



## War, Children and Altruism in J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*

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World War II is a vital component of several short stories in J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* collection. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut", "For Esme—with Love and Squalor", and "Teddy", Salinger portrays children living in the post-WWII world. While 1950s society often justified World War II, many authors including Salinger seemed wary of the present state of societal acceptance in postwar America. Salinger's *Nine Stories*, though tainted by war, include a redemptive message: salvation through altruism. Salinger advocates the value of altruism by juxtaposition of the human cost of war with the inherent goodness and innocence of children. The children of *Nine Stories* remind readers to appreciate and care for not only the children of current and future generations, but also to cater to the child within, before the best part of ourselves is lost forever to the destruction of our modern civilization.

**KEYWORDS:** Salinger, *Nine Stories*, Altruism, Children, War

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The twentieth-century is frequently represented as a period of alienation, disillusionment and spiritual aridity. America witnessed two world wars, the Depression, the Cold War, McCarthyism, the Holocaust, the Atomic Bomb and the Vietnam War. American Modernism marked the beginning of America's change from innocence to disillusionment. Before World War I, many believed that the world had order, and people largely controlled their own destinies. The war led to a general feeling of nothingness; it led to a questioning of all that American society had formerly accepted. The world wars were more horrific than anyone believed they would be. The Modernists felt that traditional literary and philosophic structures could no longer portray what the world had been through, and sought

to "make it new." Many Modernist artists believed their work portrayed meaning for humanity. The meaning of Modernist works was subjective to the author, but they believed that their subjective meaning would evoke different, yet equally important meanings for readers. Modernists believed they could help society out of the spiritual "wasteland" they found themselves in.

Many Modernist authors themselves served in World War I and/or II. Salinger served in WWII, after which he was said to have been traumatized by his war experiences, and suffered a post-traumatic nervous breakdown. Salinger's daughter Margaret "related in an interview that she wasn't aware as a child that her father was an author but she always knew that he had been a soldier. She further stated that, 'It was the point of reference that defined everything else in relation to it'" (Eger). Donahue relates that Margaret Salinger theorized in her memoir that her father "may have been traumatized by the war." Salinger's famous lifestyle of reclusion also suggests the effect the war played in changing

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him. As Rogers states, “the experience of combat does more than simply change a person...war changes the fundamental person, it destroys who they were.” Salinger’s short stories possibly offer insight into his feelings on war and on attempting to re-enter civilian life after the war.

The famous Modernist Ernest Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in WWI and a war correspondent in WWII. Salinger met Hemingway while serving in WWII (Smith 642). Many of Hemingway’s works deal with the topic of war. In particular, his short story “Soldier’s Home” is a classic postwar story depicting post-traumatic stress disorder, angst and disillusionment caused by the war. As in many of Salinger’s works in *Nine Stories*, Hemingway’s protagonist, Krebs, has just returned home from WWI, and cannot enter civilian life again. The story ends with what many critics state is Krebs’ suicide. Salinger’s *Nine Stories* by contrast include an element of hope. Salinger’s fictional children serve as barometers of postwar devastation or guides teaching his characters, and arguably readers, a way to cope and find meaning in the postwar world. As Smith states, the children in *Nine Stories* “stand on higher moral ground than their adult guardians” (640). The theme of kindness towards others is repeatedly shown as a way out of modern angst and disillusionment.

The tenet of altruism, as not only personal responsibility towards others, but also as a means to help modern society out of the spiritual “wasteland”, is not unique to Salinger. It is in fact a common theme found in modern American literature. Written at the height of the Modernist Movement, T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” encompasses the tragedy of the modern age and declared an affirmative option of salvation to “give, sympathize, and control [oneself].” In the Modernist novel, *Native Son*, Ivan remains kind to Bigger Thomas, even though Bigger murdered his girlfriend Mary Dalton. John Steinbeck closes *The Grapes of Wrath* with Rose of Sharon nursing a dying man to save him from starvation after her own child was born stillborn. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* recounts his experience serving in WWII when he was taken as a prisoner of war in Dresden. There, he witnessed the slaughter of “135,000 civilian inhabitants—the largest massacre in European history” (Vonnegut 13). *Slaughterhouse-Five* and many of Vonnegut’s other works openly condemn war and embrace altruism, poignantly summed up by his famous quote from *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*: “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (129). Many Modernist works encourage readers to reevaluate personal responsibility in a time of social acceptance.

R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience* speaks of accepting individual accountability for involvement in the violence of the modern era. Laing believes that society serves to propel violence: individuals are forced at an early age to repress themselves into accepting false beliefs like fate and God, so that responsibility for violence is taken away from oneself. Laing states that “If we can stop destroying ourselves we may stop destroying others” (49). These sentiments are echoed by Jonathan Baumbach, who states that Modernism, “at its best goes beneath the particular social evil to the fact of evil itself and dramatizes the extent and implications of personal culpability in a self-destroying civilization” (6). He points out, that out of the devastation of the modern world a lesson is often learned that enables characters to embrace altruism. Characters generally accept a certain amount of responsibility for the evils of society, the evils they did and did not commit, in an attempt to make the world better on a daily basis. Once the characters have accepted their own responsibility, they move on to pursue redemption, either for themselves or for others, even though the efforts often fail.

Salinger’s fiction in *Nine Stories* follows this modern tenet of personal responsibility leading to altruism, but is unique from other modern works in that the altruism found within these stories is brief and taught mostly to damaged postwar adults through the innocence of children. The altruism in Salinger may not completely save someone, but it is a way to cope and reconcile a life of meaning in a meaningless world.

Salinger’s “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” focuses on the postwar experience for the story’s protagonist, one Seymour Glass. The story opens with his wife, Muriel, alone in a hotel room on their honeymoon. Muriel is trite and lacks substance in many ways. In a story that will focus on the soldier’s return from war, she is painting her nails and chatting with her mother on the phone. The conversation reveals that Seymour was just released from a VA hospital, and Muriel’s mother and father feel that “there’s a chance...that Seymour may *completely* lose control of himself” (6). At the end of the phone conversation, Muriel’s mother makes her promise that if Seymour does or says anything “at all funny,” Muriel needs to call her immediately. The fear and repulsion of Muriel’s parents towards Seymour represents a sentiment that Salinger feels comes from society towards those touched by war. Salinger’s adults who are untouched by the war are portrayed as living in a completely separate world from that of Seymour. This is why he remains

separated from all adults throughout most of the story.

Seymour longs for the purity that exists in the lives of children; “Seymour’s nonconformity is of the pure, natural variety” (Boe, 66). He is found lying alone on the beach, pale, lying in the sun, but refusing to take off his bathrobe because he doesn’t want people looking at his tattoo. Seymour’s reluctance to have people look at him suggests his feeling that he is soiled or damaged in some way. He only interacts with Sybil Carpenter, a young child. Sybil speaks to Seymour in an open, trusting manner. Though the world of adults within this story is portrayed as either trite or fearful, Sybil’s world is light and innocent. Salinger’s depiction of children serves to illuminate the tainted adult world Seymour cannot reenter.

The scene with Sybil and Seymour has a questionable tone to it; the reader expects something to go wrong. Why is this character, who was introduced to be someone who could snap at any moment, separated with this child? The tension escalates as Seymour takes Sybil out into the ocean on her raft. Sybil is momentarily unsure about being so far out, but Seymour assures her with his challenge to find a bananafish. Seymour tells Sybil that a bananafish is a rare fish that eats too many bananas, swims into a hole, and can’t get out because it has grown too big. Seymour relates this tale to Sybil as a lesson, possibly even a warning; Sybil is a “receptive child, [she] has yet to taste the avarice that fills most grown-up lives, she...can turn away from the spoon held out to her” (Cotter 88). The bananafish could represent a society that accepts and engages in war; the desire and greed of Seymour’s society will eventually either kill valuable members within the society or the society itself, seemingly portrayed by the bleak portrayal of the adult characters within this, and other stories within *Nine Stories*.

The ocean scene shocks the reader because what was expected, a dark and sinister plot, does not happen; instead, it is merely a scene of a veteran needing companionship from a child. Seymour only treats Sybil with kindness and attention; he takes her out on the raft and makes her scream with delight at overcoming the waves. His interaction with Sybil offers insight into the end of the story. Seymour longs for something that is pure and innocent after his traumatic war experience. He does not fit in the current society, and remains separated from those his own age, including his own wife.

The night before, Seymour was interacting with another young girl, a friend of Sybil. Sybil is jealous of her, but Seymour teaches Sybil a lesson, one that resounds throughout the story and certainly fits the

literature of the modern era. Seymour tells Sybil that he likes her friend: “What I like *particularly* about her is that she never does anything mean to little dogs in the lobby of the hotel....She’s never mean or unkind. That’s why I like her so much” (15). In holding with Modernism’s tenet of personal responsibility, Seymour is teaching Sybil the importance of altruism. Seymour states in another Salinger short story, “Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters,” that “a child is a guest in the house—to be loved and respected, never possessed, since he belongs to God” (cited in Kaufman 131). Seymour sees in children a simplicity and purity left in the world; this innocence contrasts deeply with his war experiences. This story ends tragically for Seymour because he cannot reconcile who he is now with who he longs to be. He values altruism, which he believes can exist in the pure lives of children, but he believes that he is too far gone to embrace this tenet in the corrupted world he lives in of damaged adults.

When Seymour decides to bring Sybil back to shore, he kisses her foot, a sign of humility and of knowing her value. The scene abruptly switches to his paranoia that a woman who he does not know was looking at his feet in the elevator. The two feet scenes right next to each other in the story reiterates that Seymour feels he does not fit the society of his peers. Just as he did not want anyone seeing his tattoo, he does not want anyone seeing his feet; he is vulnerable after his war and hospital experience; he feels he is not of the same value that he feels Sybil is. Seymour leaves the woman in the elevator, goes back to Muriel’s room, finds her sleeping, and commits suicide next to her by shooting himself through his temple. Just as Hemingway’s Krebs felt in “Soldier’s Home,” returning back to “normal” society feels impossible and unbearable to Seymour. Seymour’s suicide leaves a lasting message for the reader with its contradiction of a simple, pleasant moment with a child, and Seymour’s fatal belief that he is too damaged to ever reenter this life of innocence again. This story leaves readers pained at the cost of war. Seymour was seemingly a good person who passed on brief lessons of kindness to a young child, but could not find the peace and solace he needed to live between two contrasting worlds any longer.

Salinger’s “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut” follows a theme similar to “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” The story focuses on Eloise, coping with life after the love of her life, Walt, was killed while serving in the war by a stove exploding in his face. Eloise invites, and almost forces her friend, Mary Jane, to stay the night at her house. It is clear that Eloise has been left scarred from her experience with the

war, as evidenced by her desire to talk about life before the war and her drinking alcohol through the night. There is a hardened aspect to Eloise; the girl she was before the war has seemingly been killed along with her husband. In a conversation with Mary Jane, they recount an acquaintance who died from cancer recently, and Eloise's response to Mary Jane's question of "Isn't that terrible?" is "No." Mary Jane states that Eloise is "getting hard as nails" (23). Also in trying to convince Mary Jane to skip work and stay through the night, she tells her repeatedly to call her employer and say she is dead. It is clear that Eloise is not in love with her new husband and she has not told him about Walt's death. Eloise tells Mary Jane about her life with Walt before the war; he made her laugh. This brief recounting of life before WWII is portrayed as idyllic, yet there is a certain amount of truthfulness to it. This life with Walt before the war is portrayed as genuine in contrast to the life Eloise is drinking away now. Eloise then goes on to give the reader insight into Walt's unhappiness while serving in the war; he felt that his involvement in the war, and even the war itself, seemed meaningless. She recounts the events surrounding Walt's accidental death to Mary Jane and begins to cry; this is the first time Eloise's emotion is explicitly seen; before this, her narration lacks conviction, again suggesting the emptiness within her.

The true effect of Eloise's touch with war is, again as with "Bananafish," seen through the scarred adult's interaction with a child. Eloise's daughter Ramona enters the dark scene of her mother's drunken anguish and is treated with frustration and indifference. Ramona first enters the dreary scene as an outsider, full of vitality and disinterest in the adults. When pushed, Ramona reveals that she has an invisible boyfriend named Jimmy Jimmereeno. Her explanation of him is important in revealing the effect of her mother's unhappiness; Jimmy has no mother or father. Before Ramona leaves for bed, she states that Jimmy, her imaginary friend "got runned over and killed" (34). Ramona's imaginary friend again seems to be tied to her mother's depression; her violent fantasies have been influenced by her mother's painful past and her inability to interact with Ramona. Ramona goes to bed, and Eloise asks Mary Jane to bring her another drink. Much later in the evening, Eloise's husband calls her and she says she can't pick him up, saying "why don't you boys form a platoon and march home?" (35), which again references her mind state, trapped in the effects of war. Her housekeeper, Grace, asks if her own husband can stay the night at the house to avoid the snow storm, and Eloise refuses, significantly countering Salinger's message of altruism within

"Bananafish", again showing the toll war has taken on Eloise.

The end of this work again is tragic; the last scene with Eloise shows the true degradation of her current state, and the effect it is having on her child. In a violent scene, Eloise goes up to Ramona's room, finds her sleeping on the edge of her bed, and wakes her up by yelling at her. Eloise asks her why she was sleeping that way if Jimmy was dead. Ramona remarks that she doesn't want to hurt her new imaginary friend Mickey. This news sends Eloise into a mad fit; clearly it is related to her own tragic tale, and she goes on to take her anguish out on her daughter: "Eloise raised her voice to a shriek....Ramona, extremely frightened, just looked up at Eloise....Eloise grabbed Ramona's ankles and half lifted and half pulled her over to the middle of the bed" (37). This scene is disturbing. In "Bananafish" the child's innocence and importance is embraced; in this story, it is the opposite. Ramona is left ignored by her mother and then abused by her. Eloise rushes out of the room, banging her knee to feel the pain and begins to cry remembering Walt. Eloise stumbles back to Ramona's bed, tucking in her sheets and notices that "Ramona was awake. She was crying and had been crying" (37). Eloise kisses her and leaves the room. Ramona, the child, is again the agent who reveals to the adult the importance of altruism. Eloise, at least momentarily, witnesses the effect her behavior has had on her daughter, and again at least briefly, she tries to make up for some of it with her kiss. The story ends in despair with Eloise waking her friend Mary Jane up imploring while shaking her arm: "I was a nice girl,' she pleaded, 'wasn't I?'" (38). This last comment is essential because directly after her blow up with her daughter, and seeing the effect it had on her, her concern of being a "nice girl" is tied to Salinger's recurring theme of kindness being a means towards helping postwar devastation. Salinger's message is a dark one; Eloise may never heal or be the same again, and in the meantime, she may damage her daughter. Altruism and the purity of youthful innocence could either be destroyed by post war devastation, or it could be a means towards salvation.

"To Esme - with Love and Squalor" is another work clearly showing the cost of war, but this story ends with hope - the hope coming from two children. This work is like no other in the collection; it ends with a promise of healing, rather than destruction; what is also unique is that it depicts more detail of the war than others in the collection, with many of the war experiences of the protagonist tied directly to Salinger's war experiences. Tierce states that "Salinger's heroes

are all confronted with the possibility of total destruction. At the same time, they also have the potential to find a place for themselves in their surroundings. If Seymour Glass's suicide...offers a classic example of a defeated Salinger hero, then 'For Esme – With Love and Squalor' supplies the classic example of a victorious Salinger hero." Sergeant X is healed at the end of the work directly because of the children's altruism within this work.

The story begins with the narrator, Sergeant X, recounting that he would very much like to attend a wedding of a young girl he once knew, in fact a girl who changed his life, Esme. He mentions that he would have liked to attend at any cost, but the tone immediately shifts to a dull acceptance that he will not go because he has discussed it with his "breathhtakingly levelheaded wife" and had forgotten that his mother-in-law was coming to visit; "at the outset of the story, Salinger satirizes the mundane actualities and practical consideration of post-war America" (Wenke 252). This opening of the work is important; it reveals a compromise of desire and emotion, though it also shows that X is not entirely the depleted adult of other Salinger stories.

Sergeant X steps back in time six years and recounts the importance of his meeting with Esme. He is "among some sixty American enlisted men who took a rather specialized pre-Invasion training course, directed by British Intelligence" (88). The training has just ended, and on this night he is to "be assigned to infantry and airborne divisions mustered for the D Day landings (88). As has been noted, X's military credentials are similar to Salinger's. Salinger "attended training for counter intelligence," was assigned to the intelligence section of his regiment, and he fought at D-Day (Eger). Salinger's explicit connection to X is important because this is the one story in the collection that appears to be the most uplifting because of the element of altruism.

X packs his belongings and abruptly leaves his room, walking to a local church where he sits and watches a choir practice. He notices one girl who sings the best, though she seems bored. He leaves the church and goes to a local tearoom, and moments later Esme, the girl from choir practice, walks in with her brother Charles and their governess. Esme recognizes X and walks up to him. The ensuing conversation is genuine, as was Seymour's interaction with Sybil in "Bananafish". X listens to Esme, and it is apparent that he values her. Esme does not resemble Sybil or Ramona. She is very intelligent and communicates with a maturity beyond her years. From the start, the conversation is not trite at all; Esme is a "truth-lover" (92) and "small-talk detester" (93). She knows X is American and also knows he is from the secret Intelligence school.

Though Esme appears to be more mature than other children, it is important that Esme is still a child. In Salinger's *Nine Stories* children are the social barometers of the postwar society and the purity and hope of a better existence. Esme is both here; she and her brother have been greatly affected by the war. Both of her parents are dead; her father was killed in the war – "s-l-a-i-n in North Africa" (97). Out of her pain, Esme understands the importance of embracing altruism. She takes the initiative to walk up to X because he looks lonely. She also states that she is "training" herself "to be more compassionate" (95). She values that her father was "intrinsically kind" (98), and wears his military wristwatch, again serving as evidence of the toll the war has taken on Esme. In "Uncle Wiggily" Ramona may be left scarred, but Esme, losing both parents as a result of war, forced to care for her younger brother, does not appear to be in danger of this; instead, relying much on her own independence, she has found what Salinger seems to be defining as a righteous life, even within the context of postwar devastation.

Esme's younger brother Charles is also essential to the work; she relates that he misses their father very much. Esme tells X that he has a violent temper, which usually is an indication in Salinger works of the effect of war. Charles behaves like a child should when he comes over to their table, sticking out his tongue at X, and repeatedly telling the same joke, which will prove to be quite symbolic; "What did one wall say to the other wall?...Meet you at the corner" (98-9). This riddle "illustrates the exact nature of X's reconciliation of opposites. In order for the average man (Sergeant X) to survive the war between opposing walls represented by love and squalor, or the 'nice' world and the 'phony' world...he must be able to make the compromise by agreeing to meet each wall at the corner. This message is the edification and instruction which the narrator mentions at the beginning of the story" (Bierce).

Before Esme and Sergeant X part ways, she knows he is going off to war; she requests him to write a story about her and squalor. Esme, as an altruistic character, promises to write X in the war. Charles kisses him good-bye. X recounts that "It was a strangely emotional moment for me" (102). Again the genuine nature of this conversation, fully acknowledging the danger of war, as Esme says "I hope you return from the war with all your faculties intact" (103), and the purity of acting out in accordance to how one feels, like Charles' kiss, is what will save X after he experiences war. The story shifts abruptly to after V-E Day; Sergeant X has been released from the hospital and states to the reader

that he/she will not recognize him because he has changed so much; “he is a young man who had not come through the war with all his faculties intact; he thought he felt his mind dislodge itself and teeter” (103-4). Again this explicit imagery on the effect of war is not in any other work within *Nine Stories*. As has been stated, Salinger’s personal connections to X are numerous; he too suffered a nervous breakdown after the war. Also like Salinger, Sergeant X helped to arrest members of the Nazi Party; in the hospital he is reading a journal of a low official to the Nazi Party; she wrote in her journal “Dear God, life is hell” (105). X writes “What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love”, a quote by Dostoevsky (105). This inscription is significant because the end of the story will reveal that X has been pulled out of his hell exactly by his ability to love Esme and Charles.

Sergeant X then opens a letter from his brother that reveals a complete lack of understanding or compassion. This scene shows that without Esme, X would be doomed, “like a Christmas tree whose lights, wired in series, must all go out even if one bulb is defective” (106). Even X’s comrades in war cannot help him. Corporal Z, Clay, his constant companion in the war, comes to visit him. His friend is upbeat and seemingly has not been affected by the war in the devastating way that X has been. Clay wants to discuss civilian life with X, mentioning his girlfriend, but it is clear that X cannot reenter that world. Clay goes on to talk about an experience where they were shelled for two hours, and Clay shot a cat. X cannot handle reliving this moment and begs Clay to stop. X is incapable at this time to reenter civilian life; he becomes so disturbed by Clay’s presence that he vomits. Clay leaves him unable to help him or connect with him; “Salinger implies that [Clay’s] lack of self-awareness and moral introspection is not merely contemptible, but is actually a succinct embodiment of those very forces of insensitivity and self-justification which create and sustain the absurdity of war” (Wenke 254). At this point it appears X may remain similar to the devastated character of Seymour. X “needs personal contact with someone who has a sensitive understanding of the way war can destroy one’s being” (Wenke 257). But, just at the moment when it appears X cannot take much more, he notices a package from Esme. Similar to X, “Esme has been ravaged by the war and, emotionally, her experiences and problems are similar to the Sergeant’s...both need to reconstruct their lives after being ‘wounded’ by the war. By chance, X opens the letter and receives help from the only available source...Esme’s deep desire to express love” (Wenke 257). Esme’s letter is simple, but it possesses the

power to begin to heal X. She writes that she knows D-Day was horrible, and that she is concerned about him. Esme also includes her father’s watch to wear during his difficult days. It is this gesture that is immensely important to X. The watch symbolizes the final cost of war; the war took her father’s life, yet Esme made it through this devastation still embracing altruism. Her gesture of giving X her father’s watch shows him that he too can make it through this. He will be a changed person, like she is, but he may be able to reconcile a life that seems meaningless, with his wife and his mother-in-law, with a life filled with meaning; “Seymour Glass commits suicide because he cannot accept those aspects of life untouched by the poetic imagination; Sergeant X survives because he accepts both materialism and poetry” (Tierce).

Charles also wrote in the letter a repetition of “HELLO HELLO HELLO...LOVE AD KISSES CHALES” (115). X is so moved by the letter that he cannot move after reading it; “For Salinger, it seems, meaningful human expression must be founded on authentic emotions which evolve into a sympathetic comprehension of another individual’s need...The love that Salinger affirms...does not depend on words, but on an emotional inner transformation which must be understood...before it can be expressed” (Wenke 254). When X can finally lift the watch out of the box, he sees that the crystal has been broken, like himself; “Then, suddenly, almost ecstatically, he felt sleepy...[with] a chance of again becoming a man with all his face—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact” (114). In this work “it is difficult to find many instances of love based on sympathetic understanding and shared experiences. Debased, destructive relationships predominate” (Wenke 252), yet X does finally experience a real connection with Esme and Charles because they altruistically cared about him and concretely showed him they cared. His title “X” serves to identify him as any causality of war, like Salinger himself; there is nothing special about X or Esme and Charles even. There is a resounding message here that if people can act in a genuine way and altruistically care for each other, there may be hope for postwar survivors; because of the love shown to X by Esme and Charles, X will grow into a named man again.

Salinger’s final story within *Nine Stories* entitled “Teddy”. Salinger referred to it as an “exceptionally haunting, memorable, unpleasantly controversial, and thoroughly unsuccessful short story” (cited in Bryan 354). The work is certainly “haunting” and “memorable,” but many disagree that it is “unsuccessful;” there appears a strong reason why this is the work chosen to end his *Nine Stories*.

Salinger applies many of the lessons expounded in the other works within this single text. Teddy is a unique child; he represents the value of children to a heightened degree as revealed through his philosophical views. Teddy also may be the most damaged of the children within this collection; he is hardly characterized as childlike, and his fate at the end of the story is certainly the most tragic. The appalling end of this work seems a warning to the reader of the possibility that is destroyed by postwar desolation; it serves as a warning rather than merely a fatalistic acceptance that postwar life is doomed, because it follows Salinger's "Esme," which acknowledges the possibility of salvation.

At the start of the work, Teddy and his family are on a ship returning from Europe having recently visited a group of professors, the "Leidekker examining group." Teddy is only ten years old, yet he contemplates to his mother and father what happens to matter when no one sees it, but Teddy's contemplation is interrupted by his mother. Teddy is an abused and neglected child at least in part because of his parents' encounter with war. He is treated with frustration by his father and indifference by his mother. Teddy ostensibly knows this, as he makes comments like "if anybody's interested...Which I doubt" (169). Teddy's father served in the war and as with the other works within this collection, this key element is only mentioned briefly in Teddy's thoughts about his father's dog tags. Teddy wants to find the dog tags for his father at one point in the story, but later reveals that he knows they are with his dad still. This brief discussion of the war and its tie to his father is important; Teddy's father is not a likable character from the first sentence of the story. Throughout Teddy's entire interaction with his parents in this work, his father is either threatening him or making fun of him: "Quick, get the Leidekker examining group on the phone" (171). Teddy's mother is indifferent towards him, clearly not listening to what he says by continuously interrupting him or openly ignoring him.

Teddy's parents also do not interact with each other in a respectful manner; as with the other works discussed in this paper, the adults within this story are scarred, and again, as in the other works, it appears that the war may be the culprit. In front of Teddy, his parents continuously fight, saying some astonishing things like, "One of these days you're going to have a tragic, tragic heart attack....There'll be a small, tasteful funeral, and everybody's going to ask who that attractive woman in the red dress is, sitting there in the front row, flirting with the organist" (169). Again this work follows a theme of

Salinger's short stories of wounded postwar parents not valuing their children or their postwar life.

Teddy has a younger sister named Booper who is also the "product of her parents' mutual hostility" (Bryan 358). Booper is portrayed as being unkind to a boy whose father was killed in Korea, reminding him that at any moment he could become an orphan if his mother were to die as well. Booper tells the young boy that he "is the stupidest person [she] ever met" (176). This type of hostility in a young child is reminiscent of Ramona and her fantasies of Jimmy being run over by a car. Teddy kindly defends and reassures the young boy. The work continues with Teddy meeting a professor. The professor is not portrayed as a scarred adult, as in many other Salinger works; he listens intently to Teddy and wishes to learn from him. Through their conversation, we learn that Teddy is a genius who can see into his past lives and into the future. Teddy believes he was close to enlightenment as an Indian man in a past life. He states that at the age of four he was able to "get out of finite dimensions fairly often" (189), and at the age of six, he "saw that everything was God." He discusses a belief about God, life, and love that is void of emotion and "sentimentality." He openly understands the relationship he has with his parents; "I have a strong affinity for them....But they don't love me...that way. I mean they don't seem able to love us just the way we are. They don't seem able to love us unless they can keep changing us a little bit. They love their reasons for loving us....It's not so good that way" (187).

The portrayal of Teddy in this light, to end a compilation of stories focusing on the value and insight of children, is significant. Teddy represents more than innocence, purity, and an ability to grasp the present moment. Salinger has seemingly elevated this character into a spiritual guide for the postwar world. The question remains if readers should take Teddy's teachings as Salinger's genuine message to help the people of the modern era to find meaning in life, or if Teddy's tragic end represents Salinger's acknowledgement that Teddy's vision of life cannot and perhaps should not exist in present reality. Kaufman states that many critics read too much into Teddy's mystical powers, believing them genuine, and analyzing Salinger's message on the importance of the Zen philosophy. Instead Kaufman believes that "Teddy has reacted defensively to an exploitative adult world by intuitively developing the persona of the mystic and clairvoyant both to gain the love he desperately needs and, paradoxically, to distance himself from his uncaring family and the grown-up world" (129). Kaufman's assertion is an interesting one; it is

evident, as has been discussed, that Teddy is abused and is in need of love, but the idea that Teddy is inventing his philosophy as only a false persona needs examining.

Teddy's knowledge of his parents' inability to love according to his terms is important. Teddy's philosophical message to Bob, and perhaps the reader, is that people must readjust their perspective. He states that people should stop being logical about life and just live their lives according to their own definitions. When asked how he would change the educational system, he states that he would try to get children to see who they really are; "I'd get them to empty out everything their parents and everybody ever told them" (195). It seems unreasonable to believe that, as Kaufman stated, Teddy is only making up his philosophy to take on the protective persona of a clairvoyant. Teddy's values are not attributed to many ten year olds; as his conversation with Bob proves, Teddy is expounding very deep, important, and valuable lessons, and at least some of it seems genuine.

Teddy's hope for the future generation is revealing because of his impending death. Teddy knows he will possibly die on this day; he writes in his journal "It will either happen today or February 14, 1958 when I am sixteen. It is ridiculous to mention even" (182). What is illuminating is that Teddy seems to welcome his own death. He warns his parents; he tells Bob the details of his death moments before it happens - that he may go to his swimming lesson, and the pool may not have water in it, "and my sister might come up and sort of push me in. I could fracture my skull and die instantaneously" (193), and most telling he gives Booper detailed instructions that will only aid him to meet his "fate:". The story ends with Booper screaming when Bob enters the pool area searching for Teddy. It is unclear what happened to Teddy; the reader can assume that Teddy dies as he prophesied, and Booper pushed him without knowing the deadly ramifications. There is also the possibility that Teddy commits suicide, and Booper arrived on the scene after it happened. Bryan does not believe that Teddy committed suicide, pointing out that "Seymour's suicide...seems shocking and tragic, "Teddy" systematically prepares the reader for the ending by depicting two different attitudes toward death" making Teddy's death not a tragedy (367-8). Many critics interpret Teddy's death according to his own philosophical advice, without fully acknowledging that he is a young child who was being neglected and abused by his postwar parents, as Kaufman points out. Even if Teddy's death was a prophesized accident, it is still very much a tragedy, and his short life experience makes him another

casualty of the effects of war. Kaufman argues that Teddy did commit suicide, stating that "Teddy and Seymour are closely related characters," and Salinger even pointed out their similarity; "his description of Teddy's eyes looked very much like Seymour" (130). Kaufman believes that Teddy committed suicide just as Seymour did, the first and the last story of the collection ending the same way. This certainly is a possibility. Kaufman feels that "Teddy, despite his seeming tranquility, shares [Booper's] anger and his death, suicide, is a last hostile gesture, directed primarily at his parents, sister, and the rest of the prying and hostile world in which he feels alone and isolated" (135). Kaufman's interpretation that Teddy commits suicide does make sense, but to state that he was overcome with hostility and revenge does not fit his character or the other Salinger characters within this work; it also does not seem a fitting end to this collection that has repeatedly spoken of the benefits of children and altruism. If indeed Teddy did kill himself, perhaps he did it knowing it was inevitable that Booper would push him, and he beat her to it, sparing her, an ultimate form of altruism. Whether Teddy committed suicide or not, may not affect the message of the work. The fact that Salinger dooms this unique child to die at the end of his collection reveals something important.

Teddy's insight is confusing; it remains unclear if Salinger wants readers to embrace his philosophy of altruistic individualism to help save postwar despair, or if he knows that Teddy's insight is an unrealistic fantasy for the modern world. Perhaps both possibilities make sense. Teddy clearly does have good advice that may help to create a more peaceful, accepting world. After all, as revealed in most of the short stories in this collection, the adults are despairing and sickly; they are not grasping any meaning in life, and they are in danger of corrupting the next generation if they even survive. As has been stated, Salinger sees something of value in the children of his works - something that needs to be saved in order to not repeat the past. If people would stop viewing the world in terms of the older generation's ideals and definitions, as Teddy discussed, then possibly an alternative lifestyle would evolve, one without war and destruction. But, Salinger has Teddy die in the end, a death that he did not try to avoid, and may have inflicted upon himself. The message of this has a sad realization to it - Teddy's apparent enlightenment cannot exist in the real world, and possibly should not. War and death will always continue; one can choose to view it without regret, emotion, or logic as Teddy taught; if one does not feel emotion at loss, then possibly this is a way to cope with the destruction of the



modern era and the eras to come. Though this does not seem to be Salinger's overall message for *Nine Stories*; readers have been introduced to the damaged characters of his works to feel compassion for them. Again with so many scenes of interactions with scarred adults and children, Salinger's resounding lesson is that without compassion and sincerity in human interactions, there is no end to postwar devastation. Teddy's spiritual indifference has distanced him from the real world; he is not able to feel the love that Esme and Sergeant X attained, and this makes him a character that should not be followed to achieve postwar healing.

What is important to remember is Teddy's sense of altruism; it has been a theme in other works within this collection, and is repeated possibly more explicitly in this work through Teddy's consistent value of kindness. In his journal it is discovered that all Teddy writes about are small kind acts that he wishes to do for other people: he wants to find and wear his father's dog tags because he thinks it will "please him;" he wants to write a condolence letter to someone who is ill, and he wishes to be "nicer to [the] librarian" (180-1). Before leaving his father, he observes him lying down in an odd position, and tells him that he looks uncomfortable and gives him a pillow. When meeting up with his sister Booper, he defends the young boy she has insulted. This value and maintenance of kindness is vitally important. Teddy may have been another casualty of the war, but he imparts important messages to those around him on the importance of altruism; "Teddy" concludes *Nine Stories* by dramatizing a potential answer to the corruption, materiality, egotism, and self-seeking of American life: individual rejection of the Western culture and the attempt to gain a truer understanding and fuller humanity through renunciation of the self and unqualified love of a very imperfect human race" (Kaufman 139). He dies to show the surviving characters, and the reader, the pain of loss of goodness, so that a similar pattern need not continue.

As Cotter states, "The overall impression of needy characters hungering for recognition and love remains the essential point to be made" in *Nine Stories* (98). All the children, and adults, depicted in these works need love and altruism. Salinger repeatedly shows this need, and offers the concepts of personal responsibility as the means to help the postwar world; "In the harshness of American life, it is necessary to return, acceptance, tolerance, and love" (Kaufman 130). Seymour valued Sybil, yet her youthful, innocent nature finally revealed what he felt he could never attain again. He tried to pass along to her the value of kindness to save her from his own fate, and the fate of the bananafish.

Ramona's neglect put her in danger of becoming like her damaged mother, but her childlike innocence may ultimately reveal to her mother her own flaws. Esme's and her brother Charles' altruism profoundly teach and save Sergeant X. And Teddy's altruistic philosophy teaches the remaining adults, and possibly the reader, the value of children and kindness before it is too late. The children of *Nine Stories* are "Salinger's symbols of hope" (Smith 648). Though Salinger's own parenting skills have often been put into question, he was able to leave behind his stories to serve as a warning and a guide. The children of *Nine Stories* remind readers to appreciate and care for not only the children of current and future generations, but also to cater to the child within, before the best part of ourselves is lost forever to the destruction of our modern civilization.

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