statement that she is "'not afraid of Seymour'" do little to subdue her mother (10). Whether this superficial commentary is meant to intentionally derail the conversation and protect Seymour or reveal the extent of their materialism, it demonstrates that while these two women find it very easy to discuss fashion and social life, they struggle to communicate about more

serious issues. Like Sergeant X's wife and mother-in-law, who send meaningless letters about falling restaurant service and cashmere yarn, neither Muriel nor her mother has any way to understand or empathize with a soldier who has endured the hell of war.

Because Muriel and her mother seem to adhere to the larger society's way of thinking, the reader can also infer from their inability to empathize with Seymour that he is equally misunderstood by the majority of the people in this superficial environment. In "The Rare Quixotic Gesture," Ihab Hassan identifies Seymour Glass as one of Salinger's many sensitive and responsive outsiders, like Sergeant X or Esmé, who exists in opposition to the many "vulgarians" and isolated from the rest of mankind (140). As he argues, "The response of these outsiders and victims to the dull or angry world about them is not simply one of withdrawal" (140). Seymour, for one, cannot simply escape to a quiet strip of Miami Beach and be content. Instead, the response of these outsiders "often takes the form of a strange, quixotic gesture.... It is a gesture at once of pure expression and of expectation, of protest and prayer, of aesthetic form and spiritual content" (140). Hassan goes on to explain that this gesture is often religious and seeks to embody some form of spiritual truth. Most importantly, the quixotic gesture is frequently based in language. What Hassan fails to account for, however, is the excess of language already produced in this environment. Muriel herself identifies this problem when she explains to her mother that she tried to discuss Seymour's behavior with a psychiatrist staying in the hotel, but they "could hardly talk, it was so noisy in there" (8). The phone calls of ninety-seven advertising men engaged in business and the frivolous chatter of about sequined dresses create a persistent and uncomfortable buzzing in the atmosphere, like the "uncomradely scratching of many fountain pens" (88), over which the singular voice of someone like Seymour cannot be heard. Therefore, in order for Seymour's "quixotic gesture" (140) to make a real or

lasting impact, he must reach beyond spoken language and find an alternative means of expressing himself.

The reader learns of one such linguistic gesture during the phone conversation between Muriel and her mother. In an attempt to bridge the emotional distance between himself and his wife, Seymour has given Muriel a book of German poetry. Muriel has misplaced the book and is trying to locate it while on the phone. She asks her mother, ““You remember that book he sent me from Germany? You know—those German poems. What’d I *do* with it?”” (5). She explains that Seymour asked her about it during their drive to the beach and was upset that she had not read it. Her mother seems shocked by this and says, ““It was in *German!*”” to which Muriel replies, ““He said the poems happened to be written by the *only great poet of the century*. He said I should’ve bought a translation or something. Or *learned the language*, if you please”” (6). The discussion about this book is brief and neither the title nor the name of the poet is revealed during the story, though the assertion that he is the “*only great poet of the century*” practically demands that readers join Muriel in the search for the missing work.

As explained previously, James Finn Cotter agrees with many critics who have identified the unnamed poet as Rainer Maria Rilke, and argues that a careful analysis of Rilke’s work will provide both Muriel and the reader with a better understanding of Seymour and an explanation for his suicide in the final lines of the story. He compares the contents of Salinger’s *Nine Stories* with Rilke’s *Book of Images*, and notes many similarities between Seymour and the speaker of one poem, “The Song of the Suicide.” In this poem, Rilke writes:

They hold out the spoon to me,
that spoonful of life
No, I don’t want any more,

only let me vomit

.....

For at least a thousand years now

I shall need to diet. (qtd in Cotter 86)

This poem criticizes the culture of excess and consumerism that outsiders like Seymour reject. It also offers a new perspective on Seymour's personal crisis, and suggests that Seymour himself "has become so glutted with this experience that he can no longer participate in the world outside himself" (Galloway 35). Like Sergeant X, who consumes letters and books excessively and then becomes sick after hearing Corporal Clay's hypocritical and insensitive statements, Seymour can't take any more of "this nauseating existence. A phony life only makes him vomit" (Cotter 88). By the end of the story, "Seymour is also ready for a thousand-year diet" (89), and will self-destruct in order to escape the phony world which he detests.

By offering this book to Muriel, Seymour hopes to communicate his frustration with the materialism and superficiality of the world and express how his own experiences have made him sick, while simultaneously offering Muriel an alternative mode of existence. By encouraging her to explore more imaginative, poetic, and spiritual pathways, he hopes to steer her away from the consumer lifestyle she has been living. He chooses to convey this message through this book because, as previously stated, the excess of worthless noise in their environment has made it impossible for Seymour to communicate with his wife through speech. Since Muriel is an avid consumer, it is possible that Seymour offers this book with the hope that it will appeal to her impulse to acquire material objects, and that she may be more able to receive his message if it is disguised as a commodity. Ultimately, however, Seymour's gesture fails to initiate healing communication between husband and wife for a number of reasons.

Unlike Esmé's gift to Sergeant X, which demonstrates her genuine concern and desire to understand X's experience of the war, Seymour's gesture is based on self-interest rather than empathy, and does not consider the needs of his recipient. Though Seymour must be aware that his wife cannot read German, he offers her the book in its original language. His later suggestion that she should have purchased a translation herself or even "*learned the language*" is obviously unreasonable, emphasizing the selfish nature of his gesture (6). In addition to ignoring his wife's need for an English translation, Seymour's gesture is also problematic because it is not based on mutual interests. Seymour expects Muriel to read the book simply because it was "*written by the only great poet of the century*" (6), but based on the narrator's description of Muriel, it seems very unlikely that she herself has any interest in poetry. Without any indication of why the book is personally meaningful to Seymour, she has no reason to attempt to meet his expectation and fails to recognize its value to him until he asks her about the book during their drive to the hotel. Prompted by his questioning, Muriel begins to search for the book but cannot find it in her luggage. During their phone conversation, her mother explains that she never packed it.

Though the book did not find its way into her suitcase, Muriel *has* found room in her luggage for two other symbolic objects. Comparing these to the book of German poetry allows the reader to fully recognize the problematic nature of Seymour's gift. The first of these two objects is a "jar of Bronze" which Muriel's mother has packed into her suitcase in a quixotic gesture of her own (7). She offers it as her own kind of "lucky talisman," in order to protect Muriel from the sun's damaging rays ("For Esmé" 113). This object, meant to preserve her physical beauty, is more in line with Muriel's priorities than a book of poetry. She recognizes its practical value immediately; therefore, she accepts this gesture and meets her mother's

expectations by using the Bronze, although it does not prevent her from burning. The second symbolic object is a “women’s pocket-size magazine” with an article titled ““Sex is Fun—or Hell,”” which she reads while waiting to use the phone (3). Like the jar of Bronze, this object appeals to Muriel’s interests more than the book of poetry does. Additionally, this magazine helps the reader measure Muriel’s ability to engage with written language. Unlike the German poetry, this “women’s magazine” is the kind of reading that society intends women like Muriel to take part in. The “pocket size” of the magazine symbolizes the triviality of its contents, which Muriel finds more appealing and is more capable of understanding than a book of poetry written in a foreign language.

The final issue with Seymour’s offering of language is that it does not invite a response. As “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” demonstrates, written language is most valuable when it invites the reader to reply and express himself in return. In order for Seymour’s gift of poetry to successfully bring husband and wife closer together, they must be able to engage in a dialogue with one another. Since Muriel is unable to read the book, she is also unable to respond. Though her search for the book does suggest that Muriel cares about her husband and wants to please him, even if she were able to meet his expectations by locating and reading the book of poetry, the subsequent section of the story shows that Seymour denies her the opportunity to respond by putting physical distance between himself and his wife. Rather than opening the door for healing communication, the inconsiderate nature of Seymour’s gesture, as well as Muriel’s failure to recognize the significance of this material object and inability to read it, further emphasizes the distance between them.

The first section of the story reveals a great deal about the character of Muriel and her mother, the problems of communicating in this squalid environment, and their inability to

understand or empathize with Seymour's experiences. However, the "dramatically subjective observations" offered to the reader during their phone call provide little to no substantial information about the protagonist himself (Lane 22). While the emotional and psychological distance between Seymour and his wife is great, the distance between Seymour and the readers is even greater, because as Lane writes, "our first light on Seymour passes" through the "rather dense filter" of this first section (22). In the following sections of the story, the space between Seymour and the reader shortens significantly as we encounter some of his perplexing behavior first hand. The distance between Seymour and his wife, however, grows exponentially as Salinger physically separates them within text by a section break and a setting outside of the hotel.

Following the section break, readers finally meet Seymour himself, lying on the beach in a terry cloth robe as a very young girl, Sybil Carpenter, runs excitedly up to him. Where he is lying on the beach, Seymour is "about a quarter of a mile" away from "the area reserved for hotel guests" (11). Since he has chosen to walk further down the beach to lie alone, rather than sit in the beach chairs outside the hotel with the women discussing silk handkerchiefs and drinking martinis, the reader can assume that Seymour intends to escape the consumerism and frivolity of that environment. He finds a space for himself that is not only separate, but inherently oppositional to the one his wife occupies. While Muriel polishes her nails inside the hotel, surrounded by her expensive clothes and an excess of advertising men, Seymour is outside in a calming and natural environment, alone except for the curious young girl who has taken a liking to him. The opposition between these two spaces further emphasizes the disunity between Seymour and his wife, as well as Seymour's alienation from the majority of modern society.

Seymour's conversation with Sybil also reveals that beyond a lack of understanding or empathy, there is a direct conflict between husband and wife. When Sybil asks where Muriel is, he answers, "'That's hard to say, Sybil. She may be in any one of a thousand places. At the hairdresser's. Having her hair dyed pink. Or making dolls for poor children, in her room'" (12). Seymour's sarcastic answer is very critical of Muriel, reminding the reader of the nickname he has given her: "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948" (5). Many critics use these harsh words from Seymour to support their extremely negative interpretations of Muriel, and others, like Charles V. Genthe, go so far as to blame her for Seymour's suicide at the end of the story. As Genthe writes, their "marriage has been six years of tigerish pride, vanity, and selfishness" (170), and claims that the suicide is the result of a prolonged marital conflict. Although the earlier passages do illustrate Muriel's inability to empathize with her husband's experiences and Seymour's disdain for her materialistic concerns, the reader cannot solely blame Muriel for the disunity between husband and wife or for Seymour's decision to commit suicide. The reader must also recognize that while Seymour has directed these critical statements toward his wife, they illustrate problems that he perceives in consumer society as a whole, not just in his wife. Furthermore, the reader should not assume that Seymour's comments are a reaction to years of unhappy marriage and constant conflict. Salinger does not provide much concrete information about their relationship prior to this vacation, but what he does include within the pages of this story suggests that Seymour's sarcastic response to Sybil's question may be motivated by events which have only recently occurred, rather than six years of pride and selfishness (Genthe 170).

What the reader does know, based on the concrete information in the story, is that Seymour has gifted Muriel a book of poetry by a writer who happens to be "'the *only great poet of the century*'" (6), which he values greatly. During their drive to the hotel, only a day or two

prior to these events, Seymour asked Muriel if she had read the book and is upset that she had not. While the reader knows that Muriel is in her room searching for the misplaced book, indicating that she does care about her husband and is trying to reconnect with him, Seymour's answer that she must be "At the hairdresser's. Having her hair dyed pink" (12). This proves that he is unaware his wife is putting forth this effort. The sarcastic and disparaging nature of this remark may be directly motivated by his disappointment that Muriel has not met his expectations, and more pertinently, that he has failed to communicate his feelings by offering her the book.

Having been unable to express his frustrations and sense of alienation to the woman he shares his life with, Seymour instead hopes to deliver his message to Sybil and performs another "quixotic gesture" (Hassan, 170) by telling her an imaginative tale about bananafish. As Seymour announces, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll see if we can catch a bananafish" (13). As they waded out into the water, Seymour keeping Sybil balanced on the raft, he says that bananafish lead tragic lives and explains;

"Well, they swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary looking fish when they swim *in*. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas... Naturally, after that they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again." (14)

Salinger critics offer several common interpretations of the bananafish story, and most agree that this represents Seymour's frustration with the consumerism and excess in the post-war American culture. Cotter analyzes the symbolism of the bananafish in conjunction with metaphors from other stories in "A Perfect Day." One of these is the tale of *Little Black Sambo*, which Sybil asks Seymour if he has read. In this story, a young boy surrenders his nice clothing to four tigers, to

escape being eaten. The greedy tigers chase one another around a tree, fighting over the clothing, until they melt into tiger butter. Cotter writes, “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” (86). The tigers and bananafish represent people like Muriel, her mother, and Mrs. Carpenter, who “overexpose themselves to the good life: too much sun, drinking, phoning, buying and selling” (Cotter 86). Like fish that die trapped inside a banana hole and tigers that melt away, their excessive consumption will cause these spiritual tramps to self-destruct.

Just as Esmé’s letter points to the absurdity of war while simultaneously saving Sergeant X from its destructive forces, Seymour’s offering of language exposes the dangers of vanity and overconsumption in order to guide Sybil away from the snares of modern life and along the path toward spiritual redemption. In order for this to be effective, however, Sybil must reciprocate with a gesture of her own, because as Hassan explains, the quixotic gesture is one of both “expression and expectation” (140). Seymour expects that Sybil will imagine with him, and participate in the search for bananafish. When she gleefully reports that she has indeed seen a bananafish with six bananas in his mouth, Seymour “suddenly picked up one of Sybil’s wet feet, which were drooping over the end of the float, and kissed the arch” (17). By spotting one of the gluttonous bananafish, Sybil has met Seymour’s expectation and proven that although she is the kind of child who stomps on sandcastles and pokes little dogs with sticks (15), and wears a bathing suit meant for a girl ten years older, she retains enough of her childhood innocence to be capable of imagination. Seymour kisses her foot out of gratitude and the belief that Sybil has accepted his gesture; if Sybil can spot a bananafish, she should be able to recognize and avoid the squalid practices of consumer society. James Finn Cotter believes that Seymour has

completed his task by communicating “the essential message” to Sybil, and therefore “Salinger’s hero can proceed straight to his death” (89). However, once Seymour pushes Sybil back to shore, she says goodbye and then promptly runs off “without regret in the direction of the hotel” (17), likely to collect the olive that her mother promised to save from her martini glass (11). Running without regret back toward the hotel, the real life version of a banana hole, suggests that although she is still “bright with innocence,” as Gary Lane says, she is “already tarnishing” (25). Seymour sees in her “the seedling of a future Muriel” (Lane 25). Despite her young age and ability to participate in the imaginary world which Seymour creates, a lifetime of martini olives will likely make a greater impact on Sybil than the spiritual lesson contained in Seymour’s tale. This suggests that his gesture may fail to redeem Sybil from a future of materialism and unconscious consumption. The second section ends here, with Sybil’s departure and Seymour’s failed attempt.

In the third and final section of the story, Seymour leaves the beach and returns to his hotel room where Muriel is sleeping. This is the first moment in the text when husband and wife occupy the same space, and yet Salinger continues to emphasize the emotional distance and ideological distance between them through his description of the room. When Seymour enters, he is greeted by the smells “of new calfskin luggage and nail-lacquer remover,” which remind both Seymour and the reader of society’s inescapable consumerism (18). There is no physical evidence that Seymour has ever set foot in this room before or that a married couple stays there; there are separate twin beds, the space is filled with a woman’s clothes, and as the narrator points out in the opening passage, Muriel’s wedding rings are in the bathroom rather than on her hand (4). The one tangible item that should represent Seymour, the book of poetry, is missing. Having failed to communicate his message through this artifact of language, Seymour cannot rescue

himself or Muriel from the bananafish hole that is modern life, and so in the final line of the story he takes a gun from the suitcase, “sat on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple” (18). Rather than falling into the calm, restorative silence of sleep, as victorious hero of Salinger’s “For Esmé” does, the defeated Seymour escapes into the permanent silence of death.

4. *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*

Through early stories such as “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948) and “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” (1950) Salinger establishes a narrative pattern in which characters first become overwhelmed by the squalor of their environment and an excess of meaningless language and feel alienated from the people around them, and second, attempt to combat this alienation by communicating through constructed modes such as letter writing. The end result, in both of these early stories, is that characters reach a point of silence; either healing silence that results from the triumph of successful communication, or destructive silence that coincides with a failure to connect through language. In later works such as *Franny* (1955), *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* (1955), *Zooey* (1957), and *Seymour: An Introduction* (1959), this pattern is still recognizable but has evolved and been complicated by the blurred boundaries between the texts, variations on narrative form, and fractured timelines, all of which Salinger employs in the process of building the larger narrative of the Glass family. Collectively and individually, the Glass family members attempt to survive as sensitive and intellectual outsiders in an insensitive, consumer-driven society. They continually try and fail to seek spiritual guidance and connect with those around them by relying on artifacts such as letters and diaries. Salinger, however, seems to have abandoned the idea that these objects have any potential to counteract the problems of the modern world. Instead, the content and form of these later works explore the

possibility that language, especially materialized language, is an insufficient tool and that meaningful silence may be the ideal state in which individuals may reach a better understanding of the world and one's relationship to those around them.

Although it was first published in *The New Yorker* seven years after "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" appeared there, *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* travels backwards through the Glass family history to Seymour's wedding day in 1942. Unlike "A Perfect Day," which Salinger writes through the perspective of an anonymous, objective third person narrator, this novelette is told through the eyes of the second oldest Glass sibling and Seymour's closest relation, Buddy. At the most basic level, *Raise High* is Buddy's account of Seymour and Muriel's marriage and the groom's failure to appear at the church for the ceremony. In his efforts to find an explanation for his brother's disappearance, Buddy turns to several tangible pieces of language, artifacts of the Glass family history, which he reproduces in the text. In this way, "Buddy's role is thus both verbal (as narrator) and transmissive in the sense that he collects the various Glass communications and conveys them to the reader" (Seed 82). While the excerpts from letters, books, and diary entries do provide some information about the Glass family and Seymour's individual past to the reader, they fail to help Buddy himself fully understand his brother's behavior, or to reconcile his own knowledge of Seymour's character with the harsh judgments of the other wedding guests. As he struggles to absorb the messages from these letters, diary entries, quotes scrawled on the bathroom mirror, notes passed back and forth, and the often accusatory or gossipy verbal input from the wedding guests, Buddy becomes overwhelmed and increasingly uncertain of how to handle the situation. Amidst this flood of language he finds solace only in the company of Muriel's deaf-mute great uncle, whose silent exuberance Buddy interprets as an indicator of the wisdom and peace that he himself seeks. By

the end of his account Buddy seems to have embraced the possibility that silence and a blank sheet of paper may offer more insight than any form of written or spoken word, signifying Salinger's own desire to reach beyond language.

At the start of this novelette, Buddy recalls a night from his adolescence when he and Seymour tried to soothe their youngest sibling, Franny, who was ten months old at the time and sick with the mumps. When she does not respond to a bottle, the seventeen-year-old Seymour surveyed the bookshelves of their room with a flashlight in search of what Buddy refers to as a "good prose pacifier" to read to the crying Franny (5). Seymour's decision to read to Franny shows that the Glasses, particularly Seymour, value language and literary expression. It also provides another example of how characters in Salinger's fiction use language as a tool to convey love and combat despair. This particular example takes on greater significance in the history of the Glass family because Seymour models this behavior for his younger siblings, who later mimic his behavior as they search for other "prose pacifiers" that might soothe both their physical and spiritual ailments. Franny, for one, "swears she remembers Seymour reading" the story that night (4), and when she gets older, takes another of Seymour's books as a talisman to combat her frustration with the artificiality of collegiate life (*Franny*). Seymour's actions obviously made an impression on Buddy as well, who chooses to reproduce the tale for the reader as a kind of prologue to his central narrative of the wedding day and a guide for interpreting the events that follow.

The book that Seymour selects from the shelf is his favorite Taoist tale, which describes a man named Kao who has been employed to search for a "superlative horse" (4). Although he initially seems to have no practical knowledge of horses, Kao is regarded as the most valuable man for the job because during his search he keeps in mind "the spiritual mechanism" and

“forgets the homely details; intent on inward qualities, he loses sight of the external” (4).

Because of this, “he has it in him to judge something better than horses” (4). This story illuminates a belief that is central to Salinger’s body of work and to the general philosophy of the Glasses: in order to understand the world, one must look beyond superficial or material qualities that many members of modern society prioritize. Seymour is the primary champion of this idea within the Glass family, and his siblings adopt similar viewpoints. Buddy appears eager to follow Seymour’s example, but in the account following this tale, his ability to look beyond the external details is challenged by the events of the day and the conflicting information that he receives in various forms. He questions his brother’s motivations and judgment, particularly his indiscriminating love for his new in-laws. As Buddy reflects on these events, thirteen years after the wedding and seven years after Seymour’s suicide, he realizes, “I haven’t been able to think of anybody whom I’d care to send out to look for horses in his stead” (5). By comparing him to the gifted horse selector, Buddy respectfully acknowledges Seymour’s unique perspective on the world and his invaluable understanding of one’s inner spirit.

In addition to validating Seymour’s viewpoint on the world, Buddy’s decision to replicate the Taoist tale acts as subtle appeal to the reader. He asks them to look beyond the basic facts of the wedding day and avoid passing judgment on his brother as the wedding guests do; to recognize Seymour’s inner spirit and appreciate him as a “superlative” creature (4). The tale also encourages the reader to avoid passing judgment on Muriel’s family and wedding guests, although they do not hesitate to condemn Seymour for his failure to behave like “somebody *normal*” (39). In order to accomplish this, both Buddy and the reader must navigate a seemingly endless stream of communication, in various forms, which conveys conflicting information about the groom and his past.

Following this Taoist tale and his reflection on Seymour's absence, Buddy begins narrating his experience of his brother's wedding. He transports the reader to "the morning of either May 22nd or 3rd" in 1942, when the first piece of communication about the wedding was "placed on the foot of my cot in the post hospital at Fort Benning" (8). This piece of communication, an artifact of Glass family history, is a letter from his sister Boo Boo, which Buddy also transcribes "verbatim" into the text of his story (8). Boo Boo writes to inform Buddy that "Seymour is getting married—yes, *married*," to a girl who she claims is "a zero in my opinion but terrific-looking" (8). Since none of the other family members are able to make it to the wedding, Boo Boo insists that Buddy must be present. She begs, "*Please* get there, Buddy. He weighs about as much as a cat and he has that ecstatic look on his face that you can't talk to" (9). This initial correspondence about Seymour's wedding and his intended bride provides conflicting information to both Buddy and Salinger's readers. On one hand, Boo Boo expresses her disapproval of Muriel because "she hardly said two words the night I met her. Just sat and smiled and smoked" (8). On the other hand, Boo Boo's comment about the ecstatic look on Seymour's face suggests that Seymour is incredibly happy with Muriel, despite the shortcomings that his sister perceives. Although Boo Boo provides very little evidence to justify her impressions, the disparity between her evaluation of Muriel and Seymour's intense happiness raises questions about the relationship between the bride and groom and Seymour's state of mind. Near the end of the letter Boo Boo adds, "Maybe it's going to be perfectly alright, but I hate 1942," leaving Buddy and the reader confused and apprehensive about what to expect from the wedding day.

The day of the wedding was, as Buddy writes, "a day, God knows, not only of rampant signs and symbols but of wildly extensive communication" (64). From the moment Buddy sets

foot in the “jam-packed and stifling hot” brownstone where the ceremony is meant to take place, he is confronted with an excess of noise: the enthusiastic “stage-whispers” of his neighbor, the organ music which veered “peculiarly, almost desperately, at one point, from Bach to early Rogers and Hart,” and his own frequent coughing spells (12). As the day progresses and the settings change, the amount and volume of noise surrounding Buddy increases and he struggles to absorb a flood of information that is transmitted to him through both verbal and written forms. After waiting in the brownstone for “an hour and twenty minutes past what seemed to be all reasonable hope,” the bride and her guests submit to the fact that Seymour is not going to show up for the ceremony and begin exiting the building (13). Buddy eventually finds himself sitting in a crowded car, provided to guests by the bride’s parents, accompanied by various friends and relatives of Muriel who loudly and aggressively express their anger towards Seymour, whom they have never met. In “Almost the Voices of Silence: The Later Novelettes of J.D. Salinger,” Ihab Hassan reviews Buddy’s lengthy account of this ride and writes that Salinger “has slyly created a situation rich with confusion and misunderstanding. The characters are strangers to one another. The meaning of the event they are seeking to interpret is as unknown to them as is its outcome. And the subject of calumny, Seymour, eludes them entirely” (8). Muriel’s family and friends deal with their confusion by gossiping about Seymour’s family, sexuality, and possibly “schizoid personality” (37). In many ways, the conversation about Seymour during this car ride resembles discussions which take place in “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor,” where the boorish Clay and his girlfriend Loretta exchange letters about Sergeant X and attempt to analyze his psyche despite their ignorance, and “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” where Muriel and her mother reveal their materialistic concerns and lack of empathy while evaluating Seymour’s abnormal behavior over the phone. While communication in these earlier stories is often wrought

with insensitivity and superficial concerns, the dialogue in this lengthy scene of *Raise High* presents additional problems, due, in part, to the aggressive nature of one very prominent voice.

The spearhead of the verbal attack against Seymour is Muriel's Matron of Honor, Edie Burwick, whom Buddy describes as "a one-woman mob" (23) and "bayonetlike" (29) because of her unapologetic personality. In addition to her demeanor, Edie's combative tone, "shrill" voice (39), and the sheer number of insults and accusations she hurls toward Seymour and the Glass family fill the already cramped space of the car with an excess of language, creating a squalid environment that stifles Buddy's individual voice and hinders his ability to either find his own explanation for Seymour's actions or communicate his perspective. Initially, Edie's contempt for Seymour is harsh yet understandable given the situation, and seems motivated by genuine concern for the distraught Muriel. The conversation becomes malicious, however, when Edie reports the opinions of Muriel's mother, Mrs. Fedder, who claimed earlier that morning that Seymour "was a latent homosexual and that he was basically afraid of marriage" (36). After sitting quietly for some time and desperately hoping not to be recognized as Seymour's brother, Buddy interrupts Edie with an "unsteady" voice (38) to question this assessment, indicating that although the conversation has made him self-conscious about his relationship to the groom, he does feel the need to contest such accusations. Edie reacts to Buddy's question as a challenge, and becomes more aggressive in her attack not only against Seymour, but Buddy as well. She responds to his questions "sharply, faintly hostilely" by asking, "What?" and giving "an eloquent snort" (38). She then appeals to Muriel's aunt, Mrs. Silsburn, to agree with her, asking if Seymour's actions sound like those of a "normal" man (38), or like those of "somebody that should be stuck in some booby hatch" (39). By encouraging the other passengers to participate in her condemnation of Seymour, she further isolates Buddy and silences the single dissenting

voice. Buddy, who was already uncomfortable or “unsteady” (38), feels a “sudden violent impulse to jump out of the car and break into a sprint, in any direction at all” (39). Buddy’s impulse to flee reminds the reader of Sergeant X’s desire to leave the barracks and wander through the town in order to escape the persistent, “uncomradely” scratching of pens (“For Esmé” 88), as well as Seymour’s choice to lounge a quarter mile down the beach, away from the gossiping women and advertising men who overwhelm the space of the hotel with squalid speech (“A Perfect Day” 11). These three examples from Salinger’s fiction demonstrate how language can encourage destructive distance, rather than enable constructive communication.

In addition to making Buddy feel uncomfortable and isolated, and triggering his impulse to jump from his seat and sprint away, the hostile atmosphere within the car and the Matron of Honor’s combative speech make him question his relationship with his brother and, by extension, his own identity. Almost immediately after Buddy enters the car, the accusatory remarks and third-party reports about Seymour’s bizarre behavior conflict with his own understanding of his brother’s character, and he confesses to feeling “a small wave of prejudice against the missing groom ... a just perceptible little whitecap of censure for his unexplained absenteeism” (29). He tries to combat this feeling as the car drives on, and although he does challenge the assessment of Seymour as a homosexual “schizoid” (38), the forcefulness of the conversation overwhelms his ability to defend his brother any further. Silence and anonymity are his best protection from Edie’s hostility, until she announces her suspicion that he is Seymour’s brother and bluntly asks, ““Are you?”” (42). With his face burning, Buddy reluctantly answers, ““Yes”” (42). His hesitance to reveal his connection with the despised groom seems motivated not only by his obvious desire to avoid being the target of another attack from the Matron of Honor, but also by uncertainty about his relationship with Seymour and the strength of their

familial bond, which has been worn down by the confusing events of the day and the conversation inside the car. This uncertainty also seems to impact Buddy's confidence in his own identity. When Edie asks him to confirm that he is in fact Seymour's brother, Buddy notes, "My voice must have sounded a trifle rented when I answered" (42), signaling self-doubt and a lack of autonomy. After confessing his relationship to Seymour, Buddy glances backwards "at the fifth passenger—the tiny elderly man—to see if his insularity was still intact. It was" (42). Upon seeing that the old man had not reacted to this revelation, Buddy claims, "No one's indifference has ever been such a comfort to me" (42). The acceptance and solidarity he perceives in the silence of Muriel's deaf-mute uncle help Buddy to withstand the remainder of the car ride, as Edie continues to berate Seymour and the rest of the Glass family.

The lengthy section of the narrative containing the car ride comes to a close as another of Edie's condemning remarks is "interrupted, suddenly and unequivocally, by the most piercing, most deafening, most *impure* E-flat blast," coming from a "drum and bugle corps, composed of what seemed to be a hundred or more tone-deaf Sea Scouts" who were part of a parade (44). Buddy narrates, "For an eternity of seconds, it seemed, the din was all but incredible," drowning out all of the voices in the car (45). Although the passengers are disturbed by the cacophony of the parade, both Buddy and the reader may feel relieved that something has brought an end to Edie's tirade, as well as the flood of squalid communication about Seymour and the Glasses, which is challenging to navigate. This welcome moment of transition in the narrative also illustrates Salinger's thematic use of silence and noise. As the passengers make plans to escape the heat of the crowded car by shouting at one another over the noise of the parade, Buddy once again takes note of the deaf-mute uncle's calm demeanor, which seems to be unshakable. Buddy writes a brief message on his notepad, inviting the man to join the group as they seek out a

telephone and some air conditioning. The uncle reads the note, grins, and returns it with his one-word reply: “‘Delighted’” (49). Upon reading this response, Buddy narrates, “I quickly looked over at the great writer and tried to show by my expression that all of us in the car knew a great poem when we saw one, and were grateful” (49). Contrasted with the shouting passengers, whose voices cannot compete with the sounds of the parade and only contribute to the excess of noise, the deaf-mute uncle demonstrates an economy of expression in this singular offering of language, which is admirable to Buddy.

After the passengers “abandon ship, as it were” (49), they look for a place from which to try calling Muriel, but have difficulty locating a phone. For reasons that even Buddy does not understand clearly, he invites the group back to the nearby apartment he shares with Seymour. Though the setting changes, the hostile language that filled the space of the car follows Buddy into his home. As they cool off in the air conditioned apartment, one guest calls attention to a collection of photographs from the years that Seymour, Buddy, and their siblings spent performing on the radio show, “It’s a Wise Child,” during their childhoods. For Buddy, these pictures evoke “A certain amount of low family pride” (58), but the mention of the radio program inspires Edie to begin yet another rant, in which she blames Seymour’s childhood for turning him into an exhibitionist and making him “‘absolutely unfit for marriage’” (59). She argues that his piece of the past supports Mrs. Fedder’s analysis of Seymour, and explains “‘I mean you lead an absolutely freakish life like that when you’re a kid, and so naturally you never learn to grow up. You never learn to relate to normal people or anything’” (59). Once again, this evaluation of Seymour’s character resembles the insensitive and ill-informed psychological analysis which Corporal Clay presents to Sergeant X in “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor.” When X can endure no more of Clay’s ignorance, he physically purges the squalid ideas that he

have been fed to him by vomiting into the wastebasket (110). After several hours in the company of Edie and the other guests, Buddy cannot stand to hear another word spoken against his brother and must also expel these hurtful ideas. Rather than vomiting, Buddy symbolically purges these ideas along with his own perspective on Seymour, which he has held inside for too long, by commencing his own tirade. As he narrates, “I said I didn’t give a good God damn what Mrs. Fedder had to say on the Subject of Seymour. Or for that matter, what any professional dilettante or amateur bitch had to say” (59). After tearing down the evaluations of Mrs. Fedder, her analyst, and Edie, Buddy concludes by praising his brother, saying that “not one God-damn person... had ever seen him for what he really was. A poet, for God’s sake. And I mean a *poet*” (60). Despite his zeal, Buddy knows that he cannot force his guests to appreciate his perspective or recognize Seymour as a poet and a “superlative animal,” as the Taoist tale offered at the start of *Raise High* begs the reader to do (5).

In order to understand the impact that Buddy’s outburst has on his fellow wedding guests as well as the reader, several formal and linguistic characteristics of his speech must be examined. First, it is important to note that his speech is fairly compact, compared to the collective words exchanged between Edie and the other guests throughout the length of the car ride and her final verbal attack in the apartment. It is contained in merely one paragraph of text, and rather than quoting his words exactly, as he does when presenting the lengthy dialogue between other characters, Buddy paraphrases for the reader. In these ways, the language that Buddy offers in defense of Seymour is unlike much of the language in *Raise High*, which could be characterized as squalid because it mirrors the problem of excess in the modern world. However, Buddy’s outburst is extremely problematic for other reasons and therefore cannot be considered constructive discourse.

The physical reaction which Buddy experiences in this scene indicates that he recognizes the failure of his emphatic speech. He writes, “I stopped right there, thank God. My heart was banging away something terrible” (60). Rather than feeling relieved, after purging the negative thoughts about Seymour and vehemently defending his own perspective, Buddy feels ill. He also refers to his monologue as a “polluted little stream of invective” and “the stuff that heart attacks are made of” (60). His speech is literally “polluted” in the sense that it is filled with profanity and insults, but it is also contaminated by frustration and resentment. The most problematic aspect of this speech is that unlike healthy communication, which invites a response, this “stream of invective” is intended to put an end to the discussion and make the audience, particularly Edie, finally shut her mouth on the subject of Seymour. Buddy knows that the others would not be receptive to his thoughts or open to the possibility of a civilized conversation, and so he is not interested in their response. He admits, “I have no idea at all how my guests reacted to my outbreak” because rather than meeting their eyes after he is done speaking, he looks around the room, “between and through and past the immediate faces” of the others (60). Following this speech, Buddy quickly turns his attention to more practical matters. Regaining some composure, he offers to make some cold drinks and shows Edie to the telephone so that she may call Muriel’s family.

As Buddy shows Edie into the bedroom where the telephone is, he scans the room and finds the first of two important artifacts of language left behind by other members of the Glass family. The first is Seymour’s diary, which he notices lying on top of Seymour’s valises and “thought ought not to be left alone in the room with the Matron of Honor” (63). He slips the diary under his arm and carries into the bathroom, where he plans to read a few passages before hiding it in the laundry hamper. Upon entering the bathroom, he notices a second artifact: a

message for Seymour, written on the mirror by their sister Boo Boo. This discovery is not unusual, because as Buddy explains, “it was our perhaps cloying but serviceable custom to leave messages for one another on the medicine-cabinet mirror, using a moist sliver of soap to write with” (64). Reflecting on this habit as well as the earlier events of the day, he states: “It was a day, God knows, not only of rampant signs and symbols but of wildly extensive communication via the written word” (64); therefore he should have anticipated finding additional “signs and symbols” in his own apartment. Unlike the other “wildly extensive” and primarily hostile communication in this story, Buddy expects that the diary and message from Boo Boo will counteract his growing confusion and despair. Having been trained by Seymour to seek comfort in the written word, he looks to these artifacts of language to serve as a “good prose pacifier” (5), much like the Taoist tale that Seymour read to the infant Franny when she was sick with mumps. Unfortunately, neither of these artifacts of language produces the desired effect.

As he stands before the mirror analyzing the wedding blessing intended for Seymour, Buddy first considers the visual impact of the message and provides a brief but unnecessary description of the handwriting. He explains that the writing is “unmistakably” Boo Boo’s, because “with or without soap, her handwriting was always almost indecipherably minute,” allowing her to easily scrawl the lengthy message on the small space of the mirror (65). In this way, Buddy resembles Sergeant X as he stands before a bulletin board, admiring the white on black numerals which had first caught his attention (“For Esmé” 91). In each example, Salinger’s narrator cannot help but appreciate and comment on the superficial, physical qualities of the text before taking in the meaning of the words. After remarking on Boo Boo’s unmistakably minute handwriting, Buddy transcribes for the reader the message she writes:

“Raise high the roof beam, carpenters. Like Ares comes the bridegroom, taller far than a

tall man. Love, Irving Sappho, formerly under contract to Elysium Studios Ltd. Please be happy happy *happy* with your beautiful Muriel. This is an order. I outrank everybody on this block.” (65)

Despite reading and rereading Boo Boo’s message, Buddy makes no statement about its content other than to mention that the poet, Irving Sappho, was a favorite of the Glass siblings. To the reader, Boo Boo’s marital blessing creates further confusion about Seymour’s motives. At first one would assume that Seymour failed to show up for his wedding because he was not “‘happy happy *happy*’” with Muriel, as Boo Boo urges him to be, or that he had doubts about the future of their relationship. However, this assumption contradicts Edie’s report that Seymour kept “his fiancée up all night babbling to her all about how he’s too *happy* to get married and that she’ll have to *postpone* the wedding” (39). As Buddy begins to turn his attention to the diary, the issue of Seymour’s happiness becomes more complicated and difficult to untangle.

Buddy includes “an exact reproduction of the pages from Seymour’s diary,” which were all written “while he was stationed at Fort Monmouth, in late 1941 and early 1942, some several months before the wedding date was set” (66). In these entries, Seymour expresses his affection for his bride to be and writes, “‘How I love and need her indiscriminating heart’” (66). He also declares, “‘Oh, God, I’m so happy with her. If only she could be happier with me’” (71). Buddy is likely suspicious of Seymour’s happiness and love for Muriel because sharing the day with Muriel’s unpleasant friends and guests has given Buddy an unfavorable impression of the bride. The letter he received from Boo Boo, in which she refers to Muriel as “a zero” despite being “terrific-looking” (8), has also influenced Buddy’s opinion. In his diary, Seymour himself refers to Muriel’s naiveté, and calls attention to her superficiality by speculating that she wants “‘good-looking children, with her features, not mine’” (72). He refers to her expectations of marriage as

“absurd and touching,” and writes that Muriel “wants to shop for curtains. She wants to shop for maternity clothes ... I have a feeling, too, that she wants her own Christmas-tree ornaments to unbox annually” (71-2). Seymour recognizes that these consumerist aspirations are despicable in a way, yet he feels that “they seem so human-size and beautiful that I can’t think of them... without feeling deeply, deeply moved” (72). Seymour also knows that Buddy “would despise her for her marriage motives,” and would disapprove of her mother, too. He describes Mrs. Fedder as “an irritating, opinionated woman, a type Buddy can’t stand,” but also writes, “I love her. I find her unimaginably brave” (72). Seymour is correct to assume that Buddy would disapprove. Although later in the story he will come to understand the value of living indiscriminately and accepting others’ weaknesses, at this moment, Buddy is still suspicious of Seymour’s happiness and love for these women. The last line he reads is too much for him to take in. Seymour writes, “Oh, God, if I’m anything by a clinical name, I’m a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy” (76). Here Buddy closes the diary, “slamming it shut—after the word ‘happy,’” and throws it into the bottom of the laundry hamper “with an almost vicious wrist movement” (76). Buddy does not explain his frustration to the reader, but he is clearly disappointed by his own inability to decipher his brother’s feelings, as well as by the diary’s inability to pacify him or provide insight.

As an artifact of language, the diary fails to alleviate Buddy’s confusion for a number of reasons. As previously stated, he expected the diary to counteract the effects of the squalid language and noise that he was forced to listen to during the lengthy car ride. In some ways, the diary is unlike the stream of accusations, rumors, and insults coming from the indignant Matron of Honor and does meet Buddy’s needs. Buddy can maintain control over the materialized language of the diary by deciding what entries to read and stopping whenever he wants. He can

also hide the diary from the other guests and contemplate its contents alone, without interference. While the pages themselves can be easily navigated, the ideas expressed within them are less manageable. Instead of reaffirming his beliefs about his brother, the diary increases Buddy's confusion. Despite his close relationship with Seymour, he cannot empathize with the ideas expressed in his diary and is suspicious of the happiness that Seymour feels. As an artifact of language, the diary also fails to alleviate Buddy's frustration or help him feel connected with Seymour because it does not invite a response. Seymour is not writing *to* Buddy or trying to initiate a dialogue; he is writing for his own catharsis. Though the pages of the diary may provide Seymour with a place to confess his thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment, this object of language cannot succeed as a mode of communication between two individuals or help Buddy reach the emotional connection to Seymour which he so desperately seeks. Finally, Buddy's use of the diary as a "prose pacifier" (5) is misguided because during this day of "rampant signs and symbols" (64), he has already encountered an excess of language that he has been unable to process. Just as Sergeant X cannot ease his loneliness by reading his stack of books or rereading the old letters that fill his pockets, Buddy cannot negate the unsteadiness he feels by consuming any number of messages or diary entries from his absent siblings.

After angrily throwing the diary into the hamper, Buddy once again looks for solace in the wrong place. He leaves the bathroom and goes to the kitchen to prepare drinks for his guests, where he quickly downs a generous portion of Scotch. He purposefully consumes an excessive amount of alcohol to help him relax and avoid scrutinizing the situation any further, yet he continues to be confronted with information that necessitates inquiry. When Buddy returns to the living room with drinks for his guests, Mrs. Silsburn is looking at a picture of the young Charlotte Mayhew: the actress who was first mentioned by Edie during their car ride. Edie has

reported a rumor that Seymour was responsible for injuring Charlotte and scarring her face, and uses this to support her opinion of Seymour as a cruel, unstable man (41). Now in the apartment, Mrs. Silsburn remarks on the striking resemblance between Charlotte and Muriel, and tells Buddy that she ““could *double* for Muriel at that age”” (83). Having never met Muriel, Buddy has not previously noticed her resemblance to Charlotte, and tells us that he is too drunk to consider the “many possible ramifications” of their physical similarity (83). Though Buddy wishes to ignore this information, Mrs. Silsburn’s comment invites the reader to consider other similarities between the two women as the story continues and more information is revealed.

After remarking on the photograph, Muriel’s aunt hesitantly asks Buddy to describe the incident Edie had alluded to in the car and explain why Charlotte needed nine stitches (83). Buddy is still unprepared to answer this sensitive question, but is saved the effort of finding a response when the Matron of Honor enters the living room. She has finally been able to reach Muriel’s family on the phone, and has unexpected news. She reports that ““The *groom*’s no longer *indisposed* by *happiness*”” and that the couple has eloped (85). Muriel’s aunt reacts to this news with surprise, but there is almost no discussion about this unforeseen resolution to the day’s mystery. Buddy says nothing to the other guests, nor does he share his reaction with the reader. Edie says that Muriel’s family has invited all the guests to their home for a celebration, and she, her husband, and Mrs. Silsburn quickly leave the apartment and go out into the hallway to call the elevator. Buddy tells us that after ringing the bell they “stood leadenly watching the indicator dial. No one seemed to have any further use for speech” (87). Buddy calls goodbye from his doorway, and they return his farewell. Edie adds an uncharacteristically gracious, ““Thanks for the drink!”” before the elevator door closes (87). The sparse dialogue in this scene and limited narrative discourse about the elopement is a significant departure from the lengthy passages and

aggressive dialogue prompted by Seymour's disappearance. In this way, Salinger encourages his audience to associate verbosity with chaos and conflict, and silence or brevity with resolution and harmony.

Although Seymour's elopement with Muriel has resolved the most immediate problem and satisfied Edie and the other guests, Buddy still struggles to reconcile his personal understanding of Seymour with the surfeit of information he received in various forms over the course of the day, and therefore cannot feel relieved. As he reenters the apartment, "weaving now very obviously" (87), his physical unsteadiness mirrors his mental and emotional instability. Entering his living room, Buddy is surprised to find that the deaf-mute uncle is still sitting on the sofa. This forgotten guest greets Buddy enthusiastically by raising his glass and "wagging his head up and down and grinning, as though the supreme, jubilant moment we had both been long awaiting had finally arrived" (88). This moment is indeed worth celebrating, as he has long awaited some respite from the chaos and noise of the day and the opportunity to reflect on the events without interruption. The increasingly uncoordinated Buddy sits down on the couch and sloppily pours himself another drink. In this uninhibited state, and with a deaf-mute as his only audience, Buddy chooses to share the truth of what occurred between Seymour and Charlotte Mayhew many years before. He explains that Charlotte was visiting the Glasses at their lake house when the twelve year-old Seymour threw a stone at her "'because she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo's cat'" (89). Like the wedding day, this incident from Seymour's childhood demonstrates what Warren French refers to as "Seymour's fear of 'being too happy,' which might provoke him to behave irresponsibly" (154). Watching Charlotte, whom Muriel closely resembles, Seymour is overcome by her beauty and simplicity and moved beyond words.

This story from the Glass family history is significant because it establishes a pattern in Seymour's behavior, but more importantly, because the family's reaction to the incident provides a model which Buddy and the reader should follow when trying to decipher the strange events of the wedding day. Buddy claims that the family never questioned Seymour's behavior, and he simplifies the incident by insisting "'That's all there was to it'" (89). French argues that this reaction demonstrates the central lesson of *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*. In Salinger's fiction, "the family circle is the place where the individual need not be 'understood' at all; he should simply be exempted from criticism" (153). Just as Buddy does not need to truly understand why Seymour threw the rock at Charlotte in order to forgive his behavior, he should trust Seymour's judgment of Muriel and not be suspicious of his brother's happiness. In his diary, Seymour himself reflects on the "'virtues of living the imperfect life, of accepting one's own and other's weaknesses'" (74). He writes, "'I'll champion indiscrimination till doomsday, on the ground that it leads to health and a kind of very real, enviable happiness. *Followed purely*, it's the way of Tao, and undoubtedly the highest way'" (74). He also makes a connection between acceptance and language when he writes that for a discriminating man to achieve this kind of happiness, "'he would have to dispossess himself of poetry, go *beyond* poetry'" (74). Following Buddy's story, the deaf-mute uncle exemplifies a man who, dispossessed of poetry, has achieved happiness through indiscrimination. Buddy narrates that the old man did not dispute this explanation of the incident, and "grinned at me encouragingly, as though anything further I had to say on the subject would go down only as the absolute truth" (89). This silent grin reminds the reader of the comforting indifference he displayed after Buddy confesses to being Seymour's brother during the car ride, which counteracted the loud and excessively hostile response he received from Edie. While the narrative continually associates language with

judgment, the deaf-mute's silence is portrayed as "undoubtedly the highest way" (74).

Without excusing himself, Buddy stumbles out of the living room and into the bedroom, where he passes out cold. Though the narrative does not conclude here, Buddy's sleep marks the end of the "wildly extensive communication" which has characterized the majority of the wedding day (64). There is no further mention of any letters, diaries, or soap messages within the story, and he neither hears nor produces noise of any kind. Buddy awakens after thirty minutes with a "splitting headache and a parched mouth" (91), as though waking from a vivid and confusing alcohol-induced nightmare. He wanders into the vacant living room and finds the deaf uncle's "empty glass and his cigar end in the pewter ashtray" as the only evidence that he had ever existed (92). Buddy closes his narrative with this image and his reflection that the man's cigar end should be sent to Seymour as a wedding gift: "Just the cigar, in a small, nice box. Possibly with a blank sheet of paper enclosed, by way of explanation" (92). The blank sheet of paper which Buddy imagines symbolizes not only the deaf-mute's silence, but the comforting indifference that such silence conveys. He wishes to forward the acceptance he felt in the old man's presence to his brother, but recognizes that this cannot be expressed through any constructed mode of discourse. Unlike the line of poetry Boo Boo leaves on the bathroom mirror as a wedding blessing for Seymour, this blank note would reach "*beyond* poetry" (74) to communicate Buddy's indiscriminating love for Seymour. This powerful final image leaves the reader with the understanding that within the squalid and noisy environment of Salinger's fiction, silence which is pregnant with meaning is far superior to any volume of language.

Despite the many similarities that exist between *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," this story marks a distinct shift in Salinger's exploration of the squalid world. What initially seems to be a thematic

meditation on the challenges of communicating in an insensitive and superficial society evolves into a more formal exploration of the complex relationship between silence and noise. In this story Salinger demonstrates how the problems of excess and consumerism threaten language; he not only depicts the consequences of successful or unsuccessful communication, as he did in the earlier works, but forces the reader to face these challenges first hand. As the reader attempts to navigate lengthy stretches of aggressive dialogue and numerous transcripts of letters and diary entries, he or she experiences the events of Seymour's wedding day in the same way that Buddy himself does and feels the same frustration. The blank note and silent room which mark the end of this story provide relief not only for the protagonist, but the reader as well. When scholars consider these three examples of Salinger's fiction together, the most significant commonality is that as each work concludes, Buddy, Sergeant X, Seymour, and the reader abandon their objects of language, and settle gladly into a peaceful, undiscriminating silence.

5. Conclusion

Like the majority of J.D. Salinger's fiction, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters* expose and critique the problems of consumerism, superficiality, insensitivity, and a culture of excess that characterize the modern world. More specifically, these works explore the many ways these issues challenge the effectiveness of communication by portraying the experiences of sensitive, intellectual outsiders such as Esmé, Sergeant X, Seymour, and Buddy, whose singular voices cannot be heard over the noise of the squalid environment. As they attempt to overcome their alienation, these characters instinctively turn to language for comfort, and attempt to express their frustrations through various "constructed modes of discourse" (Wenke 252). Regardless of the value that this materialistic society places on material objects, the characters' almost compulsive

production and acquisition of letters, books, and diary entries proves that language is rarely effective when consumed in excess or exchanged as a commodity.

Despite the obviously detrimental impact that the excess of noise in Sergeant X's environment has on his fragile psyche, which cannot be overcome by his frequent letter reading and writing, "For Esmé" suggests that, when certain conditions are met, it is possible to express empathy and initiate a constructive dialogue through a tangible object of language. The letter Sergeant X receives from his young acquaintance, Esmé, provides a unique example of an artifact of language which successfully conveys the writer's love and relieves the Sergeant's loneliness. Her letter expresses concern and genuine interest, demonstrates her ability to empathize with X's experience of war, and invites him to respond. After receiving this linguistic gesture of love, X begins his recovery process by falling asleep in the comforting silence. This offering of language provides a model for constructive communication, which should be used to assess other acts of communication that occur in works such as "A Perfect Day" and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*.

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" follows a similar narrative pattern, in which Seymour, another former soldier and sensitive intellectual, feels isolated within a superficial consumerist environment and attempts to convey his frustration and loneliness by offering his wife a book of German poems. Though he finds the poetry meaningful, his materialistic wife does not have the interest or ability to read it, or to empathize with her husband's experiences. Rather than initiating a dialogue, the offering of the book creates further tension and misunderstanding, and though this story also concludes with silence, Seymour's suicide is tragic rather than triumphant.

Whereas "For Esmé" and "A Perfect Day" provide examples of the triumph of language over squalor, on the one hand, and the utter failure of communication on the other, *Raise High*

the Roofbeam, Carpenters is worth examining because of the way that Salinger plays with form, and enables his audience to experience the conflict between profane language and peaceful silence by withholding certain important pieces of information and simultaneously overwhelming the reader with superficial, combative, gossipy, and insensitive dialogue and transcripts of many diary entries, letters, phone conversations, etc. In addition to its unique form, this example of Salinger's later works emphasizes the connection between silence and indiscrimination, which Seymour believes is one path to true happiness.

In order to develop a more thorough understanding of Salinger's thematic and formal usage of language and extend the arguments made in this thesis, future scholars should look to other works in the Glass family saga, particularly *Franny* and *Zooey*, in which Seymour and Buddy's youngest siblings try to deal with their own spiritual crises by relying on artifacts of language. Franny, the youngest of the Glasses, is fed up with the superficiality of her collegiate life and has grown distant from her boyfriend, Lane. In an attempt to keep her frustration and uncertainty at bay, Franny practices a "method of praying without ceasing" (Salinger, 35), which she read about in one of Seymour's books. As Lyle Glazier writes in "The Glass Family Saga: Argument and Epiphany," "Trying to emulate Seymour, she makes an attempt to project herself into sainthood, using 'The Way of the Pilgrim,' and 'The Pilgrim Continues His Way,' two consecrational books borrowed from the library of her dead brother" (250). Rather than finding comfort in these books or attaining her spiritual goals through ceaseless prayer, Franny continues to deteriorate emotionally and eventually collapses to the floor. Although scholars have produced insightful work examining Franny's "pea-green clothbound book" (Salinger, 23) and ceaseless praying, none have yet connected her problematic relationship with this artifact to other

examples from Salinger's fiction, or his larger goal of exploring the role of language in the squalid modern world.

Zooey continues Franny's story, and once again opens with the protagonist rereading a letter, which, as Monika Gehlawat claims, highlights "the risks and rewards implicit in the problem of communication" (70). This story also provides readers with a look into the Glass family apartment in New York, which is crowded with objects of every sort and reveals that even the Glasses cannot completely resist the lure of consumerism. Hassan notes that "the wealth of descriptive details, from the handling of a cigarette to the contents of a medicine cabinet, is nearly as overwhelming as the flood of speech" ("Almost the Voices of Silence" 10). In this story, language is "brilliantly shattered into letters, invocations of the audience, memoirs, footnotes, asides, quotations on beaverboard, telephone conversations, and, of course, endless dialogue" (10). When trying to console Franny, Zooey himself calls attention to the hazards of consuming language in excess or relying too heavily on any book or letter for spiritual comfort. Once again, this story concludes with silence, which grants Franny the relief she needs and allows her to fall into a restorative sleep. Remaining on the line after a phone call with her brother, Franny listens to the dial tone, which the narrator explains was "extraordinarily beautiful to listen to, rather as if it were the best possible substitute for the primordial silence itself" (202).

Zooey also marks a departure from the use of language by the Glass children to understand or connect with Seymour, towards an effort to free themselves from the haunting influence of their dead brother. Hassan claims that Zooey's ability to help Franny in the absence of Seymour represents "both a defeat and the apotheosis of Seymour: defeat because the youngest of the Glass children has at last achieved a measure of independence from the guru of the house, and apotheosis because this is precisely what Seymour would have wanted" ("Almost

the Voice of Silence” 12). This process continues in two later works, *Seymour: An Introduction* and “Hapworth 16, 1924,” which provide more information about Seymour’s character while simultaneously relieving the supposed author-narrator of his burdensome memories of his brother. These works also deserve attention because of the way that Salinger continues experimenting with form. “Hapworth,” Salinger’s last published work, is particularly worthy of further analysis, as the entire story takes the form of an artifact of language: a letter that Buddy maintains was written by the young Seymour while away at camp. Examining this story as a “constructed mode of discourse” (Wenke 252), rather than another confusing portrait of Seymour, may provide readers with a direction from which to view this story, which has been criticized by many as frustrating and even unreadable.

While this thesis focuses primarily on the challenges of language within the Glass family stories and closely related works such as “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor,” the criteria for evaluating methods of communication which have been established here may also be applied works outside of the Glass family collection. Within *Nine Stories*, works such as “De Daumier-Smith’s Blue Period,” and “Teddy” contain further examples of young characters, seeking spiritual and intellectual growth, who are constantly engaged in correspondence. Like *Franny*, these stories offer readers the opportunity to explore the role of language not only as it appears in constructed modes such as letters and diaries, but also as it relates to the quest for enlightenment and the practices of Zen Buddhism and other religious traditions. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, artifacts such as the baseball glove covered in lines of poetry, which belonged to Holden’s deceased brother, allow scholars to connect Salinger’s use of language to issues such as the loss of childhood innocence and the struggle to maintain authenticity in a “phony” world.

In addition to providing a model for future readers to use as they examine artifacts of language and modes of communication in these and other works, the arguments made in this thesis may also be applied to a study of non-linguistic gestures or gift-giving and the role of sacred objects in Salinger's writing. Within the Glass family stories, some examples of these gifts include the previously mentioned wristwatch which Esmé sends to Sergeant X in "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" as a lucky talisman, the martini olive which Sybil's mother promises to her daughter in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and the old man's cigar left behind in Buddy's apartment at the conclusion of *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*. *Zooey* also contains several noteworthy examples, particularly the bowl of chicken soup which Mrs. Glass offers to Franny in an effort to restore her health. Boo Boo Glass, the protagonist of "Down at the Dinghy," offers her young son two symbolic gifts worth examining: a set of keys and a pair of goggles. Additionally, "Down at the Dinghy" offers scholars the opportunity to continue examining the relationship between language and gender, as Boo Boo is one of the few women in Salinger's fiction to appropriate language and manipulate it for her own purposes, rather than accepting language offered by men as most of his female characters do. Beyond the examples listed here, readers will not struggle to find further instances of linguistic or non-linguistic gestures and artifacts which deserve critical attention.

Though there is no shortage of criticism on Salinger's fiction, few scholars have conducted careful, in-depth studies of the methods through which information is exchanged between characters and shared with, or withheld from, the reader. Rather than continuing to speculate about motives for Seymour's suicide and the possible identity of Sergeant X or attempting to fuse individual works into one cohesive portrait of Seymour and the Glass family as previous writers have done, future scholars should seek to extend the work of this thesis,

which takes strides toward developing a thorough understanding of Salinger's formal and thematic uses of language. By examining his works with this purpose in mind, readers may finally recognize them as more than just sentimental portraits of precocious children and psychologically damaged ex-soldiers, or an author's literary love affair with his own family of characters. Instead, future audiences may learn to appreciate Salinger's body of fiction as an evolving, meaningful exploration of communication and the complex relationship between silence and noise.

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