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Living Lawn Ornaments: Middle Class Status Anxiety in George Saunders's "The Semplica Girl Diaries"

JOSEPH M. GORMAN

George Saunders's unique brand of satirical, speculative fiction has classically starred the fringe losers of society. His stories are populated with the downtrodden and disenfranchised, those who are chronically out of place or dismissed by the world. Like many writers in the satirical tradition of Swift or Vonnegut, Saunders has a particular eye for examining the social issues that plague humanity by using the absurd and fantastic to open avenues of contemplation and criticism. One of the main issues dealt with in many of his stories is classism and the consequences of living in a divided world. In a supplemental interview found in his most recent collection of stories titled *Tenth of December*, writer David Sedaris comments that "A lot of this book has to do with class in America," to which Saunders replies "I think it was

always my subject when writing at my highest level. Not by intention, but maybe by disposition" (257). I feel this is indeed true, and perhaps most pressing in the story "The Semplica Girl Diaries," originally published in *The New Yorker* in 2012. While the story is collected in 2013's *Tenth of December*, I am intrigued by the historical moment of the story's initial release—namely the wake of the 2007-2008 U.S. financial crisis. In an interview with Jacki Lyden of NPR, Saunders states that the story took 12 years to write after initially having the premise come to him in a dream ("George Saunders on Absurdism"). I propose that the 12-year writing process inadvertently situated Saunders's work in a specific moment that brought his story both gravity and urgency.

In a 2006 piece titled "The Middle Class Falls Back," economist Christian Weller concludes his examination of "stagnant incomes" and cost of living with the notion that "the middle class is increasingly anxious about its economic future, despite a growing economy" (37). The tragic irony of his conclusion lies in the ensuing financial crisis of 2008. During the years following the economic recession caused by the collapse of the housing market and unchecked corporate greed, the middle class of America found itself suffering even greater anxieties than Weller had suggested two years earlier. Increasing financial difficulties were marked by "the ever more distinct sorting of Americans into winners and losers, and the slow hollowing-out of the middle class" (Peck). The wealth gap between the elite of America and the middle and lower class remainder of America increased to a point where, as *The*

Atlantic deputy editor Don Peck writes, “class mobility will likely decrease in the future, and class divides may eventually grow beyond our ability to bridge them.” From the wreckage and despair of a recovering American economy emerged the “Occupy Wall Street” movement that saw protesters rallying against the wealthy elite of America. It is in the smoldering aftermath of “quite possibly the worst economic recession since the Great Depression” (Ellis 13) that Saunders’s story finds an unfortunately appropriate and frighteningly pertinent context.

Through “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” Saunders examines the American middle class’s anxieties about social mobility and status. His story spotlights an all too vast—and all too real—social group that lives in fear of falling victim to an ever widening wealth gap. I argue that Saunders’s story not only exposes class obsession in America, but also moves readers to consider their own biases and prejudices through carefully constructed narrative empathy and satiric elements. In crafting a piece told through the diary of a struggling father, Saunders lulls readers into an empathetic connection with the narrator and subsequently leads them to question the ethics of the narrator’s quest for social status. The creation of a relatable narrator proves problematic when judging his choices in light of the fact that society has impressed upon him a standard of life he is not capable of achieving. Given the time period of publication and the readership of *The New Yorker*, I suggest that Saunders’s story acts dually as an examination of America’s struggling families and as a reflective lens for those who consider themselves a part of the “super-

rior” upper class.

“The Semplica Girl Diaries” chronicles the seemingly typical life of a nameless lower middle class husband and father of three. Throughout the story, the narrator reveals his status anxiety and his desire to ascend to the upper class. After winning a relatively substantial sum of money, the narrator opts to erect a “Semplica Girls” display in his yard in order to please the wishes of his eldest daughter and validate his own sense of self-worth. The lavish and unsettling display is composed of women from poor countries who have sold themselves into the service of being strung together through their heads using “microlines” and raised into the air as a living decoration and signifier of wealth. When the narrator’s life seems to be in a promising upswing, his youngest daughter sets the women of the display free. He is then left to deal with pending legal fallout and a descent back into lower middle class malaise and melancholy.

The story is punctuated by the narrator’s growing social anxieties about the well-being of his family. It is in these revelatory moments that Saunders exposes the seemingly overpowering and detrimental effects of America’s obsession with social status. Early in the story, the narrator writes “When will I have sufficient leisure/wealth to sit on hay bale watching moon rise, while in luxurious mansion family sleeps? At that time, will have chance to reflect deeply on meaning of life etc., etc.” (Saunders 112). The narrator openly admits that he longs for wealth, and that in fact, this wealth will afford him the ability to live a more fulfilling life.

In essence, the narrator equates wealth with the capacity to be a better, more reflective person. He wishes to relieve himself of the daily stresses that draw his attention away from “deep” reflection. This luxury, at least in the narrator’s mind, is reserved for those in the elite upper class who are not burdened by financial woes. The irony of his desire to simply watch the moon—a cost-free experience—only further illuminates his misguided perceptions of status and happiness.

When discussing his family, the narrator tries to define their status as middle class rather than “poor” or “lower” class. This may be due in part to the idea that “The dominant images of poor people in the United States include negative beliefs about their characteristics, negative expectations about their behavior, and the attribution that their poverty is caused by their own failings” (Lott 102). After attending a birthday party thrown at the impressive home of an affluent family, the narrator drunkenly writes “Do not really like rich people, as they make us poor people feel dopey and inadequate. Not that we are poor. I would say we are middle. We are very very lucky. I know that. But still, it is not right that rich people make us middle people feel dopey and inadequate” (Saunders 118). With an air of uncertainty noted by his use of qualifying phrases such as “I would say,” the narrator distances himself from the idea of “us poor people” by redefining his family as “middle.” In a 2014 sociological study of social perception and social location, Sarah Irwin notes that “Some have argued that people actively distance themselves from classed identities, finding in ‘class’ a set of negative associations which themselves speak of

the moral degradation of class inequalities in modern society” (261). While Saunders’s narrator doesn’t entirely distance himself from class identity as Irwin may suggest, he does situate himself in a seemingly “safe” class identity—one that is not so easily disregarded or excluded by the social elite.

The narrator’s entire perception of status is directly defined by those to whom he compares his own life and wealth. In returning to Irwin’s study, she notes “people are aware they are situated in an unequal and hierarchical society. They are also very capable of providing nuanced accounts of how their circumstances compare with proximate others. Such comparisons may attenuate, or exacerbate, people’s feeling about their relative well-being” (271). This idea provides sociological grounding for the narrator’s observations and commentary about his own dissatisfaction with life. The previously noted “Very depressing birthday party at home of [daughter’s] friend Leslie Torrini” (Saunders 113) is rife with the “[comparison] with proximate others” that Irwin claims drives social location and perception of “well-being.” The narrator labels the party as “very depressing” because of his own growing sense of failure when touring the excessively opulent home. He notes the “Thirty acres, six outbuildings...one for Porsches... [a] trout-stocked stream, red Oriental bridge flown in from China..Picasso Autograph, Disney Autograph, dress Greta Garbo once wore” (Saunders 113) with both awe and wistful defeat. After offering an adoring first mention of an “SG arrangement” (Saunders 114), the narrator finds himself and his children atop a star gazing platform connected to the Torrini

house. He remarks “our kids sat watching stars fascinated, as if no stars in our neighborhood. What, I said, no stars in our neighborhood? No response. From anyone. Actually, stars there did seem brighter” (Saunders 117). To the narrator, life seems “brighter” when living the Torrini’s privileged lifestyle. His comparison to the upper class deflates his sense of self-worth, leaving him to wallow in the social anxiety that drives his future choice to spend money on the ultimate symbol of upper class status--a set of Semplica Girls.

In a further moment of despondency, the narrator writes about walking through a presumably upper class housing estate called Woodcliffe where “everything lavish” and there are “men my age reading in big chairs under orange affluent lights...beautiful flowerbeds...speedboats on lawns in moonlight” and, of course, “fifteen...SGs hanging silently, white smocks in moonlight. Breathtaking” (Saunders 120-121). The narrator asks himself “What are we doing wrong here?” (120), as if to suggest when compared to the residents of Woodcliffe, his life is one of worthlessness and failure. The narrator closes his diary entry with “Lord, give us more. Give us enough. Help us not fall behind peers. Help us not, that is, fall further behind peers. For kids’sake. Do not want them scarred by how far behind we are” (121-122). The scenes of the birthday party and the walk through Woodcliffe serve as the most forthright foundation for Saunders’s examination of middle class status anxieties. The narrator desperately fears “falling further” behind the elite, indicating his acceptance of financial failure and the possibility of what psychologist Bernice Lott describes as “insti-

tutional discrimination [which] punishes members of low-status groups by erecting barriers to full societal participation” (104). Through the narrator, Saunders highlights the American middle class’s obsession with “keeping up with the Joneses.” If such a lifestyle proves problematic, then *appearing* to keep up with the social elite must suffice—as in the case of the story. The narrator’s motivation may be benevolent enough: the desire to keep your family afloat in troubled times and to protect your children from being “scarred” by the realization of financial trouble is noble, if not sympathetic. However, his preoccupation with his absurdly wealthy friends exposes the way in which American society has become increasingly divided and defined by the wealth gap.

It is only when the narrator installs a set of Semplica Girls and redesigns his yard that he admits “Having so often seen similar configurations in yards of others more affluent, makes own yard seem suddenly affluent, you feel different about self, as if at last you are in step with peers and time in which living” (Saunders 133). The narrator goes so far as to write “Note to future generations: Happiness possible. And when happy, so much better than opposite, i.e., sad...I knew, but forgot. Got used to being slightly sad! Slightly sad, due to stress, due to worry vis-a-vis limitations” (Saunders 131). His anxieties are relieved only when he feels that others’ perceptions of his own economic status are on par with the social elite. Saunders’s narrator knows that “The gap between the excesses of the wealthy and the state of affairs for the middle class is causing Americans to reconsider their chances for realizing the

American Dream” (Ellis 15), and he will do what it takes to bridge the gap and move towards that dream. Ultimately, the family’s newfound status is sabotaged by their youngest daughter’s act of setting the SGs free. In a final diary entry, the narrator laments the loss and reflects back on a life of sacrifice for his family in writing “And after all that, look where we are. Is Unfortunate” (Saunders 166). For the narrator and the class of citizen he represents, a family, job, and house are not enough to warrant satisfaction in life. Happiness and self-worth are now measured by the class tier you inhabit. This proves to be a truth with grave consequences, as the anxieties that the narrator--and the middle class--feels give way to questionable measures of attaining the coveted status.

While the plot of the narrator wishing to breach upper class status for validation of his life exposes American Middle class anxieties, I believe Saunders’s story also works on a secondary level—a level aimed directly at exposing readers’ perceptions of superiority and social status. In writing the story as an epistolary narrative, Saunders confines reader perspective to the experiences of his nameless narrator. As a result, readers empathize with the plight of the working class father and are subsequently faced with a complicated judgment not only of the narrator, but of the American middle class whom he represents. The narrative choice proves effective as Suzanne Keen notes that the “use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states... [contribute] to empathetic experiences, opening readers’ minds to others, changing attitudes, and even pre-

disposing readers to altruism (213). Furthermore, in an analysis of a historical diary, Patricia Meyer Spacks writes “More even than novels, diaries-in-print invite one to enter intimately into another life... diaries can provide reassurance about the contours of shared humanity” (“Private Life” 608). While Spacks applies this notion to an actual diary, I feel it is also applicable to Saunders’s fictive use of the diary format. In being privy to the narrator’s intimate thoughts, his social anxieties and diminished sense of self become more real and relevant to the reader, thus creating an empathetic connection.

In the narrator’s opening diary entry, he writes “So goodnight future generations. Please know I was a person like you, I too breathed air and tensed legs while trying to sleep and, when writing with pencil, sometimes brought pencil to nose to smell” (110), indicating that he is no different from those who will someday “read” his diary. Saunders’s efforts to establish the narrator as a likable character, and more importantly, a relatable character, continue throughout the story. The narrator is a man who feels he must “do better” (Saunders 112) for his family. He is a man whose credit card gets declined at dinner and whose debt forces him to worry that his daughter(s) are “destined to be, not princess, but poor girl. Poorish girl” (Saunders 128). When he finally achieves upper class status—or at least the appearance of status—readers cannot help but share his relief and elation. The narrator’s sense of accomplishment, optimism, and self-worth are abundantly apparent through the shift in tone in the diary entries. However, it is here that Saunders’s use of satirical

elements—the SGs themselves—challenge the empathic connection between the narrator and readers.

While the narrator’s choice to install SGs certainly raises many ethical questions that warrant further analysis, I am specifically concerned with the readers’ reaction to the idea of literally suspending humans in air to signify wealth. This satirical element is not initially described in full detail. In fact, it is only hinted at through the narrator’s passing admiration. The full revelation of the display creates, as Patricia Meyer Spacks explains in an essay on satire, “uneasiness” (“Uneasiness” 144) in readers. For nearly half the story, Saunders moves readers to empathize with a man whose entire life is distilled to a daunting pursuit of social status dictated by society. The sudden introduction of absurdity and horror by way of the SGs challenges the reader’s emotional connection with the narrator. Upon realizing that the narrator is marveling at exploited women being hoisted up as a display of dehumanizing aesthetic pleasure, “the reader is left insecure, [and] unanchored” (Spacks, “Uneasiness” 144) from the previously empathetic character.

I suggest it is here that readers are faced with a dilemma of moral judgment: either condemn a man who disregards the dignity of other struggling humans to assuage his own status anxiety, or pity a man who is willing to disregard the dignity of others to assuage his own status anxiety. Spacks further observes that:

In the best satire [the writer] is likely to create level upon level of uneasiness; as our insight increases,

we see ever more sharply our own involvement in tangles which it is our responsibility to unravel. In the most powerful satire, too, uneasiness plays constantly against complacency: we identify the victims as others and feel our superiority, only to find ourselves trapped a moment later, impaled by the scorn we have comfortably leveled against the rest of the world. (“Uneasiness” 144)

This is exactly what Saunders accomplishes in the story. There are levels of uneasiness layered into the narrator’s obsession with class, his own feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, and ultimately, his ethically objectionable purchase of the SGs. In other words, “As our skepticism about the speaker’s values increases, we must question our own values” (Spacks, “Uneasiness” (146). Even as the narrator tries to rationalize the so called “opportunity” he is offering the women, readers must bear in mind that his motivation for both his purchase and rationalization lie with his overwhelming fear of being labeled as “poor” by others. *His* sense of status anxiety leads him down an obviously contemptible path. *The readers’* sense of “superiority” comes from the fact that they are not facing the dire circumstances described in the narrator’s diary. The story closes with the narrator contemplating the SGs’ escape in asking “What in the world was she seeking? What could she want so much, that would make her pull such a desperate stunt?” (Saunders 167)—a question that readers should be asking themselves about the narrator. As he comes to grips with the fact that he has exploited—in vain—other suffering people, readers too must come to grips with their own judgment of a

man who cannot see value beyond his own social status. In passing judgment on the narrator, readers situate themselves at the superior vantage of the social elite that fuels the narrator's obsession with the upper class.

Ultimately, Saunders is not demonizing or attacking the middle class through his story—he is critiquing the desperate times and circumstances they face. His careful examination of status anxiety paired with his use of narrative empathy and satire moves the story from “just merely [being] a kind of propagandistic preaching job” (“George Saunders on Absurdism”), to something more meaningful to the historic moment of its publication. Suzanne Keen observes:

The timing and the context of the reading experience matters...some novels may only activate the empathy of their first, immediate audience...Readers' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may enhance by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances, either in the moment of first publication or in later times, fortuitously anticipated or prophetically foreseen by the novelist. (214)

In considering Keen's theory, my argument looks not at whatever creative process Saunders employs, but at the events of the latter years of the story's completion. As I noted earlier, Saunders claims that the story took 12 years to complete. I feel that the 2008 financial crisis, marked at least in part by the displacement of middle and lower class Americans from their homes, provided a poignant moment in which Saun-

ders's story could affect readers. The state of the American economy from 2008 to 2012 allowed the story to become more pressing and—to be frank—more real than it might have been when he first conjured the idea in the early 2000s.

The audience to first experience the story was most likely *not* the middle class whom the story's narrator represents, but rather the social elite whom the narrator so desperately longs to join. According to the United States Census Bureau, the 2012 median household income was \$51,371. According to a 2012 study of magazine readership performed by the PEW research center, the average household income of readers of *The New Yorker* in 2012 was \$96,329 (Sasseen)—nearly double the United States average. The first time the story appeared in print, the demographic it reached was the upper class of America. It first reached those who very well may be amused or appalled by the narrator's life and choices—and justifiably so. After all, Saunders is a satiric writer who created a horrific version of the status symbol. However, these very readers are also those who are most in need of reflection upon the pressures bearing down on their less fortunate fellow Americans. Saunders's story offers the chance to realize that the narrator's morally despicable exploitation of the SGs is analogous to the exploitation of the lower class by the housing market. Both the fictional narrator and those real people who were most devastated by the financial crisis are not to be judged for their misguided attempts at social ascension—they are to be treated with sympathy and compassion.

In the previously mentioned interview with

David Sedaris, Saunders goes on to state “In the midst of crisis is where we get the true measure of a character, and thus some new feeling about human tendency” (258). While Saunders speaks of fiction in describing the “measure of character,” his words hold true for the consumers of his work. The crisis facing the narrator may be the crisis facing the middle class of America, but the consequences and entanglements of class anxiety and judgment cut a wide swath across the entire social hierarchy. In an article titled “Oppressing the Comfortable,” Saunders is quoted as saying “there is the really frightening leap, which is to say, that success equals virtue. If you’re successful, you must have more access to moral information than I have. And we do that all the time,” (Bahr) and I feel that this encapsulates one of the main effects of his story. In a moment in American history where the upper class could sit back and watch the fallout from the economic crisis, Saunders asks them to avoid perpetuating the skewed values that drive his narrator’s status anxiety. He asks them to suspend their judgment of those whose lives fell apart during the early years of the collapse, as they are victims of a fractured social system. Saunders begs the upper class of America not to leave the middle class behind, but to offer care and decency for those most in need. “The Semplica Girl Diaries” reminds readers that those who are struggling are, at their most fundamental level, human. They, much like the everyman narrator created by Saunders, deserve every right to happiness that the social elite are afforded by virtue of avoiding the crushing anxieties of exclusion and failure. Yes, the ideas of classism and judgment may be eternal, but Saunders’s timely publication of such a powerful examination of

America’s social classes is vital to our understanding of how to cope with disaster. The 2008 financial crisis will almost certainly continue to be studied and written about in the years of recovery our country still faces, but it is Saunders’s voice that reminds us of the humanity at stake in moving forward.

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