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Franny and Zooey

In the book *Franny and Zooey*, J. D. Salinger tells the story of a young woman named Franny and her religious crisis as she struggles with the issues of academic life and the lack of peace and authenticity she feels in the way she is living. In Franny's struggle to fight against the egotism and pride she sees in herself and others, her older brother Zooey offers an answer that leads to greater holiness, rather than deeper arrogance. Zooey advises Franny that she could only achieve a relationship with the divine through a personal love of people as particulars in whom she could see God and best love Him. By extension of Zooey's thought, Franny could achieve such a relationship with the particular God-Man Jesus Christ of the Christian faith. Unlike some religions that worship an impersonal god, Jesus is concretely personal through His incarnation, and He embodies a love of people as particulars through His service and self-sacrifice ultimately exemplified through His death on the cross. Because this type of love is not found in other religions, to take Zooey's assertions seriously, Franny must ultimately find her faith through Christianity by emulating Jesus Christ.

Before considering Zooey's solution to Franny's frustrations, it is necessary to understand what is upsetting her. The novel opens by relating Franny's interactions with her boyfriend Lane during their disastrous night out. Franny, an intelligent woman, often stifles her intellect and controversial opinions in her relationship with her boyfriend. Lane presents himself

as an intelligent person, weary of the world's demands upon his unparalleled intellect; he brags of the many demands for the publication of his writings, and his manners adopt a disdainful tone towards those he deems less intellectual than himself. During their dinner, Franny does not at first voice her opinions, but listens quietly to Lane, who was "speaking now as someone does who has been monopolizing conversation for a good quarter of an hour or so and who believes he has just hit a stride where his voice can do absolutely no wrong" (11). After one of Lane's particularly wordy speeches of self-praise, Franny, clearing her "throat before talking because it had been so long since she had said anything at all" (11), begins to speak up, expressing her frustration towards both Lane and the academic life. Franny responds to Lane's self-praise by accusing him of acting like a "section man" —someone who diminishes the work of another solely to admire their own intellect and bask in a sort of vain-glory (14). She is "sick of pedants and conceited little tearer-downers" that fill her English department, and she is angered by the lack of authentic learning in her college education (17). Franny expresses that she would have been less bothered by the section men and fake friends in her life if "just once in a while there was at least some polite little perfunctory implication that knowledge should lead to wisdom... but there never is!" (146). As the date progresses, Franny grows increasingly anxious and upset as they continue arguing about true beauty and problems in academic life. Franny feels hopelessly caught up in her mind, hating herself for how she feels, but feeling anger nonetheless. Eventually, she seems to pinpoint the source of all her anger and frustration, telling Lane, "I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. It's disgusting— it is, *it is*" (29). Franny feels herself caught in an endless trap of egotism, superficiality and pride; in a

world where she feels that “everything everybody does... it’s just so tiny and meaningless and—sad-making (26), she is seeking for one good, beautiful thing to counteract the problems she encounters.

This desire leads Franny to an obsession with a little book called *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a religious story that she discovered in her older brother’s room. Franny relates to Lane that the pilgrim in the story is concerned solely with learning how to pray ceaselessly and that he eventually achieves this endless prayer by constantly reciting the “Jesus Prayer.” Franny explains, “if you keep saying that prayer over and over again... then eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self-active. Something happens after a while... the words get synchronized with the person’s heartbeats” (37). Franny is not sure if she believes it, but she finds it fascinating because she is told that this prayer allows one “to see God. Something happens in some absolutely nonphysical part of the heart... and you see God” (39). Though Franny is ethnically Jewish and was raised with a broad understanding of countless religions, she still finds the idea of finding God through the Jesus Prayer appealing; nonetheless, she relates how countless religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism believe this same idea and that they accomplish the same end by praying to their god (39). Ultimately, Franny’s obsession with this story and the Jesus Prayer, her anxiety about her own failures, and her disgust with the pride of everyone around her causes such emotional and mental distress that it physically manifests itself in Franny, who ultimately breaks down and faints, ending her date with Lane.

Though Franny’s extreme dissatisfaction with the egotism she experiences is appropriate, she expresses it in undesirable ways. For example, her complete disgust of Lane’s patronizing pride leads her to unkindness as she snaps at him and refuses to show grace for his human

limitations. She insults Lane, rebukes him, and demeans his work, leading him to exclaim, “you’ve got the goddam bug today— you know that? What the hell’s the matter with you anyway?... I’m worried about you” (15). While her anger towards Lane’s pride and arrogance is justifiable, she treats him with a harsh and belittling attitude. Though she recognizes her unkindness, she is unable to control herself: “Franny made her voice stop. It sounded to her cavilling and bitchy, and she felt a wave of self-hatred that, quite literally, made her forehead begin to perspire. But her voice picked up again, in spite of herself” (25), and Franny continued criticizing. She is so disgusted with the flaws she sees in Lane that she cannot accept when he correctly accuses her of acting with the same egotism she hated in others, and that her blatant hatred of the entire higher education system was “one *helluva* sweeping generalization” (17). He also reminds her that “there are incompetent people in all walks of life” (18), but Franny refuses this dismissal and continues to rant about her frustrations.

While Franny is rightfully upset with the vain-glory, conformity, and materialism that she encounters, she allows her dissatisfaction to hinder her own growth in virtue and ultimately, fear of her own ego paralyzes her. Franny tells Lane that, while acting in the theater had been her passion, she quit the department entirely because she started feeling “like such a nasty little egomaniac” (28). She continues, “I used to hate myself so, when I was in a play... all those little egos running around feeling terribly charitable and warm... I just hated myself” (28). Lane rightfully challenges Franny, saying that she presumed her own knowledge of plays and acting to be superior to everyone else’s. He also accuses her of dropping theater because she was afraid of competing and failing, but Franny responds, “I’m afraid I *will* compete— that’s what scares me... I’m sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I’m sick of myself and

everybody else that wants to make some kind of a splash” (30). Her search for humility and the desire to resist conformity has paralysed Franny, and, because she does not know how to be an actress without feeling egotistical, she drops acting altogether. She is caught in an endless cycle of frustration towards the egotism she sees in everyone around her, and her uncertainty of how to prevent her own arrogance when attempting to reject the pride she sees.

Because Franny realizes the terrible nature of egotism and desires to free herself from this lifestyle, her breakdown arises from her uncertainty of how to rise above this without arrogantly assuming that she alone has found the key to a humble and holy life. Though she condemns her classmates, professors, and even her boyfriend for their desire to “pile up treasure on earth” as they boost their ego with knowledge for their own sake, she also tells her older brother Zooey, “I *want* something from the Jesus Prayer— which makes me just as acquisitive, in your word, really, as somebody who wants... to be *famous*, or to be dripping in some kind of crazy *prestige*. I know all that!” (149). Franny tells her brother, “Don’t you think I have sense enough to worry about my motives for saying the prayer? That’s exactly what’s bothering me so. Just because I’m choosy about what I want... doesn’t mean I’m not as egotistical and self-seeking as everybody else. If anything, I’m more so!” (149). Clearly, Franny recognizes that she is caught in a trap of fighting egotism with more ego, and she tells Zooey that her breakdown is resulting from her anxiety and uncertainty of how to escape this vicious cycle.

As Franny sits at home on her couch crying and sleeping, her brother Zooey, at the urging of their mother, attempts to help his sister. Before helping her find an answer to her dilemma, however, he begins to diagnose Franny, asserting that she has allowed her frustration and anger to become dramatic and harmful. While he acknowledges that she is “legitimately falling apart,”

he tells her she must stop the “routine” because it is hard on her parents. Their mother, Bessie, shows clear concern for her daughter’s mental and physical well-being, telling Zooney, “she’s eaten practically nothing since she got home... I tried— not half an hour ago— to get her to take a nice cup of chicken broth. She took exactly two mouthfuls, and that’s *all*... I don’t know what I’m supposed to do... I just don’t, that’s all” (85, 87). Bessie is anxiously trying to help Franny, and tries to force her son to help as well, as her daughter refuses to be consoled and rejects all loving care. Zooney challenges Franny to recognize the harmful impact her breakdown is having on her parents, saying that if she was going to refuse their attempts towards love and assistance, she should just return to college to have her breakdown (160).

While Zooney affirms that Franny is right in feeling dissatisfaction and frustration with the arrogance she encounters as well as feeling concern for her own ego, he thinks she is dealing with her feelings wrongly and is “beginning to give off a stink of piousness” (159). He bluntly criticizes Franny for her “hair-shirty private life of a martyr” and the “snooty crusade you think you’re leading against everybody” (161), saying that she makes her attack against pride by withdrawing from everything around her and pretending that she is better than those who are content to continue living in the world of arrogance. Zooney also tells her, as Lane did, that she is over-generalizing and making a “blanket attack” against the entire system of higher education and the people in it. Zooney points out how she talks about people, saying “you don’t just despise what they represent— you despise them” (162); he tells her that if she is going to “go to war against the system,” she needed to take things less personally and realize that she does not take time to try and help people, since she is too busy tearing them down by their flaws (162). Lastly, Zooney criticizes Franny’s understanding of Jesus, saying, “you have confused him with about

five or ten other religious personages, and I *don't* see how you can go ahead with the Jesus Prayer till you know who's who and what's what" (164). He challenges her breakdown, asking how this could be a helpful way of addressing the issues she sees in the world, and though he is not trying to belittle her Jesus Prayer or her feelings, he does say, "if you're going to say the Jesus Prayer, at least say it to *Jesus*" (169). Rather than praying to who Jesus is shown to be in the Bible and in history, Zoey says she is saying the prayer to "St. Francis and Seymour and Heidi's grandfather all wrapped up in one" (169). Zoey believes that Franny was "in this messy state of mind in the first place" (170) because she ignored who Jesus really was and only chose the appealing parts that aligned with what she wanted out of religion. He concludes by harshly accusing Franny of using the prayer "to set up some little cozy, holier-than-thou trysting place with some sticky, adorable divine *personage* who'll take you in his arms and relieve you of all your duties" (172). He wants her to use the Jesus Prayer as an end, but the means to get there requires her to first understand why she used the prayer and how; rather than hiding behind it, she could allow it to help her see others as Jesus would see them.

After these blunt accusations, Zoey leaves Franny sobbing on the couch. When he again tries to talk to her, he approaches in a gentler way, seeking now to offer healing and guidance for her anguish, rather than simply pointing out her failures. Zoey proposes several solutions that acknowledge Franny's appropriate frustration with the wrong she sees, but does not enable her pride. Firstly, he affirms her desire to come home when she felt the urge to begin her journey with the pilgrim and the Jesus Prayer, but he then tells her that "if it's the religious life you want, you ought to know right now that you're missing out on every single goddam religious action that's going on around this house" (196). He reminds Franny that the religious life begins first in

the home, and that, in failing to recognize her mother's "consecrated chicken soup," as a soup of pure love, she was missing all of the healing and religious experiences around her. "Even if you went out and searched the whole world for a master... to tell you how to say the Jesus Prayer properly, what good would it do you? How in the hell are you going to recognize a legitimate holy man... if you don't even know a cup of consecrated chicken soup when it is right in front of your nose?" (196). He wants Franny to see that she would never find holiness if she was unable to recognize it in those around her—in this instance, accepting her mother's kind actions for her sick daughter. Before recognizing God, Franny needed to recognize how each particular person could serve as an example of Christ's love, and that she must love God firstly by loving the particular people around her. Zooey also prescribes a need for detachment, particularly in regard to her acting. He affirms Franny's feelings that her audience is unskilled and would likely miss the excellence she was portraying—that they would laugh at the wrong times, and care about the wrong things. Nonetheless, she needed to detach herself from this and act simply because she was good at it. In fact, he says, "the only thing you can do now, the only *religious* thing you can do, *is act*. Act for God, if you want—be God's actress" (198). He reminds her that it is "none of her business" if the audience is unskilled; rather, "an artist's only real concern is to shoot for some kind of perfection, and *on his own terms*, not anyone else's" (199). Zooey urges Franny to act because she is talented and passionate about acting and could use her talent to act for the glory of God; in doing so, she may still reveal some small glimpse of truth and beauty for her audience. However, Zooey also tells her to act for her own sake—to aspire for excellence not because of the audience or the reviews, but because she knows it is excellent.

Lastly, Zooney reminds Franny of the story their older brother told them of “the Fat Lady,” relating how, when he was a little boy, his brother Seymour told him to shine his shoes before he went on the air; “I said [the audience] couldn't see them *anyway*... but [Seymour] said to shine them. He said to shine them for the Fat Lady... He didn't tell me who the Fat Lady was, but I shined my shoes for the Fat Lady every time I ever went on the air again” (200). Here, Zooney is trying to show Franny who this unknown “Fat Lady” was. If she was trying to find the light of Jesus beyond the particulars, she could not forget that the particular person leads to Jesus, as the kingdom of God is within each and every person. Zooney ends their conversation by urging Franny to remember, “*There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady*. This includes your professor... and all his goddam cousins by the dozens. There isn't anyone *anywhere* that isn't Seymour's Fat Lady... *don't you know who that Fat Lady really is?*... Ah, buddy. It is Christ Himself” (202). He acknowledges that Franny should hate the pride she sees in her professor, but, while hating what he stands for, she cannot hate the professor himself because Jesus lives within him: to love Jesus is to love the person and to serve Him excellently is to serve the Fat Lady, in whom Jesus Christ resides.

Through the guidance of her older brother, Franny is able to develop an approach towards right humility and holiness that both avoids the pitfalls of egotism while still acknowledging the real issues in her education and her life. Zooney recognizes that Franny is right in feeling dissatisfied with the issues she experiences; however, he feels that she fails in addressing them. Rather than retreating into a piously secluded world after lashing out at everyone around her, Zooney offers a solution that does not enable pride, but asks instead that Franny recognize the

religious experiences and opportunities for holiness that surround her. Franny must work on loving each individual person, because Christ is in everyone; however, if “you don’t see Jesus for exactly what he was, you miss the whole point of the Jesus Prayer. If you don’t understand Jesus, you can’t understand his prayer— you don’t get a prayer at all, you just get some kind of organized cant” (172). Thus, in order to truly achieve what Zooey is calling her to, Franny must reach this through Jesus Christ, Who serves firstly as a personal God for Franny to love, and Who embodies the type of love for others that Zooey believes will lead Franny to true humility and peace.

Works Cited

Salenger, J.D. *Franny and Zooey*. Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1991.