“Money or the Sandwich Half?”:
Salinger’s “Just Before the War with the Eskimos”

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INTRODUCTION

In The Catcher in the Rye, published in 1951, J. D. Salinger, through Holden Caulfield’s sensitive eye, gives a bitter indictment against the “phonies” in our world that hamper our mutual communication, and reveals to us that the phonies are virtually derived from materialism and egoism in our life. Likewise, in Nine Stories, the same theme is dealt with and most of those stories end in tragical failure in communication. “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” also represents how these characters are deeply contaminated with materialism and egoism; however, it ends with a clear sign of communication, as do “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” and “Down at the Dinghy.”

One of the most controversial questions in this story is why Ginnie abrogates her demand for repayment from Selena. In The Fiction of J. D. Salinger, Gwynn and Blotner conclude that it is because she feels sympathy by “discovering the pathetic situation of Selena’s 24-year-old misfit brother” (24). Almost equally, Warren French says that it is “maudlinly sentimental” and insists that she attempts “to keep Selena ... from drifting into the same state of pathetic isolation as Franklin” (99). Does Ginnie feel such sympathy for Franklin? Does she feel so deep a consideration for Selena? First of all, does she think Franklin is in so pathetic a situation? Doesn’t Franklin have favorable attributes? The main purpose of this paper is to give a valid reason for Ginnie’s abrogation and, based on the reason, to interpret this fantastic title in a historical context.

Chapter I will clarify Ginnie’s role and Selena’s egoism. Chapter II will first reveal the mental qualities of Franklin, comparing him with Eric, his friend, and eventually discuss a sign of communication suggested in this story by a close analysis of the conversation between Ginnie and Franklin. The last chapter will discuss the meaning of the title from a historical viewpoint.

I.

Before looking into the personalities of the four young people in the story, it will be useful to start our discussion by considering the structure of the story, which is closely related with the relations with each other.

This story is well-structured, if not well-balanced, like a short classical drama, and it consists of four scenes, each of which is mostly made up of dialogues: (1) the opening—Ginnie, after playing tennis with Selena, goes to Selena’s apartment to retrieve her money; (2) the second scene, consisting of the conversation between Ginnie and Franklin, Selena’s brother; (3) the third, of the dialogue between Ginnie and Eric, Franklin’s friend; (4) the ending—Ginnie, refusing to take the money, leaves home with “the sandwich half” (49) in her pocket.
Warren French criticizes this plot as "mechanical" (87), denouncing the structure: "the story has more 'entrances' and 'exits' than a French bedroom farce" (89). However, this clear-cut structure is closely related to each person's relations with the others. The fact that the other three characters do not exist in the same scene means that they have no relation with each other: Eric and Franklin are not such close friends though they go to the movies together; there is no real brother–sister relation between Franklin and Selena; besides, the reason why Selena is absent during Ginnie's conversations with Franklin and Eric is that Selena is so indifferent to Ginnie and her trouble and their relation is not so close.

Of the four young characters in the story, the one who is given the most important role is Ginnie Mannox. As far as Ginnie is concerned, we should see her as a point-of-view character, from whom most of the descriptions are told and her opinions of objects she sees are often inserted: "In her opinion, it was an altogether hideous room—expensive but cheesy" (42); "And he looked—well, goofy" (43); "This had the stature of an interesting answer, in Ginnie's secret opinion" (44).

This story is so constructed that Ginnie functions as the only character that comes into contact with the other three. As a matter of fact, most of the descriptions are narrated and judged from her eyes. Ginnie, as the guide of the story, can reveal each person's personality, comparing them with each other. Thus, this simple structure is quite useful to make the contrasting personality of each character, seen from a certain person, much clearer.

As a point-of-view character, Ginnie is quite normal and her sense of value is favorable and even sensible. Ginnie is a fifteen-year-old girl who is so "normally nice" (Gwynn and Blotner 23), innocent a girl as to have paid the whole cab fare four straight times without any objection. She is inexperienced and pure-minded, as her name "Virginia" suggests. She, like Holden, prefers something "natural"; she hates "artificial flowers" (42) in Selena's apartment. Furthermore, she keeps such a degree of sentimentality as to need "three days to dispose of the Easter chick. At the same time, she is old enough to claim her rights if needed, as she does on Selena today, and to retort against blunt, impudent manners and opinions. And yet, she is still "awkwardly uncertain of herself" (Lundquist 90), as is proven by her imbalance in growth between body and soul: "At fifteen, Ginnie was about five feet nine in her 9-B tennis shoes, and as she entered the lobby, her self-conscious rubber-soled awkwardness lent her a dangerous amateur quality" (41).

Even this central character, who has got "stuck—every single time—for the whole cab fare" (39), becomes so angry as to make a peremptory demand on Selena for payment of a dollar ninety and forces herself into her apartment. Today she becomes "self-conscious" (41), thinking only about herself, so there is little room for "sentimentality" (41) in her heart, despite the fact that Selena's mother is in bed with pneumonia.

Selena, on the other hand, is a self-centered, egoistic girl. As is true of Ginnie's judgment, she is "the biggest drip" (39). She is so snobbish as to walk like "visiting Hollywood royalty" (41). She is totally indifferent to others even if they pay the taxi fare, and completely callous to their demand for payment, and rather she is so highly proud that she wants to keep "finality enough to give herself the upper hand" (40), however wrong she may be. Besides, she is so insensitive and impudent as to change clothes, while keeping Ginnie waiting alone. It is quite natural that Selena does not "seem to be on
speaking terms” (42) with her colored maid, and that she cannot understand her brother but calls him “a character” (54).

Such characteristics have much to do with her family. Her mother is sick in bed, and her father does not seem to give her love but “fresh cans of tennis balls” (39). There is total absence of father and mother in her family. In such a family Franklin has to buy sandwiches in a delicatessen at night. Ginnie gives quite a sarcastic description of the Graffs’ dinner table: “it involved a perfect servant coming around to everyone’s left with, instead of a glass of tomato juice, a can of tennis balls” (39). They must be rich, but this is a loveless family, as is proven by its interior, which Ginnie dislikes and even rearranges in her mind: “She looked around the room, mentally rearranging furniture, throwing out table lamps, removing artificial flowers. In her opinion, it was an altogether hideous room—expensive but cheesy” (42).

Why, then, does Ginnie regularly play tennis with such a snobbish girl? We cannot say that they are close friends. Actually, Ginnie calls Selena not a friend, but a classmate, as on the following two occasions:

“Friend of the jerk’s?”—“We’re in the same class.” (43)

“You’re a friend of Franklin’s sister, I take it?”—“We’re in the same class,” Ginnie said.... (53)

Interestingly, the relation of the two girls reveals that the social relations in our contemporary world are decided by economical elements, not by spiritual ones. Likewise, Holden keenly realizes this fact when he says: “It’s one of the reasons why I roomed with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine” (142). Ginnie and Selena play tennis together, just because they have the same standard of living: both of them are so rich as to go to private school, play tennis every Saturday morning and return home by taxi; the interior of Selena’s apartment looks expensive; Ginnie’s family can afford to go to Nassau for vacation. Such a materialistic relation is therefore broken by a problem of small money². This story reveals how relationships in our society have become hollow and materialistic.

II.

Comparing Franklin with Eric, this chapter will clarify these two men’s characters and finally fathom what kind of aspects Franklin assumes make Ginnie abrogate her demand.

First of all, we will notice the remarkable differences in appearance between the two. Wearing pajamas and no slippers, Franklin, who has bed-dishevelled hair and a “couple of days’ growth of sparse, blond beard,” with “his slack mouth ajar,” is literally slovenly and untidy from head to toe; besides, he gives us a dirty image by his habitual scratching. Quite naturally, he looks, to Ginnie, “the funniest-looking” and even “goofy” (43).

In sharp contrast, Eric looks clean and well-dressed, in his “regular features, his short haircut, the cut of his suit, the pattern of his foulard necktie” (50). Rather, he is a mysophobia who is extremely disgusted with dog hair on his suit and everything touched by his friend’s “filthy, dirty hands” (52).

The same difference can be pointed out in their speeches. Franklin is rough and foul in speech, like Holden, using slang and swearwords like “goddam,” “Christ,” “Jesus,” “the hell,” and “helluva.” In contrast, Eric is fairly polite and refined, using no slang or swearwords. The same occasion of
asking Ginnie's name reveals the contrast in speech between the two. Franklin impudently asks, “Who are you? Friend of the jerk's?” (43), whereas Eric politely asks, “May I ask your name? You're a friend of Franklin's sister, I take it?” (53)

As Gwynn and Blotner point out, Eric is “effeminate” (24). His speech is characterized by emotional phraseology with fustian superlatives, interjections and exaggeratedly-stressed utterances: “This has been the most horrible morning of my entire life” (51); “even the remotest judge of human nature” (51), “this apartment microscopic little apartment” (52), “it's the first really good camel's hair I've seen since the war” (52); “I am dog hairs from head to foot” (53); “that boy would insist on dragging me to the most impossible pictures in the world” (53). In addition, the movement of his fingers looks feminine: Eric brushes “the cuffs of his trousers with the flat of his hand” (53). It may be quite reasonable that Warren French regards him as “homosexual” (88).

Next, let us look into their inward qualities. Franklin is autistic and in most cases he is conscious of himself. The first moment Ginnie meets him, he talks abruptly about his cut finger. Even afterward, he continues to talk, as if his finger was “the true and only focal point in the room” (43). We can say he lives in his own world. In fact, he is excluded from the society: during the wartime because of his heart disease he could not enter the Army as other young people did; and besides, he neither works nor goes to college. So he can be called an autistic misfit during this time. So, in “some particularly isolating form of pioneering” (43), he chooses to stay in his room, looking down from the window, and does not go outside except when he goes to the movies with another misfit Eric.

Eric is a typical type of egotist. His manner of speech, as mentioned, is polite and sophisticated, but all the topics he chooses are full of self-display and self-justification. It is tremendously ironic that he says: “I never bore people I haven't known for at least a thousand years” (51); or “I'd just as soon not go into details” (51); or “I don't want to talk about it. I really don't” (52). Despite these remarks, he rattles on rigmarole full of complaints and disgust, which Ginnie neither wants nor asks him to talk about. Furthermore, calling himself very “kind and decent” like “the original Good Samaritan” (51–52), Eric explains in detail what he has done for his friend. In addition, he is so conceited that he suggests that Ginnie may quote what he says (51). He is a typically “show-offy” type Salinger hates most. Ginnie's keen eyes penetrate into his true quality in the movement of his hands: his hands "looked neither strong nor competent nor sensitive. Yet he used them as if they had some not easily controllable aesthetic drive of their own” (51).

The above discussion reveals Franklin as looking like a slovenly, autistic misfit, but what kind of aspects he assumes abrogate Ginnie's demand?

He is described as an autistic misfit, but instead he keeps his innocence, which takes many forms in the story. He is so frank—as his name literally suggests—and unpretentious that he confesses to Ginnie that he is refused by her sister though he writes eight letters (48). In many respects, he is childish when he says wildly to the stranger Ginnie, “I just cut my goddam finger” (42) or when he makes a fuss about iodine, saying, “I don't like it when it stings” (45). It should be noticed that his frankness and childish response interest and fascinate Ginnie, and in the scene of iodine, make her act like his mother, with whom he agrees, as in the following:

“He looked at Ginnie. “It stings a lot, though, doesn't it?” he asked. “Doesn't it sting a helluva
It is important to mention that this scene is one of the good examples in the story which prove a sign of mutual communication between Ginnie and Franklin: Ginnie feels sympathy with his cut finger and he understands her kind feeling for himself; that is why Franklin "nods" in agreement without resenting her tone. Soon afterward, Franklin in turn becomes considerate of her, asking her if she would like a chicken sandwich or a glass of milk.

Franklin may look stupid and sometimes absent-minded, but we can say he has a keen eye for people. According to Franklin, his sister Selena, for example, is a "jerk" (43), and Ginnie's sister is the "queen of the goddam snobs," and "If she was half as good-looking as she thinks she is, she'd be goddam lucky" (44). At first, Ginnie objects to his judgments, but finally she accepts and even admires his most adequate and witty expression, which is one of his charms: "This had the stature of an interesting answer, in Ginnie's secret opinion" (44).

Toward the second scene, after their long conversation, Ginnie and Franklin create a scene of another sign of mutual communication in which each person, feeling considerate of each other, answers him or her by "nodding," not by words:

"Hey. Do me a favor. When this guy comes, willya tell him I'll be ready in a coupla seconds? I just gotta shave is all. O.K."

Ginnie nodded.

"Ya want me to hurry Selena up or anything? She know you're here?"

"Oh, she knows I'm here," Ginnie said. "I'm in no hurry. Thank you."

Selena's brother nodded. (49)

Franklin, who understands her forlorn situation, suggests that he hurry Selena up, and Ginnie, anxious about his injury, tells him to use a Band-Aid. Carried on by Ginnie's kindness, Franklin, as in return, brings "the sandwich half" for her, which she accepts.

These scenes prove Salinger's respect of spirituality, which is likely to be eliminated by materialism. The relationship between Ginnie and Franklin is created by their mutual sympathy and understanding. Their series of "nodding" shows how deeply they understand each other by hearts, not by words. Philosophically, this is closely related with Franklin's attitude against logic. He rejects logic in everything as he answers Ginnie's questions many times by phrases such as "I don't know" (43, 47, 48, 49). Such an attitude may lead to his suspicion of Western philosophy which is based on words and logic. Because of these qualities, Franklin is quite similar to other innocent, "absurd" characters in Salinger's works like Holden or Seymour. He is a misfit who cannot live up to materialism, but
instead retains innocence. Even his habitual use of swearwords may be interpreted as a frustrated way of accusation against the materialistic world.

The last part of the second scene is another good example for a sign of mutual communication:  

"Eat this," he said. "It's good."

"Really, I'm not at all—"

"Take it, for Chrissake. I didn't poison it or anything."

Ginnie accepted the sandwich half. "Well, thank you very much," she said....

"It looks very good."

"Well, eat it, then."

Ginnie took a bite.

"Good, huh?"

Ginnie swallowed with difficulty. "Very," she said.

Selena's brother nodded. (49-50)

It should be noticed, however, that though Ginnie does accept and bite the sandwich, she seeks for a good place to throw it out or hide it. It is after the contact with Eric that Ginnie comes to feel special attachment for that sandwich and cannot throw it out. In other words, Eric's egocentric attributes bring into relief Franklin's innocent quality. Eric plays a role as a setoff for Franklin's innocence which Ginnie as well as the reader might not notice otherwise. Ginnie's initial selfishness is soothed by touching the mutual communication with Franklin, and she learns to find Franklin's inner qualities hidden under his dirty appearance. Here, "the sandwich half" becomes the symbol of mutual communication which can rarely happen in our materialistic, contemporary world.

III.

Looking down at the street, Franklin abruptly begins to talk as follows:

"They're all goin' over to the goddam draft board," he said. "We're gonna fight the Eskimos next. Know that?" (48)

What does he mean by the "war with the Eskimos"? Why the Eskimos?

Judging from the year of the publication of "Beauty and the Beast," the setting of the story is placed in 1946, just one year after the end of World War II. Why, then, does Franklin think America is going to fight the Eskimos next, just after the end of World War II?

Historically, from the start, America developed her land by fighting the innocent Indians. Later, in the 19th century, in the name of "Manifest Destiny," she expanded her territory until the frontier disappeared in 1890. In the 20th century, America experienced two world wars. Economically, each fight made America bigger and richer, and the First World War especially gave her unprecedented economical growth, and yet all the people in the world vowed never to fight again. Their vow notwithstanding, another bigger war broke out as a result of greed of each nation. War, whatever its cause, represents egoism and materialistic greed of each nation and supports imperialism.

The Eskimos, living away from materialism, symbolize innocence. Franklin predicts with the bitterest sarcasm that America, which is so foolish as to continue wars, will be sure to go and fight the innocent Eskimos next. His extremely imaginative idea of the war with the Eskimos gives a
strong irony to America’s imperial, materialistic history. That is why Franklin calls volunteers going to the draft board “Goddam fools” (48), who eventually support imperialism. His remark reminds us of Holden’s equally ironical comment on World War II: “Anyway, I’m sort of glad they’ve got the atomic bomb invented. If there’s ever another war, I’m going to sit right the hell on top of it. I’ll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will” (183). Both of them strongly denounce the stupidity of repeated wars.

The title clearly declares that materialism continues to eliminate innocence—a warning Salinger intends to proclaim. In other words, an innocent Franklin will be eliminated by an egocentric Selena and a materialistic Eric. Franklin curses the way America has taken and will take—in reality, we know that there were the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1960–75), which seemed to follow Salinger’s prediction.

CONCLUSION

As the title “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” symbolically warns, our world is faced with a critical situation in which greedy materialism eliminates innocence. This is why this story starts with a problem about money, which may suggest that many of the troubles we have in the contemporary society are closely related with money. So, we can go so far as to say that people’s relations now are economical, and they can be created and broken by money, as is shown by the relationship between Ginnie and Selena. This story elaborately reflects the reality of our materialistic world. Through this short story, Salinger gives a serious warning to our materialistic world where innocence is hard to maintain, and simultaneously advocates the significance of inner qualities, such as innocence, honesty, and sympathy for others, which lead to mutual understanding and communication.

NOTES

1. Holden, for example, says: “I can’t even stand ministers.... I don’t see why the hell they can’t talk in their natural voice. They sound so phony when they talk” (131).

2. Holden keenly realizes the role of money in this world, saying: “In New York, boy, money really talks — I’m not kidding” (90); “I need to keep some dough for the tickets and stuff. I was sorry anyway, though, Goddam money. It always ends up making you blue as hell” (147).

3. Quite interestingly, Lundquist says that “Franklin is a homosexual” (91) just because Eric is Franklin’s friend; however, this is not evidence for that.

4. According to the Selective Service Act of 1940, all males from 21 to 35 were required to register with one of 6,443 local boards. But when America entered World War II, the age limits were expanded to 18 and 65. In December 1942 voluntary enlistment was stopped (Encyclopedia Americana). Many young Americans registered in the military service, but as many critics point out, Franklin is “4-F” exempted because of his mental disease as well as heart trouble (Gwynn ard Blotner 24). Incidentally, it is an interesting fact that in 1941 Salinger was rejected by the draft board because of “what he’d been told was a mild heart complaint” (Hamilton 69).

5. To take a few examples, “I hate a guy that does a lot of show-off tricky stuff on the dance floor” (93); “They were mostly old, show-offy-looking guys with their dates” (90).

6. See Galloway The Absurd Hero in American Fiction. He explains: These absurd heroes “begin their quests with a vision of the apparent lack of meaning in the world, of the mendacity and failure of ideals,
but they conclude with gestures of affirmation derived explicitly from their realization of the significance of love" (171). In this story, this definition is applicable to Franklin.

7. In *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, Po Lo explains the difficulty of finding truth: "What Kao keeps in view is spiritual mechanism. In making sure of the essential, he forgets the homely details; intent on the inward qualities, he loses sight of the external. He sees what he wants to see, and not what he does not want to see. He looks at the things he ought to look at, and neglects those that need not be looked at" (10).

8. The film "Beauty and the Beast," or "La Belle et la bete," was directed by Jean Cocteau in France in 1946. The film is used in "The Eskimos" to show the superficial formalism of a sophisticated person. He says: "...it's the one film where you really should get there on time. I mean if you don't, the whole charm of it is gone" (53). However, interestingly enough, this well-known story shares the same themes with "The Eskimos": anti-materialism; human gentleness; love; importance of inner qualities, not appearance.

9. This is a well-known catchword implying "divine sanction for the territorial expansion of the young nation." That phrase first appeared in the July–August 1845 issue of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which proclaimed "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our multiplying millions." Clearly, this key phrase comes from America's self-esteem and self-justification of her imperialistic materialism, and under the name of manifest destiny, the annexations of Texas, Mexican territory, the Oregon country, Hawaii, and Guam were achieved (*Encyclopedia Americana*).

10. Hamilton makes quite an interesting comment on Salinger's feeling of the fact that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor: "Salinger for one was surprised by his own feelings of patriotic outrage" (69). And yet, Hamilton adds: "...since then he had shown no sign — in his letters or his stories — that the hostilities were weighing on his mind" (77).

11. Hamilton explains Salinger's mental condition when he comes back from the war: around July 1945 "Salinger was going through some sort of nervous breakdown. 'Breakdown' might, for all we know, be too severe for whatever it was that afflicted Salinger around this time" (89).

12. The United States participated in the war in 1960, though it broke out in 1954.

**Works Cited**


