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GEORGE SAUNDERS : A POSTMODERN AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern literature is a form of literature that is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and which often thematises both historical and political issues.

Initially emerging from a mode of literary criticism, postmodernism developed in the mid-twentieth century as a rejection of modernism, and has been observed across many disciplines. Postmodernism is associated with the disciplines deconstruction and post-structuralism. Postmodernists are "sceptical of explanations which aims to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person". It considers "reality" to be a mental construct. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of unmediated reality or objectively-rational knowledge, asserting that all interpretations are contingent on the perspective from which they are made; claims to objective fact are dismissed as naïve realism.

George Saunders postmodern fiction serves as exemplar for early twenty first century Americas satire's new attention. By categories of age, output of work, and literary style, George Saunders occupies a liminal position among America's writers at the end of the twentieth century. His fiction is not believed to be part of the early postmoderns, such as Vonnegut, Pynchon, or DeLillo, but nor is he situated with contemporary younger writers such as Joshua Ferris, Karen Russell, or Jonathan Safran Foer. While Saunders' contemporaries, as a result of age, may be seen as Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Chuck Palahniuk, among others, his aesthetics—particularly his satire and insistence on writing short stories over novels—is less concerned with directly responding to postmodernism (such as Wallace sought to) than it is proposing a unique style of satire in the current era. As a result of this, there is a clear transition in Saunders' work from navigating the achievements of postmodernism—pastiche, blankness, sense of exhaustion, Irony, rejection of history, acute self-consciousness —with a renewal of sincerity and affect sometimes associated with post-postmodernism. For all its evasiveness as a term, postmodernism remains the best point of demarcation to survey the most significant aspects of American culture for the last seventy or so years. Furthermore, the need to at least explain postmodernism's connection to contemporary fiction is not to settle arguments of its worth or existence, but to convey a sense of the self-aware and literary-conscious environment the majority of writers, such as David Foster Wallace and George Saunders, were writing and responding to do.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Metafiction, Transition, Literary-Conscious Environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Absurdist fiction is a genre of literature that began in the 1950s and 1960s mainly in France and Germany as a result of post-war disillusionment. This is a specific time period in which gave birth to Postmodern literature and what that label entails. Postmodern literature is defined as literature written after World War II through the current day. Works of Postmodern literature reflect a society's social and/or political viewpoints, shown through realistic characters, connections to current events, and socioeconomic messages. The writers are looking for trends that illuminate societal strengths and weaknesses to remind society of lessons they should learn and questions they should ask. So when we think of Postmodern literature, we cannot simply look at a few themes or settings. Since society changes over time, so do the content and messages of this writing. It is from these real-life themes that we find the beginning of a new period of writing.

2. LITERATURE

Moving forward, we have Postmodern literature that is a form of literature characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and which often thematizes both historical and political issues. This style of experimental literature emerged strongly in the US in the 1960s through the writings of authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, Kathy Acker, and John Barth. (source) Postmodernists often challenge authorities, which has been seen as a symptom of the fact that this style of literature first emerged in the context of political tendencies in the 1960s.

The postmodern novel is by definition a radical experiment that emerges when a writer feels the customary tropes of fiction have been exhausted. For the postmodernist, the well-worn genre of the novel is insufficient and no longer capable of conveying the imagination of the writer or the magnitude of historical events.

Several critics agree that postmodern fiction is a product of the post-World War II period. At that time, many of the major modernist writers, such as Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, had died. Other writers, including William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, had ceased publishing innovative and experimental work. Critics also tend

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to concur that postmodernism is an extension of rather than a decisive break or deviation from modernism, the defining literary movement of the twentieth century.

Many different authors have been labelled postmodernist. These writers include Thomas Berger, Richard Brautigan, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Vladimir Nabokov, and Thomas Pynchon, Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, and Umberto Eco. Most critical discussion, however, focuses on American writers publishing since the late 1950's.

Like the modern novel, the postmodern novel is subversive; that is, it counters traditional notions of plot, narrative, chronology, and character development. Postmodern novels are often described as self-reflexive— that is, they center on the nature of fiction itself and are written as though fiction is independent of society, reality, and any realm outside itself. The origins of the "autonomous" postmodern novel can be found in the essays of early modernist writers such as Oscar Wilde, who argued against Aristotle's premise that art imitates life. On the contrary, Wilde contended that life imitates art.

Saunders is often considered a postmodern writer, an accidental side-effect of his efforts to push through the limitations of existing modes of expression. For a long time, he felt "very vulnerable around postmodernism" and stuck, in his reading, to Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dos Passos and Thomas Wolfe. "So then it was a long process of trying to not become a 1930s writer, when it was actually 1980." He didn't, at that point, set out to be postmodern. "My thing is to say: I want to do as much weirdness and experimentalism as is necessary to access the emotional core; no more, no less. It's not a fancy side-project." It's central to the project of making it real? "Exactly. Toby Wolff said all good writing is experimental by definition. If it's not experimental, it's just a museum piece."

There is a point in every George Saunders story when the scene he has meticulously created springs a leak, an anomaly just visible in the corner of the eye, and a sign of the terror about to rain down. In "Victory Lap", it is a man standing on a neighbour's doorstep. In "The Semplica-Girl Diaries", it is a seemingly innocent reference to a garden ornament. "For me," says Saunders,

"the game would be to assume a very intelligent reader who can extrapolate a lot from a little. And that's become my definition of art; to get that pitch just right, where I can put a hint on page three, and the reader's ears go up a bit, as opposed to dropping it all on the first page."

The period of poverty he went through in his 20s is the moral underlay to all this; it taught him, in a different way, to be lean and efficient and, if he didn't already, to regard the truisms of his country with a certain scepticism. He was unemployed when he returned from Indonesia, and "to come back and be a dope with a college degree who couldn't find work – to see what America feels like when that happens … it was short term, but I got enough to see. When you butt up against capitalism in that way, it leaves a scar that stays. Terry Eagleton says capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body and to get that experience first hand, I think you've got something to work with for the rest of your life." It is true of many writers, he says: "They may not have the facts, but if they've had any kind of encounter with the moral universe, that may be enough. That's it."

There's the ability to articulate a knowledge and there's the ability to enact it. And I was never that interested in the first. It's sort of a job hazard. You have to do it, and in teaching you do it. But the real reason I got into this is that I wanted to actually be able to do it. Be able to write a story. And there's whole tracts of knowledge in there that you can do without being able to articulate it."

When "CivilWarLand" first came out, there was a lot of talk about Saunders as a new, savage, satirical voice bursting onto the scene, though he'd been publishing the stories one at a time over eight years, writing them while making a living at a day job preparing technical reports for a company called the Radian Corporation, in Rochester. His stories are set in what might be described as a just slightly futuristic America or, maybe better, present-day America, where, because of the exigencies of capitalism, things have gotten a little weird. These initial stories often take place in theme parks gone to seed or soul-withering exurban office strips, but the stories themselves are overflowing with vitality; they are sometimes very dark but they are also very, very funny. The characters speak in a strange new language — a kind of heightened bureaucratese, or a passively received vernacular that is built around self-improvement clichés ("It made me livid and twice that night I had to step into a closet and perform my Hatred Abatement Breathing") — and this lends them the feeling of allegory, though they are something else too, that's harder to place. The book was published right around the same time as David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest," and it felt back then as if those two writers (and a handful of others) were busy establishing the new terms for contemporary American fiction.

George Saunders is primarily a short story writer who focuses on the struggles and deferred hopes of white workers caught in the absurdities of contemporary capitalist America. While his work, like Carver's, is minimalist in many respects – the terse dialogue, the elliptical interiority, the brief brushstroke setting descriptions – Saunders eschews Carver's gritty realism for a flamboyant comic absurdity that is equal parts Kurt Vonnegut and Monty Python, both of whom he has cited as influences. His stories can take place in quirkily conceived theme parks, futuristic suburban neighborhoods, sci-fi laboratories, or cock-eyed corporate motivational seminars. For all its whimsy and postmodern play, however, his work remains firmly grounded in an ethics of empathy and kindness. His fanciful settings, no matter how far-flung from the real, always point back to, and diagnose,

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contemporary discontent. Writer Junot Díaz observes, "There's no one who has a better eye for the absurd and dehumanizing parameters of our current culture of capital," adding that "the cool rigor" of Saunders's fiction is "counterbalanced" by the "capacious[ness of] his moral vision." Meanwhile, Joel Lovell, in a New York Times Magazine profile promoting Saunders's acclaimed 2013 story collection Tenth of December , defines that "moral vision" as a desire "to be as open as possible, all the time, to beauty and cruelty and stupid human infallibility and unexpected grace."

Saunders's fiction takes as its subject matter some of the worst excesses of American individualism and selfishness. Characters are depicted as trapped in their own neurotic, self-justifying monologues, unable to imagine a world in which they are not 'central to the universe'. As David Rando notes, Saunders peoples his stories with 'no-life lowlifes', forcing the reader to inhabit some of the most disaffected and marginalised members of the 'American working class'. Indeed, stories such as 'Puppy' and 'Winky' initially seek to distance the reader from its working-class protagonists. In 'Puppy', we first follow Marie, a mother who spoils her children with her husband's credit card and feels moral indignation at the sight of a boy. Marie swiftly assumes that the boy's 'white-trash' mother, Callie, is motivated by 'cruelty and ignorance', wishing to 'snatch this poor kid away so fast it would make that fat mother's thick head spin'. Likewise, in 'Winky', the reader is encouraged to denounce Neil Yaniky's mantra of selfish individualism: 'Now Is the Time for Me to Win!', which he justifies to himself under the shallow guise of 'love' for his sister, Winky. However, Saunders refuses to allow any single character to claim moral authority; Callie and Winky are also given an equal amount of internal focalisation through a free indirect style, giving the reader access to their moral motivations in the face of severe economic hardship. We learn that Bo suffers from a mental illness that requires him to be restrained; thus, Saunders presents the act as a form of compassion – it is Callie who loves him more than anyone else in the world'. As Layne Neeper argues, Saunders unsettles our habitual moral assumptions and challenges our capacity for empathising with 'the pathetic Other [who] expressly does not deserve our benevolent receptivity' by providing the reader with just 'enough knowledge of the character's psychological motivations' to 'understand, condemn' their actions.

In Lincoln in the Bardo, such an inability to empathise with another's radically opposed moral universe, exemplified in the fight between racist confederate Lieutenant Cecil Stone and former slave Elson Farwell, merely results in the two 'fight[ing] on into eternity'. Such irreconcilable disputes based on mutual misunderstandings find a contemporary parallel in the two 'separate ideological countries' of modern-day American politics, 'LeftLand' and 'RightLand'.Saunders provocatively suggests that this political (and personal) polarisation results from a failure of empathetic imagination; if we instead attempted to 'read the secret history of our enemies', we would 'find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility', thereby achieving an almost 'unimaginable alteration of our moral reality'.

The ghost story "Sea Oak" presents George Saunders at his most biting and also most tender. The story takes place in a housing development, Sea Oak, and centers around the unnamed narrator, his sister and cousin (Min and Jade, respectively), and their children, Troy and Mac.

However, the story takes a dramatic twist when Bernie dies of fright during a home robbery and returns from the grave as a swearing, smelly, violent woman. She also, however, returns with a plan. She is determined that the narrator, Min, and Jade will work to become successful and enable themselves to move out of dangerous Sea Oak.

"*Sea Oak's not safe. There's an ad hoc crack house in the laundry room and last week Min found some brass knuckles in the kiddie pool" (97).*

Bernie's family is shocked less by her return from the dead than by her change in personality. Formerly an optimist, Bernie has a new personality that is brash and brutally honest.

"You ever been in the grave? It sucks so bad! You regret all the things you never did. You little bitches are gonna have a very bad time in the grave unless you get on the stick, believe me!" (115).

In an age of television and film violence, it seems clear that Saunders's message is that the violence we either abhor or worship as a part of our daily routine has seeped into our lives and serves to identify us as a culture. Min and Jade are studying for their general equivalency diplomas (GEDs), but they spend more time watching shows called 'How My Child Died Violently' and 'The Worst That Could Happen',

"a half-hour of computer simulations of tragedies that never actually occurred but theoretically could" (107).

They are not content with their lifestyles, but they are too lazy to change their circumstances. The narrator shows promise, but he is forced to spend his nights stripping to earn money for the household.

The story's setting is a slum, and its plot largely that of a dead woman rotting in her former living room; the characters are all symbols of the overall negative attitude that pervades U.S. culture written in Saunders's trademark satirical style. Through all of this, however, the story ends with hope. The characters do move forward, and they do so of their own momentum. Saunders's suggestion that no one, no matter how dire the situation, is ever without a chance to change and become productive leaves the reader with a feeling that Bernie's optimism did not disappear with her death.

3. CONCLUSION

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In order to achieve real moral progress, perhaps one must move beyond a passive empathetic acceptance of evil, towards a revived human proclivity for hatred-inspired action, motivated by a highly subjective encounter with injustice. Yet, Saunders and makes clear that such actions must ultimately find their origins in the painful, ongoing process of empathetic identification; just as Havens and Lincoln find it 'hard' to inhabit each other's minds, we must be resolved to stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day we die, world without an end.

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