



# A Comparative Study of George Saunders' Stories with special reference to optimism

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## Abstract :

American author George Saunders penned novels, short stories, essays, and children's books, and in 2006 he was the recipient of both a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His short-story collection "Tenth of December" (2013) was a finalist for the National Book Award, and his first novel, "Lincoln in the Bardo" (2017), won the Man Booker Prize. George Saunders is the author of eleven books. His short stories were collected in such books as "Civil War Land in Bad Decline" (1996), "Pastoralia" (2000), "In Persuasion Nation" (2006), and "Tenth of December" (2013) and many more. The "In Persuasion Nation" was one of three finalists for the 2006 STORY Prize for best short story collection of the year. Saunders is a second-generation postmodernist who, despite owing much to his contemporaries and predecessors, appears to offer contemporary American fiction a way out of its preoccupation with irony and solipsism. Satire in Saunders' stories represents a turn which affects both on and off the page—it is new, tender, and wholly empathetic to its characters and readers. However, due to Saunders' use of violence and restricted narrative points of view, there are complexities and complications in Saunders' morally-charged and emotional satire. While his hopeful satire is sincere in its evocation of empathy with others, Saunders restricts reader choice and reminds his readers of his authorial power by way of narrative point of view. After all, so many of his stories are about authority, and include acts of writing and speech making. In this respect, the reader (as much as Saunders himself) is implicated in and comes to experience the conditions of choice. Saunders writes about—conditions which often preclude real choice and empathetic consideration. Despite such complexities, Saunders' fiction offers a moral, sincere, and emotional challenge to the short stories of the late twentieth century. He is ingenious in the way he describes the thought processes of his characters with authenticity. This detailed and blunt description of the tumultuous strings of thought of the characters helps us understand the reason behind all their lives' pitfalls. We understand that self expression goes a long way in keeping one's sanity in the troubled and dark world created by Saunders. His writing style expresses optimism and fatalism in both the short stories to make his satire thoughtful. Class conflict is portrayed very directly in "Puppy" and "Home" and emerges as the dominant theme in the book's first story, "Victory Lap," which compels attention first of all as the story of a young woman abducted by a madman but rescued by a neighbour boy before she is killed. George Saunders, a writer with a particular inclination in modern America, carefully depicts the newly-emerged working class of America and its poor living condition in his literary works. By blending fact with fiction, Saunders intentionally chooses to expose the working class's

hardship, which greatly caused by poverty and illiteracy, through a satirical approach to criticize realistic contemporary situations. Finally, however, the thriller-tinged plot (which seems taken from a television crime drama) serves as a device to dramatize the distance that has grown between the young woman and her rescuer, once childhood friends, a distance exacerbated by the pretensions of class, Saunders is a writer whose work has the ambition of “saying something” about the state of American life and culture.

**Keywords :** Post modernist, contemporary American fiction, complexities, ingenious, pretensions.

## Introduction :

Many of George Saunders’s stories, including “Puppy,” were first published in *The New Yorker*, whose average reader is reported to earn almost double the average American income and is, according to its *Encyclopedic Britannica* entry, “sophisticated” and “well-educated,” and, as shown by a Pew Research Centre study, tends to be politically left-leaning. Given these characteristics, it seems safe to assume that Saunders’s original intended audience would naturally gravitate towards identification with Marie, whose social status is more like their own than is Callie’s. This tendency, one imagines, would only be reinforced by the superficial attributes and actions of each woman in the story—affluent Marie adheres to the socially engineered and applauded norms of consumerism, individualism, and liberal parenting, while social underdog Callie flies in the face of middle-class gentility by having a filthy house, a volatile husband, a less polished command of the English language, and a problematic child she keeps tied to a tree in her garden. Yet through his techniques of focalization and narrative distancing, Saunders commits what Jameson terms a “*socially symbolic act*”—underpinning his literature with a recognizably “*political perspective*” (17) that champions the working class, and creating a literary artefact that responds to the socio-political conditions of his own historical moment. The author deepens our understanding of Marie and Callie, evoking an unexpected emotional response in his readers, as he manipulates their sympathies in a way that in many cases will conflict with their initial class-related inclinations and (perhaps) lead them to reflect upon both their own socio-political prejudices and the society that has engendered them.

In the short story “Puppy” by George Saunders, the multiple characters view single events and objects with contrasting perceptions. Therefore, instead of painting a precise picture of the characters and the plot, the story expresses several views regarding the morals of the characters, the motivations of their actions, and the meaning of the events that take place.

*“Life will not necessarily always be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me” (41)..*

*Life can be transmutable, one day suffering and the next blossoming into something beautiful and splendid, difference amongst classes. Childhood and the influence once has, trying to control everything. Parents are just caretakers and kids are their “own little people” (Saunders 32).*

*Post-modernism because everything is transmutable-concept and jumps from different perspectives. Foil is another aspect between Marie and Callie and the dog and Callie’s son gives Marie flashbacks to her horrid child of not being properly cared for or “spoiled” in other terms.*

In “Puppy”, George Saunders explores the theory that perception is not an elementary, universal definition of an object or idea, but a complex interpretation that is influenced by one’s unique and varying past experiences and opinions. The complexity of perception is evident in one the story’s narrator’s, Marie’s, vantage point. Marie, who is a product of an abusive family, is influenced by her past, as she perceives the relationship between Callie and her son, Bo. Saunders writes, describing Marie’s childhood experiences,

*“At least she’d [Marie] never looked on of them [her children] in a closet while entertaining a literal gravedigger in the parlor” (174).*

Marie and Callie both value motherhood and the sale of the puppy. Yet, their beliefs towards these concepts vary greatly. These two women are symbolic to the differing perceptions of all human beings because no two individuals have identical experiences or values. George Saunders emphasizes through this story that perception is not a unanimously decided meaning of a concept because every individual's past inspires an exclusive outlook on life. These unique views are evident in the many distinctive preferences that individuals express. What makes one person excited may enrage someone else. How we see the world, other people, and ourselves is reliant on perception.

In "In Persuasion Nation," a community of commercial mascots mounts an insurgency against their corporate overlords. They include a woman who leaves her husband for a Twinkie and a teenager who is dismembered by his grandparents because he doesn't like Doritos. It is a collection of short stories, the first of which is titled, "I CAN SPEAK!"

"I CAN SPEAK!" is a story which a product, called I CAN SPEAK, is used by parents to amuse themselves with their children. The product is a mask which can be placed over a baby's face, and will translate what the baby said so that the parents can understand. Typically, the sentences it utters are amusing, bringing up the ethical problem of whether or not babies should be used for entertainment in this way.

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.

*There comes that phase in life when, tired of losing, you decide to stop losing, then continue losing. Then you decide to really stop losing, and continue losing. The losing goes on and on so long you begin to watch with curiosity, wondering how low you can go.*

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 humor. 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. In Saunders' short stories, Jon and My Flamboyant Grandson, the protagonists are well-developed characters that are easily relatable. My Flamboyant Grandson" is a story in which a grandfather takes his grandson to see an entertaining show. Seeing that the young boy had a talent for singing and dancing, he enrolls him in a class for such behaviour. However, the class is simply a gimmick, and doesn't really teach his grandson anything besides infusing him with media. The cover picture for this short story is often noted, as it is the CBS eye portrayed as a sun. The way Saunders separates the relation between reader and character is by placing them in the possible future.

*America, to me, should be shouting all the time, a bunch of shouting voices, most of them wrong, some of them nuts, but please, not just one droning glamorous reasonable voice.*

Because they live in an alternate universe these characters are also somewhat of an unreliable source for information; we cannot truly grasp what is happening in their minds. Saunders characterizes his protagonists as having better morals and a more clear thought process than the supporting characters

"Another of the short stories is titled "CommComm", which is short for Community Communications. This science fiction short story examines the extent of advertising and monetization of everything around us – in a laughable, unbelievable world. In this fictional world, everything that is marketed has been marketed, and such an extent of compounded marketing words have been made that practically nothing makes sense anymore.

George Saunders creates a dystopian world in his collection of short stories. 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.

*“A hip-looking teen watches an elderly woman hobble across the street on a walker.*

*“Grammy’s here!” he shouts.*

*He puts some MacAttack Mac&Cheese in the microwave and dons headphones and takes out a video game so he won’t be bored during the forty seconds it takes his lunch to cook. A truck comes around the corner and hits Grammy, sending her flying over the roof into the backyard, where luckily she lands on a trampoline. Unluckily, she bounces back over the roof, into the front yard, landing on a rosebush.”*

The setting Saunders gives us is set in 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. Saunders succinctly informs that audience on the issues, but the audience ultimately decides whether or not the issue will be solved. Saunders is only the messenger and the reader is the one who should act on his message.

It is not so hard to understand why readers and reviewers would find the fiction of George Saunders appealing. Although his stories are to first-time readers no doubt a little puzzling, requiring that we accommodate ourselves to their surrealistic settings and premises, ultimately they are puzzling in an entertaining way,

The stories of Saunders are often very funny, so that even if we remain uncertain how to interpret the narratives’ mutated reality, we can still enjoy their oddities, especially as conveyed through Saunders’s deadpan, understated style, which can assimilate the most stilted, bureaucratic jargon with the most colloquial, slang-ridden expressions, often in the same paragraph or even the same sentence. Reinforced by Saunders’s ability to mimic the inanities of American speech in dialogue, this adept orchestration of voices and language practices is frequently a source of pleasure in itself.

However much these particular stories depict characters facing extreme situations, they are otherwise describable as works of narrative realism. Even Saunders’s more radically surrealist stories do not really depart from the requisites of conventional storytelling, and in this his fiction is consistent with (probably one of the inspirations for) most of the neo-surrealist fiction that has become quite a noticeable development in recent American writing, for example in the work of Aimee Bender and Stacy Levine. If anything, this fiction observes the dictums of plot development even more scrupulously than traditional realism, as the freakish or oddball characters and absurdist events are chronicled in a strictly linear way, comprising appropriately rising actions and clear resolutions and generally satisfying any reader’s need for narrative. At the same time, claims are often made that this mode of fiction is nevertheless audacious and unconventional, claims based entirely on its defiance of the surface logic of ordinary reality. Thus the alternative posed to “realism” is a diametrical anti-realism that informs a story’s content but not its form. Saunders is himself probably the most accomplished of these new surrealists, but his stories only illustrate most prominently that such fiction derives its appeal from conjuring fanciful flights from reality related through familiar narrative strategies. That Saunders employs his vision of an altered reality at the satirical level to achieve the traditional goals of realism — to depict the way things are — could lead us to the conclusion that Saunders’s ambitions aren’t that far removed from those associated with the realist tradition — they might be seen as two sides of the same literary coin.

## References :

George Saunders, In Persuasion Nation

George Saunders, Puppy