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The Cage of Dualism: Ego-Attachment and Zen Insights in *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*

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This paper examines J.D. Salinger's *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* through the lens of Zen Buddhist philosophy, particularly focusing on the concepts of dualistic opposition and ego-attachment. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how protagonist Seymour Glass's psychological trajectory embodies the Zen struggle to transcend conceptual dualities while simultaneously falling prey to spiritual ego-attachment. The paper argues that Seymour's tragic suicide stems not from war trauma alone, but from his unrecognized attachment to his own detachment—a paradox that Salinger meticulously constructs through symbolic imagery and dialogic interplay with the child character Sybil. By situating the story within Salinger's engagement with Zen thought and postwar American spiritual crises, this analysis reveals new dimensions of one of the 20th century's most enigmatic short stories.

Keywords: *Bananafish*, Zen, ego-attachment

Introduction

Zen Buddhism is an Eastern spiritual philosophy and a significant branch of Mahayana Buddhism. Its core tenet lies in transcending all conceptual dualities and dissolving the distinction between self and the other, whether that other takes the form of flora and fauna, mountains and rivers, or even demons and God. Zen differs fundamentally from Western thought. D.T. Suzuki, who brought Zen to the West in the early 20th century, explains this contrast clearly: in Zen there is "no struggle between the finite and infinite, between the intellect and a higher power, or more plainly, between the flesh and the spirit" (Suzuki, 1996, p. 8).

Following World War II, Zen's radical and subversive ideas gained significant traction in the United States. As Zhong Ling points out, the erosion of post-war spiritual certainties—coupled with a growing disillusionment with Western cultural norms—fostered a deep sense of existential anxiety among American writers and intellectuals. During this period, the ancient and culturally distinct tradition of Zen, with its emphasis on direct experience and non-dualistic thought, emerged as a compelling alternative for spiritual and intellectual exploration, making it particularly resonant (Zhong, 2019, pp. 36-38). This influence is notably reflected in the literary output of the Beat Generation, where works such as Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* explicitly engage with Zen practice and philosophy.

J.D. Salinger, writing during this transformative period, also cultivated a profound engagement with Zen Buddhist philosophy. His immersion in works on Zen Buddhism, coupled with dedicated meditative practice,

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informed a distinctive literary vision through which he wove Zen principles into his fiction. Far from serving as a mere philosophical backdrop, Zen in Salinger's works functions as a dynamic mode of thought and aesthetic sensibility, manifesting in the psychological depth of his characters, their ways of apprehending the world, and the nonlinear, fragmented structures of his narratives. This influence is particularly evident in his later works, such as *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Franny and Zooey*, which are deeply imbued with the ethos of Zen and Eastern spirituality.

As early as 1948, Salinger's *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* demonstrates an incipient yet sophisticated engagement with Zen concepts. Through ostensibly mundane dialogues and evocative symbolic imageries, the narrative unveils the universal human condition of being ensnared by logic limitations and spiritual fixations. The tragic arc of the protagonist, Seymour Glass, transcends mere personal psychological turmoil, serving as a profound meditation on two central Zen ideas—the transcendence of dualistic opposition and ego-attachment—situated within the complexities of modern society.

This study will adopt Zen Buddhism as a critical perspective to undertake a meticulous and comprehensive analysis of Salinger's seminal text. It will explore how the narrative deftly constructs the confines of "dualistic thinking" and interrogate the modern individual's moments of struggle and failure in their endeavor to transcend "ego-attachment."

To properly contextualize our Zen reading, we must first examine how previous critics have interpreted Seymour Glass's mysterious suicide through various perspectives. The predominant psychological approach, exemplified by Gwynn and Blotner (1958) and expanded by Metcalf, applies Freudian theory to Seymour's behavior, interpreting his war trauma and apparent sexual dysfunction as key factors in his psychological disintegration. Other scholars prioritize symbolic interpretation, though they diverge sharply in their conclusions. Alsen (1983) reads the bananafish as allegories for postwar materialism, arguing that Seymour's suicide stems from despair over spiritual decay, even in children like Sybil. In contrast, Miller (1965) contends that Seymour himself embodies the bananafish—not due to greed, but because his extreme sensory sensitivity traps him in an unbearable physical world. Bernice and Sanford Goldstein have extensively discussed the impact of Zen on Salinger in works such as *Zen and Nine Stories* and *Zen and Salinger*, providing valuable background and interpretive insights. However, they overlook critical details in Seymour's portrayal, including his fixation on dualistic oppositions—a key to understanding the story's underlying tragedy. Other scholars, such as Tomoko Oda, have acknowledged this dimension, proposing that "Seymour attempts to transcend the binary opposition" (Oda, 2018, p. 188). Yet such interpretations tend to lack sustained textual engagement and miss significant narrative clues.

Despite these varied approaches—psychological, symbolic, spiritual, and intertextual—the story's central mystery persists: why does Seymour kill himself immediately after his serene interaction with Sybil? The lack of consensus underscores the narrative's deliberate ambiguity, inviting continued reinterpretation of its haunting tensions between inner turmoil and external reality.

The Cage of Dualism: Ego-attachment and Zen Insights in *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*

J.D. Salinger's *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* represents far more than its modest length might suggest. The story, which "underwent over a year of careful revision with New Yorker editor Gus Lobrano" (Slawenski, 2010,

p. 159), emerged during Salinger's deepening engagement with Zen Buddhism. This spiritual influence permeates every aspect of the narrative, from Seymour Glass's tragic struggle with dualistic thinking to the story's carefully constructed symbolism. What appears as a simple postwar character study becomes, through Salinger's meticulous craft, a profound meditation on enlightenment's elusiveness.

By 1946, as he composed "*Bananafish*," Salinger had begun serious study of Zen through the works of D.T. Suzuki. This philosophical engagement manifests clearly in his 1953 collection *Nine Stories*, where "*Bananafish*" serves as the opening statement of themes that culminate in the final story "Teddy." While "Teddy" presents the ideal of enlightenment through its child protagonist who sees "God pouring God into God," "*Bananafish*" offers its dark counterpart—Seymour's failed spiritual journey. The collection's structure itself reflects Zen principles, beginning with a koan that challenges binary perception ("What is the sound of one hand?") and ending with Teddy's non-dual vision.

Salinger's protagonist Seymour embodies the paradox of spiritual seeking—his very attempts at transcendence become traps. Ostensibly detached from material concerns, he remains fatally attached to his role as spiritual guide, particularly in his interactions with young Sybil. Their exchanges, which alternate between genuine play and forced instruction, reveal Seymour's fatal contradiction: he cannot practice the non-attachment he seeks to teach. Like the bananafish of his parable that gorge themselves to death, Seymour's spiritual hunger becomes self-destructive when contaminated by ego. This paper aims to demonstrate how Salinger transforms a brief story into an enduring examination of human struggle in the cage of dualism.

Dual Psychological Background: Secular Trauma and Spiritual Aspiration

Salinger establishes Seymour's psychological duality through two narrative threads in *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*. The explicit thread—his war trauma, emphasized by Dr. Sivetski's warning about losing control—frames his suicide as a foreseeable collapse. The implicit thread, however, reveals Seymour's deeper conflict: his spiritual aspirations clash with postwar America's materialism. This tension drives his tragic arc.

Muriel embodies the societal values Seymour rejects. While she obsesses over fashion and class (reflecting consumerist culture), Seymour gifts her untranslated German poetry by "the only great poet of the century," insisting she "learn the language." His mocking label for her—"Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948"—exposes his judgment of her and the society's spiritual rootlessness, while ironically revealing his own attachment to moral superiority (Salinger, 1991, p. 5). The hotel's opening scene, crowded with advertising men, underscores the cultural void Seymour resists.

His detachment manifests in eccentric defiance of norms, like mocking Granny's funeral plans—a rejection of conventional attitudes toward death. Yet these acts betray not transcendence but ego-driven dualism: Seymour positions himself as an enlightened outsider, compulsively "teaching" others (Muriel, Sybil) while clinging to spiritual ideals. His interactions with Sybil later crystallize this paradox. Though he seeks purity in her childlike innocence, his need to impart wisdom ("bananafish") mirrors his strained dynamic with Muriel.

Salinger layers Zen undertones here: Seymour's failure stems not from trauma alone but from *attachment to detachment*—a dualistic trap. His suicide emerges as the tragic endpoint of this unresolved tension, where spiritual yearning collides with the impossibility of reconciling self and world. The story thus critiques both postwar alienation and the illusion of transcendence without true non-dual awakening.

Zen Infusion: Attempts at "Breaking Attachments" in Dialogue and Guidance

The beachside encounter between Seymour and Sybil reveals his dualistic approach to the child—both embracing her innocence and attempting to spiritually instruct her. Their playful exchanges initially suggest genuine connection:

> **Sybil**: "Are you going in the water?"
> **Seymour**: "I'm seriously considering it. I'm giving it plenty of thought, Sybil, you'll be glad to know."
>
> **Sybil**: "It needs air."
> **Seymour**: "You're right. It needs more air than I'm willing to admit."
>
> **Sybil**: "Do you like wax?"
> **Seymour**: "Do I like what?"
> **Sybil**: "Wax."
> **Seymour**: "Very much. Don't you?" – Sybil nods.
> **Sybil**: "Do you like olives?"
> **Seymour**: "Olives—yes. Olives and wax. I never go anyplace without them."
>
> **Sybil**: "I like to chew candles."
> **Seymour**: "Who doesn't?" (Salinger, 1991, pp. 12-15)

Here, Seymour meets Sybil's whimsy with performative enthusiasm, relishing her spontaneity. As the Goldsteins note, he responds with "almost perfect spontaneity" to her childlike world (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1970, p. 176). This reflects his appreciation for unfiltered innocence—a quality he likely sees as spiritually pure.

Yet Seymour also initiates more pointed exchanges, embedding Zen teachings:

> **Seymour:** "That's a fine bathing suit you have on. If there's one thing I like, it's a blue bathing suit."
> **Sybil:** "This is a yellow," she says, looking down.
> **Seymour:** "It is? Come a little closer. What a fool I am." (Salinger, 1991, p. 12)

This mirrors *Teddy*'s lesson that color names impose dualistic expectations ("if you tell them grass is green, it makes them start expecting...your way"). Seymour's deliberate "mistake" tests Sybil's attachment to labels—a Zen challenge to perceive beyond linguistic constructs. When she corrects him literally, he drops the lesson without frustration, demonstrating non-attachment to outcomes.

A deeper test follows:

> **Sybil:** "(I live in) Whirly Wood, Connecticut."
> **Seymour:** "Is that anywhere near Whirly Wood, Connecticut, by any chance?"
> **Sybil:** "That's where I live. I live in Whirly Wood, Connecticut." (Salinger, 1991, p. 14)

The exchange above can almost be regarded as a verbal reworking of the kōan printed on the frontispiece of *Nine Stories*. In that kōan, the "one hand" is used to dissolve the dualistic sound of two hands clapping; here, "Whirly Wood" functions as a place-name that implicitly establishes a duality between "here" and "there." Yet Seymour's question—"Is that anywhere near Whirly Wood, Connecticut, by any chance?"—erases that very "there," rendering the distinction between this place and that place meaningless and exposing the untenability of dualistic thinking (Salinger, 1991, p. 14). Such a question lies entirely outside the bounds of ordinary logic and, to most people, would sound like nonsensical rambling. Unsurprisingly, Sybil fails once again to grasp Seymour's

intention and grows impatient with his absurdity. From the moment she first finds him on the beach until this point, only a brief time has passed—but Seymour has already tested her twice with Zen-inflected remarks. We may therefore safely conjecture that, over the longer stretch of their time together, he would have continued to seize every opportunity to guide and "make her vomit up" the ingrained bits of logic in her mind, just as Salinger later describes in "Teddy."

In a nutshell, Seymour demonstrates two distinct attitudes in his relationship with Sybil: one is his appreciation for childhood innocence and his willingness to indulge it; the other is his deliberate attempt to guide and edify her, seeking to liberate her from the constraints of worldly experience. It is precisely this latter attempt that plants the seeds of attachment in Seymour's mind - in the very process of striving to free Sybil from her attachments, he gradually falls into the trap of "ego-attachment".

The Exposure of Attachment: Beginning with the parable of the bananafish

The question of whether Seymour achieves enlightenment in *Bananafish* remains contested. While Bernice and Sanford Goldstein argue he attains temporary satori, citing Hakuin's provisional enlightenment (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1970, p. 175), this comparison falters. Hakuin's initial experience was refuted by his master ("You poor child of the devil in the dark dungeon!" (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1970, p. 176), prompting deeper practice. Seymour, conversely, shows no such progression. The *Diamond Sutra* defines enlightenment as non-attachment, yet Seymour exhibits clear fixation—particularly in his interactions with Sybil.

A pivotal moment occurs when Sybil reacts jealously after Seymour plays piano with Sharon Lipschutz:

> **Sybil:** "Next time, push her off."
> **Seymour**: "Push who off?"
> **Sybil**: "Sharon Lipschutz." (Salinger, 1991, p. 13)

This possessiveness reflects what Alsen calls Sybil's "greedy" nature—a "miniature Muriel… small adult" (Alsen, 1983, pp. 13-15). The Goldsteins idealize children's "zen-like world" (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1970, p. 177), overlooking their capacity for attachment, evident in Sybil's demand and other *Nine Stories* children (e.g., Ramona's imaginary boyfriend, Lionel's obsession with running away).

Seymour crafts the bananafish parable to dissolve Sybil's jealousy, but Salinger reveals his growing attachment through three failed attempts:

First Mention: Seymour introduces "bananafish," but Sybil only asks, *"What?"* (Salinger, 1991, p. 13). He repeats it, met with indifference. His subsequent meticulous folding of his robe—"first lengthwise, then in thirds" (Salinger, 1991, p. 13)—suggests performative patience, masking his frustration.

> **Second Attempt**: He asks if she's seen one. Sybil "shook her head" (Salinger, 14). His response escalates to provocation:
> **Seymour:** "You haven't? Where do you live, anyway?"
> **Sybil:** "I don't know," said Sybil.
> **Seymour:** "Sure you know… Sharon Lipschutz knows where she lives and she's only three and a half." (Salinger, 1991, p. 14)

Here, Seymour weaponizes Sharon's name, contradicting his earlier effort to soothe Sybil's jealousy (*"I pretended she was you"*). His tone—*"she's only three and a half"*—reveals pettiness, undermining his spiritual pretensions (Salinger, 1991, p. 13).

Final Push: After Sybil ignores him (*"yanked her hand away… looked at [a shell] with elaborate interest"* [Salinger, 1991, p. 14]), Seymour briefly recovers with Zen-like wordplay about "Whirly Wood." Yet in the water, he again forces the bananafish lesson, exposing his compulsion to teach.

The parable itself—bananafish gorging until trapped—mirrors Seymour's spiritual gluttony. His insistence on Sybil's enlightenment becomes his own undoing. Where Zen demands non-attachment, Seymour clings to his role as guide, revealing *ego-attachment*. His suicide confirms this failure: true satori would preclude such violence. Thus, while Salinger infuses the story with Zen motifs, Seymour remains a tragic seeker, destroyed by the dualisms he cannot transcend.

The Tragedy of Ego-Attachment: A Zen Interpretation of the Motivation for Suicide

It's worth noting that Sybil had never shown any interest in the banana fish until this moment. Yet when Sharon's name was mentioned again, Seymour's compulsive need to "educate" Sybil reignited. As they waded into the ocean, he steered the conversation back to the mysterious creatures. This time, Sybil bit. Sensing his opening, Seymour launched into his parable of the banana fish—those gluttonous mythical beings that gorge themselves on bananas in underwater caves. He described how they would eat compulsively, swelling until they became hopelessly wedged in their holes, doomed to perish in their self-made prisons.

What follows is the most obscure and thought-provoking part of the story. In the author's view, the direct motivation behind Seymour's suicide lies precisely here. Previously, Salinger had meticulously described how Muriel spent time in the hotel room, how she spoke to her mother on the phone in painstaking detail, and how Seymour interacted with Sybil on the beach. Yet when it comes to this pivotal moment, the narrative is abruptly brief—only a few short lines. This stark contrast in structural pacing creates a powerful tension between excess and scarcity. This section will now be closely analyzed; but before doing so, let us first review what happened immediately afterward.

After Seymour and the little girl returned to shore:

> "The young man put on his robe, closed the lapels tight, and jammed his towel into his pocket." (Salinger, 1991, p. 17)

As a lone autumn leaf speaks volumes of the season, so did Seymour's fleeting movements betray his troubled psyche. Let us contrast this with Seymour's behavior before entering the water:

> "He folded the robe, first lengthwise, then in thirds. He unrolled the towel he had used over his eyes, spread it out on the sand, and then laid the folded robe on top of it." (Salinger, 1991, p. 17)

Before entering the sea, Seymour was composed and unhurried; after returning to shore, he was rushed and agitated. The adverb "tight" implies tension, and the abrupt act of "jamming" stands in stark contrast to his earlier meticulous towel-laying, carrying an undercurrent of violent release.

Next, on Seymour's way back to the hotel, Salinger used words like *slimy*, *cumbersome*, and *plod* to describe the heaviness of his troubled state of mind:

> "He picked up the slimy wet, cumbersome float and put it under his arm. He plodded alone through the soft, hot sand toward the hotel." (Salinger, 1991, p. 17)

This dramatic shift in Seymour's behavior—from "orderly and restrained" to "irritable and restless"—foreshadows the conflict to come in the hotel elevator. Why did Seymour's mood shift so drastically after returning to shore? The answer lies in that brief, crucial moment just before they came back to land:

> With her hand, when the float was level again, she wiped away a flat, wet band of hair from her eyes, and reported, "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 until Sybil got off it. He carried it the rest of the way.
> "Goodbye," said Sybil, and ran without regret in the direction of the hotel. (Salinger, 1991, pp. 16-17)

Previously, Sybil had been indifferent to the bananafish. Yet now she claimed to have actually seen one—a creature Seymour had fabricated. The little girl who had failed to grasp Seymour's earlier intentions suddenly became so cooperative that Seymour couldn't resist lifting her foot and kissing its arch. This unusual gesture signaled Seymour's overwhelming joy—Sybil had accepted his parable not just through language, but through experience. This signified a moment of connection between the two. However, the kiss also revealed his deep attachment—his fixation on achieving such a moment, and the elation it brought him. But where there is joy, sorrow follows. He had fallen into the trap of dualism. Pleasure is but the surface of suffering; when its cause fades, pain follows. As Vasubandhu wrote in Abhidharma-kośa-śāstra: "Of all pleasurable sensations, they are pleasant when arising, pleasant when abiding, but bitter when decaying" (author's translation).

Sybil's exclamation of "Hey!" kicked Seymour off the peak of his joy. She did not reciprocate his emotional investment. The supposed connection between them was nothing more than a fleeting illusion. Seymour's response was immediate: he abruptly ended their "fishing" trip. Despite Sybil's high spirits and vehement protests, Seymour unceremoniously and forcibly pushed her back to shore. In short, it was like a blunt declaration: "The game is over." At this moment, anger arose in Seymour's heart—a desire for retribution. This was strikingly similar to how he previously used Sharon to provoke Sybil. But this time, it was anger born from ecstasy, and thus it burned hotter.

When Sybil left, she did so *"without regret"* (Salinger, 1991, p. 17). A child, whose pleasure had been suddenly taken away, accepted the situation with no apparent sadness. But what about the one who took that pleasure away? This sentence, on the surface, describes Sybil; in reality, it reflects Seymour—he was *full* of regret. This episode laid bare his attachment and desire: he saw himself as a preacher, greedy for the success of his teaching. Whether it was gifting poetry to Muriel or discussing life and death with Muriel's grandmother, Seymour was motivated by the same desire—to instruct others and have them accept his worldview. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching; the Buddha too sought to enlighten all beings. But if one becomes attached to the outcome—experiencing joy in success and anger in failure—then one has already fallen into the

abyss of duality. The enlightener's obsession with outcomes ultimately reveals an attachment to duality—the illusory hierarchy between self and other, between one's own spiritual pursuits and others' material desires. This attachment to results is no different in essence from indulging in worldly pleasures—it is a manifestation of ego-attachment.

In the bananafish parable Seymour invented, he intended to reflect the greed of the world around him. In that moment, he saw his own attachment and craving, and recognized that he was no different from Muriel, from Sybil, or from anyone else around him—he too was a bananafish.

This shattering realization caught Seymour off guard. His composure collapsed. Returning to the beach, his emotional state was already in turmoil. Then, stepping into the hotel elevator, he once again encountered the symbol of the "foot"—a recurring trigger of emotional trauma—and was powerfully disturbed. Already prone to suicidal ideation due to his post-war trauma, Seymour now completely lost control. Back in his hotel room, surrounded by the sensual atmosphere of worldly desire and entrapped by his own spiritual attachments, he found himself locked in an inescapable duality. In the shadow of the bananafish's tragic fate, Seymour, overwhelmed by despair, took out his pistol and ended his life.

Conclusion

In *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, the bananafish symbolizes ego-attachment—obsessive self-indulgence leading to destruction—mirroring Seymour's struggle and postwar society's spiritual decay. Close reading and Zen critique complement each other: the former reveals Seymour's psychological shifts, while the latter frames his conflict philosophically. This dual approach avoids abstraction or superficial analysis, enriching literary and philosophical insight. The "textual reading + Zen critique" model can extend to *Nine Stories* (e.g., *Down at the Dinghy*), exploring characters' ego-attachment and attempts at liberation. Beyond literature, ego-attachment manifests in modern issues like social media envy and consumerism. Zen teachings, paired with interdisciplinary dialogue, can soften rigid dualities.

Salinger's allegory merges Zen wisdom with literary depth, offering a framework for analyzing modern psychology and cross-cultural Zen adaptations. Future studies could compare his works with other Zen-infused literature.

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