

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS IN GEORGE SAUNDERS STORIES PUPPY AND VICTORY LAP

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### ABSTRACT

George Saunders, The American writer, who has a collection of short stories, believes fiction could become a tool to motivate readers to be bold and act with purpose in these troubled times. He is anything but a newcomer. Saunders published his first short story with *The New Yorker* back in 1992, and his new stories have regularly debuted in the magazine's Fiction section ever since. Over the years, he has gained the reputation of being a "writer's writer," with authors like Tobias Wolff saying about Saunders: "He's been one of the luminous spots of our literature for the past 20 years." Saunders's fiction often focuses on the absurdity of consumerism, corporate culture, and the role of mass media. While many reviewers mention his writing's satirical tone, his work also raises moral and philosophical questions. The tragicomic element in his writing has earned Saunders comparisons to Kurt Vonnegut, whose work has inspired him. He has woven his stories so beautifully as the readers can easily connect themselves with the protagonist. As in the story 'Puppy', Marie is a mother who likes bringing home various animals. Her husband, Robert, just accepts the new guests. Her son, Josh, has a behavioural problem but he is distracted with a new video game. Callie is also a mother with a son, Bo, who is uncontrollable. She is selling a puppy so her husband, Jimmy, won't have to kill it. His writing is quirky, full of made-up food products like "Stars-n-flags" and "Small Cows" and the use of invented Proper Nouns. Saunders excels at creating strange metaphors and comparisons, and the tight economy of language he uses in his stories only makes each sentence hit harder. The stories 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.

**Keywords :** Absurdity, Tragicomic element, Bureaucratic jargon, Mutated reality

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will analyse two short stories of George Saunders: "Victory Lap" and "Puppy", and will develop our understanding towards Saunders style of writing. Saunders has beautifully portrayed the characters and very aptly conveyed a message of the sufferings and common problems of the people.

"Victory Lap" is a story about a young girl being taken by an older man who believes he can claim her as his. The boy next door comes to her rescue at the last moment. Saunders cleverly uses a twisted point of view to alter the cognitive and emotional response of the reader towards the characters of "Victory Lap". The story Victory Lap by George Saunders is ambiguous and has many unexpected twists. Through the characters' thoughts, it is revealed that who they appear to be isn't always who they turn out to be. The story starts off slightly confusing, as it begins in the mind of Alison Pope. The first few paragraphs suggest that the story is about a young girl pretending to be a princess, until her thoughts change to her dance recital, then to her family, and many other things. It then becomes clear that Alison Pope is a young, teenage girl who has a lot of thoughts running through her head at any moment in the day.

"Victory Lap" is the most naturalist story by George Saunders that I have come across. Nothing happens in the story that couldn't happen anywhere; there are none of the surprising post-modern social arrangements that make the stories in *Pastoralia* so quietly shocking. A boy watches from the deck of his house as the girl next door is dragged off to a van by a brute. After a spell of understandable dithering, the boy takes action, and things work out well — the brute gets what's coming to him, and then some.

All this surface ordinariness, however, is perceptible only in retrospect; looking back, we find that we can account for everything without having to resort to as-yet un-metastasized corporate growths for explanations. As a reading experiencing, the story is a parade of weirdness that approaches but never quite crosses over into surrealism. Make that two parades, one for the girl, Alison Pope, and one for the boy, Kyle Root. (The brute has neither a name nor a parade of personal weirdness that amounts to very much, although he does have some unlikely thoughts.) Alison and

Kyle are not so much weird in themselves as stuck in the essential weirdness of adolescence. Kyle's parents, who never appear but who are heard from quite a lot, are not so much weird as rational to an unusual degree. Alison's parents, in contrast, appear only in negative outline, as permissive vacancies. Neither child had siblings.

What's wonderful at heart is that these two teens confront reality poorly armed – Alison with a naïve “all's right with the world, I'll give the disadvantaged with open sores some vaseline and we'll all be fine” attitude, Kyle with the Rules that have been imposed on him. They have to fend for themselves when reality comes crashing through the protective layers their families have devised for them. And, bless their hearts, they do pretty well, considering. The not-meter reader doesn't fare so well (he too has his way of dealing with reality) but then again, he's the bad guy, so he's supposed to lose.

On the other hand in “Puppy” written by George Saunders, the characters face unstable family relationships, their roles in society creating many struggles and conflicts with not only each other but themselves. Written in a third-person point of view, “Puppy” a story switching from one character, Marie, a woman who faced poverty growing up, with a mother who left her in the snow after a school dance. But Marie grows up to marry a man of more money, having nicer things, becoming a mom of two kids Josh and Abbie. It then switches to the point of view of Callie, another woman who faces poverty but stays where she is at, because she has enabled herself to think she lives the life that is full of love, when that is surely not the case. Callie lives in an abusive marriage with her husband and struggles to raise her son, Bo, who seems to have mental issues.

A personal belief that many people have is that puppies are one of the most adorable creatures in the world. The young, energetic, playfulness of one can bring joy and love to people who are a fan of dogs. The story by George Saunders titled “puppy” brings to light the youthful nature of children and how they are like puppies needing understanding and guidance. On the adult side of the spectrum, adults may not always make the best decisions just like puppies when it comes to making choices about the people they love and having clear judgment. The story is set in the belief that we prioritize the people we love based on the conditions and choices that come with that person.

Marie has a loving family dynamic of spending time together playing games and having fun. Callie has a tougher outlook on life as she sees no wrong in teaching her children natural selection and pleasing her husband even though the relationship may not be perfect. Marie has more of a higher class outlook on life as on how she views Callie and her living situation and what she thinks about the puppy. Callie also seems content on sheltering her child in a yard or a small space because of his tenacity to run off however she also wants the children to experience what the world is really like. Marie uses Callie's family dynamic to teach her children the treatment others receive and what they have to endure. This is highlighted in the words Marie wants to say to the little boy

*“Life will not necessarily always be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me(pg.177)”.*

Marie is driving to Callie's house to purchase a puppy for her children, Josh and Abbie. Throughout the drive to Callie's, Marie is trying to connect with her children but they are not interested. Once Marie makes it to Callie's home, we can see how judgmental she is when she talks about the uncleanliness and disorganization. She decides against purchasing the puppy after seeing Bo, Callie's son, chained to a tree. When she refused to purchase the puppy, she sealed the fate of its death. Marie is a suburban wife, loving mother, and want what's best for her children. Throughout the period of her childhood, her mother was abusive. Her mother:

*“left [her] standing in the blizzard for 2 hours after a junior-high dance” (183), “locked [her] in the closet while she [entertained] a ditchdigger” (183),*

and told Marie,

*“[she wasn't] college material” (183).*

Because of this Marie does not want to be like her mother as a parent and is very permissive as a mother to Josh and Abbie. When Josh,

*“goose[s] her with his Gameboy” (182) and “swat[s] at her affectionately... knocked off her glasses” (183),*

she laughs it off versus disciplining him. She feels this shows that her children are,

*“well loved” (183).*

She would rather treat him as a friend rather than discipline them as a parent. Even in the car she describes the car ride, to get the puppy, as a,

*“super field trip” (185).*

Marie spoils her children, Abbie and Josh; Saunders shows this through indirect characterization of Abbie's demands for the puppy, “I love it, Mommy, I want it!” The other family in the story plays as a foil for this spoiled suburban family.

Callie being the mother of the rural family immediately shows how different her views on mothering is to Marie. Her thoughts on her mentally challenged son were,

*“Today he didn’t need the medication.”*

She obviously doesn’t have the same incentive to spoil her children, she doesn’t even have the incentive to give him needed medication, justified by the yard being “perfect”. We can make many assumption on Marie’s character based on her thoughts towards Callie and her family: “the filth, the mildew smell”, and, “as long as they just please kept their hands out of their mouth”. She is an exacting person, an obsessive neat freak, and very judgemental. While Callie foils Marie, she is also very similar in that they both share unequivocal love for their children. Despite her son Bo being challenged, Callie displays her feelings towards her son when he does certain things like wave at her from the yard, stare at flowers, and quietly play in the yard.

Like Marie, Callie is a mother of a strange child. Callie’s son has a habit of darting between cars on the interstate. Callie fears for her son’s safety so she makes his take medication, but it makes him grind his teeth and lose control of his body. Like Marie, Callie has a plethora of problems but she is tough and appears to be relatively happy.

Callie and Marie are similar but have different lifestyles. Marie loves bringing home new animals to surprise her husband while Callie has too many animals.

Consequently, Callie’s husband feels a need to kill the various animals because he grew up on a farm and understands the reality that the best way to get rid of animals is to kill them. This is what motivates Callie to post an ad in the paper to sell her dog ergo her husband won’t have to kill it. For Callie, a lot depends on whether or not Marie buys her dog.

So Marie arrives at Callie’s house and intends to purchase the dog. Everything is going smoothly until Marie looks out the window and sees Bo, Callie’s son, chained to a tree. It’s the funniest moment of the story. After seeing this boy chained to a tree, Marie assumes that this is child abuse. She flashbacks to her own painful upbringing and changes her mind about buying the dog. Little does she know that this boy is chained up for his own good. Its possible that this chain is keeping the boy alive but Marie sees it in a different light. Both women love their children but experience love in a different way. Marie can manipulate her son’s behaviour by getting him a video game but Callie’s situation is more difficult. Bo is a danger to himself when given free roam outdoors but hates being kept indoors. Callie’s solution is to chain him to a tree. This is how love exists in Callie’s world. Loving those around you for who they are and trying to make them realize their full potential. I believe this is the ultimate message of Saunders’ “Puppy”.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Thus, while stories such as these clearly enough have some satirical intent, they are in most cases just as clearly explicit moral fables, tales of overcoming the degrading and dehumanizing attitudes that appear to underlie the social order depicted in the stories. It seems likely that this quality in Saunders’s fiction also contributes to its appeal: the imaginative projections into the future come marked with palpable disapproval of the sorry state of affairs it has produced, but offer some hope that the human capacity to overcome cultural conditioning and make morally courageous decisions might still survive. This sort of provisional optimism does not color every story, but finally one can’t really call Saunders a gloomy writer, however much his fiction does illuminate the march of folly on which the human species, especially in America, seems to be proceedings.

“Victory Lap,” the first story in the collection, is told from three different points of view. Although there is a third-person narrator, the different sections are written in the voice of the character who has the current focus. The story is about the attempted abduction teenager, Alison Pope. The story opens with Alison fantasizing about being the centre of attention at a grand party in her honour. We get the sense that she lives a comfortable life, is coddled by her parents, believes herself to be a superior being—a modern princess. She does, however, have a moral conscious and in an innocent way, believes in the inherent goodness of people and her own noble intentions of doing good. These narratives intersect when Kyle decides to intervene and rescue Alison, defying the lessons his parents have hammered into him for his entire life. He throws a rock through the window of the van, disrupting the kidnapper’s plans. The story ends back with Alison’s perspective. She intervenes to prevent Kyle from killing the kidnapper.

## 3. REFERENCES

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