

IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLS, INFLUENCES AND PHILOSOPHIES IN SUCCESSFUL LITERARY CREATION

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Abstract:

In the literary world writers have to be able to integrate all their beliefs and life philosophies so that their characters are more credible and realistic. Jerome David Salinger is one example in point. His entire literary legacy, although not very prolific, is an example of the writer's own evolution alongside with the characters'. For this brief article I have focused on the influence of Zen philosophy which is present throughout Salinger's exquisite mature works and it represents the source of his array of themes and motifs: children and what they stand for; oppositions between the phony, material world and the spiritual one; the war and the effects of its traumatic experiences; love and squalor; suicide theme; religion; alienation and vulnerability; reality; idealization of beauty; the quest for a moral ideal; communication and the problems caused by the lack of the ability to communicate directly; the quest for the seer. All of Salinger's themes, which are actually his trademarks, are very well presented against the social and political background of the post-war period and they also stand for the evolution of his characters and writing technique.

Keywords: literary creation; symbols; influences; philosophy; mature works

Many critics agree that Salinger's *Nine Stories* represents the highpoint of his publishing career, generally due to the Glass family and particularly due to the introduction and killing of Seymour Glass. In this collection the readers and the critics can see how Salinger's art and life came together in the best possible way, how Salinger's Zen interests fused with his favorite themes, and how he managed to give a new perspective to the American short story. Salinger's collected stories mainly focused on "genius, spiritual integrity, moral corruption, and the occasional ability of innocence to transform our lives" (Smith).

It seems that all Salinger's mature works represent, more than in his previous writings, a quest, a search for the seer and all his characters have a very well-defined role in helping the reader find this seer.

Salinger seems to be an author accessible to a wide range of students, especially young people. A chronological approach of his literary creations can only help to understand Salinger's repertoire of characters, symbols, patterns, and recurrent themes. All of Salinger's writings demonstrate how he managed to add details in order to improve his writing technique and his characters, who developed from their introductions until they finally emerged as fully developed characters. An outlook of Salinger's entire fiction sheds light on his prose styles, on Salinger's trademarks—such as his direct contact with the reader, his confusing story lines, his being a complete master of dialogue in which the choice of every word seems to be a very well balanced and detailed act, his italicizing words for emphasis, his colloquial language often considered too strong for those who wanted to censor or ban his books, the symbolism of his characters' names and of his stories' titles, the Zen imagery, and the portrayal of honest feelings in characters as Holden, Seymour, Franny, or Buddy, who are all searching for meaning in a crazy and phony world.

The influence of Zen philosophy is present throughout Salinger's exquisite mature works and it represents the source of his array of themes and motifs: children and what they stand for; oppositions between the phony, material world and the spiritual one; the war and the effects of its traumatic experiences; love and squalor; suicide theme; religion; alienation and vulnerability; reality; idealization of beauty; the quest for a moral ideal; communication and the problems caused by the lack of the ability to communicate directly; the quest for the seer. All of Salinger's themes, which are actually his trademarks, are very well presented

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against the social and political background of the post-war period and they also stand for the evolution of his characters and writing technique.

It is very important to mention that Salinger was working on “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and on **The Catcher in the Rye** at almost the same time which means that some of the themes and attitudes treated in the short story opening *Nine Stories* also appear in the novel. But Holden Caulfield breaks the model of the Salingerian hero who uses the “written word” as “the mode of communication”—Joe Varioni who is a writer, Raymond Ford who is a poet, Teddy and Seymour who keep diaries (Levine 499). Thus, coming back to Seymour Glass, he is the Seer, he has the gift of vision and this statement is also reinforced by Salinger’s use of symbolism in the choice of his name and in the way Sybil calls him, “See more glass.” This kind of symbolism is characteristic for Salinger and it is used under different forms in all his short stories and especially in his novel. But the real importance of names relies in the symbolism used by Salinger in their choice.

W. French points out to another major symbolism in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” which starts with the diagnosis of “banana fever” and refers to the fact that bananas symbolize or stand for “a struggle between materialism and spirituality ... ” (French, “Revisited” 67). J. Lundquist believes that the sea in which the bananafish swim “represents the blue world of spirituality in which we may swim freely if we only choose to do so” (80). But he continues by saying that “most of us are bananafish who prefer to swim into some dark place and become such gluttons for sensual pleasure that we cannot swim out again and are trapped” (80). The color yellow used by Salinger in the short story embodies the same idea connected to sensual pleasure. J. Lundquist points out that Seymour, during his conversation, tries to make Sybil “see herself in an alternate way” (82) and that is why he insists that her bathing suit is blue and not yellow. The colors are very important in the story because they stand for two different concepts: “blue is associated with spirituality (the heavens are blue, the Madonna’s cloak is traditionally blue in sacred art) and yellow is associated with various aspects of the physical or carnal (the color is the color of gold and the color of cowardice)” (Lundquist 82), and they can help the reader in understanding or solving the puzzle in this short story taken as an example for Salinger’s mastery of style.

Coming back to the symbolism of names and colors used by Salinger in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” it is important to add that next to Sybil’s interpretation of Seymour’s name as “see more,” his last name, Glass, has two important connotations: the word glass denotes the object through which one can see, but it can also be understood as a mirror that reflects one’s image back, and it can also denote another object—a window through which one can see (Lundquist 82). Referring to the first connotation, that of a mirror, J. Lundquist explains that “[t]he image that is reflected is a false one; it is reversed, untrue, and unreal, and obsession with it is nothing more than vanity. In Zen, trying to understand oneself this way is as absurd as are the student’s efforts at discovering his ‘original face.’ But the other sense of *glass* as window is a different matter, because self-understanding can result from *seeing through* oneself” (82). The connection found by Lundquist between this type of thinking and the *koan* is that the latter encourages the former in order to make the student destroy the “glass of illusion” (82). The earlier discussed symbolism of the color yellow becomes all the more important once Seymour and Sybil start talking about the story of the “Little Black Sambo” and then the story of the bananafish. J. Lundquist argues that “[I]like the tigers, the bananafish become trapped in their own mortality” and asks the key question, making the analogy between bananafish and man, if man’s fate is not that of becoming trapped in his own mortality, just as the fate of bananafish is of eating bananas (83). His answer to such questions, and thus to the general problem raised by Salinger’s story “is that before the bananafish enters the hole, he is something else—at least he is free to swim the blue depths” (83).

According to J. Lundquist we have become blind, we are no longer in tune with the blue spirituality because “[w]e see only our images as bananafish without seeing through them” (83). But Sybil is not blind because she can see a bananafish with six bananas in its mouth. This is the much-discussed moment when Seymour kisses the arch of her foot, as a sign of blessing because she has managed to understand or see what he himself was trying to understand or see. W. French was talking about a different way of reading “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” as a metaphor, and this, I believe, needs to be applied to all of Salinger’s writings, while keeping in mind that Salinger opens the *Nine Stories* collection with a Zen koan: “We know the sound of two hands clapping, / But what is the sound of one hand clapping?”

This reference to the Zen koan seems to announce the reader that he or she needs to read the short stories differently, keeping in mind the connection with this type of philosophy. James Lundquist provides an explanatory account about Zen art that stands as one of the major themes in Salinger’s fiction, especially in works like “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” “For Esmé – with Love and Squalor,” “Teddy,” *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Franny and Zooey*. Actually, J. Lundquist believes that the Zen koan opening Salinger’s collection suggests a different approach and thus Salinger’s short stories are no longer “rather conventional,” but “they become calligraphic paintings, reach their artistic high point in a tea ceremony, and have the arrangement of a Japanese garden” (70). Salinger’s use of Zen philosophy has been a long-debated issue. Some critics believe that Salinger took interest in the mid 1940s in this type of philosophy because it was a fashionable new type of philosophy emerging in America at that time. Other critics believe that Salinger used it as a metaphor in his fiction and as an aid to help him convey his messages better. It is very difficult to agree with just one point of view since it seems that all of them bring to light something new and plausible.

Salinger’s short stories are closely connected to the Zen and koan practice. As the reader starts the short stories collection, some logical questions arise referring to Salinger’s using the “one hand clapping” koan and the implicit paradox implied by such a question—how can one hear the sound of something that cannot make any noise, or how can one hear the sound of a hand that has nothing to hit against? J. Lundquist wonders if one can obtain any knowledge of his or her real nature, or, in other words, if the mind can hit against itself, and the answer found by him is that this is the “final question that Salinger comes down to in his stories as he presents characters who achieve or fail to achieve *satori*, who either do or do not achieve a sudden and intuitive way of seeing into themselves” (78).

An important indication of the Zen influence is the very use of the Zen koan opening *Nine Stories* and it represents a device used by Salinger to announce the reader that (s)he needs to read the short stories differently, keeping in mind the connection with this type of philosophy. Most critics also believe that Salinger’s interest in Zen Buddhism and its use in his fiction represent a metaphor and an aid to help him convey his messages better and more efficiently.

A very important pattern in Salinger’s fiction is represented by what many critics have largely discussed: the crucial moments of compassion and growth or rebirth, or epiphanies. It is noteworthy that W. French mentions the influence or illustration of James Joyce’s theories in Salinger’s works; especially in short stories as “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut,” “Just Before the War with the Eskimos,” “The Laughing Man,” and these are only a few worth mentioning here. French explains that these stories “serve to illustrate the Joycean concept, explained in *Stephen Hero*, of the ‘epiphany’—‘a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself’” (French 97).

In most of Salinger’s literary creations “love” is a central issue, and in the more optimistic ones it brings about growth or rebirth, although critics have different opinions concerning the moment when this “salvation” has been accomplished. W. Wiegand, in his article “Seventy-Eight Bananas,” sees Salinger’s crucial moments of compassion and growth not as Hassan’s “quixotic gesture,” but as “remedies,” since Salinger’s stories are “stories of

the search for relief” (Grundwald 128). Thus, Wiegand sees the “remedy” offered by Salinger for “The Laughing Man,” and implicitly for John Gedsudski as “sublimation in art” (Grundwald 128).

A significant pattern representative of Salinger’s works is the already mentioned crucial moments of compassion and growth or what James Joyce termed an “epiphany” or revelatory and changing experience for the characters, a kind of conversion through compassion, trust and love, which saves them from real or symbolic death and suggests that they may be able to function more adequately in their world in the future. Martin Bidney in a critical essay entitled “The Aestheticist Epiphanies of J. D. Salinger: Bright-Hued Circles, Spheres, and Patches; ‘Elemental’ Joy and Pain,” states that there have been not too many attempts “to find a pattern that can unite the epiphanies of characters in the works of J. D. Salinger,” and he attempts to provide such a pattern. In a recent book, Patterns of Epiphany, the author mentions that he tried to find “a method for studying the distinctive epiphany patterns of writers and applied it to a series of nineteenth-century authors,” and the above-mentioned essay focuses on Salinger. He believes that the “[s]ources and parallels for Salinger’s literary epiphanies have been sought in many religious traditions,” mostly in Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, and Christianity, “[b]ut such references to other people’s imaginings cannot reveal—may even distract from—what is distinctive about Salinger’s own vision, the epiphanic pattern that underlies his characters’ moments of revelation.”

According to Martin Bidney, every writer develops a unique pattern when producing an epiphany and he defines an epiphany as generally being “a moment in a literary work that affects the reader as (1) intense, (2) expansive in meaning (that is, seeming to mean more than such a brief experience would have any right to mean), and (3) mysterious (its resonance or vibrancy exceeding any apparent explanation offered in the author’s text) [3].” Based on this definition and on his studies, he derives three basic components of epiphanic patterns: “elements (in the ancient sense: earth, air, fire, water); patterns of motion (irrespective of whatever it is that moves); and shapes (most commonly, geometric), together with certain recurrent features that are occasionally linked to the above (thus, in one Salinger epiphany the color green is linked to earth in springtime, but patches of bright, pure color appear often, without requiring any ‘elemental’ cause).” After the identification of the distinctive components in a certain writer, the next thing he has to do is to “locate the author’s ‘paradigm’ epiphany,” and Martin Bidney defines this paradigm as “the one epiphany that manifests the author’s recurrent pattern most completely and vividly.”

Martin Bidney sustains that Salinger’s epiphanies are usually made up of a grouping of two or more elements. The interesting aspect is that one of the elements is suggested “only vaguely by a color-link (as the mention of a gold medallion may suggest the fiery sun).” “De Daumier-Smith’s Blue Period” is typical of Salinger because it contains most of the themes that dominate his work: alienation, phoniness, reality versus fantasy, and so on. The hero is an introverted, alienated young man, with a strong tendency to live in a world of fantasy. During his experience in Canada, he reinforces certain views of himself and of life. There are aspects in the story of the external world that are absolutely hideous, symbolized in the two episodes at the orthopedic appliances shop. The main character finds out that permanent happiness is elusive, since the moments of satisfaction and joy are short-lived; nevertheless, they are possible only if sought and found within oneself. The short story also deals with one of Salinger’s favorite themes, the “nice” versus the “phony” world. Thus, the reader understands, once again, that the universe is so phony and hostile that the bright and sensitive people are forced into a kind of retreat from it (Stone).

Salinger’s symbolism of colors is also very representative in **The Catcher in the Rye**, namely in the carousel scene at the end of the novel when Phoebe is riding the carousel. The two colors present in this scene are blue and brown. W. Glasser points out that Phoebe’s

innocence is also reflected by the color of her coat, namely blue, which “might possibly suggest the height at which she exists in spirit: above the earth, in the sky, or the heavens” (113). The color in opposition is that of the horse she rides, namely brown, “a color we may associate with the earth” (Glasser 113). But this apparent opposition, just as the ying / yang opposition, actually illustrates “the dependency of human existence upon a blending of spirit and matter” (Galsser 113).

Salinger’s novel, as demonstrated by W. Glasser, also contains “movement,” “usually in a straight line, symbolic, not only of aging, but of proceeding from one state of existence to another” (103). In order to achieve this symbolism, Glasser sustains that Salinger uses different colloquial expressions in his novel to reinforce this idea, and that the “symbolic conception of movement” is present in the entire the novel. The second pattern of movement discovered by Glasser in Salinger’s novel is a symbolical one, up and down. He believes that all downwards movements illustrate world related experiences and that is why any type of fall “implies a loss of childhood spirit, which Holden would prefer to keep up, on a cliff, above any involvement with the world below” (104).

The essence of Salinger’s use of movement in a symbolical way is greatly and simply described by Glasser: the movement forward suggests relating to another person, the movement upwards suggest spiritual connotations, and the movement downward suggests “a deeper immersion into worldly experiences” (111). At the end of the novel, Salinger’s use of movement as symbol acquires paramount importance as it makes Holden aware of the fact that he needs to accept “the necessity for movement within a child’s existence” (Glasser 111). Although it is very difficult for somebody like Holden to accept the last type of “movement” in a child’s life because of the material and phony connotations, he finally has to do it since there is no other for a child to have a “complete existence unless it continues ‘becoming’ within this world” (Glasser 111). This dramatic change in Holden’s attitude occurs at the end of the novel when all of the movements blend together in the carousel scene.

This analysis comes to strengthen Martin Bidney’s affirmation that “[t]he geometric shape Salinger prefers in his characters’ epiphanies is always something round: circle, sphere, or cylinder.” The roundness of the carousel and the circular movements that it creates can be one of the most representative patterns used by Salinger, in this case, in his novel.

Glasser has also identified the importance and recurrence of breath in Salinger’s novel as a symbol. Salinger introduced early in the novel references to breath, as in the example used by Glasser, when Holden waits for Sunny in the hotel room and he tests his breath to check if it smelled from cigarettes and alcohol, and many other examples. A deeper examination of Holden’s gesture determined Glasser to establish a connection between it and a “Biblical association of man’s breath with his spirit or soul” (100). Thus, when Holden blows his breath up into his nostrils he does more than simply determining if his breath smells. Glasser explains that Holden tries to see if his “breath has been tainted, in this case by the adult acts of drinking and smoking, is, by implication, the extent to which Holden’s spirit has been corrupted” (100). Glasser gives Holden’s brushing his teeth after the test symbolical meaning, comparing his gesture “to cleansing one’s spirit” (100). By extending the symbolism of the gesture, Glasser continues and gives “spiritual significance” to bathrooms as the place “where one cleanses not only his body, but also his soul, a view that is emphasized when Phoebe’s mother asks her if she has said her prayers, and Phoebe answers that she said them in the bathroom” (100). But many of the characters who populate Salinger’s novel do not take care of their breath. The most useful example in this case is that of Ackley who never brushes his teeth. Another good example in point is the maid of the Caulfield family, Charlene, who always breathes on Phoebe’s food and on everything else, as Glasser mentions (100). But Holden is nothing like these characters; he always checks his breath and tries to keep it clean. That is why he becomes very upset “whenever he breathes

his tainted breath on anyone else, especially if he believes that the other person is untainted” (Glasser 100).

The song played when Phoebe rides the carousel is “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” and it is yet another allusion to the above-mentioned symbolism of breath and to “the debilitating effect of cigarette smoke upon one’s breath, or spirit” (Glasser 112). This interpretation allows Glasser to say that the carousel is “a symbol of enduring childhood,” and it “plays a song suggestive of its eventual corruption” (112).

Salinger’s epiphanies “usually generate within the observer, and vicariously in the reader, a vivid mixture of pleasure and pain, of joy and grief” (Bidney).

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to focus on what most critics agree to be a very important pattern in Salinger’s fiction: the crucial moments of compassion and growth or rebirth or epiphanies, focusing mainly on the episodes and literary creations in which they occur. The most common acceptance of an epiphany is that of a “sudden spiritual manifestation” which can take almost any form (a gesture, a phrase, a line, a state of mind). The essence of all these epiphanic moments is love, in all its forms, and such moments can be viewed as a weaker form of the “quixotic gestures” or as “remedies” since Salinger’s stories are in search for relief. Such moments are highly important since they seem to offer the character that experiences them equilibrium, at least a temporary one if not a long-term one.

I have also tried to present Salinger’s pattern of crucial moments of compassion and growth or epiphanies from James Joyce’s perspective which refers to a revelatory or changing experience for the characters, one which can only happen through love, trust and/or compassion and which saves the characters experiencing it from a real or symbolic death and offers an optimistic perspective on the characters’ future existence.

My belief that Salinger’s use of so many symbols denotes his desire to work on multiple levels at the same time: he uses not only explicit ways (direct communication), but also indirect or hidden ways (symbolism in all its forms) to emphasize his ideas and convey his messages more efficiently to his readers. Another device which helps Salinger do the same thing is the use of his Zen interests and influences in his fiction as a metaphor and an aid to transmit his messages easier and better. The conclusion is that Salinger used Zen Buddhism concepts to make the reader achieve the very essence of this type of thinking and which is very similar to the essence of any Zen koan: that of reaching a state of awakening which can help an individual surpass all conscious knowledge and thus achieve the ultimate state of “satori” and the enlightenment necessary to ease the way to achieving “ultimate freedom.”

All the similar or contradictory points of view of different critics presented in this article concerning Salinger’s fiction, which have greatly changed and improved along the decades thanks to the great interest literary critics have taken in analyzing and developing different theories represent a significant aid which eases the readers’ comprehension of Salinger’s literary works from a wider angle and which allow more interpretations.

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