Hypochondriac Notions: Thoughts on the Language of Disease in J.D. Salinger's "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters"

Serena Demichelis

University of Verona – Italy

There is, let us confess it
(and illness is the great confessional)
a childish outspokenness in illness;
things are said, truths blurted out,
which the cautious respectability of health conceals.
-Virginia Woolf, On Being Ill

Abstract

Despite the fact that he describes his brother as a "Sick Man," Buddy Glass, J.D. Salinger's "alter-ego and collaborator" (Franny and Zooey), is not much healthier – both as a person and as an author. While the utter demolishment of his work as a 'standard short-story writer 'will not be complete until the two last Glass stories (Seymour) are published (1959 and 1965), Buddy/Salinger does not refrain from giving out signs of decadence and degradation in slightly earlier works – such as "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters" (1955), the famous account of Seymour's wedding day.

In the novella, collected together with "Seymour" in 1963, a twenty-three-year-old Buddy is presented, exhausted and with pleurisy, arguing his case in favour of his beloved older brother, the absent focus of all his writing; by picturing himself as a young yet physically strained man, Buddy/Salinger is anticipating his upcoming struggles with a) genre constraints (cfr. "Zooey" and "Seymour" for an explicit mention, "Hap-worth" for an implicit surrender) and b) representation in toto, especially with regards to Seymour. The language of disease accompanying the action of the short story functions as a sign of deeper corruption, a failure in speech and writing when major

'human 'issues like love, loss and death come to the fore. Exploiting the traditional topos of disease, Salinger introduces the figure of the 'writer in distress 'that will inhabit, with varying degrees of physical impairment, his next and last fictional works. Such a statement also contributes to the reading of the whole Glass family saga as an ample reflection on literature and writing factualised through the existential and identity dilemmas of its characters.

Introduction

The writing and representing of illness can take up multiple forms, aims and purposes; illnesses and diseases have inhabited literature with a number of functions since its origins, while only more recently the call for space granted to 'actually 'ill voices has started giving out fruits. As for disability, illness is often used as a device (Mitchell and Snyder) to characterise, identify or justify a given participant or situation.

While not necessarily a text about illness, J.D. Salinger's "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters" (1955; 1963) plays with the subject, apparently with the only purpose of thoroughly representing its protagonist and narrator Buddy Glass, back from military training to attend his older brother's wedding. In the specificity of the plot, however, Buddy's illness does not really play any role; we have to presume it is with more stratified levels of signification that the feature is attributed to the young man. I maintain that here, as well as in other Salingerian stories, illness functions as part of the construction of a topos, that of the 'writer in distress, 'at the same time peculiar to the author's oeuvre and a perpetuation of a symbolic tradition of ill/diseased/disabled narrators or focalisers.

Physical ailment, the sufferings of the body, represent the surface version of inner and creative issues faced by the author's alter-ego, and protagonist of the tale, Buddy. A full exploration of such issues can be found in "Seymour: An Introduction," a novella published in 1959 and collected together with "Raise High," however, some aspects are foreshadowed in a two-step's performance that from physical ailment in "Raise" (and contemporary "Franny") moves to the discussion of genre

conventions in "Zooey" and culminates in what critic Warren French did not hesitate to define as "self-indulgent kitsch" (160).

This opinion is not only excessively trenchant, but also flattening and de-complexifying: with a wish for a reconsideration of Salinger's later works in mind, I will structure this paper around a close reading of illness features in "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters," with specific attention paid to the development of 'foreshadowing, 'as well as to how the topos of the writer-in-distress is developed (also) to represent Salinger's struggle with genre constraints. Moreover, the use of illness in these stories can function as a refracted mirror-image of other illnesses, diseases that cannot be mentioned, as the one haunting Seymour but never described, surfacing only in fragments scattered through the works.

Buddy-in-Distress

"Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters" starts with a dichotomic image of health and sickness: "One night some twenty years ago, during a siege of mumps in our enormous family, my youngest sister, Franny, was moved, crib and all, into the ostensibly germ-free room I shared with my eldest brother, Seymour" (3). The house is tainted by disease, but the room in which teenage Seymour and Buddy live is germ-free, so much so that a child can be preserved by a highly contagious ailment. This condition, as my close reading of the novella will show, only characterises the narrator and protagonist in this very instance.

By now almost proverbially (at least in Salingerian terms) famous, the opening of the novella has functioned as a key for interpretation of the character of Seymour: in Buddy's own words, "Since the bridegroom's permanent retirement from the scene, I haven't been able to think of anybody whom I'd care to send out to look for horses in his stead" (5). The statement refers to a Taoist tale ("prose pacifier" [5]) Seymour reads to a ten-months-old Franny and which offers a brief illustration of what it means to live according to detachment and indiscrimination, unable to see the difference between

a "dun-coloured mare" and a "coal-black stallion" (4). See-more Glass is thus always the one for undiscriminating love: he is commonly recognised as the looker of horses, a real "mukta, ring-ding enlightened man, a God-knower" (Seymour 86). However, one may easily advance a further hypothesis: "but the superlative horse one that raises no dust and leaves no tracks is something evanescent and fleeting, elusive as thin air" (4). In life, Seymour may very well have been the looker: in fiction, yet, is he not the horse? Buddy cannot successfully represent him, his struggle in doing so is potentially the main concern of the whole 1963 volume: on paper, Buddy is the looker. This double condition of spectator and author, of involved and involving, caught up in the unsolvable swirl of writing and being written, is what spurs my critical category of 'writer-in-distress. 'The characterisation strategies deployed to go with such a strongly connoted narrator are many and varied and, at least in the last three novellas of the Fifties, quite often lean on the category of disease.

A Close Reading of "Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters"

"In late May of 1942, the progeny seven in number of Les and Bessie (Gallagher) Glass […] was flung, extravagantly speaking, all over the United States. I, for one, the second-eldest, was in the post hospital at Fort Benning, Georgia, with pleurisy […]": while in togetherness health is maintained, Buddy develops a physical ailment when apart from his dear ones, and in particular his brother Seymour. This serves a three-fold purpose: first, it characterises the narrator (common effect of illness and disability – a major case is Benji in The Sound and the Fury); secondly, it establishes a connection between emotional turmoil and disease; lastly, it grants the narrator total freedom of expression, which would not be as easily appointed to a perfectly healthy person. Woolf's quote, in epigraph to the present paper, summarises this concept quite clearly: there is "a childish outspokenness in illness" (36). Buddy could easily be regarded as 'unreliable, 'with his suspicious proximity to the subject matter of his writings and his accidental (?) identity mix-ups: Salinger himself sort of wants us to think so. However, Buddy's physical conditions come to the fore at seminal points in the narrative as some kind of 'justification' against two of the great enemies of a writer, the requirements of truthful representation and the adherence to the rules of genre. While these issues, as anticipated above, are

more explicitly discussed in "Seymour," it is in "Raise High" that their prominence is first foreshadowed in a few key passages.

The picturing of Buddy-in-distress alternates between objectively 'retrievable 'signs of sickness and mental projections (hypochondriac notions) the narrator himself makes: "pleurisy," as reported above, is the official diagnosis, and provides Buddy with the painful grounds for his subsequent elucubrations concerning his "own state of health" (15). Interestingly, while at the beginning paranoia as to his possible illness is endogenous, towards the ending external causes come to the fore, specifically identifiable in other people's behaviours and statements (in particular the well-known Matron of Honor's): however, similar if not identical linguistic formulations are used, as to create some sort of epithetical environment around the narrator's depiction of himself. Compare for reference the following passages (my emphasis):

> I had a sustained, cowardly notion, the entire time I was in the room, that I was about to haemorrhage, or, at the very least, fracture a rib, despite the corset of adhesive tape I was wearing. (11)

> But for the first part, those first few minutes in the car, I was still mainly concerned with my own state of health. Besides having pleurisy and a bruised head, I had a hypochondriac's notion that I was getting a strep throat. (15)

> I stopped right there, thank God. My heart was banging away something terrible, and, like most hypochondriacs, I had a little passing, intimidating notion that such speeches were the stuff that heart attacks are made of." (49)

While seemingly simple evaluations about one's self as a paranoid "hypochondriac," these passages ' placements in the story establish a very clear connection between author, narrator and subject-matter: in the very first instance, Buddy (and everybody else) is about to discover that no wedding is going to take place. For Buddy, however, unlike for everybody else, this translates into something different:

the subject of his writing is gone. Quite literally, the story has "haemorrhaged" and lost the presumed blood constituting its core: this recurrent image of Seymour eloping or running away is a refracted echo of his first, blasting appearance and his most definite elopement in death in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" – but it is also a common enough staple of writerly debates surrounding the possibility of actually representing something in fiction.

Narrative tension grows when Buddy enters a car with other wedding guests: faced with the possibility of having something to tell again, the narrator's notion this time involves "strep-throat" – which could make speaking, i.e., narrating, painful and difficult. Salinger's characters are all doomed by anxiety concerning their identity (Seed 85), and Buddy is perhaps the most anxious of all: the prospect of identifying himself as his brother's brother is at the same time galvanising and terrifying ("My face was burning. In a way, though, I felt an infinitely less furry sense of self-identification than I had since I'd got off the train earlier in the afternoon" Buddy admits when he is finally discovered by Edie Burwick [34]).

Last comes the fear of a heart attack: defending Seymour against accusations and insinuations on the part of the Matron puts Buddy face to face with his biggest enemy the impossibility of success in writing about Seymour hence stimulating an almost deadly response. And still as death is Buddy's sleep when everybody has left the apartment to reach the bride's family home: "I was asleep or, possibly, out cold before I landed, or so it seemed" (73). But his work is not done – sleep is for those who have reached at least a touch of awareness: 1955 was not the year for this kind of ending, with Buddy waking up "with a splitting headache and a parched mouth" and Franny "looking at the ceiling"; however, with a symmetry that challenges all detractors of Salinger's eye for composition (among whom, interestingly, novelist John Updike [54]), both "Zooey" and "Seymour" resolve in sleep at the end, oblivion mimicking death while also granting relief.

Anything but a Short Story Writer: Foreshadowing the Failure of Genre Constraints

All about Buddy's statements contributes to the literary construction which I have labelled 'writer-in-distress'; however, it also serves the purpose of foreshadowing the extensive discussion of core

issues in subsequent works. As shown in the paragraph above, Buddy's "notions," while apparently concerning his health, are related to three key points: the fact that subject-matter can escape writers; the problem of identification and identity; the issue of emotional attachment and distance. If taken without reference to the Glasses, we can see how such concerns may apply to wider issues of fiction-writing, which is why I maintain Salinger's next steps will be always more explicit in these terms: already in 1957, we see Buddy challenging genre constraints in the introduction of "Zooey," which "isn't a really a short story at all but a sort of prose home movie" (37); and in 1959, "Seymour" "fails to be a story" (Bloom 3) and gifts the reader with statements as

> […] his character lends itself to no legitimate sort of narrative compactness that I know of, and I can't conceive of anyone, least of all myself, trying to write him off in one shot or in one fairly simple series of sittings […]. […] My original plans for this general space were to write a short story about Seymour and to call it "SEYMOUR ONE," with the big "ONE" serving as a built-in convenience to me, Buddy Glass, even more than to the reader – a helpful, flashy reminder that other stories […] would logically have to follow. Those plans no longer exist. […] on this occasion I'm anything but a short-story writer where my brother is concerned. What I am, I think, is a thesaurus of undetached prefatory remarks about him (Seymour 86).

If paired to the switch to letter-writing (or better letter-reporting) that is "Hap-worth 16, 1924," we can have a glimpse of the formal intuitions which were likely to be stimulating Salinger as of the late fifties/early sixties. In front of his fifty-five years of silence, one would be tempted to admit that no solution was found to the problem of what it means to write and relate to one's writing – literature as representation is a failure, writing about writing may be the solution, so what next? Perhaps Salinger continued working on the subject and the publication of his unpublished prose [which was expected in 2020, but which will likely not happen before 2022 (Salinger)] will unveil a few developments.

Seymour Glass as a Mosaic of Quotations

With all the pleurisy and hepatitis and lack of sleep, how is it that Buddy can only refer to Seymour – and not to himself – as to a "Sick Man"? I'm sick is one of the most frequent phrases in all the Glass stories but, exception made for his suicide and suggestions made by Rhea Fedders, Muriel's psychoanalysis-enthusiast mother, nothing more specific emerges about the man's actual discomfort with life. Very little is disclosed in "Seymour," from which we know that the eldest Glass would be able to lie down and scream but never to tell where it hurt; and of the man's experiences during the war, we have close to nothing. His remaining siblings, however, suffer, and quite a bit – as this paper has tried to show. Apart from Buddy, whose case is paramount also because of his triple role of character/narrator/fictional author, we find: Franny's stomach ache, self-starvation and passing out in "Franny," her breakdown in "Zooey," Walt's death by means of an exploded gas stove, and, among the 'enlarged family, 'Eloise's alcohol-fed unhappiness in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" and her daughter's disastrous short-sightedness. By means of letters (Franny's first and Seymour's then) we also learn of ailments attributed to Les and Bessie.

Seymour is a representational crux and, as such, is better depicted in the scattered form of quotations, reverberating his discomfort, transformed and transmuted, throughout the other protagonists of the stories: but is he the core of the discourse here, or is it once again Narrative (with a capital N)? This question anticipates my interpretation of the character: while much criticism has focused on trying to describe who Seymour is, with evaluations as to the validity of his representation through the stories (inconsistencies between "Perfect Day" and other works have frequently been pointed out; needless to say, Salinger had spotted them first and made amends per Buddy in "Seymour") and investigations concerning his suicide, I would suggest a more fruitful approach in considering the man as a function of narrative. Without his death, no stories would have been written. This is not to underestimate the number of themes, concerns and echoes that are brought forward by the mere existence of such a character in the saga: however, I believe the main issues investigated by

criticism so far tend to privilege Seymour's status as a (fictional) human being and neglect his much more powerful narrative status.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a close reading of one of Salinger's last novellas, "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters" through the interpretative framework of illness. While the performativity of disease is barely brushed upon in the story, which is not strictly concerned with the construction of a sick subject, physical ailment is nonetheless used in a symbolic manner and exploited to grant the narrator a certain degree of freedom – a feature peculiar of illness (Woolf).

Aspects of disease correspond to as many issues on the narrative front, articulating the problem of writerly and genre constraints that characterises Salinger's last (so far) phase – by exploiting the concept of foreshadowing, I have shown how "Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters" is the soil in which rhetorical and theoretical features of the following stories are rooted.

Works Cited

Anthony, Lawrence. *AntConc* (version 3.5.8). Computer software. 2019.

Bloom, Harold (ed.). *J.D. Salinger, New Edition.* Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008.

"Celebrating JD Salinger - An interview with Matt Salinger." Penguin Books UK YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2iYrFGeT3s&t=1456s (last accessed August 9th 2021).

French, Warren. *J.D. Salinger. Revised Edition*. Twayne Publishers, 1982.

Grunwald, Henry Anatole (ed.). *Salinger. A Critical and Personal Portrait*. Harper and Row, 1963.

Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Salinger, J.D. *For Esmé – With Love and Squalor, and Other Stories (Nine Stories).* Penguin Books, 2010 [1953].

---. *Franny and Zooey.* Penguin Books, 2019 [1961].

---. *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction.* Little, Brown &co, 2014 [1963].

---. "Hapworth 16, 1924" *The New Yorker*¸ June 19, 1965.

Seed, David. "Keeping it in the Family: the Novellas of J.D. Salinger." *J.D. Salinger. New Edition.* Ed. by Harold Bloom. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008. 78-87.

Updike, John. "Franny and Zooey." In Grunwald, Henry Anatole (ed). *Salinger. A Critical and Personal Portrait*. Harper and Row. 1963, 53-56.

Woolf, Virginia. *On Being Ill.* [Hogarth Press, 1930] Project Gutenberg Australia, http://www.gutenberg.net.au/ebooks15/1500221h.html#ch3 (last accessed August 9th 2021).