

INNOCENCE, RACE, CLASS AND RELIGION IN J.D. SALINGER'S "DOWN AT THE DINGHY"

Renata Gonçalves Gomes (UFPB)¹
Universidade Federal da Paraíba

ABSTRACT: This article aims at analyzing the modern short story "Down at the dinghy" (1949), by J.D. Salinger, focusing on the issues of innocence, race, class and religion. This is a short story that presents two characters of the Glass family — relatives that are presented in eight different stories by Salinger. Therefore, this article presents a brief initial analysis in perspective in relation to the other two short stories of the saga previously published: "A perfect day for bananafish" (1948) and "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" (1948). This means that this article presents a comparative analysis when discussing formal aspects of the narratives, such as construction of characters, structures of the narrative and of the genre. Moreover, the analysis focuses on aspects of innocence, race, class and religion. As a result, it is possible to conclude that Salinger's short story is as relevant for the Glass family saga as other stories, and that they present a social criticism in relation to race, class and religion in the context of the post-World War II in the United States of America in the 1950s and 1960s.

KEYWORDS: Glass Family Stories; J.D. Salinger; Innocence; Class; Race; Religion.

RESUMO: Esse artigo tem como objetivo principal analisar o conto moderno "Down at the dinghy" (1949), de J.D. Salinger, com ênfase nos aspectos temáticos de inocência, raça, classe e religião. Esse é um conto que apresenta duas personagens da família Glass — família essa que aparece em oito diferentes narrativas de Salinger. Portanto, esse artigo apresenta em sua primeira parte uma análise breve em perspectiva com relação a duas outras histórias anteriormente publicadas: "A perfect day for bananafish" (1948) e "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" (1948). Isso significa que esse artigo apresenta uma análise comparativa quando discute aspectos formais do conto, como a construção de personagens, as estruturas das narrativas e do gênero. Ademais, a análise é feita com base em aspectos de inocência, raça, classe e religião. Como resultado, é possível concluir que o conto de Salinger é tão relevante quanto outras histórias da saga da família Glass e que esta apresenta crítica social no que diz respeito à raça, classe e religião no contexto do pós II Guerra Mundial nos Estados Unidos da América nos anos 1950 e 1960.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Histórias da Família Glass; J.D. Salinger; Inocência; Classe; Raça; Religião.

"Down at the dinghy" was first published on April 1949, in *Harper's* magazine. It was, then, published after *Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger's greatest success of critic and public. Later, in 1953, "Down at the dinghy" was published in Salinger's only short story collection entitled *Nine Stories*. This is a short story that presents characters such as Boo Boo and Lionel,

¹ Docente da Universidade Federal da Paraíba (UFPB), Campus I – João Pessoa. Contato: gomex10@hotmail.com.

who are members of the Glass family². Thus, Salinger wrote short stories and novellas in which the Glass family members are the main characters. However, these stories were fragmentally published, i.e., in different magazines and books. Moreover, their stories are also told in a fragmented form, so the reader does not have a total comprehension of their lives. This means that the reader has an important role of collecting the Glasses details that are spread out in these eight stories³ in the attempt of understanding them as a totality, a unity. The narratives provoke the readers to find more evidences in order to better understand the characters and their struggles in life. However, the sense of totality and unity, proper of the short story defined in the 19th century by Edgar Allan Poe in “Twice-told tales: A review” is never achieved. This is due to the fact that these narratives can be considered modern stories that do not present the totality and unity the 19th century stories used to, as Ernest Hemingway states with the iceberg theory for the modern short story.

“Down at the dinghy” is the first story to present Boo Boo Glass Tannenbaum and her four-year old son Lionel⁴. In this narrative, two Glass siblings are briefly mentioned, Seymour and Webb. If reading chronologically, the reader will not know that Webb Glass will be later presented as Buddy, his nickname in the family, who is the narrator of some Glass stories⁵.

The analysis presented in this article aims at discussing “Down at the dinghy” in relation to the issues of alienation and innocence, mainly. Moreover, other aspects of the US social and

² The Glass characters are: the parents, Bessie and Les; and the children, from the oldest to the youngest: Seymour, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walt, Waker, Zooey, and Franny. There are other characters in the stories that are not from the main Glass family, but are also included, for example: Lionel (Boo Boo’s son) and Muriel (Seymour’s wife).

³ The eight stories are: “A perfect day for bananafish” (1946), “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut” (1948), “Down at the dinghy” (1949) — published later in the book *Nine Stories* (1953), “Franny” (1955), “Zooey” (1957) — published later in the book *Franny and Zooey* (1961), “Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters” (1955), “Seymour: an Introduction” (1959) — published later in the book *Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963), and “Hapworth 16, 1924” (1965) — the only Glass story that was never published in book.

⁴ Boo Boo will later appear in the story “Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters” through a letter she sent to her brother Buddy. In the last Glass narrative, “Hapworth 16, 1924,” Seymour sometimes addresses Boo Boo in his letter. These are the only appearances of Boo Boo in the Glass family stories. Lionel, on the other hand, does not appear neither is mentioned in any of the other Glass stories besides “Down at the dinghy.”

⁵ Buddy narrates *Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters, Seymour: An Introduction, Franny and Zooey*. In “A perfect day for bananafish” he mentions that he wrote (he is the narrator and also a writer) the story about his older brother’s, Seymour, suicide. However, it is not possible to argue that he is the narrator of the story, since the narrative style is quite different from all the other four stories.

political context will also be discussed, e.g., social inequality, race and religion. Since this story is connected to the Glass world, the issues presented in this story will be partially discussed in parallel with other Glass family stories.

“Down at the dinghy” can be compared to both “A perfect day for bananafish” and to “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut.” Similarly to “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut”, “Down at the dinghy” can be considered a peripheral story in relation to the other Glass narratives.⁶ This is mostly because in “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut”, Walt, the Glass character who is mentioned, is not physically present in the story, and also because “Down at the dinghy” presents Boo Boo Glass, one of the Glass children who is not a major character of the family⁷. However, both stories are significant in order to show different perspectives of the family. “Down at the dinghy” can also be compared and contrasted to “A perfect day for bananafish” in relation to their dialogues’ structures and their narrative form, as I will later argue.

In “Down at the dinghy,” the fifth story of the book *Nine Stories*, Salinger presents Boo Boo Tannenbaum Glass and her son Lionel. As in “A perfect day for bananafish,” “Down at the dinghy” is divided into untitled sections. In the first part of the story, a dialogue is established between the living-in maid, Sandra, and Mrs. Snell, the temporary maid from the countryside, where the Tannenbaum Glass family is spending the month of October. The dialogue between both women is initially based on Sandra’s fear of Lionel: he has listened to her saying something about his father and, because of the content of what he heard, he ran away from the house. There are moments in which Sandra says to Mrs. Snell that she must not worry about it, but there are also the ones in which she shows preoccupation. Sandra’s dialogue with Mrs. Snell shows her insecurity about losing her job. Mrs. Snell, who seems to be quite relaxed, is having her tea and smoking her cigarette before leaving the house. Concerning Sandra’s

⁶ Howard M. Harper Jr. affirms this in his book *Desperate Faith* (1972, p.50-51).

⁷ It is possible to affirm that the main character of the family is Seymour, the older brother, due to the relevance he represents for all the Glass children. He commits suicide and this affects his siblings and parents.

worries, Mrs. Snell says that she does not need to worry about anything. After that, Boo Boo enters the kitchen and asks to both women for pickles. The maids mention the fact that Lionel ran away and Boo Boo says that this is a common fact. Boo Boo tells other stories from the past to illustrate Lionel's usual getaways.

In the second part of the story, Boo Boo goes after her son Lionel down at the lake's shore, near the deck where the family's dinghy is anchored. The mother, then, starts chatting with the boy in order to know what made him run away. First, Boo Boo tries to get closer to Lionel by saying she is the Vice Admiral Tannenbaum, which Lionel abruptly rejects by saying "You aren't an admiral. You're a lady" (SALINGER, 1991, 80)⁸. The chat goes on about the issue of Boo Boo being an admiral or not, and Lionel being reluctant most of the time. Lionel, then, goes to the dinghy and says no one can come in with him. By the deck of the boat, there was a pair of goggles. Lionel caught them with his toes and threw them overboard. Boo Boo replied to the action by saying "That's nice. That's constructive" (...) "Those belong to your Uncle Webb. (...) They once belong to your Uncle Seymour"⁹ (SALINGER, 1991, 84). Lionel says that he does not care about it. Afterwards, Boo Boo gets a package out of her pocket saying that there is a key chain inside it. Lionel recognizes as his, and asks his mother to throw it into the lake, because it would be fair. Boo Boo replies saying that she does not care, and contrary to what Lionel had done to the goggles, delivers the key chain to the boy. After that, Boo Boo gets in the dinghy and comforts Lionel tenderly while he cries sitting on her lap. Then, Lionel says that he had run away because Sandra said to Mrs. Snell that his father was a "big sloppy kike." (SALINGER, 1991, p.86) Boo Boo, then, asks if he knows what a kike means and Lionel replies saying it is "one of those things that go up in the air" (SALINGER, 1991, p.86),

⁸ Later in "Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters" the reader will know that Boo Boo was telling the truth for Lionel, since she was an admiral serving the World War II.

⁹ Mentioned before, uncles Webb and Seymour are the only references to other Glass siblings in this story. Boo Boo refers to her older brothers Buddy Glass (Webb) and Seymour Glass.

confusing it with a kite. After their conversation, they go back to the house betting a race, one that Lionel wins.

The structure of the narrative of “Down at the dinghy” is similar to the one of “A perfect day.” Both stories are divided into sections and have the same pattern in their sections. In the first section of “A perfect day for bananafish,” as well as in “Down at the dinghy,” there are two women talking about one character that is struggling: Seymour and Lionel, respectively. In both stories, one of the two women complaint about the main characters — Muriel’s mother against Seymour and Sandra against Lionel — and another one is trying to appease the situation — Muriel and Mrs. Snell. In “A perfect day for bananafish,” Muriel and her mother talk about Seymour and his supposed psychological “problems,” whereas in “Down at the dinghy,” Sandra and Mrs. Snell talk about Lionel’s “difficult” behavior of sneaking around and running away.

In the second sections of both stories, the narratives present a Glass family member — Seymour and Boo Boo — talking to a child — Sybil and Lionel, respectively — apart from the rest of the characters of the stories. Both stories also have a similar pattern in the end, when the adults go back to their places of origin: the hotel and the house by the lake. These similarities show that when composing the Glass family short stories, Salinger concentrates them in a specific pattern, which gives the stories a sense of unity, even though they do not figure the same characters and do not tell the same story. This also evidences that, even though some of the stories do not feature the main characters of the Glass family, there are no specific peripheral stories. All of them are connected to each other through their form, characters, issues, struggles and socio-political context.

By analyzing both stories in comparison, it becomes evident that Seymour and Lionel are struggling in their lives. However, the affection with which Boo Boo treats Lionel reverts his struggle into comfort, which makes him feel less disoriented in life than Seymour. For Lionel, adulthood may represent disrespect and threat – as he listens to Sandra calling Mr.

Tannenbaum a kike. Even though he does not know the meaning of the word, Lionel understands the tone of Sandra's talk. However, Lionel ends the story with a different perspective of adulthood, the one given by Boo Boo, his mother. The affectionate, patient and understanding way she treats Lionel makes him forget about the dark side of adulthood. The story "A perfect day for bananafish," on the other hand, presents Seymour as a character who cannot see the bright side of adulthood. It is clear that he does not have a good relationship with Muriel's parents, and he has a terrible conversation with the woman at the elevator. The story shows that he does not have good adult-to-adult relationships. Maybe Muriel is the one who could give him comfort, such as Boo Boo to Lionel, but she is sleeping when he gets in the room to commit suicide, and therefore, cannot comfort him in that moment of struggle.

When comparing the characters of "Down at the dinghy" with the ones in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut", it is possible to distinguish the mothers and wives Boo Boo and Eloise, as well as the children Lionel and Ramona. Instead of feeling comfortable in the position of a mother, like Boo Boo, Eloise does not feel part of the family she lives with – she rejects her daughter, as well as her husband Lew. Eloise cannot comfort Ramona when she is struggling, because she is struggling too. Ramona "loses" her imaginary friend and gets feverish, but when she goes upstairs to her room she goes with Grace, the maid. Her proximity with Grace is exactly the opposite of Lionel with Sandra, because Ramona cannot count on Eloise's affection, but Lionel can with his mother's. When contrasting these characters from different stories, it is possible to understand that Eloise thinks that her life would be better if she were a Glass, if she had married Walt Glass and had continued their rebellious relationship. She lives her present life in denial, and chooses to dream of her past. By doing that, Eloise feels frustrated life in family acting as a rude mother and wife — two positions that she might not have desired for her. Because of that, Eloise, as a character, is more similar to Seymour than to Boo Boo.

Most of Salinger's Glass family stories present a character who is an outsider, a person who does not fit in the world. In the previous stories analyzed, Seymour and Eloise may be considered outsiders, because they do not feel comfortable with their lives and with the people around them. Because of that, they alienate themselves from their present life: Seymour commits suicide, and Eloise rejects her family. In "Down at the dinghy," the outsider is a child, and because of that, the comparison between Lionel to Seymour and Eloise cannot be fully done. Boo Boo's son is also a person who lets his emotions command his choices, similarly to Seymour and Eloise. However, Lionel is just a child, and it is not the case here to say that he alienates himself when he runs away. Lionel is a very sensitive character who responds to the reality he faces. On the other hand, it is possible to say that Boo Boo is not an alienated character. Differently from Seymour and Eloise, from the other short stories, Boo Boo does not avoid her reality. She is aware of the son's usual behavior and constantly attempts to comfort him.¹⁰

Lionel's act of running away represents a premature rebellion. It is not possible to say if Lionel is going to perpetuate this behavior through his adult life, however, it is clear that this is not the first time he had run away.

"I hear Lionel's supposed to be runnin' away." She gave a short laugh. "Certainly looks that way," Boo Boo said, and slid her hands into her hip pockets. "At least he don't run very *far* away," Mrs. Snell said, giving another short laugh. (SALINGER, 1991, p.77-78)

This brief conversation between Mrs. Snell and Boo Boo shows that they do not think Lionel's trip out of the house to run away is too serious due to the recurrence of it. They know that he

¹⁰ Later, in the story "Raise high the roof beam, Carpenters" this argument will be confirmed, since Boo Boo is the one who sends a letter to Buddy to tell him that Seymour was going to marry Muriel and that no one in the family would be able to be present. So she requests Buddy to go to Seymour's wedding in order to support him. Seymour's wedding, and consequently this letter, happened before Boo Boo was married and had Lionel. It seems, then, that she is a character who is constantly concerned with the Glass characters that are struggling. Bearing that in mind, it is possible to say that Boo Boo is not an alienated character, but one who has the empathy to face the Glasses realities.

usually goes out to isolate himself when he is upset, and that generally is not for a too far away location. In another dialogue, Boo Boo reveals other escapes by Lionel. “‘Well, at the age of two-and-a-half,’ Boo Boo said biographically, ‘he sought refuge under a sink in the basement of our apartment house. Down in the laundry’” (SALINGER, 1991, p.79). Lionel’s isolation is generally from the people of the house: as two years old from his parents, and as four from his living-in maid. He recurrently goes to places below the level adults are, which represents that even though he has run away from them, he can be caught or seen by them.

Moreover, the expressions “down in the laundry” or “down at the dinghy” represents not only the place where Lionel is — and where he does not want to be found —, but also how sad (or down) he is feeling in those situations. Then, the title of the short story enunciates that Lionel is feeling down, and he is at the water level near the family’s dinghy. However, the dinghy is anchored — and has not been used for a while, as Sandra says:

“I mean none of ‘em even go anywheres *near* the water now. *She* don’t go in, *he* don’t go in, the *kid* don’t go in. *Nobody* goes in now. They don’t even take that crazy boat out no more. I don’t know what they threw good money away on it for.” (SALINGER, 1991, p.76)

The dinghy is a common space for the family to go in, as well as a place to have fun on the lake. However, the dinghy is stagnant on the lake, which makes it accessible to Lionel — who can use it when isolated from the family. It is, at the same time, a place of comfort — where he used to be with the family —, and a place of possible isolation for him. This might represent that even though Lionel wants to isolate himself from the family in this situation, he also finds comfort in the dinghy, which is a representation of his family moments.

Moreover, Sandra’s words made Lionel repel not only adulthood, but also, and consequently, adults. When Boo Boo goes after him and tries to talk to him, Lionel hesitates and starts being a bit hostile with his mother, who had nothing to do with Sandra’s words. This shows that Lionel created a behavior in which he repels adults in general after his flight.

Lionel's reactions to the adults in those situations could be misinterpreted as a spoiled behavior. However, Lionel is not spoiled; he is very sensitive and gets hurt due to what he listens from people he trusts. He does not isolate himself because he did not get a lollipop or a chocolate bar, for example, he isolates himself because of the confrontation caused by people he knows — and probably likes — when saying bad things about him or his family. He rebels against the world he does not fit in, and not because of something he wishes. Or maybe he wishes he had more caring people around him.

The post-World War II US context is represented by the non-conformist actions regarding race, class, and religion. Even though Lionel does not know what a “kike” is, he is upset because of the tone of a dialogue that contains issues of race, class and religion implicit in it. His perception of Sandra's dialogue with Mrs. Snell makes him lose his innocence and, because of that, he isolates himself from the rest. Anti-Semitism is one of the main aspects of this short story. Sandra acted with prejudice against Lionel's father, and therefore, Lionel feel Sandra's prejudice and the rude tone. Boo Boo, as a protective mother, seems to minimize religion intolerance when talking to Lionel, since she notices her son did not understand what Sandra really meant. Also, Boo Boo does not know exactly the context in which Sandra said that Mr. Tannenbaum was a kike, and neither does the reader. Sandra may have been reacting to something her boss had done to her or said to her before¹¹.

However, Boo Boo tries to get Lionel less upset and make him feel that the world is not as bad as he was thinking it was. By the time Lionel notices that his mother — an adult — is affectionate with him and that she does not throw his key chain on the lake, he feels relieved,

¹¹ Similarly to “A perfect day for bananafish,” in “Down at the dinghy,” Salinger uses the technique of the modern short story (the iceberg theory), by showing only a tip of the whole story — as mentioned before through Ricardo Piglia's *Formas Breves* (2000). The reader does not have the information of why Sandra said that, and neither does the reader knows how is Sandra's relationship with her boss. Boo Boo's relationship with the maids seems to be a little cold, as it will be argued later.

as if realizing that the world was not as cruel as he thought it was. Boo Boo, then, tries to keep Lionel's innocence intact, apart from the problems of the adult world.

It is possible to understand, then, "Down at the dinghy" within the post-WWII context, since it raises issues such as race and class that were present in protests from the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, Salinger uses a child character to represent the loss of innocence and the disgust with adulthood. This can counterbalance the idea that even though the characters are sensitive to notice that their realities need changes, they are not, necessarily, able to change such realities.

Whereas in "A perfect day for bananafish," Seymour Glass — or See more Glass, the one who sees beyond¹² — does not find a solution for his reality, in "Down at the dinghy" Salinger gives a more optimistic view, showing that it is with a new — sensitive — generation that something better could happen. It is not strange that Lionel throws Seymour's goggles on the lake, as a metaphor that means that the way Seymour used to see life is not the one Lionel will choose. While uncle Seymour killed himself due to the possible inability of changing his reality, his nephew Lionel is questioning the acts of adults and trying to escape from it without being coopted. Even though both "escape" from their realities, these are two different postures and acts concerning the same anguishes about the reality they live in: differently from Seymour, Lionel can go back to the house and continue to live.

In light of the issues related to the historical protests of the 1950s and 1960s, it is important to mention social inequality and race contained in the story. In the first sequence of dialogues of "Down at the dinghy," Sandra and Mrs. Snell are having a conversation in the kitchen of the Tannenbaum Glass family holiday home. It is clear that both of them are maids, however, Sandra is a permanent maid and Mrs. Snell is a temporary one. It is possible to establish a dichotomous relationship between both regarding their names: while one is called

¹² In the short story "A perfect day for bananafish", Seymour's little friend, Sybil, refers to him as See more Glass.

by her first name, the other one is called by her last name – representing a social status of a married woman of the long 1960s. Being Mrs. Snell a temporary maid, she minimizes Sandra’s concerns regarding what Lionel heard Sandra saying about his father. Sandra argues, “It’s all right for *you*, you live here all year around. You got your social life here and all” (SALINGER, 1991, p.76). Mrs. Snell lives in the city of the Tannenbaum’s holiday house, and as a temporary employee she does not worry much about losing her job. Mrs. Snell’s behavior in the kitchen differs from Sandra’s. Mrs. Snell relaxes in the kitchen after her work hours having some tea and smoking a cigarette: “Boo Boo Tannenbaum, the lady of the house, came into the kitchen (...) Sandra and Mrs. Snell were silent. Mrs. Snell put out her cigarette, unhurriedly” (SALINGER, 1991, p.77).

Both maids feel uncomfortable with the entrance of Boo Boo in the kitchen, however Sandra worries about losing her job, what Mrs. Snell does not feel. This differentiates the way both act in front of Boo Boo: even though both were silent and surprised by Boo Boo’s sudden entrance in the kitchen, Mrs. Snell does not hurry to put out the cigarette she was smoking. This shows that even though she was doing something that she should not do — otherwise she would not have put out when Boo Boo arrived — she does not try to hide it.

Boo Boo is described by the narrator as the “lady of the house” (SALINGER, 1991, p.77). She seems to treat Sandra and Mrs. Snell in a very distant way. The narrator subtly describes the difference between the way Boo Boo treats the maids and the way she treats Lionel.

The swinging door opened from the dining room and Boo Boo Tannenbaum, the lady of the house, came into the kitchen (...) She went directly to the refrigerator and opened it (...) Sandra and Mrs. Snell were silent. Mrs. Snell put out her cigarette, unhurriedly. “Sandra...” “Yes, ma’am?” Sandra looked alertly past Mrs. Snell’s hat. (SALINGER, 1991, p.77)

Boo Boo enters in the kitchen without talking to the maids. She ignores Sandra and Mrs. Snell, who feel a little intimidated with Boo Boo’s sudden entrance. Boo Boo only addresses

Sandra, who alertly responds to her, when she needs to know if there are more pickles. The maids were talking about what Sandra said about Mr. Tannenbaum, and it seems that Sandra is in doubt whether Boo Boo heard anything when entering the kitchen. This shows that Boo Boo and Sandra, the live-in maid, maintain only a professional relationship. The “lady of the house” is too cold with the maids, and shows a silent superiority in relation to them.

Even though Sandra knows better the family she works for, she does not feel as comfortable to act the same way Mrs. Snell does. Sandra constantly asks Mrs. Snell about how she should “fix” the fact that Lionel heard what she said about Mr. Tannenbaum. And Mrs. Snell, on the other hand, is “relaxed” in her workplace, because she does not fear losing her job as much as Sandra does. The relationship between maids and bosses is not good, then. However, Mrs. Snell does not fear to lose her job because it is temporary, whereas Sandra does.

Moreover, the reader only knows what Sandra’s concern is when Lionel — in the second part of the story — is talking to his mother and tells her that he heard Sandra saying that his father was a “big sloppy kike.” Even though Sandra knows the family well, she keeps being insecure in front of Mrs. Snell. Sandra’s insecurity comes not only from her displacement for being in a city she does not recognize as hers: “I’ll be so gladda get backa the city. I’m not foolin’. I hate this crazy place.” (SALINGER, 1991, p.76), but also because of Mrs. Snell’s indifference to the relevance Sandra gives to her job.

Besides Mrs. Snell’s indifference to their job positions, since for her this is only a temporary job, the narrator describes Mrs. Snell’s personal objects as ones from expensive brands. However, Mrs. Snell’s personal objects are worn, which may imply that she once belonged to another social class. This may indicate that Mrs. Snell’s indifference to her current job as a temporary maid may be because she does not feel as belonging to the position. This justifies why Sandra was confronting Mrs. Snell by saying “It’s all right for *you*, you live here all year around. You got your social life here and all” (SALINGER, 1991, p.76).

Moreover, the references given in the story about Mrs. Snell, through her objects, make the reader think that she was, once, part of a upper social class, but that she is, currently, in financial decadence.

“(...) Reach me my bag, dear.” A leather handbag, extremely worn, but with a label inside it as impressive as the one inside Mrs. Snell’s hat, lay on the pantry. Sandra was able to reach it without standing up. She handed it across the table to Mrs. Snell, who opened it and took out a pack of mentholated cigarettes and a folder of Stork Club matches.” (SALINGER, 1991, p.75)

Mrs. Snell’s extremely worn handbag shows that even though this is a shabby bag, it is an expensive one. Another class reference in relation to Mrs. Snell is her Stork Club matches. Stork Club was one of the most prestigious nightclubs in Manhattan, New York, from 1929 to 1965, which means that at least once, Mrs. Snell had been there. The financial decadence of Mrs. Snell suggests that she once belonged to an elite position. That means that Mrs. Snell has a background story in “Down at the dinghy,” which makes her feel more secure and comfortable in front of the Tannenbaums, whereas Sandra is a live-in maid who does not seem to have much going on in her “social life” (SALINGER, 1991, p.76). This can be a reference to the 1930s economic crises in the US.

This social inequality between Sandra and Mrs. Snell goes beyond their current class status. In the story, they were supposed to belong to the same social class, since they are both working as maids and both at the same house. However, Mrs. Snell’s background as a married woman that holds personal objects with impressive labels on them puts her in a higher position between them. Moreover, the narrator describes Sandra as feeling oppressed.

Mrs. Snell lit a cigarette, then brought her teacup to her lips, but immediately set it down in its saucer. “If this don’t hurry up and cool off, I’m gonna miss my bus.” She looked over at Sandra, who was staring, oppressedly, in the general direction of the copper sauce-pans lined against the wall. “Stop *worryin’* about it,” Mrs. Snell ordered. “What good’s it gonna do to worry about it? Either he tells her or he don’t. That’s all. What good’s *worrin’* gonna do?” (SALINGER, 1991, p.75)

The fact that Sandra feels oppressed and Mrs. Snell does not is due to the fact she thinks that her job is in danger, while Mrs. Snell does not seem to have big intentions on turning her temporary job into a full-time one. Another evidence in the text that distinguishes the behavior of both characters is the way Mrs. Snell talks to Sandra: either she is ordering Sandra to do her favors, “Reach me my bag, dear” (SALINGER, 1991, p.75), or ordering her to ‘let it be’ or to stop nagging about it, “‘Stop *worryin’* about it,’ Mrs. Snell ordered.” (SALINGER, 1991, p.75).

Due to Sandra’s language use it is possible to argue that she may be a black woman¹³. Sandra’s insecurity to lose her job, as a black woman in the late 1940s, may be considered a reproduction of the racial inequality that many protests were trying to combat in the Civil Rights Movements. At that time in the US, as it was mentioned before, the black community in the US were commonly refused work at positions in service of elitist places where they could be seen by customers. Because of that, many protesters, artists, institutions and politicians included racial inequality within their political agenda in order to support the Civil Rights Movement and its demands.

Moreover, the issue of religion is very important in this story¹⁴. Warren French, one of the first scholars to publish analyses on Salinger’s short stories, in *J.D. Salinger* (1966), writes few remarks about the theme of religion within the Glass stories. And despite the relevance of the anti-Semite tone of the story “Down at the dinghy,” French leaves this theme open and

¹³ The article “*Estudo da cultura Afro Americana relacionando o Black English e o Reggae*,” by Barros, Vargas, and Almeida, presents a comparison between the Standard English and the Black English. According to the article, it is common for Black English speakers to use the words “wanna, gonna” instead of “want to, going to,” the non-use of the letter “g” when the words finishes in “ing,” such as “singin’.” The authors define this group of words by analyzing reggae lyrics, but they do not specify these are the only ones. These are uses that Sandra makes throughout the story, which let open the idea that she may be a black woman. However, since there is no physical description of Sandra, only of Boo Boo “She was a small, almost hipless girl of twenty-five, with styleless, colorless, brittle hair pushed back behind her ears (...)” (SALINGER, 1991, p.77), it is difficult to say that being black is the only possibility for Sandra. However, based on the language spoken by Sandra, my reading is that she either differs from Boo Boo by her skin color or by her social class – or both. Reference of the article: <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/index.php/ci/article/viewFile/14162/8848>.

¹⁴ Only one article that relates Salinger’s works to the Jewish theme was found for this research. The essay “Humorous Contemporary Jewish-American Authors: An Overview of the Criticism,” written by Nilsen, presents a brief section about J.D. Salinger’s works and critical review, however he strangely does not mention the story “Down at the dinghy.”

disagrees with other scholars — since, as he says, there is no evidence that the maid, who speaks bad words about Lionel’s father, is not Jew (FRENCH, 1966, p.96). French believes that, because Sandra — the maid — suffers prejudice from other maids (he means Mrs. Snell or others without mentioning names), she just reproduces their bully behavior when calling Lionel’s father “a big sloppy - kike” (SALINGER, 1991, p.86). French eases the political tone that the story has. French’s argument emphasizes that the anti-Semite aspect of the story occurs in detriment of actual anti-Semite prejudice Sandra may suffer from other maids. This is an argument that does not stand because there is no evidence that shows Sandra is a Jew, or even that she was suffering religious prejudice from Mrs. Snell. Yet, if Sandra were Jew, she would not worry about the Tannenbaum family knowing what she said.

What French considers relevant for the story is the dichotomous dynamic of life (being either good or bad) that Lionel sees after listening to the words said by the maid. It is hard to leave the anti-Semite theme out of “Down at the dinghy,” though, especially if considering that Salinger was born in a Jewish family¹⁵, and that the story was first published only four years after WWII. As mentioned before in this chapter, the WWII had a great impact on Salinger, causing him a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after serving in the Army. Being Salinger’s family Jewish, it is presumable that the anti-Semitism of the WWII had great impact on the production of the Glass family stories. Even though Sandra commits an anti-Semitic act, she knows how bad that can sound – her awareness of the gravity of that act is implicit in the story through her fear of losing her job.

As it mentioned earlier, the issue of religion is only brought up for the reader in the end of the conversation between Lionel and his mother when he says to her what he had heard to Sandra say about his father.

“Sandra – told Mrs. Snell – that Daddy’s a big – sloppy – kike.” Just perceptibly, Boo Boo flinched, but she lifted the boy off her lap and stood him in front of her and

¹⁵ According to Salinger’s biographer Kenneth Slawenski (2010, p.3).

pushed back his hair from his forehead. “She did, huh?” She said. Lionel worked his head up and down, emphatically. He came in closer, still crying, to stand between his mother’s legs. “Well, that isn’t *too* terrible,” Boo Boo said, holding him between the two vises of her arms and legs. “That isn’t the *worst* that could happen.” She gently bit the rim of the boy’s ear. “Do you know what a kike is, baby? (...) It’s one of those things that go up in the *air*,” he said. “With *string* you hold.” (SALINGER, 1991, p.86)

Lionel tells, crying, what he had listened to, and Salinger uses the dashes to mark the pauses for every sob Lionel makes. Religion is part of the story when Sandra says kike referring to Mr. Tannenbaum. Lionel, by confusing the word kike with kite, does not understand the meaning of the sentence, but understands the tone of it. Lionel’s innocent world only recognizes naïve, ludic or child-like references. Lionel quickly understand that this is not a pleasant world. Lionel’s lost innocence made him struggle, even though not knowing exactly why.

The fact that Lionel chooses to isolate himself down at the dinghy shows that he does not understand and accepts adulthood. The movement of running away Lionel makes shows that he does not understand the world he lives in pretty well. He is an innocent child who believes that what adults say is true. Lionel gets upset when he hears that his father is a “kite,” because he knows his father could never be a kite, since he is a man. As an innocent boy, he does not problematize what necessarily Sandra says about his father — because it does not make sense — but how she says it. He understands that being a “kite” in the adult world is not a good thing. Lionel does not see his father as a person with bad personal features, so he gets confused and enters a personal conflict. And so he chooses to be out of this world.

To sum up, “Down at the dinghy” presents Boo Boo and Lionel as characters of the Glass family. Moreover, Lionel’s innocent world is not lost due to the effort made by his loving mother Boo Boo, who comforts him in his moment of struggle. Because of that, Boo Boo seems to be very aware of her family’s struggles, and does not escape from it. On the other hand, Boo Boo and her husband seem to have a classist relationship with their maids Sandra and Mrs. Snell, which may have been the cause of Sandra saying that her boss was a “sloppy kike.” In

light of this comment, the short story also presents the issue of religion in relation to the post-WWII context, by evidencing the prejudice to the Jewish community through Anti-Semitic discourse after the war.

WORKS CITED

- BARROS, Cristiano Santos de, et al. "Estudo da cultura Afro Americana relacionando o Black English e o Reggae." *Cadernos Imbondeiro*, vol. 2, no.1, 2012, <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/index.php/ci/article/viewFile/14162/8848>. Accessed online 5 Jan. 2013.
- FRENCH, Warren. *J.D. Salinger* (trans. by Rubem Rocha Filho). Rio de Janeiro: Lidador, 1966. Print.
- GITLIN, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, days of rage*. USA: Bantan Book, 1987. Kindle.
- HARPER JR., Howard M. *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972.
- NILSEN, Don L.F. "Humorous Contemporary Jewish-American Authors: An Overview of the Criticism," in *MELUS*, v.21, n. 4, winter, 1996. PDF file.
- ROSZAK, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture*. California: University of California Press, 1968. Print.
- SALINGER, J.D. *Nine Stories*. 1st edition: 1953. New York: Little Brown, 1991. Print.
- SLAWENSKI, Kenneth. *J.D. Salinger: A Life*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.

Recebido em: 10/05/2018
Aceito em: 25/07/2018