# A Perfect Day for Bananafish

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. D. SALINGER

Jerome David Salinger grew up on Park Avenue in Manhattan, New York. His father was a successful Jewish cheese importer, and his mother was Scotch-Irish Catholic. After struggling in several prep schools, Salinger attended Valley Forge Military Academy from 1934 to 1936. He went on to enroll in several colleges, including New York University and Columbia, though he never graduated. He took a fiction-writing class in 1939 at Columbia that cemented the dabbling in writing he had done since his early teens. During World War II, Salinger ended up in the U.S. Army's infantry division and served in combat, including the invasion of Normandy in 1944. Salinger continued to write during the war, and in 1940 he published his first short story in *Story* magazine. He went on to publish many stories in *The New Yorker*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, and others from 1941 to 1948. In 1951, he published his only full-length novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which rocketed Salinger into the public eye. Salinger, however, hated his sudden fame and retired from New York to Cornish, New Hampshire, where he lived until his death in 2010. In his final years, he continued to avoid contact with the media and ceased publishing any new works.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II robbed millions of young men and women of their youthful innocence, and Salinger himself witnessed the slaughter of thousands at Normandy, one of the war's bloodiest battles. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Salinger's World War II experience is reflected in Seymour's longing for his pre-war innocence; his cynical view of adult society; his psychological agony; and, of course, his eventual suicide. During World War II, product shortages and rationing of goods such as rubber and fuel meant that there was a stunning lack of consumer goods available to purchase. The end of World War II in 1945 saw sharp uptick in American consumerism—in the face of a new abundance of jobs and higher wages, coupled with the shortage of products available for purchase in years' past, Americans were suddenly eager to spend their money. Thanks to newly developed technologies during the war, many new products came on the market, such as nylon, plastics, Styrofoam, the aerosol spray can, and more. Ad agencies also began to spend more and more following WWII—some advertisers even taking to television rather than radio to support their brands—further fueling the growing atmosphere of materialism. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Muriel embodies this shallow culture of consumerism.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Salinger was famously private and detested the media, so not much is known about who or what influenced his work. It is known, however, that he met with Ernest Hemingway in Paris during World War II, which suggests that Salinger admired Hemingway's work. Many of Hemingway's stories featuring protagonist Nick Adams—such as "Big Two-Hearted River" and "The Three-Day Blow" bear thematic resemblance to "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick has just returned from World War I and is grappling with the unpleasant memories and emotions associated with that experience, though he largely attempts to avoid these emotions. In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Seymour Glass has recently returned from fighting in World War II and is similarly emotionally traumatized and fails to articulate how he's feeling. In "The Three-Day Blow," in which Nick also appears, Hemingway explores the generational angst of the Lost Generation—a generation of youths, including Hemingway himself, who came of age in between World War I and World War II. This generation grew disillusioned with traditional American values, because these conventions seemed hollow, materialistic, and devoid of meaning after the wartime atrocities they had witnessed. Like Nick, who feels aimless and "lost" without such values to ground his choices, Seymour also struggles to exist in such a materialistic, shallow world. The thought of living in such a world after all he's experienced in the war is so hard for him to fathom, in fact, that he commits suicide at the end of the story. Salinger's only full-length novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, centers around a male protagonist who's also alienated from other people and is in psychological distress, as much of the novel focuses on Holden Caulfield's depression and suicidal thoughts. Other books that grapple with mental illness include Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Perfect Day for Bananafish
- **When Written:** Late 1940s
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1948 in *The New Yorker*; 1953 in *Nine Stories*
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A resort on the coast of Florida in 1948
- **Climax:** Seymour shoots himself in the temple.
- **Antagonist:** Emotional trauma from war; American consumerism; isolation

- **Point of View:** Third Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Family Affair.** Many of Salinger's stories feature other members of the Glass family, but "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is the only one in which Seymour Glass, the eldest child in the family, appears in real time. In other stories, he's referred to in passing or appears in other characters' memories.

## PLOT SUMMARY

The long-distance phone lines at the hotel are busy, so Muriel Glass has to wait two and a half hours for her call to go through—time that she spends reading a magazine article about sex; grooming herself; cleaning her clothes; and painting her nails. When the operator finally rings her room, Muriel is unhurried in getting to the phone and leisurely puts the finishing touches on her manicure. Careful to keep her freshly painted nails away from the fabric of her silk dressing goal, Muriel picks up the receiver, and the operator connects Muriel's call to New York.

On the other line is Muriel's mother, who is beside herself with worry and berates Muriel for not calling sooner. Muriel begins to explain that she's called a few times, but her mother cuts her off, frantically asking Muriel if she's alright. She demands to know who drove; Muriel admits that her husband, Seymour, did—but she assures her mother that he drove appropriately and didn't run into any trees. After alluding to an incident in which Seymour crashed Muriel's father's car, Muriel asks her mother if she's seen a book of German poems that Seymour sent her while he was away at war. Muriel and her mother laugh about how Seymour expected Muriel to read poems in a different language.

Muriel's mother gravely explains that Muriel's father consulted Dr. Sivetski about Seymour's recent behavior—like when he brazenly asked Muriel's grandmother about her plans for dying. According to Dr. Sivetski, the army made a big mistake in releasing Seymour from the hospital, and Seymour is bound to lose control of himself soon. Muriel's mother again frets about Muriel's well-being and begs her to come home. Muriel balks; she hasn't had a vacation in years, so she's not going to leave now.

Muriel shares that she met a psychiatrist at the hotel while Seymour was off playing piano elsewhere; the psychiatrist had asked if Seymour was sick, and Muriel assumed he was referring to Seymour's pale complexion. Muriel begins talking about the man's horrible, unfashionable wife, but her mother wants to know more about what the psychiatrist said about Seymour. Muriel doesn't remember much of what the psychiatrist said and explains that it was so noisy in the bar they were in, she couldn't really hear him well to begin with. Muriel's mother again implores Muriel to spend some time away from Seymour, perhaps on a cruise. Exasperated, Muriel says that Seymour has been behaving himself—though he refuses to take his **bathrobe** off because he doesn't want people looking at his tattoo, even though he doesn't actually have one.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Carpenter is slathering her young daughter, Sybil, in sun-tan oil. Sybil keeps repeating the phrase "See more glass," while Mrs. Carpenter's friend chatters on about a silk scarf. Annoyed with her daughter, Mrs. Carpenter tells Sybil to run off and play, so Sybil bounds down the beach until she reaches a young man lying in the sand in a bathrobe. The man is startled but, realizing that his unexpected visitor is just Sybil, he quickly relaxes. The pair fall into an easy conversation about Seymour's wife and Sybil's bathing suit (which is yellow, but which Seymour mistakes for blue). As they talk, Seymour frequently touches Sybil's **feet** and ankles.

Sybil accuses Seymour of letting Sharon Lipschutz, a different young girl visiting the resort, sit on the piano bench with him—Seymour admits that this happened but that he felt like he couldn't just push Sharon off, so he pretended she was Sybil. Sybil demands that they get in the water. Shedding his robe, Seymour agrees, saying that they can catch **bananafish**. He asks Sybil where she lives, but when she claims to not know, he says that Sharon Lipschutz knows where she lives—and she's only three and a half years old. Sybil answers that she lives in Whirly Wood, Connecticut but then demands to know if Seymour likes Sharon. Seymour says he does, especially because she doesn't abuse dogs in the hotel lobby—like the one that belongs to the hotel resident from Canada. He explains that, shocking as it may sound, there are some little girls who meanly poke the dog with balloon sticks. Sybil goes quiet.

Once in the water, Seymour declares that it is a "*perfect* day for bananafish." He explains that bananafish are like regular fish, but they swim into holes full of bananas. They then gorge themselves on said bananas until they're so fat that they can't swim back out of the holes and then they die of "banana fever." When a wave comes, Sybil screams in delight and claims that she saw six bananafish underwater. Seymour picks up one of Sybil's ankles and kisses the arch of her foot. Sybil yells in surprise, and Seymour says that it's time to go back to shore, even though Sybil doesn't want to.

After they part, Seymour dons his robe and makes his way back to the resort. In the elevator, he aggressively accuses a woman of secretly staring at his feet, and the woman nervously asks the elevator operator to let her out. When Seymour arrives to his hotel room, he's greeted by the strong smells of his wife's nail polish remover and calfskin luggage. He looks at Muriel sleeping on one of the beds and then digs through his own luggage, pulling out a gun, which he promptly loads. He settles himself on the twin bed next to Muriel's, looks over at her again, and then shoots himself in the temple.

## CHARACTERS

**Seymour Glass** – The protagonist of the story, Seymour Glass is Muriel's husband who has recently returned from fighting in World War II and has been struggling psychologically ever since. The story alludes to several incidents in which Seymour has behaved erratically or violently: crashing Muriel's father's car into a tree, for instance, or bluntly asking Muriel's elderly grandmother about her plans to die. Indeed, Muriel's mother and father are both extremely concerned with Seymour's behavior (going so far as to consult a doctor, Dr. Sivetski) and even more concerned for Muriel's well-being. Muriel, on the other hand, is flippant about Seymour's struggles and goes out of her way to avoid discussing them with her mother when she calls. Muriel and Seymour's marriage doesn't appear to be a happy one. Instead, it's one of profound isolation—they don't speak once throughout the entire story, and they spend much of their vacation apart (usually with Muriel having drinks or lounging in the hotel room while Seymour lays on the beach alone or plays piano). Muriel's inability to empathize with her husband and the pair's inability to communicate or spend time with one another point to the theme of communication and isolation that runs throughout the story. And while Muriel fails to understand her husband, he seems unable to understand her either. Muriel is the very picture of American consumerism: she's shallow and obsessed with fashion, and she'd rather gossip about people than have a deep or productive conversation. Having just returned from the war, Seymour likely can't find value in the materialism that his wife—and American society more broadly—subscribes to. This is perhaps in part why Seymour is so drawn to befriending children like Sybil, as kids are (in theory) not yet corrupted by things like war and blind consumerism. However, Seymour's draw to innocence throughout the story is also violent and destructive. Most notably, his playful rapport with Sybil carries uncomfortably sexual undertones, while his constant pull towards innocence and away from corrupt adult society leads him to take his own life at the end of the story.

**Muriel Glass** – Seymour's wife, Muriel, is a materialistic young woman who is indifferent toward her husband's clear psychological suffering. While Seymour has a poetic sensibility—he loves poetry, literature, and playing piano, for instance—Muriel is the complete opposite and caters more to the state of her physical appearance than to the state of her marriage. Throughout the story, she and Seymour don't speak once to each other, and she's flippant about his mental state when her mother brings it up on the phone. It seems that Muriel and Seymour suffer from a clash of values: Muriel is deeply entrenched in the materialistic mindset that defines American culture, while Seymour, a WWII veteran, struggles to find meaning or happiness in consumer goods.

**Sybil Carpenter** – Sybil Carpenter is a young girl whom Seymour befriends at the resort in Florida. The narrative implies that she's older than three-and-a-half-year-old Sharon Lipschutz (a fellow resort-goer) but young enough that she won't go through puberty for at least nine years, suggesting that she's probably around age four or five. Because Sybil is so young, she and Seymour have silly conversations about all things strange (Sybil's penchant for eating candles) and silly (Seymour's story about made-up creatures called **bananafish**). For Seymour, these topics seem to be a welcome reprieve from the psychological trauma he's struggling with as a WWII vet—and from his wife, Muriel's, vapid materialism. Sybil's innocence and playful spirit draw Seymour to her, but their relationship isn't entirely squeaky clean—Seymour behaves in borderline sexual ways around her, giving her flirtatious compliments and touching her **feet** and ankles (and even once kissing the arch of her foot). Because Sybil so young, though, she doesn't grasp the sexual undertones of Seymour's behavior or feel creeped out by him—when Seymour suddenly kisses her foot in the ocean, she yells "Hey!" in surprise but expresses that she wants to continue playing with him. While Seymour is drawn to Sybil for her innocence, it seems that Sybil is simply delighted to have someone who will listen to her and play along with her—her mother, Mrs. Carpenter, is uninterested in her and finds her annoying. Near the middle of the story, Sybil repeats, "See more glass" to her mother, presumably trying to tell her about her new friend, Seymour Glass. But rather than understand what her daughter is trying to communicate, Mrs. Carpenter essentially tells Sybil to be quiet and leave her alone—one of many instances of failed communication in the story.

**Muriel's Mother** – Like Muriel's father, Muriel's mother is deeply worried about Seymour's strange and erratic behavior lately, and how it might endanger Muriel. The first several pages of the story are dedicated to Muriel's phone conversation with her mother, in which her mother attempts to air these concerns and convince Muriel to spend some time apart from Seymour. But though so much air time is devoted to this conversation, the pair fail to communicate very much at all—they cut each other off mid-sentence, change the subject abruptly on each other, and only really engage in mutual back-and-forth conversation when discussing frivolous things like fashion or gossip. Both mother and daughter are extremely materialistic and don't understand Seymour's poetic sensibilities—for instance, they laugh and scoff at the time he sent Muriel a book of German poems while at war and actually expected her to read them. But Muriel's mother does seem to have a little more emotional intelligence and empathy for others than her daughter does, given her clear concern for Muriel's well-being.

**Muriel's Father** – Muriel's father, like Muriel's mother, is concerned about Seymour's mental state. During their phone call, Muriel's mother implies that Muriel's father has been

speaking with a doctor (likely a psychiatrist) about some of Seymour's recent concerning behaviors, such as crashing Muriel's father's car into a tree and asking Muriel's aging grandmother about her plans for dying. Throughout this phone conversation, Muriel's mother expresses some irritation with her husband—when explaining how Muriel's father sought Dr. Sivetski's advice, Muriel's mother says, "He told him *ev*erything. At least, he said he did—you know your father." And when Muriel explains that she tried to call twice the previous night, her mother says, "I *told* your father you'd probably call last night. But, no, he had to—[…]". Both of these comments suggests that the parents' marriage may have some level of animosity to it, or perhaps that Muriel's father isn't exactly dependable.

**Dr. Sivetski** – Dr. Sivetski is a psychiatrist whom Muriel's father consults about Seymour's increasingly strange and unsettling behaviors after coming home from World War II. The doctor declares that the army shouldn't have released Seymour from the hospital, and that Seymour is bound to lose control of himself soon. Muriel's mother relays this information to Muriel, believing her daughter to be in danger, but Muriel is flippant and unconcerned.

**The Psychiatrist** – The psychiatrist is a resort guest who asks Muriel if Seymour is sick. The story heavily implies that this is because of Seymour's strange behavior, but Muriel assumes that the psychiatrist is referring to Seymour's pale complexion. When recounting this conversation to her mother on the phone, Muriel can't remember much of what the psychiatrist said about Seymour's condition because she was distracted by the psychiatrist's wife's ugly dress.

**The Psychiatrist's Wife** – The psychiatrist's wife is also vacationing at the resort in Florida where Muriel and Seymour are staying. When discussing her interactions with the psychiatrist to her mother, Muriel is far more interested in talking about the psychiatrist's horrible wife and her unfashionable dress than discussing what the psychiatrist thought about Seymour's behavior.

**Sharon Lipschutz** – Sharon Lipschutz is a three-year-old girl who's staying at the resort. Sybil is jealous that Seymour gives Sharon attention, accusing him of letting her sit on the piano bench with him while he was playing piano. Seymour says that he couldn't have just pushed her off, and he assures Sybil that he was just pretending that Sharon was Sybil. The way Seymour frames this conversation makes it seem like he cheated on Sybil with Sharon—even though the girls are essentially toddlers—which is one of many instances in which he makes an innocent interaction or conversation inappropriately sexual.

**Mrs. Carpenter** – Mrs. Carpenter is Sybil's mother. She is far more interested in talking about fashion with her friend than listening to her daughter talk—though, in her defense, she doesn't seem to understand that the phrase Sybil keeps repeating, "See more glass," refers to fellow resort-goer Seymour Glass. Like Muriel and her mother's relationship, Mrs. Carpenter and Sybil's mother-daughter relationship is also one marked by failed communication.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### SANITY AND SOCIAL NORMS

Throughout "A Perfect Day For Bananafish," young World War II veteran Seymour Glass is implied to be insane. While he and his wife, Muriel, are on vacation at a Florida resort, his behavior is erratic and possibly dangerous: Seymour is paranoid that others are looking at him, he behaves inappropriately with a young girl on the beach, and he ultimately shoots himself in the head in his hotel room. While this seems to affirm Seymour's insanity, Salinger leaves open the possibility that the man's suicide is a rational response to his circumstances; perhaps, after the horrors he saw during wartime, it's simply too jarring for Seymour to exist amid the vapidity and selfishness of upper-class postwar life. By leaving the motivation for Seymour's suicide ambiguous, Salinger raises the possibility that Seymour's insanity is a rational rejection of American cultural norms.

Throughout the story, Salinger cultivates the perception that Seymour is insane. This is first apparent in the story's opening phone conversation between Muriel and her mother, who is wild with panic about whether Muriel is okay. She seems to believe that Seymour is so dangerous that Muriel took a catastrophic risk simply by driving to Florida with him. To account for her exaggerated fear, Muriel's mother references ominous incidents: "what [Seymour] tried to do with Granny's chair," for instance, and "that funny business with the trees." The clear implication is that Seymour's past behavior has been erratic and physically destructive. It's not only Muriel's mother who thinks Seymour might be dangerous; there are doctors with similar concerns. Muriel says that a psychiatrist at the resort saw Seymour playing piano and asked her if Seymour had been "sick or something," implying that Seymour's public behavior is alarming enough to require intervention. Likewise, Muriel's mother spoke with a different doctor who called it a "crime" that Seymour was released from an army psychiatric hospital. He told her there was a "*great* chance […] that Seymour may com*plete*ly lose control of himself," implying that Seymour is a danger to himself and others.

Seymour's own behavior seems to affirm that he might be

dangerous. This is clearest when he plays on the beach with Sybil, a stranger's young daughter. While Sybil enjoys their playful and imaginative rapport—discussing her home in "Whirly Wood, Connecticut," and hunting for imaginary **bananafish** in the waves—the whole interaction has a sinister undertone. Seymour excessively touches Sybil's ankles, and when she criticizes him for playing with a different little girl at the resort, he remarks (cryptically quoting T.S. Eliot) about "mixing memory and desire" and tells Sybil that he "pretended she was you." Affirming the sense that he is being inappropriately sexual, he kisses the arch of Sybil's **foot** while they're in the water, which seems to alarm both of them, making him take her back to shore. Adding a final sense of danger to this interaction, Seymour's playful and happy mood shifts dramatically as soon as he leaves Sybil. On the elevator ride back to his hotel room, he accuses a woman of staring at his feet in such a frighteningly aggressive way that she flees at the first opportunity. It seems that every adult Seymour meets finds him menacing, which is powerful evidence that he might be insane.

Despite this, Salinger indicates that at least some of Seymour's erratic behavior is a rational response to his circumstances. For example, when Muriel's mother suggests that Seymour was crazy to talk "to Granny about her plans for passing away," she's describing behavior that (while perhaps insensitive) is not insane. After all, Seymour recently returned from war, so confronting the reality of death likely seems normal to him. Furthermore, Muriel and her mother seem disturbed that Seymour isn't enjoying vacation, but this, too, seems rational. A luxury resort probably feels profane to Seymour after experiencing the horrors of World War II. In this light, Seymour's "insanity" seems more like evidence of the dissonance between his traumatic experiences and the vapidity of his current social life.

In further defense of Seymour, Salinger suggests that the norms Seymour is rejecting truly are contemptible. With the exception of Sybil, everyone around Seymour is materialistic, status-obsessed, and conspicuously lacking in empathy. When Muriel and her mother talk on the phone, for instance, they shift between a fussy and judgmental discussion of Seymour's behavior and a petty conversation about social life at the resort. At no point does either of them express any empathy or understanding of Seymour's point of view, even though he is clearly suffering. Furthermore, Muriel reveals while talking to her mother that she didn't even read the book of poetry Seymour mailed her from war, despite its importance to him. Muriel is clearly too caught up in her own wealth and status to try to understand her husband's feelings and experiences, which suggests that she—and the culture that shaped her—bear significant blame for Seymour's difficulty with re-adjusting to civilian life. In this light, Seymour's inability to assimilate himself to the callous materialism of the world around him seems less like a symptom of insanity than a rational and inevitable response to experiencing a devastating war.

Ultimately, when Seymour returns to his hotel room from the beach, he sees his wife sleeping and smells her nail polish and new calf-skin luggage (emblems of the cruel and shallow culture he hates). He then kills himself with a pistol. It's not clear whether this is simply an act of insanity, or whether his suicide is a rational choice to reject the callous materialism around him—it's probably a bit of both. But by leaving ambiguous which of Seymour's behaviors are dangerously insane and which might be moral rejections of social norms, Salinger suggests that Seymour alone is not responsible for his fate: the horrors of both war and civilian life have driven him there.

## WEALTH AND MATERIALISM

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is set at a dazzling resort along the Florida coast where upper-class guests luxuriate and indulge. Everyone is surrounded by decadent things like calfskin leather, designer clothes, silks, and fashion magazines, suggesting that the resort and its patrons are the very embodiment of upper-class refinement. But for Seymour, who has recently returned from fighting in World War II, the resort is a hellish place, brimming with shallow people who are obsessed with accruing, discussing, and showing off their wealth—people much like his own materialistic wife, Muriel. In exploring the resort-goers' materialism and how this pushes Seymour towards suicide, Salinger stresses that greed can destroy people on both a spiritual and physical level.

The story that Seymour makes up for Sybil about the **bananafish** speaks to the idea that consumerism can have a corrupting effect on person, drawing a clear parallel between the resort guests' greed and the bananafish's insatiable appetites. According to Seymour, the bananafish seem at first like normal fish, but then they swim into holes that are full of bananas. The resort is like the holes full of bananas—just as the holes separate the fish from the rest of the ocean, the resort is cloistered from the outside world, and it's full of bananas in the sense that it's brimming with luxury and wealth. When the fish enter the holes, they become totally beholden to their gluttony; they eat so many bananas that they can no longer physically leave the hole, and they eventually die. This implies that once someone tastes luxury, they transform into beings propelled by greed. This makes them unable to leave the world of wealth and exist in normal society, which kills them. The bananafish die of "banana fever." Seymour doesn't clarify what that is, but a fever is often a reference to a psychological state—just as a fever addles the brain, when someone talks about "fevered" behavior, they usually mean fanatic and delusional. So Seymour seems to be saying that banana fever is akin to the psychological fever of

materialism, which is what kills wealthy people. It's not that they overeat and their stomachs explode, or that they exhaust their supply of bananas and starve—the bananas make them psychologically addled, and *that* is what kills them.

Just as Seymour's bananafish story predicts, other characters in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" seem spiritually corrupted by their materialism. Muriel, for instance, seemingly only cares about wealth. While Seymour has a poetic sensibility (he references T.S. Eliot and once mailed Muriel a book of German poems that he loves), Muriel is completely indifferent to anything that isn't superficial. This is reflected in Seymour's nickname for her, "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," which implies that even though Muriel has plenty of money, she is—spiritually speaking—a vagrant or a beggar. Indeed, while Muriel has plenty of indications that her husband is in grave distress, she's so blinded by materialism that she doesn't recognize what's going on. For instance, the psychiatrist at the resort seems to be trying to alert her to the danger Seymour is in, but when Muriel describes the interaction to her mother, she can't remember *anything* the psychiatrist said—all she remembers is that his wife was wearing an ugly, unfashionable dress. With this, Salinger explicitly associates wealthy people's concern with materialism with their inability to empathize, show kindness (rather than judgement), or have any spiritual sensibility.

Beyond being spiritually and emotionally destructive, materialism can literally kill. In Seymour's story about the bananafish, the fish gluttonously consume so many bananas that they swell up and trap themselves in underwater holes, where they eventually die. The indication here is that greed kills—and the title of the story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," makes clear that Salinger is implicating the whole resort, meaning that it's a perfect day for all the greedy people luxuriating. Greed also kills Seymour literally. His sensibility is opposed to the materialism that surrounds him (he loves poetry, he's playful and imaginative, he doesn't care about luxury or wealth), and he feels that he cannot keep living in a world so shallow—it's spiritual death or literal death, and he chooses literal death by shooting himself in the head. Of course, the story doesn't explicitly reveal that Seymour's suicide is a reaction against the consumerism surrounding him, but there are a few key moments that make this connection clear. Most notably, right before he kills himself, Seymour is acutely aware of the scent of new calf-skin luggage that Muriel just bought—a symbol of her wealth and also an encapsulation of how consumerism is tied to violence, as the luggage is made from the flesh of a baby animal that was killed so that Muriel could have a status symbol. Furthermore, Seymour looks at his sleeping wife both right before he retrieves his gun and right before he shoots himself. Throughout the story, Muriel is emblematic of their greedy, consumeristic culture: shallow, materialistic, and self-absorbed. She's unable to empathize with others and would rather gossip than hold a meaningful conversation. So when Seymour looks at his wife—especially with the smell of calfskin luggage and nail polish in the air—it's likely that he sees her as this symbol of materialism, which is what leads him to pull the trigger and end his own life. Materialism, the story shows, is deeply rooted in American culture—and it's deeply destructive to the human psyche.

For a brief moment in the final lines of the story, it's unclear if Seymour is going to kill himself or kill his wife. He frequently glances at his sleeping wife as he retrieves and loads his gun, leading readers to wonder if she will be on the receiving end of his bullet. And while the story never makes it clear whether Seymour indeed contemplates killing his wife, his ultimate decision to kill himself rather than kill her seems to suggest that the materialism she represents is too far-reaching and too embedded in American culture for it to make any difference whether she lives or dies. So, instead, Seymour decides that the only way to escape from this lifestyle is to permanently remove himself altogether. Consumerism, the story bleakly implies, isn't going anywhere.

## COMMUNICATION AND ISOLATION

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," everyone seems isolated from one another—especially Seymour, who appears to deliberately isolate himself by playing the piano at night and going to the beach alone. For other characters, conversations and even intimate interactions are marked by a sense of alienation and disconnect, sometimes because people refuse to empathize with one another and other times because they simply can't understand someone else's experiences (particularly Seymour's traumatic experience of war). While Salinger certainly makes the case that it's difficult to communicate with people who have such different experiences, he also makes the broader point that American culture doesn't value empathy and understanding, which leaves people lethally isolated.

In every instance of characters trying to connect, they miss each other somehow. For instance, Muriel and her mother can't even get in touch with each other for two days, and then when they do, they talk *at* each other during their whole phone call instead of mutually participating in a conversation. Muriel doesn't take her mom's concerns seriously (even though she should), and likewise Muriel's mom doesn't seem to hear Muriel's assurances that she's okay—essentially, they communicate nothing to each other. Even more strikingly, Muriel and Seymour never once speak throughout the whole story, showing how isolating and uncommunicative their marriage is. While on the phone with her mother, Muriel recalls how Seymour sent her a book of poetry while he was away at war, but she didn't read it—nor does she even know where she put it. With this, Muriel gestures to the idea that their entire marriage is one of failed communication and profound

disconnect.

Seymour particularly struggles with effective communication and feelings of isolation. Throughout the story, Seymour is always roaming around the resort alone, set apart from others playing piano or lying on the beach by himself, and he's rarely seen talking to anyone. Seymour's interaction with a little girl named Sybil is the only time in the story when he has a productive conversation, but they're talking at a child's level. Sybil understands Seymour's imaginative poetic side, which is an immense pleasure to him, but she can't relate to the other parts of him, leaving him still profoundly isolated. In contrast, Seymour's interactions with adults are marked with odd misunderstanding and even paranoia. For instance, he's paranoid that people are looking at his nonexistent tattoo, which might be a sort of twisted way of expressing that he thinks everyone can see that he has been changed by his experiences in the army. Additionally, his interaction in the elevator (where he thinks that a woman is staring at his **feet**) comes just after his inappropriate fixation on Sybil's feet and ankles, so it seems that he assumes the woman aware of this. In both of those cases, Seymour wrongly assumes that he's less isolated than he is—that people can know something important about him when they really can't. In actuality, nobody understands what is tormenting Seymour, which is painful for him—and his paranoia just alienates him further. There's so much misunderstanding, miscommunication, and isolation throughout the story that it's hard not to read Seymour's ultimate suicide as a final attempt to communicate something to Muriel—but it's actually not clear what that something is. Seymour doesn't leave a note, and Salinger is fairly ambiguous about Seymour's motivations besides making it clear that the man is socially isolated and in mental agony.

Salinger published "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" just two years after World War II came to a close, so it's easy to see how his consortium of characters might be reflective of post-WWII American society. Through his unempathetic, uncommunicative characters, Salinger suggests that people outside the story's pages are similarly disconnected from one another—which, as Seymour's fate shows, can come at a great cost. Indeed, Seymour's suffering speaks to the disconnect that soldiers often feel when coming back from war, since few civilians understand—or even try to understand—the harrowing scenes veterans have witnessed and the trauma they've endured. That Seymour's death is left vague and unexplained reads like a call to action for readers to connect deeply, communicate openly, and genuinely try to understand one another's experiences.

## INNOCENCE AND VIOLENCE

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," innocence and violence often go hand and hand. Having just returned from the trauma and violence of World War II, Seymour seems to want to access his prewar innocence through playing with children, reveling in their playfulness, imagination, and naivety. However, no matter how much Seymour plays with children, he cannot return to his prewar state. For one, the story's children are not entirely innocent (they themselves can be violent and manipulative), and—more importantly—Seymour's desire to connect with them is somewhat predatory, so his quest for innocence itself corrupts the children. By refusing to depict an innocence unmarred by violence, Salinger suggests that violence is an integral part of human nature, even for the very young.

Seymour is horrified by the callousness and materialism among adults at the beach resort where the story takes place, so his only happiness comes from his childlike rapport with a young girl named Sybil. Implied to be around four or five years old, Sybil is curious and whimsical, and she brings out an equally playful and talkative side to Seymour. For instance, when Sybil declares that she loves eating candles, without missing a beat, Seymour responds, "Who doesn't?" And when Sybil adds olives to the list of things she loves, he responds, "Olives and wax. I never go anyplace without them," matching her enthusiasm. While Sybil's mother, Mrs. Carpenter, seems annoyed by Sybil and is constantly shushing her or shooing her away, Seymour appears to get genuine joy out of their interactions, which is why he actually engages with and responds to everything she says—even when it's as silly and bizarre as eating candle wax.

Seymour's story about the made-up **bananafish** also shows him mirroring Sybil's own childlike imagination and curiosity. His story sounds like it was made up by a child: bananafish are like regular fish, he explains, only they swim into holes that are full of bananas, and they gorge themselves on those bananas until they're so fat that they can't swim back out of the hole. At this point, the bananafish die of "banana fever." Seymour's story is both simplistic (in that it's easy to follow) and entirely outlandish. That he makes it up on the spot to entertain and delight Sybil reveals how much joy he gets from his childlike connection with her. Seymour seems to have an easy time befriending children in general—besides Sybil, he's also friends with a three-year-old named Sharon, who is staying at the resort with her family. This furthers the depiction of him as a man who is drawn towards innocence. In contrast, the adults around Seymour are either wary of him or deeply dislike him (a feeling that appears to be mutual), such the woman in the elevator who flees when Seymour inexplicably accuses her of stealing glances at his **feet**. This dynamic is reflected through the symbol of Seymour's **bathrobe**. Throughout the story, Seymour's bathrobe is a sort of security blanket for him and symbolizes his refusal to open up to others, so it's significant that he sheds it entirely when Sybil comes by to go swimming. That Seymour is more comfortable with children, and Sybil in particular, is more evidence that he is drawn towards childlike naivete, playfulness, and simplicity.

But throughout, Salinger links innocence and violence in ways

that suggest that innocence really isn't innocent at all. For instance, even though Sybil is a child and is the pinnacle of innocence in Seymour's eyes, he implies that he saw her abusing someone else's dog. She also goes out of her way to stomp on the remnants of a sandcastle (apparently to have the satisfaction of destroying it fully), and she kicks sand in Seymour's face—two relatively mild incidents that nevertheless point to underlying violent impulses. So although Sybil is certainly childlike, her behavior shows that even children aren't perfectly innocent. Instead, they are morally nuanced people with inherent impulses towards destruction. Seymour's own desire to connect with innocence through Sybil is violent, too. For one, he physically endangers her when they're playing together in the water; she implies that she's not a strong swimmer and she's on a half-deflated float, but Seymour refuses to allow her to go back to shore. More ominously, Seymour is also somewhat sexually inappropriate with Sybil through flirtatious-seeming compliments and excessively touching her feet. He even kisses the arch of her foot—something that startles Sybil enough that she promptly leaves. This affirms that, while their bond initially seemed innocent, it's laced with violence and vulgarity.

Seymour's character more generally speaks to the idea that innocence isn't really innocence. Although he can be playful and childlike and he's far more comfortable around children than adults, it's implied that he witnessed a great deal of violence as a solider in WWII. Ultimately, at the end of the story, he violently commits suicide by shooting himself through the temple next to his sleeping wife. Seymour's violent suicide reads like a reaction to his failed attempt to access innocence through Sybil. It seems that his behavior with her startled him so much that he realized that innocence is inaccessible to him, and that the only way out is violence. In other words, it seems that Seymour is drawn to innocence, but his very attraction threatens to destroy that innocence—a grim reflection of Salinger's overarching point that humankind is inherently violent. Completely pure, genuine innocence simply can't exist in such a world.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### SEYMOUR'S BATHROBE

Near the beginning of the story, Muriel complains to her mother that Seymour refuses to take his bathrobe off, which she flippantly attributes to him wanting to hide his pale complexion. However, his bizarre attachment to the bathrobe actually symbolizes how he closes himself off to other adults and the adult world they inhabit. Indeed, when the story introduces Seymour a few pages later, he's lying on the beach with his eyes closed, but he's bundled up in his robe. When Sybil walks up and startles him, Seymour's hand instinctively flies up to the lapels of his robe, as if he were closing it tighter and closing himself off from the interaction. But when Seymour notices that the visitor is a child, he relaxes, and it's not long before he takes off his robe entirely to go swimming with her. That Seymour so willingly sheds his robe, which appears to be a kind of security blanket for him, reveals that he's much more comfortable with children than adults, and it points to the thematic idea that he is drawn to the innocence that children represent. True to form, when Seymour leaves Sybil's company and walks back to his hotel, he puts his robe back on and "close[s] the lapels tight," closing himself back up both physically and emotionally as he prepares to reenter the adult world.

More specifically, it seems that the bathrobe symbolizes Seymour's attempt to conceal his wartime experiences—and resulting psychological trauma—from others. After first writing off Seymour's behavior as simple embarrassment about his pasty skin, Muriel eventually admits to her mother that Seymour wears the bathrobe so that people don't stare at his tattoo. Surprised, her mother asks if Seymour got a tattoo in the army, and Muriel says no—he doesn't have a tattoo. With this, the story implies that this invisible tattoo that Seymour is desperate to cover up is a stand-in for Seymour's experiences in World War II. He worries that people will see these experiences—and his subsequent psychological trauma—just by looking at him, and so bundling himself up in the bathrobe is a way for him to close himself off from other people.

### FEET

In the story, feet symbolize the idea that there's no such thing as pure, uncorrupted innocence. The first time feet appear in the story is when Sybil, a young girl around four or five, runs energetically down the beach but goes out of her way to stomp on a lopsided sandcastle and destroy it completely. This moment is a small one, but it begins to flesh out the idea that what may seem innocent at first glance (here, a little girl's bare feet on the beach) can actually be tinged with violence. This is made more clear—and far more ominous—a little later when Seymour can't seem to keep his hands off of Sybil's feet and ankles while they chat about silly, childlike things. Even though this doesn't seem to bother or even really register with young Sybil, this repeated breaking of the touch barrier (in a place as strangely intimate and personal as bare feet) begins to paint Seymour in a vaguely predatory light. And when the pair go swimming in the ocean together, their childlike rapport is also tinged with violence as Seymour literally puts Sybil in physical danger. When a wave comes and she begins to panic, he grasps both of her ankles and pushes her over the wave. Luckily, Sybil finds this exhilarating, but the

repeated appearance of feet and ankles coupled with the danger of the wave (and the fact that Sybil is implied to be a poor swimmer and is on a half-deflated raft) depicts Seymour and his friendship with Sybil in a disturbing light.

And when feet and ankles appear again, it's when Seymour goes so far as to kiss the arch of Sybil's foot—the most tender spot on a foot, and one of the most tender parts of the body in general—while they're in the water. His own behavior seems to startle him, as he immediately insists that they get out of the ocean and part ways. (Also notable here is how he proceeds to wrap himself up tightly in his **bathrobe**, itself a symbol for Seymour's impulse to close himself off from other adults, suggesting that he knows that his behavior with Sybil wasn't innocent.) The story implies that Seymour's distress here comes from the fact that he tried to access innocence through Sybil but failed to and was instead somewhat flirtatious and predatory with her.

When Seymour returns to the hotel alone, he rides in the elevator with a fellow hotel guest and aggressively accuses the woman of stealing secret glances at his feet. As is characteristic of Seymour, he assumes the woman knows far more about him than she actually does; he seems to think that she's aware of the uncomfortable intimacy he just displayed with Sybil down on the beach when he kissed her foot. In berating the woman for looking at his feet, he seems to be trying to keep her from "seeing" the interaction with Sybil and his resulting discomfort or guilt with his own behavior—guilt he projects onto the woman by twisting her into the offender who was secretly doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing. Feet thus symbolize the idea that there is always latent violence or predation lurking beneath seemingly innocent aspects of life, as even things as wholesome as a child's feet are associated with destruction and inappropriate impulses. And now that Seymour has been sobered to this realization, he feels that his own feet are a marker of *his* lost innocence as a World War II veteran who has likely witnessed (and committed) terrible violence.

## BANANAFISH

The titular bananafish—a kind of fish that Seymour makes up to entertain Sybil—has two layers of symbolic significance: the story that Seymour tells about the fish is a metaphor for the destruction caused by war and by hyper-materialistic culture. As the story goes, bananafish are much like regular fish, only they swim into holes that are full of bananas. Once inside those holes, the bananafish feast on bananas until they're so fat that they can't swim back out of the hole, at which point they die of "banana fever." Given that Seymour has recently returned from fighting in World War II and is clearly still haunted by all he witnessed there, it's reasonable that those experiences would bleed into the story he makes up for Sybil. Indeed, it seems that the bananafish symbolize soldiers who went into the war as regular, run-of-the-mill men (like the bananafish prior to swimming into the banana hole) but then witnessed and committed so many violent acts (feasted on so many bananas) that they eventually died—whether mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically (succumbing to banana fever).

However, it's also possible to consider the bananafish and their insatiable appetites in the context of the resort-goers' similarly insatiable materialism. Just like the holes are filled with bananas, the resort is overflowing with wealth—designer clothing, calf-skin luggage, silks, and more. In Seymour's story, just one taste of a banana triggers the bananafish to gluttonously overindulge ("Why, I've known some bananafish to [...] eat as many as seventy-eight bananas," Seymour tells Sybil gravely), which suggests that a single taste of luxury incites a similar kind of single-minded obsession and overindulgence. Like the bananafish with their swollen stomachs, unable to squeeze back out through the hole, those who become beholden to wealth and greed can never escape that life. In Seymour's story, the bananafish, overstuffed with bananas, die of so-called banana fever. He doesn't explain what this is, but his use of the word *fever* here seems to suggest that the greed and gluttony that consumerism can kick up in a person are a type of mental fever—that is, materialism thrusts people into a fanatic and frenzied mental state. While the bananafish literally die of their fever, those who are ensnared in materialism's grasp "die" psychologically and are unable to lead normal, healthy lives again.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *Nine Stories* published in 1991.

## A Perfect Day for Bananafish Quotes

"[…] He calls me Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," the girl said, and giggled.

"It isn't funny, Muriel. It isn't funny at all. It's horrible. It's *sad*, actually. When I think how—"

"Mother," the girl interrupted, "listen to me. You remember that book he sent me from Germany? You know—those German poems. What'd I *do* with it? I've been racking my—"

"You have it."

"Are you *sure?*" said the girl.

"Certainly. That is, I have it. It's in Freddy's room. You left it here […] —Why? Does he want it?"

"[…] He wanted to know if it'd read it."

"It was in German!"

"[…] He said that the poems happen 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."

**Related Characters:** Muriel's Mother, Muriel Glass (speaker), Seymour Glass

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 3-4

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Muriel is on the phone with her mother, who is anxious about the fact that Muriel is away on vacation with her mentally ill war veteran husband, Seymour. Throughout the call, readers get the sense that Muriel is shallow and materialistic whereas her husband has a deeper spiritual sensibility, and this dialogue speaks to this contrast. While away fighting in World War II, Seymour sent his wife a book of poems from a German poet who he claimed was "the *only great poet of the century*." But not only did Muriel not read the poems, she doesn't even know where she put them, which reveals how little she cared for the gift or her husband's interests. To her credit, it is somewhat unrealistic for Seymour to expect his wife to track down a translation of the book or learn German just for the sake of reading the poems. But this nevertheless speaks to how important poetry and art are to him, and so Muriel's casual indifference reads as somewhat shocking.

Elsewhere in the story, Seymour quotes T. S. Elliot and is revealed to have a penchant for playing piano, furthering the idea that he is sensitive to literature, philosophy, music, and beauty. The only beauty Muriel is sensitive to, however, is her own, which is why Seymour nicknames her "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948." The word *tramp* means that someone is a vagrant or a beggar, so Muriel being a "Spiritual Tramp" means that she is spiritually poor and without spiritual direction. This nickname also reinforces the story's setting, making it clear that it's 1948, only three years after the end of World War II—a detail that will become increasingly important as it relates to Seymour's odd behaviors and eventual suicide.

"[…] he said it was a perfect *crime* the Army released him from the hospital—my word of honor. He very *definitely* told your father there's a chance—a very *great* chance, he said—that Seymour may com*plete*ly lose control of himself. My word of honor."

**Related Characters:** Muriel's Mother (speaker), Muriel's Father, Dr. Sivetski, Seymour Glass, Muriel Glass

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

While on the phone with her daughter, Muriel's mother explains how the girl's father recently spoke with a psychiatrist named Dr. Sivetski about Seymour's odd and downright distressing behaviors, such as crashing a car into a tree seemingly on purpose and asking an elderly woman about her plans for dying. While the story has hinted that Seymour is a war veteran who has recently returned from fighting in World War II (the story is set three years after the end of the war), this passage makes it explicit. After fighting in World War II, Seymour was hospitalized for mental instability and is still in an incredibly fragile state. This is what the psychiatrist means when he says (at least in Muriel's mother's retelling) that "it was a perfect *crime* the Army released [Seymour] from the hospital"—Seymour is still in so much psychological agony from the trauma he's experienced in war that he should be under the care of nurses and doctors rather than living independently out in the world.

It's implied that Seymour is suffering from what was then known as shell shock, a fairly ill-defined term that referred to the psychological disturbance those exposed to war often experienced. (It wasn't until after the Vietnam War in the 1970s that the more precise term "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," or PTSD, was coined.) Having witnessed—and even committed—so much violence in the war, Seymour is now psychologically burdened to the point that he has little

control over his actions. This is why the psychiatrist (supposedly) claimed that Seymour is likely to snap and "lose control over himself"—foreshadowing his suicide at the end of the story.

Muriel's mother's repetition of the phrase "my word of honor" also gestures to the story's theme of failed communication. Even though the mother and daughter have been talking, they aren't really communicating; up to this point, Muriel's mother has been trying to voice her serious concerns for Muriel's safety and Seymour's precarious mental state, but Muriel has repeatedly made light of her worries or changed the subject. In repeating "my word of honor," Muriel's mother attempts to emphasize that she is telling the truth about what Dr. Sivetski said and thus that Muriel needs to take this seriously.

"[…] he asked me if Seymour's been sick or something, So I said—"

"Why'd he ask that?"

"I don't know, Mother. I guess because he's so pale and all," said the girl. "Anyway, […] His wife was horrible. You remember that awful dinner dress you saw in Bonwit's window? The one you said you'd have to have a tiny, tiny—"

"The green?"

"She had it on. And all hips. […]"

"What'd he say though? The doctor."

"Oh. Well, nothing much, really. I mean we were in the bar and all. It was terribly noisy."

**Related Characters:** Muriel's Mother, Muriel Glass (speaker), Seymour Glass, The Psychiatrist's Wife, The Psychiatrist

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 6

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Muriel shifts the conversation with her mother away from Dr. Sivetski (and his grave concerns about Seymour's mental state) and towards the psychiatrist staying who is staying at the resort in Florida. Once again, Muriel sidesteps an important conversation about Seymour's health. Clearly, the psychiatrist noticed something about Seymour that was alarming enough to bring it up with Muriel—and it was likely some sort of quality or behavior that, as a psychiatrist, he attributed to mental illness. But when telling the story to her mother, Muriel says that the psychiatrist must have noticed Seymour's pale skin and assumed that he was physically ill.

It seems, though, that Muriel is on some level aware of her husband's mental illness, but she actively tries to avoid facing or discussing it. Later in this phone conversation, she admits that Seymour is oddly attached to his bathrobe and refuses to take it off (even while lying on the sand at the beach), she explains that Seymour is paranoid about other people seeing his tattoo even though he doesn't actually have a tattoo, and she notes that he spends a lot of time alone on their vacation. Taken together, it's unlikely that Muriel doesn't notice that her husband is struggling psychologically. But Muriel doesn't have the empathy to care about her husband's struggles or engage in conversation about them, which is why in this passage she quickly turns the conversation over to something vapid and materialistic like the psychiatrist's wife's unfashionable dress. This is where Muriel's priorities lie—she is most dynamic and engaged throughout the story when she's gossiping about strangers or talking about fashion, which makes her reflective of the shallow consumerism that characterized American culture in the late 1940s.

"Sharon Lipschutz said you let her sit on the piano seat with you," Sybil said.

"Sharon Lipschutz said that?"

Sybil nodded vigorously.

[…] "Well," he said, "you know how those things happen, Sybil. I was sitting there, playing. And you were nowhere in sight. And Shorn Lipschutz came over and sat down next to me. I couldn't push her off, could I?"

"Yes."

"Oh, no. No. I couldn't do that […] I'll tell you what I did do, though."

"What?"

"I pretended she was you."

**Related Characters:** Seymour Glass, Sybil Carpenter (speaker), Sharon Lipschutz

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, a young hotel guest named Sybil Carpenter,

implied to be around four or five years old, accuses Seymour of being too friendly to another little girl at the resort. Sybil's "vigorous[]" nod and accusatory, tattling tone are reminders that she's extremely young. She's struggling to "share" her new friend Seymour with others (just as children often struggle with sharing their toys), or she has an innocent crush on him since he's nice to her and gives her attention.

Seymour, however, takes this interaction from innocent to sinister, as he frames his run-in with Sharon (who he later says is three and a half years old) in a sexual way. He explains and justifies his interaction with Sharon as if he cheated on Sybil with her—claiming that Sybil "know[s] how those things happen," that Sybil wasn't around to stop it, and that Sharon came on to him so he "couldn't push her off," so he pretended she was Sybil. Of course, Sybil is not that much older than a toddler, so she doesn't "know how those things happen," nor does it even register for her that Seymour is framing this conversation in an inappropriately mature way. That this conversation is both childlike and innocent *and* vaguely predatory and violent speaks to the overarching idea that innocence can never remain innocent. Even though Seymour tries to access innocence through his friendship with Sybil, he tinges it with violence, perhaps inadvertently.

"Where do you *live*, anyway?"

"I don't know, said Sybil."

"Sure you know. You must know. Sharon Lipschutz knows where *she* lives and *she's* only *three and a half*."

Sybil stopped walking and yanked her hand away from him. She picked up an ordinary beach shell and looked at it with elaborate interest. She threw it down. "Whirly Wood, Connecticut," she said […].

"Whirly Wood, Connecticut," said the young man. "Is that anywhere near Whirly Wood, Connecticut, by any chance?"

Sybil looked at him. "That's where I *live*," she said impatiently. "I *live* in Whirly Wood, Connecticut." […]

"You have no idea how clear that makes everything," the young man said.

**Related Characters:** Sybil Carpenter, Seymour Glass (speaker), Sharon Lipschutz

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 12

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Sybil and Seymour are chatting on the beach, and Seymour encourages her to tell him things about herself. Like many of Sybil and Seymour's interactions, this conversation reads as both innocent and somewhat violent. It's important to remember that Sybil is around four or five years old, while Seymour, an adult man (who readers know to be mentally unstable) is a stranger to her. With this context, it's concerning that Seymour attempts to casually ask Sybil where she lives. It's possible that Sybil, despite being so young, senses that this is predatory and that she's not supposed to reveal this kind of information to strangers, which is why she immediately claims to not know.

To this, Seymour adopts a childlike, almost singsong-y tone—seen through the emphasis on the words "she," "she's," and "three and a half"—as he taunts Sybil about how a little girl even younger than her knows where she lives. Despite his childlike tone, Seymour is being manipulative here, using Sybil's jealousy of Sharon as fuel to get her to tell him personal information about herself. This technique of tapping into Sybil's insecurity and competitiveness with Sharon is clearly effective, as she goes from mumbling "I don't know" when asked where she lives to emphatically exclaiming, "Whirly Wood, Connecticut […] That's where I *live* […] I *live* in Whirly Wood, Connecticut," naming her city three times.

Even though Seymour is drawn to children for their playfulness and innocence (a sharp contrast from the materialistic, violent adult world he detests), his own desire to connect with innocence through his friendship with Sybil is somewhat violent in the way he manipulates her and pulls private information out of her. Throughout their conversation, he's also flirtatious and vaguely sexual (kissing the arch of Sybil's foot, for instance), and he physically endangers her by wading out deep in the ocean with her on a half-deflated raft even though she's implied to be a poor swimmer. Overall, then, Seymour's easy rapport with Sybil seems innocent and playful on the surface, but it's also tinged with danger and vulgarity, underscoring Salinger's point that violence is an integral part of humankind.

"Do you like wax?" Sybil asked.

"Do I like what?" asked the young man.

"Wax."

"Very much. Don't you?"

Sybil nodded. "Do you like olives?" she asked.

"Olives—yes. Olives and wax. I never go anyplace without 'em."

[…]

"I like to chew candles," she said finally.

"Who doesn't?" said the young man […].

**Related Characters:** Seymour Glass, Sybil Carpenter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 13

**Explanation and Analysis**

This comical back and forth happens between Sybil and Seymour as they prepare to play in the ocean together. Sybil jumps from one random topic to the next in quick succession, which is a reminder that she's only around four or five years old. While Sybil's mother, Mrs. Carpenter, shushed Sybil and didn't try to understand what she was saying or why it was important to her, Seymour effortlessly mirrors Sybil's childlike enthusiasm and inquisitiveness and plays along with her eccentricity in a way that doesn't condescend to or alienate her. For instance, when she randomly declares her undying love for chewing candles, Seymour simply says, "Who doesn't?" without missing a beat. Much of Seymour and Sybil's friendship speaks to the way that innocence isn't really innocent at all—that people and interactions are always tinged with violence—but this passage shows Seymour at his most pure and childlike. It is this state of ease, simplicity, curiosity, and playfulness that Seymour seems attracted to, which is why he's shown in the story as having more adolescent friends than adult ones. As the story will go on to show, though, Seymour's violent nature—inherent not just to him but all of human nature—will bubble up in more ways than one, thoroughly shattering the idea that his connection to Sybil is purely innocent.

"Their habits are very peculiar. *Very* peculiar. […] They lead a very tragic life."

**Related Characters:** Seymour Glass (speaker), Sybil Carpenter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 14

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Seymour begins to explain the titular bananafish to Sybil as they wade out into the ocean. As the story goes, bananafish look like normal fish, but what differentiates them is that they swim into holes full of bananas. Once inside the hole, a bananafish will so thoroughly gorge themselves on bananas that they quickly grow too fat to swim back out of the hole, at which point they die of the so-called banana fever. It's significant that, in this passage, Seymour first introduces the made-up bananafish as being "peculiar" in their habits and leading a "tragic life," as it reinforces the two different ways of interpreting the bananafish symbol.

On the one hand, the bananafish could refer to men like Seymour who were unremarkable prior to entering World War II (swimming into the hole), but this environment was so saturated with violence (bananas) and they became so filled with it, that they eventually died a moral, emotional, mental, or even physical death (dying of banana fever). It makes sense, then, that the bananafish—men like Seymour himself—would have "very peculiar habits," because Seymour in fact does have odd habits (refusing to take off his bathrobe, for instance). It would also make sense to say that these men lead a "tragic life," since war has stripped them of mental stability, joy, innocence, and more. Seymour's own character arc speaks to this, as he is so psychologically unstable and irreparably disenchanted with the "real" world he's expected to now inhabit that he tragically commits suicide.

On the other hand, it's possible that the bananafish represent shallow, gluttonous people like Seymour's own wife, Muriel, who has an insatiable appetite for consumer goods. The bananafish metaphor suggests that people like Muriel were "normal" once, but once they had their first taste of luxury (bananas), they couldn't stop. Overindulging in luxury and materialism makes a person fevered (banana fever) in that they're frenzied and frantic in the pursuit of more and more wealth. This attitude then kills them on a spiritual level, which ties back to Seymour's nickname for Muriel, "Miss Spiritual Tramp," implying that she is devoid of spirituality just like a tramp (a vagrant or beggar) is devoid of money or a stable home.

[…] "I just saw one."

"Saw what, my love?"

"A bananafish."

"My God, no!" said the young man. "Did he have any bananas in his mouth?"

"Yes," Said Sybil. "Six."

The young man suddenly picked up one of Sybil's wet feet, which were drooping over the end of the float, and kissed the arch.

"Hey!" said the owner of the foot, turning around.

"Hey, yourself! We're going in now. You had enough?"

"No!"

"Sorry," he said, and pushed the float toward shore […].

**Related Characters:** Seymour Glass, Sybil Carpenter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 15

**Explanation and Analysis**

After floating over a wave, Sybil excitedly tells Seymour that she saw a bananafish. Once again, this passage shows how Sybil and Seymour's friendship is both innocent and violent. Seymour matches Sybil's excitement about the made-up bananafish as if he, too, were an excitable child, and he seems friendly and kind when he calls her "my love." But this innocence quickly bleeds into violence when Seymour kisses the arch of Sybil's foot. For one thing, the arch of the foot is an extremely intimate part of the body—it's usually covered up by shoes or pressed into the ground—and it's also a physically sensitive spot. So perhaps if Seymour had kissed the top of Sybil's head, it would have been sweet and platonic, but kissing the arch of Sybil's foot is deeply intimate and even has sexual undertones. Furthermore, up until this point, Seymour has been steadily breaking the touch barrier with Sybil, first by touching one of her ankles, then by grasping both of her ankles, and now by kissing her foot. This steady escalation in touch paints Seymour in a suspicious and predatory light, begging the question of whether Seymour will at some point stop this behavior or if he will continue to behave in increasingly inappropriate ways.

Given that Sybil is so young—she's implied to be about four or five years old—she doesn't seem to sense that Seymour's touch is inappropriate, only that it's surprising. This is why she yells, "Hey!" but balks when Seymour says they have to stop playing together. That Seymour immediately announces they need to go back to shore right after kissing Sybil's foot, however, suggests that *he* is aware of the ways in which his behavior towards the girl is becoming increasingly threatening, so he wants to get himself away from her.

"I said I see you're looking at my feet."

"I *beg* your pardon. I happened to be looking at the floor," said the woman, and faced the doors of the car.

"If you want to look at my feet, say so," said the young man. "But don't be a God-damned sneak about it."

"Let me out here, please," the woman said quickly to the girl operating the car.

The car doors opened and the woman got out without looking back.

"I have two normal feet and I can't see the slightest God-damned reason why anybody should stare at them," said the young man.

**Related Characters:** Seymour Glass (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 15-16

**Explanation and Analysis**

After his vaguely predatory interaction with Sybil (kissing the arch of her foot in the ocean), Seymour rides the elevator back to his hotel room. On the elevator, though, he oddly accuses a stranger of staring at his feet. Throughout the story, feet and ankles appear in moments when Salinger is making the point that humankind is inherently violent, and so people and interactions that seem innocent on the outside aren't really innocent at all. This passage is no exception. It seems that Seymour is still mulling over his threatening behavior towards Sybil, and he (wrongly) assumes that the woman in the elevator will know how he acted with Sybil just by looking at his feet.

This moment harkens back to when Muriel told her mother on the phone that Seymour refuses to take his bathrobe off because he doesn't want anyone looking at his tattoo—even though he doesn't actually have a tattoo. In that instance,

the tattoo represents Seymour's wartime experiences; he doesn't want people to see the violence he's endured and committed just by looking at him, so he wraps himself up tightly in a bathrobe. Here, he's self-conscious of the woman looking at his feet, thinking she will somehow see through to his inappropriate behavior.

> The room smelled of new calfskin luggage and nail-lacquer remover.

He glanced at the girl lying asleep on one of the ten beds. Then he went over to one of the pieces of luggage, opened it, and from under a pile of shorts and undershirts he took out an Ortgies caliber 7.65 automatic. […] He cocked the piece. Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple.

**Related Characters:** Muriel Glass, Seymour Glass

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 16

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage appears at the very end of the story, as Seymour returns to the hotel room he shares with Muriel after spending time on the beach with Sybil. It's important that the very first thing that greets Seymour when he opens the door isn't his wife but is instead the smell of "new calfskin luggage and nail-lacquer remover," as it underscores that Muriel is the embodiment of materialistic, shallow society. Seymour can't escape this smell, which points to the way that he can't escape this adult world of consumerism and vapidity, no matter how much time he spends alone or how many children he befriends. So when Seymour fishes his gun out of his luggage and seemingly intends to shoot his wife, he actually shoots himself—shooting his wife wouldn't change the shallowness and obsession with material things entrenched in American culture, so Seymour seems to feel that his only option is to remove *himself* from this life.

In a way, then, Muriel was right when she told her mother that she wasn't afraid of her husband—after all, he didn't hurt her, which was Muriel's mother's fear all along. But Muriel's mother was also right that it was only a matter of time before Seymour "[lost] control of himself," as he does here when he shoots himself in the temple. Ultimately, the story doesn't provide a clear message of what could have saved Seymour—whether the answer is that Muriel needed to be more empathetic and communicative, the Army needed to keep Seymour in the hospital longer, or if Seymour's war-related trauma was too powerful for him to really be helped.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### A PERFECT DAY FOR BANANAFISH

A convention of New York advertising men is tying up the long-distance phone lines at Muriel's hotel. Because of this, Muriel busies herself for two and a half hours as she waits for her call to go through. She spends the time grooming herself, doing things like painting her nails and moving a button on her Saks blouse. When the operator finally calls her room to connect her call, Muriel lazily walks to the phone while putting the finishing touches on her manicure. When she eventually picks up the phone, she's careful not to smudge the wet polish on her silk dressing gown.

*Muriel's preoccupation with grooming herself and tending to the state of her clothes introduces the theme of wealth and materialism—the mention of her blouse from Saks (an upscale department store) and her silk dressing gown suggests that Muriel surrounds herself with nice things. That she prioritizes finishing her manicure over picking up the phone also suggests that she values materialism and appearances over things like connecting with others and valuing their time. On this note, the fact that she's unhurried in picking up the phone also begins to gesture at the theme of failed communication that runs throughout the story.*

Once the operator connects Muriel's call to New York, Muriel's mother's panicked voice rings out through the receiver, demanding to know if Muriel is okay; Muriel says she's fine but it's brutally hot in Florida. Cutting her off, Muriel's mother frantically asks her daughter why she hasn't called, but Muriel calmly answers she tried twice the day before and the call didn't go through. Muriel's mother asks who drove and is horrified to find that "he" did. Muriel quickly interjects, assuring her mother that he drove competently—it was at a reasonable speed and he didn't hit any trees. In fact, he forced himself to not even *look* at the trees.

*When Muriel's mother asks her daughter if she's alright, she clearly means whether Muriel is safe—her panicked tone suggests that she thought Muriel had gone missing and was in danger. Muriel misinterprets the question, perhaps willfully, and answers about the weather being uncomfortably warm. Even though Muriel is technically answering her mother's question, the two aren't effectively communicating, which is a trend that will mark their entire phone conversation. Meanwhile, Muriel's mother's anxiety about the man driving suggests that he was in a car crash in the recent past. But strangely, Muriel's assurance that he didn't even look at the trees this time suggests that his last accident was somewhat on purpose, as if he had seen trees and couldn't resist hitting them. This detail begins painting the man as violent or potentially unhinged, while Muriel's flippant attitude about him and the accident is another example of her failing to truly engage in conversation.*

While they're on the subject, Muriel asks if her father got his car fixed yet after her husband, Seymour, crashed it into a tree. Cutting her daughter off once more, Muriel's mother asks Muriel if Seymour is still calling her the same horrible nickname. With a laugh, Muriel says he has a new one for her—he now calls her "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948." Muriel's mother is unamused, but Muriel quickly changes the subject, asking her mother if she's seen the book of German poems that Seymour sent her while he was in Germany.

*Here, the man that Muriel and her mother have been talking about is revealed to be Muriel's husband, Seymour Glass, and Seymour's nickname for his wife reveals that the story is set in 1948. In this passage, Muriel's mother is once again concerned about Seymour's behavior and her daughter's well-being, while Muriel laughs off her concerns, unwilling or unable to have a conversation about them. Likewise, in calling Muriel "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," Seymour seems to be criticizing Muriel's character, suggesting that she doesn't have a spiritual sensibility or emotional depth to her—that she's vagrant or beggar spiritually, meaning that spirituality is something she sorely lacks. True to form, though, Muriel is flippant and laughs about the nickname, again unwilling to discuss it more deeply. On another note, the fact that Seymour sent Muriel poems from Germany—coupled with the detail that the story is set in 1948—suggests that Seymour has recently returned from fighting in World War II.*

Muriel explains that Seymour brought up the poems on the drive and asked if she read them. Muriel's mother scoffs at this, since the poems were in German, and Muriel says that according to Seymour, the poems were written by "the *only great poet of the century*," so she should have tried to find a translation or just learned German. After making sure her daughter is listening, Muriel's mother explains that the girl's father recently spoke with Dr. Sivetski about Seymour's behavior. According to the doctor, it was wrong of the Army to release Seymour from the hospital, and it's likely that Seymour will suffer from a mental breakdown any day now—"My word of honor," Muriel's mother declares.

*The fact that Seymour sent Muriel the poems and actually expected her to read them—and the fact that Muriel not only failed to read them but also doesn't even know where she put them—suggests that husband and wife are on completely different planes when it comes to their sensitivity to spiritual things like poetry and philosophy. Meanwhile, Muriel's mother's use of the phrase "My word of honor," coupled with her confirming whether Muriel is listening, again gestures to the theme of communication, as she is doing everything she can to get Muriel's attention. The mention of Muriel's father's conversation with Dr. Sivetski confirms that Seymour indeed fought in World War II and that he is suffering psychologically. At the time, such a condition was called "shell shock" and came to be known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, after the Vietnam War.*

Muriel says that there's a psychiatrist staying at her hotel, though she struggles to remember his name. Muriel's mother implores her to come home, but Muriel refuses to cut short the first vacation she's had in years—plus, she's too sunburned to move. Shifting the conversation back to the psychiatrist, Muriel's mother asks her daughter if she talked to him at all and if Seymour was present for it. Muriel says Seymour was off playing piano in another room, as he's done the last two nights. As for the psychiatrist, he said "nothing much"; he asked if her piano-playing husband was "sick or something." Muriel's mother interjects, asking why the man asked such a thing, and Muriel causally says that it's probably because Seymour is so pale.

*Once again, Muriel makes light of her mother's real—and reasonable—concerns for her daughter's well-being and her son-in-law's mental state. By focusing on her sunburn and how much she wants to enjoy her vacation, Muriel avoids actually addressing her mother's fears. Muriel also sends the message that she is far more interested in material things, like ritzy vacations or the appearance of her skin, than her husband's health. The detail about Seymour playing piano alone points to his spiritual sensibility (besides poetry, he also appreciates music) and is the first indication that he isolates himself from others. The psychiatrist seems to see these two things—Seymour's piano playing and his willful isolation—as evidence of psychological distress. Muriel characteristically waves this off.*

Shifting the conversation to the psychiatrist's wife, Muriel talks at length about the woman's figure and horrible dress. Once again, Muriel's mother steers the conversation back to the psychiatrist, asking if he had any insight on Seymour's behavior. Muriel says that she didn't go into specifics, and the bar was so noisy that she could barely hear him anyway. She assures her mother that she'll have another chance to talk to him, given that he's in the bar all day long. When her mother asks if the psychiatrist thought Seymour "might get—you know—funny or anything," Muriel reminds her that the bar was too noisy to really hold a conversation.

*The detail that the psychiatrist spends his days in the bar, coupled with Muriel's shallow preoccupation with fashion and gossip, reflects the culture of overindulgence and materialism at the resort and in American culture more broadly. While the noisy bar gestures to the idea of failed communication, this passage also suggests that what hinders communication the most is a lack of empathy and understanding; Muriel fails to engage in a real conversation with the psychiatrist or with her mother because she doesn't empathize with Seymour's mental agony or her mother's anxiety.*

The women then talk about fashion, the quality of Muriel's hotel room, and the kinds of people staying at the resort. Suddenly, Muriel's mother asks again if Muriel is alright and if she wants to come home. Exasperated, Muriel says she's fine, but her mother presses on, saying that she and Muriel's father think it would be good for Muriel to have some time away from Seymour to think things through, possibly on a cruise. Muriel tries to say no, but her mother keeps talking, lamenting the fact that Muriel waited for Seymour for the entirety of the war.

*Even though Muriel and her mother are talking, they aren't actually communicating with one another. They consistently cut each other off, for one thing, but they also seem to be talking at one another rather than with one another. This is why Muriel's mother continues to ask if Muriel is alright—she hasn't gotten a satisfying answer out of her daughter. This passage also provides the only glimpse readers get of the pre-WWII Seymour, whom Muriel apparently felt was worth waiting for. Compared to Seymour's odd behavior in the present and Muriel's mother's pressing concerns about his mental health, it's clear that the violence of war is what changed him and their relationship.*

Trying to end the conversation, Muriel says that Seymour has been down on the beach but is bound to return shortly. When her mother asks if he's been conducting himself properly on the beach, Muriel criticizes her mother for implying that he's some sort of "raving *maniac*"—though she does admit that Seymour refuses to take off his **bathrobe**, even while lying on the beach, because he doesn't want anyone to look at his tattoo. The girl's mother is surprised to hear this and asks if he got a tattoo in the Army, but Muriel says no. Her mother insists that Muriel call the moment Seymour does something "funny." Muriel agrees but declares that she's not afraid of her husband. They hang up.

*Although Muriel suggests her mother is over-reacting—that Seymour is far from being a "raving* maniac*"—she goes on to admit that he has been talking about having an invisible tattoo. This suggests that Muriel's mother is perhaps not too far off in being extremely concerned for Seymour's mental health and Muriel's well-being. Muriel's mother seems to be worried that Seymour will seriously hurt Muriel, but she uses the euphemism "funny" (e.g., Seymour will do something "funny" to Muriel), which ties into the idea of failed communication, as she doesn't say exactly what she means. The tattoo Seymour is referring to seems to be connected to the horrible things he's witnessed or done in war. He doesn't want people to be able to have insight into these things just by looking at him, which is why he covers up with the bathrobe.*

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the hotel a little girl named Sybil Carpenter repeats the phrase "See more glass," much to Mrs. Carpenter's annoyance. Mrs. Carpenter is putting sun-tan oil on Sybil, who is wearing a yellow two-piece swimsuit—"one piece of which she would not actually be needing for another nine or ten years." In the background, Mrs. Carpenter's friend chatters on about a silk handkerchief. Mrs. Carpenter finally dismisses the squirming Sybil, telling her to go play elsewhere.

*Sybil is clearly referring to Seymour Glass, but Mrs. Carpenter (perhaps understandably) doesn't pick up on this and instead shushes her daughter. In this way, the mother and daughter's dynamic isn't all that different from the one between Muriel and her mother: one party talks, while the other quiets, minimizes, or ignores the discussion. Mrs. Carpenter's friend prattling on in the background about a scarf is another reminder that the resort guests—and Americans more generally—are materialistic. The detail about Sybil's bathing suit top not being filled out for another nine years (in other words, she won't go through puberty for at least nine years) means that she's around four or five years old.*

Sybil runs purposefully down the beach and makes a beeline for a drooping sandcastle, which she stomps her **foot** into. She then walks for a while until she spots a young man lying on the sand in the distance, at which point she runs toward him and asks, "Are you going in the water, see more glass?" The man (Seymour Glass) is startled and immediately draws his **bathrobe** tighter, but seeing that his unexpected visitor is Sybil, he relaxes and tells her that he was waiting until she arrived to go in the water.

*Throughout the story, feet symbolize the idea that innocence isn't innocent at all. The story engages with that for the first time in this passage, as little Sybil goes out of her way to destroy a sandcastle with her foot, showing her inherent violence, even though she's a supposedly innocent child. Meanwhile, Seymour's knee-jerk reaction to human contact is to pull his bathrobe tighter around his body, which suggests that the robe is a security blanket of sorts. The robe symbolizes his isolation from others—he uses it to feel separate from people—but that he relaxes upon seeing Sybil adds nuance to this, suggesting that he's really only alienated from other adults, not children.*

Sybil announces proudly that her father will be arriving the next day and kicks sand in Seymour's face; he puts his hand on her **ankle**. When Sybil asks where "the lady" (Muriel) is, Seymour answers that she could be just about anywhere, like in her room or out getting her hair dyed, and he asks to change the subject. Seymour compliments Sybil's blue bathing suit, but she emphatically declares that her suit is yellow, not blue; after asking Sybil to come closer, Seymour confirms that she is correct. She again asks if he's going in the water and points out that his half-deflated rubber float needs air.

*As the interaction between Sybil and Seymour unfolds, it begins to seem less and less innocent. Seymour touches Sybil on the ankle, seems uninterested in his wife's whereabouts, and commands Sybil to come closer, which makes Seymour appear vaguely predatory towards the young girl. His mix-up between the colors blue and yellow is also strange; it's unclear if he does this on purpose just to entertain Sybil and get a rise out of her, or if he is in such a fragile mental state that he really can't tell the difference. He also furthers the depiction of his wife as materialistic when he suggests that she may be at the hairdresser's.*

Grabbing hold of both of Sybil's **ankles**, Seymour asks Sybil to tell him about herself. Instead, she accuses him of letting Sharon Lipschutz sit on the piano bench with him. Gravely, Seymour explains that Sharon simply climbed up on the bench while he was playing, and he didn't want to rudely push her off—instead, he pretended that Sharon was Sybil. After Sybil insists that he should push Sharon off next time, Seymour wistfully says, "Ah, Sharon Lipschutz […] How that name comes up. Mixing memory and desire."

*Seymour's possibly inappropriate behavior towards Sybil begins to escalate here, as he goes from touching one of her ankles to clasping both of them. His explanation of what happened between him and Sharon adds weight to this, as he's framing the situation as if he were justifying cheating on Sybil. Of course, Sybil is around four or five years old, and the story later reveals that Sharon is only three and a half years old—so while Sybil is exhibiting childlike jealousy, Seymour seems to be inappropriately sexualizing his friendship with the children. That Seymour is holding Sybil's ankles during this interaction is another indication that feet and ankles symbolize how what seems like innocence is often tinged with violence.*

Seymour tells Sybil that they can go swimming and look for a **bananafish**. He sheds his **bathrobe**, revealing his blue swim trunks, folds his towel neatly, and takes Sybil by the hand. When Seymour asks Sybil where she lives, she claims to not know, but he smugly informs her that "Sharon Lipschutz knows where *she* lives and *she's* only *three and a half*." Sybil rips her hand away from Seymour and, after a moment, says she lives in Whirly Wood, Connecticut.

*It's surprising that Seymour takes his bathrobe off, since Muriel was just explaining to her mother how he refuses to do so because he doesn't want anyone to look at his (made-up) tattoo. His willingness to disrobe around Sybil suggests that he's far more comfortable around children than adults. The moment when Seymour asks Sybil where she lives also toes the line between innocent and violent; he taunts her in a childlike way, trying to make Sharon seem smarter or better than Sybil, which immediately makes Sybil cave and reveal where she's from. While it's possible that Seymour is just being childlike, he essentially manipulates a young girl into revealing personal information about herself.*

After interrogating Seymour about whether he's read *Little Black Sambo* and if he likes wax and olives (he claims to "never go anyplace without 'em"), Sybil then asks if he likes Sharon Lipschutz. Seymour admits that he does, explaining that what he likes most about her is that she doesn't abuse dogs in the hotel, like the one that belongs to the hotel guest from Canada. "You probably won't believe this, but *some* little girls like to poke that little dog with balloon sticks," Seymour says, adding that Sharon is never cruel.

*The overlap between innocence and violence appears again in this moment. Sybil's eccentric and excitable questions reveal her childlike curiosity, but Seymour's comment about "some little girls" who abuse dogs in the lobby suggests that Sybil was precisely this little girl, and that she has a violent streak. While Seymour just compared Sybil with Sharon to make Sybil reveal personal information about herself, which is somewhat predatory, here he uses this tactic for good, implicitly encouraging Sybil to not be so violent and cruel.*

After a long silence, Sybil announces that she likes to chew candles, to which Seymour responds, "Who doesn't?" They wade out into the ocean until the water is up to Sybil's waist, at which point he lays her on her stomach on the raft. She commands him to not let go; he assures her he won't and declares that it is a "*perfect* day for **bananafish**." He explains that bananafish look like normal fish, but they swim into holes filled with bananas. In the holes, the bananafish feast on bananas until they're so fat that they can't fit back out through the hole, at which point they die of banana fever.

*Seymour's story about the titular bananafish seems random and playful, just like Sybil's own ramblings about things like eating candles. However, given the materialistic culture of the resort (which even his own wife exemplifies), Seymour also seems to be linking the gluttonous bananafish with Americans who have an insatiable appetite for wealth and material goods. That is, they have banana fever, because they are "fevered" or frantic in their gluttony. It's possible, too, that the bananafish represent soldiers who are regular men when they enter the war but become so overstuffed with violence and trauma that they die a mental, physical, emotional, or even spiritual death.*

Sybil nervously points out an approaching wave. Seymour clasps her **ankles** tightly and guides her and the raft smoothly over it, which makes Sybil scream with delight. On the other side of the wave, Sybil announces proudly that she saw a **bananafish** with six bananas in its mouth. At this, Seymour lifts one of Sybil's wet ankles and kisses the arch of her foot. She yells out "Hey!" in surprise, but he just says "Hey, yourself!" and announces that they're going back to shore, much to Sybil's disappointment. Once they reach the sand, Sybil yells goodbye and runs back to the resort "without regret."

*Once again, feet and ankles are linked with innocence and violence. Leading up to this moment, Seymour's behavior has escalated from touching Sybil's ankle to grasping both of them; here, he goes so far as to kiss the arch of Sybil's foot, which is an intimate and sensitive part of the body. Although this surprises Sybil, it doesn't seem to register with her that is inappropriate behavior (she is sad to have to go back to shore, and she runs "without regret" back to the hotel). Seymour, however, seems to realize that he's crossed the line, which is why he immediately insists they go back to shore. While he tried to access innocence through his childlike rapport with Sybil, his own behavior was tinged with violence.*

Seymour dons his **bathrobe** once more, closing it tightly around his body, and he walks back to the hotel. On way up to his room, he accuses a woman in the elevator of staring at his **feet**, but she assures him that she was only looking at the ground. Seymour continues his rant, saying that if the woman really wanted to look at his feet, she should just make her intentions clear instead of trying to steal secret glances at them. She hurriedly exits the elevator. Seymour says aloud that he has normal feet, and there's no reason why anyone should look at them.

*The symbols of the bathrobe and feet collide here. The bathrobe represents the way that Seymour closes himself off from other adults (and the materialistic, violent world they inhabit), which is why he now puts the bathrobe back on as he returns to the resort. Meanwhile, feet represent the idea that innocence is always tinged with violence—an idea that is clearest in the story when Seymour touches and kisses young Sybil's feet. So in this passage, tightly wrapped in his bathrobe and self-conscious about someone looking at his feet, Seymour seems to be trying to hide his inappropriate interactions with Sybil from others. Of course, it doesn't make sense that a stranger in an elevator should be able to know what just happened on the beach between Seymour and Sybil just by looking at Seymour's feet, but his self-consciousness and anxiety surrounding this possibility point to his own guilt.*

When he reaches his room, Seymour is greeted by the sharp smell of nail-polish remover and new calfskin luggage. He looks at Muriel, who is asleep on one of the twin beds, and then fishes in his luggage for his gun, which he unloads and then reloads. He looks again at Muriel and then sits down on the twin bed next to her. He aims the gun and then shoots himself in the temple.

*The smell of the hotel room (nail polish, expensive luggage made from a baby animal) underscores that Muriel is associated with the shallow, materialistic culture that Seymour so despises. Given this, it at first seems like Seymour intends to shoot his wife, since he looks at her frequently as he fetches and loads his gun. The fact that he ultimately shoots himself, though, suggests that he simply can't stand to live in the shallow, consumeristic world that Muriel represents. Plus, having just lashed out at a woman for supposedly looking at his feet, it seems that Seymour is also deeply disturbed by the way he interacted with Sybil on the beach. In other words, he tried to access innocence and childlike lightness through her, but he ultimately failed, which perhaps made him suicidally distressed.*

## HOW TO CITE

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