



Satire in the Fiction of George Saunders

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Abstract

Satire is a literary device for the artful ridicule of folly or vice as a means of exposing or correcting it. The subject of satire is generally human frailty, as it manifests in people's behaviour or ideas as well as societal institutions or other creations. Satire utilizes tones of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation towards a flawed subject with the hope of creating awareness and subsequent change. In particular, satire is often used to comment on and even influence the political or social events of the time. The main role of satire is to raise people's awareness about the current state of affairs and to challenge their viewpoints by using humor and irony. It helps us confront the unpleasant reality and see the world as it is, so that we can improve it.

American fiction has been known to use satire for a significant period of time, with the literary device evolving with great writers of fiction like Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, and George Saunders, among others. The impact that Saunders has made in satirical fiction has proven to be gigantic over the years, with his most popular short story collection *Pastoralia*. Saunders answers the question of whether postmodernism has killed literary satire in a classic manner that reveals that satire has not only been inherited from past writers, but has also been innovated, reinvented, and reshaped to perfectly fit the literary needs of contemporary society. This paper will explore how George Saunders, through *Pastoralia* and with other short stories has managed to depict fictitious satire in stories and fictional worlds, as well as how he believes his use of satire has impacted his audience through the role it plays in passing the messages he had intended to communicate to society. As Saunders stories focused American culture and the lives of the people and the customs prevailed in the past and the present world.

Keywords: Satire, Folly, Indignation, Postmodernism, Inherited, Reinvented

Introduction

Satire came into English at the beginning of the 16th century, and the meaning of the word has not strayed very far from its original sense. The initial uses were primarily applied to poems, and the term now has a broader applicability. Satire has a semantic and etymological overlap with both farce and lampoon. Farce ("a light dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and improbable plot") came into English as a synonym for forcemeat, meaning "finely chopped and highly seasoned meat or fish that is either served alone or used as a stuffing." Lampoon ("a harsh satire usually directed against an individual") is thought to come from the French lampons!, meaning "let us guzzle!" And satire is believed to trace back to the Latin satur, meaning "well-fed."

Early and contemporary works of fiction apply different literary devices to pass a message, tell a story, or communicate with audiences in different ways. One major device used by most writers is satire. It is a literary device that applies the use of ridicule to mock advice as a means of criticizing, exposing, and correcting it. Satirists often tend to blend humor with their personal attitudes, hence communicating to the audience that the aspect of human behaviour they are ridiculing is not an acceptable way of life. Writers use satire in fiction to poke fun at some of the most critical issues in society while equally criticizing them in the hope that it provokes an audience and challenges their contradictory viewpoints.

Saunders uses some of the most complex forms of satire in his works. Therefore, to understand his satirical style, one has to first understand the overall concept of satire. Even though many satirists do not openly admit it, the application of satire in literary forms is often aimed at achieving moral reform. Satire found its way into the works of American writers in the turn of the millennium. For them, satire has a specific function in their works, as does fiction. The audience at which satire is often targeted consume it as spectators, but also recognize that it does not exist just for art's sake. On the other hand, the satirist writers do not merely feel compelled to write satire but present their literary works based on feelings of necessity. Their urge to communicate their dissatisfaction cannot be retrained in any way within the worlds in which they write their fictions. They recognize that vices, stupidity, and follies exist in abundance in society, and they cannot be ignored. For this reason, satire has to be connected to social action to ensure that society embraces it and tries to bring reforms as a part of innovation.

There are short stories based on the theme of satire of Saunders's collections: "Civil War Land in Bad Decline" and "The Wavemaker Falts" in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), "Sea Oak" in *Pastoralia* (2000), in "In Persuasion Nation (2006)", and "Escape from Spiderhead" in *Tenth of December* (2013). Saunders shows the limitation of satire as a genre, and the spectral dimension of his work gives it more force to promote action.

Finally, the question will be posed of which outcomes may be envisaged from Saunders's satire. It is in his ghost stories that his purpose of a restoration to sanity through the depiction of excess is clearest.

Though Saunders is known as "a writer's writer" and regularly publishes in that "highbrow US cultural magazine," *The New Yorker*, his media profile is so high that he is by now a household name (see Colman, WARC and IMDb sites). He is an intrinsic part of popular American culture in which the satirical genre and ghostly themes are highly developed.

The satire in George Saunders's short story "Pastoralia" could be about the lack of boundaries between professional life and personal life. In the story, the narrator and Janet not only have to work in the cave, but they have to live in the cave as well. There is no separate home for them. Their home is where they work. They eat, sleep, and communicate with their families in the exhibit. Perhaps Saunders uses their quirky situation to send up the all-consuming nature of America's work ethic under capitalism.

Staying with American work life, Saunders might be satirizing the deceptive language that is often deployed by companies to mask what they're really doing. The amusement park plans to fire people, including Janet. However, the company doesn't say that they're firing people; they portray it as a "Staff Remixing." This phrase makes the layoffs seem fun and exciting. It's as if people won't be losing their jobs and livelihood—they'll just be moved around or shaken up a bit.

Saunders satirizes, think about how Saunders pokes fun at the artificiality of the cave exhibit. The narrator and Janet are supposed to be living in pre-modern times, yet they have fax machines and must deal with modern corporate lingo. Even the customers don't buy into the pretence. One man asks them if they have call-waiting. Of course, Janet doesn't make the setup anymore believable with the way that she treats the visitors.

Most importantly, it might be hard to argue that the satire centers on how companies force their employees to create a narrative that supports the company's view. The company isn't forcing the narrator and Janet to perpetuate a view. While it's fair to say that they're being exploited, they are, nonetheless, paid to re-enact cave life. More so, Greg Nordstrom isn't forcing the narrator to say something that's not true about Janet. Janet does have performance issues. Saunders, very beautifully showcases the dominance of earning livelihood over the exploitation one has to face and to compromise with the ethics of the society.

In "Escape from Spiderhead," the narrator, Jeff is another social spectre, a convict involved in sexual and drug experiments, at the mercy of excessive "reformers" who pass off violent sadism as humanistic science. Though he has killed in the past, he refuses to inflict more suffering and in the end, he chooses to commit suicide by tricking his captors, and "escapes" as a spirit. The central theme is crime and punishment, and Saunders grabs hold of this theme and runs with it. He asks us to consider where punishment ends and inhumanity begins. He gives us the character of Ray Abnesti, a scientist developing pharmaceuticals and using convicted felons as guinea pigs as part of the justice. "Escape from Spiderhead" is a dystopian short story that portrays a controlled pharmacological environment in which scientists experimentally manipulate the desires and emotions of human subjects.

Saunders is best known for his satirical bite, but *Lincoln In The Bardo* is a deeper examination of life, explored through the dead, unable to move on for various reasons. If we talk about "Lincoln in the Bardo", a novel written entirely in textual citations, practically all of whose authors are now deceased, he's never written anything quite so poignant and moving as this story about death. There is certainly surreal humor, with Saunders bringing his signature flair for drama and heightened silliness to the small anecdotes of the characters who hover between this world and the next, be it in the trio of bachelors who gallivant amid the graveyard and jauntily throw hats around or the phrase "matter light blooming phenomenon" to describe the instant when individuals finally succumb to the pull of the next world, their shadows leaving the bardo forever. This is also a deeply moving story of accepting death. Tied to the cemetery they're buried in because of their regrets, the dead characters fixate on the lives they stopped living, in some cases centuries ago.

The novel opens with various partygoers' describing an extravagant event thrown at the White House while Willie Lincoln is upstairs, dying of typhoid. This narrative by way of historical snippets forms the state of Mary Todd Lincoln upon her son's death, but they mostly focus on Abraham Lincoln—his relationship with Willie, his grief, his preoccupation with the war, and connecting the loss of his child to that of parents around the country suffering the same loss because of the war. It serves to transform a historical figure into a real, breathing man, bowed down by grief and unable, for a night, to leave his son's final resting place.

Unlike other works, the story begins with a party and ends with a death. But this is no simple party. It is a state dinner at the White House, hosted by Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln — a lavish, decadent state dinner thrown in 1862, as the meat grinder of the Civil War is just beginning to churn.

And it's no simple death, because it is the death of the Lincolns' beloved young son Willie, of typhoid fever, at age 11. He lay sick upstairs while below, the party went on until dawn. It was thought, in that moment, on that night, that the boy would recover. His mother saved him candies from the elaborate dessert display — a chocolate fish plucked from a pond of spun sugar, a bee made from honey — and told him she would keep them until he was feeling better.

And then Willie dies. There is a funeral (glossed over) and an interment in a borrowed crypt in a Georgetown cemetery. Willie Lincoln's body goes into its box and the box goes into its hole in the wall.

"Bardo" means limbo, a liminal place, between worlds, between lives. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is the bodiless state that exists in the lag between one incarnation and the next, full of unquiet spirits tethered by ... guilt? By rage? By unfinished business, traditionally, or a simple unwillingness to move on.

During the telling of what happens to both Lincolns, the father and the son, in the bardo, the author introduces 166 characters. The major characters each have their own backstory and their own voice (parole). Some are tragic, others funny.

For example: “Roger Bevins”, was a printer before he died, and tended to overwork himself. To make up for that, in death, he is a spectre with many hands, eyes, arms and mouths, who frequently goes off on a rant about the beauty in the “previous place” that he never noticed when he was alive.

“Hans Vollman” was an ugly fellow with wooden teeth who married late in life and never consummated his marriage. Now he wanders the graveyard with a massive swollen member. Lincoln’s grief, even though he had another living son, Tad, was immense, by all accounts, and is on public record. He goes to the graveyard to hold his son in his arms one last time, and Willy “puts himself into” his father’s body and so can read his thoughts.

“We have loved each other well, dear Willie, but now, for reasons we cannot understand, that bond has been broken. But our bond can never be broken. As long as I live, you will always be with me, child.

Then let out a sob.

Dear Father crying that was hard to see And no matter how I patted & kissed & made to console, it did no

[...]

Then father touched his head to mine.

Dear boy, he said, I will come again, that is a promise.

Willie Lincoln”

Lincoln was a great man, and the loss of a child is a shattering blow to absorb—especially if you also happen to be a leader of conscience aware that your decisions will cost other parents their own sons. As for the ghosts themselves, they persist in a suspended state familiar to any reader of Samuel Beckett, a condition only slightly more existentially pointless than that occupied by the living. The subjects of loss and mortal regret are momentous ones, which probably explains why (to the browsing critic, at least) seemingly every other literary novel is about grief. Anyone can write a “serious” novel when they choose such serious themes, which is why, in addition to the great ones, so many mediocre writers with nothing especially interesting to say are drawn to them.

In “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” the majority of the protagonists lives in a state of perplexity and uncertainty about how to deal with the myriad hardships life in contemporary America bring their way. George Saunders’s *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* appeared in January of 1996. This collection, full of uncanny horror and hilarity felt apropos of everything we had been wanting: sailors who waltzed together after rescuing a suicidal corporate saboteur from drowning and a gang-besieged historical theme park torched for insurance money.

“I have a sense that God is unfair and preferentially punishes his weak, his dumb, his fat, his lazy. I believe he takes more pleasure in his perfect creatures, and cheers them on like a brainless dad as they run roughshod over the rest of us. He gives us a need for love, and no way to get any. He gives us a desire to be liked, and personal attributes that make us utterly unlikable. Having placed his flawed and needy children in a world of exacting specifications, he deducts the difference between what we have and what we need from our hearts and our self-esteem and our mental health.”

That year was the year that solidified the presence of home-grown all-American terror. There had been the Oklahoma City Bombing and then there was the Centennial Olympic Park bombing and the arrest of Ted Kaczynski. Before those, the police beating of Rodney King, the Los Angeles riots, and the O.J. Simpson trial. Waiting in the wings: Columbine, the impeachment of Bill Clinton, Travelocity, Amazon, and the unholy fusion of Carlos Santana and Rob Thomas. All of this, one can say, is circumstantial, and none of this means anything other than a lot happened back then, as a lot always happens no matter the time. Life in a Demented Theme Park. *CivilWarLand* depicts life in the U.S.A., and it certainly is in bad decline. The basic idea, repeated in most of these stories: we Americans are living not in a life, but in a huge, dystopian amusement park, where we fight to escape but remain wallowing in despair .

While reading George Saunders’ Short story collection, *In Persuasion Nation*, it is easy to see that Saunders is using literary fiction with a hint of science fiction to convey a central message in each of his short stories. Saunders offers us a glimpse into a possible sad and scary future. Saunders’ loony characters play a huge role in the final production of a meaningful message. The protagonist is often the most morally sound of the characters, so this gives the reader a closer connection with them. Another factor in determining the way Saunders’ message is conveyed is the ridiculous unpredictableness of the plot. While the reader understands the message it makes it seem less scary or serious when the moral of the story is coated with humour. The use of outlandish story elements show the use of science fiction in his stories, but each story serves an intricate subject and this fundamentally shows Saunders’ rhetorical meaning. The general message is the persuasion of people in an era of consumerism. What’s ironic is that this is a world where most people are not even aware that they are being persuaded, but are happily integrated into the dystopian environment. The setting Saunders gives us is set America and could be easily applied to our country or any country for that fact. Saunders is highly effective in his use of a dystopian setting, complex characters, and his character’s modest diction to accentuate the problems in today’s materialistic society.

Perhaps, in this way, Saunders is upholding fiction to its noblest purpose: to create a space for communion and understanding at a time when newsfeeds threaten to polarise the world beyond repair. “If I write a story, and you read it and you enjoy it, that’s actually kind of a profound thing,” he says.

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