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The American't Dream: The Roles of Irony, Magic Realism and Empathy in George Saunders' Short Fiction “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”.

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Statement of Intellectual Honesty

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Title of Assignment: The American't Dream: The Roles of Irony, Magic Realism and Empathy in George Saunders' Short Fiction “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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Ysabella Pachano

18th June, 2025

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive."

— James Baldwin, *The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are.*

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Abstract

The American Dream, a long-established ideological construct rooted in the Declaration of Independence (1776), holds that American people can achieve upward mobility, equality and freedom through hard work. However, in the context of the late capitalism of the 21st century, this ideal has become increasingly elusive, yet it remains deeply ingrained in American culture. Its paradoxical nature, both aspirational and unattainable, has made it a recurring theme in contemporary literature.

In particular, the New Sincerity Movement engages with the disillusionment and existential struggles of individuals living in a postmodern world, often balancing irony and emotional depth. This TFG will focus on author George Saunders' two short stories, "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" and "The Semplica Girl Diaries," to determine the extent to which Saunders uses various forms of irony—situational, verbal, dramatic and cosmic— as well as elements of magical realism, such as ghosts, to subvert the American Dream and to foster empathy in the readers.

While previous researchers have explored situational irony in Saunders' critique of capitalism, for instance Bigler (2014) and Neeper (2016), fewer studies have examined the interplay of the various forms of irony with magic realism to dismantle contemporary exploitative beliefs such as the American Dream. Building on Suzanne Keen's concept of narrative empathy (2007) and Michael Basseler's study on empathy in Saunders' fiction (2017), this TFG aims to explore how empathy functions with irony's narrative effects, particularly, in relation to the ongoing debate about the limits of empathy in eliciting to prosocial responses.

More specifically, this TFG will argue that "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" and "The Semplica Girls" challenge the core tenets of the American Dream –equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—by exposing its contradictions through irony, magic realism, and empathy. Despite being set in dystopian worlds, these stories underscore the alienation, exploitation and violence inherent within the pursuit of commodified ideals in capitalist American society. To do so, I will employ Marxist Criticism, Narrative Theory and New Historicism and Cultural Criticism.

Keywords: irony, commodification, subversion, empathy, American Dream, New Sincerity, magical realism, capitalism, epiphany.

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Introduction

"The American Dream is surging —bigger and better than ever before. The American Dream is unstoppable, and our country is on the verge of a comeback the likes of which the world has never witnessed and perhaps will never witness again" (Trump), declared current U.S. President Donald Trump during a Joint Address to Congress on March 6th, 2025. This gilded statement illustrates how political rhetoric continues to feed the ideology of the American Dream, a vision that clearly contrasts with the realities faced by many Americans in the context of late capitalism. As linguist and political theorist Noam Chomsky states, "The dream persists, fostered by propaganda. You hear it in every political speech [..] you even hear it from people who are destroying the dream" (Chomsky, "A Note on the American Dream"). Chomsky characterises the American dream as a 21st-century myth, one that endures even as economic inequality in the U.S.A reaches unprecedented levels: the rich grow richer, and the middle class faces increasing precarity. Despite its economic unattainability and contradictory use in political rhetoric, the American Dream remains deeply embedded in contemporary American society.

The term "American Dream" was originally envisioned as a collective dream of equality, justice, and democracy by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931) (Wills), but it can be traced back to the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), which asserts that "all men are created equal" and endowed with unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet, during the Cold War, the term became associated with suburban affluence and material success as capitalist prosperity was promoted in the West as a counterpart to communist ideologies.

For its cultural force, the American Dream is continually questioned by contemporary literature, however not as a hopeful and constructive ideology but as a source of alienation, disillusionment, and exploitation. One prominent voice in this

discourse is author George Saunders, often aligned with the New Sincerity Movement, a cultural and artistic movement that aims to overcome cynical irony and sarcasm recurrent in postmodernism. David Foster Wallace, in his seminal essay *"E Unibus Pluram"* (1993), critiques postmodernist irony that, once subversive, has been "absorbed, emptied and redeployed" (184) by television and media rendering it cynical and oppressive. In this esssay, Wallace anticipates a new type of writer "who has the childish gall to actually endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions and U.S life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue" (Wallace 193). His call for a return to sincerity and emotional reflection reflects the literary mission that the New Sincerity embraces.

Writers linked to this movement —such as Wallace himself (regarded as a central figure) alongside Richard Powers, Michael Chabon, Zadie Smith, Dave Eggers, and George Saunders— engage with human experiences (or in Wallace's words, "the old untrendy human troubles" (193)) with a sense of narrative purpose, emotional vulnerability, and earnestness. Their work seeks to move beyond the detached, ironical tone and rejection of sentimentality typical of postmodernism.

Broadly speaking, irony is "saying the opposite of what you mean, or inviting an interpretation different from the surface meaning of your words" (Lodge 179). Claire Colebrook, in her book *Irony*, further categorizes irony into four main types: situational irony, in which human understanding is undercut by forces beyond one's control; verbal irony, in which an utterance's meaning extends beyond it literal interpretation; dramatic irony, when a character's and the audience's points of view fail to correspond; and cosmic irony, when the outcomes starkly contrast with the characters' intentions or expectations (13-17). Colebrook's findings complement Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), a foundational study that distinguishes between stable and unstable irony: the former is

intentional and readily inferred by the audience, while the latter remains ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations.

Furthermore, irony became a prominent rhetorical mode in postmodern literature to challenge the deceptive narratives that shaped postwar America[1] (Peyton 4). While New Sincerity authors acknowledge the rampancy of irony, their relationship with it is complex. As Bolaño Quintero (2022) notes, Wallace's view on irony is nuanced. While Wallace rejects institutionalized irony for its nihilistic effects, he believes the nature of irony is meant to "reveal the unpleasant reality hidden" (McCaffery in Quintero Bolaño 38). This use of irony is referred to by Konstantinou as "post-irony", where irony is viewed "as a necessary phase of critical or artistic practice whose lessons must never be forgotten" (8). New Sincerity thus emerged in the late 20th century as a cultural discourse reacting to irony in postmodernism while still recognizing its significance (Sokolov and Shabrova 192). Furthermore, Konstantinou expands on the New Sincerity movement contending that although it accepts the legacy of postmodernism—the realization that language is malleable, thus, incapable of providing transparent communication—it does not succumb to cynicism but instead insists on aiming to express emotions in a sincere and trustworthy manner (175). This makes New Sincerity a movement concerned not only with critiquing social issues but also with aspiring to restore trust in human language and relationships.

Notably, this combination of sincere human emotions with self-consciously antirealist plots and estranging literary devices (such as surrealism, magical realism, metafiction) becomes the widely celebrated idiosyncrasy of the New Sincerity aesthetic (Smith 186). Saunders exemplifies this style, as he shares the movement's commitment

[1]As the "long sixties" progressed (Gladstone et al. 60), the narratives that had sustained idealized versions of the American identity after WWII —such as national unity, exceptionalism, social equality, and boundless prosperity— became increasingly challenged by the reality of the Cold War period, including the Vietnam War, civil rights movements, second-wave feminism, and growing distrust in the institutions.

to emotional vulnerability. His work is marked by a distinctive use of dark humour, satire, and magical realism, which he uses to explore sincerity in contexts of systemic absurdity and violence.

The role of magical realism in the New Sincerity movement is one of emotional anchoring. This literary device is defined by Lodge as the presence of "marvellous and impossible events in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative" (Lodge 114). Saunders, like other authors associated with the movement, often uses magical realism to amplify real social tensions, such as precarity, violence, and exploitation, thereby creating emotional resonance and ethical inquiry. His use aligns with that of Dana Del George, who contends that magical realism can function as a "literature of replenishment", a term coined by John Barth to describe literature that transcends binary divisions and offers an escape route from the excessive ironic detachment of postmodernism (127).

She expands on the power of magical realism to reconnect with readers, noting that it "harnesses the wonders of premodern cultures and the wonders of childhood, and it conveys authentic feeling even in artificial circumstances" (122). Moreover, Del George argues that Saunders' use of magical realism and "empathetic storytelling" within the short story format "amplifies the heartbeat of the poor and powerless" (122) foregrounding a central concern of the New Sincerity movement: empathy.

Benjamin Peyton elaborates on Wallace's call for a sincere engagement with narrative, one "that grants basic human respect to the characters and their struggles...[allowing] the reader to forge empathic bonds with [them], thus closing the emotional distance that an ironic tone would create" (18). For Wallace, the power of narrative empathy lies in its capacity to facilitate connection: "we become less alone inside" (Wallace as cited in Peyton 22).

Nevertheless, the New Sincerity movement does not frame empathy as a simplistic solution. As Basseler argues, Saunders' narrative empathy motivates readers to reflect on their emotional responses to the stories of others (155), while remaining "fully aware of the ethical limits of interpersonal understanding" (168).

The main objective of this TFG is to explore how Saunders combines irony and magical realism in his prose, not only to subvert the core tenets of the American Dream but also to expose the emotional and social consequences of striving toward an increasingly unattainable ideal in today's America. High wealth inequality and class stagnation have created an environment that undermines the promises of the American Dream (Gelrud Shiro *et al.* 22). Focusing on two of Saunders' short stories, "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" (1996) and "The Semplica Girl Diaries" (2012), this paper will examine how Saunders dismantles the ideological promises of equality, liberty, and happiness by portraying characters who are alienated, exploited, and emotionally fractured. In both stories, Saunders blends different types of irony—situational, verbal, dramatic, and cosmic—to subvert the foundational tenets of the American Dream, but he also uses these forms of irony alongside elements of magical realismto enhance his dystopian portrayal of contemporary capitalist American society. While he engages in biting social commentary, Saunders also strives for earnestness, inviting readers to engage empathetically with the characters' pain and moral dilemmas. However, aligning with the New Sincerity Movement, Saunders presents empathy as a complex and potentially insufficient response to systemic injustice. Through moments of emotional epiphanies, both stories raise uncomfortable questions about the limits of empathy as a viable ethical alternative for social change. Thereby, Saunders not only critiques the failures of the American Dream but also questions the viability of human connection within a society contaminated by emotional performativity and exploitation.

This TFG is structured into three main sections followed by a conclusion. The first section focuses on "The Semplica Girl Diaries." I will explore Saunders' use of irony and magical realism to critique the American Dream and build my analysis around three key aspects: the unreliable narrator with dubious aspirations; the surreal presence of the Semplica Girls, which functions as a magical realist device exposing the dehumanization of marginalized bodies; and moments of resistance, even if limited, that challenge the status quo. Then I will turn to section two, in which I will analyse "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline", where the same narrative strategies are used to expose the emotional and ethical failures of capitalist corporate world and the imposibility to reach the American Dream under such circumstances. This section will explore the narrator's emotional detachment and exploitation; the use of ghosts as a magical realist element to embody historical trauma and violence; and the protagonist's complicity in systemic violence despite fleeting desires for moral action. The third section will offer a reading of both stories' endings through the lens of empathy, interrogating its function within unjust worlds. The dissertation will conclude by reflecting on how Saunders' fiction aims for self-reflection and emotional expression while still being critical of the contradictory American values.

This analysis draws on Marxist Criticism, Narrative Theory, and New Historicism to evaluate Saunders' narrative style and to contextualize his stories within contemporary American society and its historical relationship with the American Dream. While previous scholarship has addressed Saunders' critique of capitalism in dystopian settings, fewer studies have examined the interaction between situational, verbal, dramatic, and cosmic irony and elements of magical realism, or explore the ethical implications of empathy in his work. Furthermore, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarly research on the New Sincerity movement by analyzing how irony and sincerity coexist in

Saunders' fiction, functioning as a response to both postmodern cynicism and the broader socio-political disillusionment that defines the 21st century .

"WHAT IF I AM YOUR DAUHTER"[2]: Irony and The Surreal in "The Semplica Girl Diaries".

"The Semplica Girl Diaries" was first published in the 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* and later compiled in Saunders' acclaimed short story collection *Tenth of December* (2013) publised by Random House. Shortly after, the collection won the Story Prize and the inaugural Folio Prize. It was also included in *The New York Times Book Review*'s 10 Best Books of 2013, earning Saunders critical praise and securing his place as a powerful presence in American contemporary literature. "The Semplica Girl Diaries" offers a sharp satirical portrayal of structural inequality, familial love, social aspiration, and moral blindnes. It is an exemplary work on the intersection of irony, magical realism and empathy within the New Sincerity Movement.

"The Semplica Girl Diaries" is structured as a diary, with an autodiegetic narrator: a struggling father who decides to document his life for "future generations" (Saunders, 79). The diary format is sustained throughout, confining the narrative to his limited perspective and exposing his volatile and self-contradictory reflections. The story follows the narrator's life and his efforts toward upward mobility as he strives to offer a better life to his family. After winning a large amount of money in a scratch-off coupon, rather than using the funds to pay off debts, he decides to spend it on arranging four Semplica Girls as a birthday gift for his eldest daughter, Lilly. The Semplica Girls (SGs) are immigrant women from impoverished backgrounds who are recruited to serve as lawn ornaments in affluent households. To do so, they must undergo surgery in which a microline is implanted through their temples, which allows them to remain strung together while suspended. The arrangement of the SGS serves as a status and wealth symbol in this dystopian society.

[2] The phrase *"WHAT IF I AM YOUR DAUHTER"* is quoted exactly as it appears in George Saunders' *Tenth of December*, including capitalization and the misspelling of *daughter.*

The narrator, encouraged by competitive consumerism, perceives the SGs as dazzling angelic figures without fully grasping the violent exploitation, objectification, and commodification of their lives and bodies. This treatment of the SGs echoes Karl Marx's concept of "alienation as objetification". By conforming and contributing to this common practice, he believes he is advancing socially and economically; however, fate intervenes when his morally troubled youngest daughter, Eva, releases the SG as an act of resistance and empathy, leading the family to face legal and economic repercussions.

This chapter follows a layered, interwoven reading of "The Semplica Girl Diaries" to trace how Saunders blends irony, magical realism, and narrative empathy to expose the contradictions of the ideology of the American Dream. The discussion begins by tracing the foundations of America as a land of promises, intertwined with the use of dramatic irony in the story, which emerges through the diary format and unrealiable narration. From there, the analysis gradually explores the role of magical realism, where surreal elements literalize the objectification and commodification of human life and offer a different moral angle on social mobility. These literary devices reinforce situational and verbal irony, revealing the dissonance between the narrator's intentions and the consequences of his actions. Finally, cosmic irony underscores the story's moral conflict by confronting the reader with the futility of ethics in an unjust system. This section also highlights the emotional and political implications of the characters' complicity, privilege, and aspiration. A gendered reading further reveals that, like the narrator, the Semplica Girls aspire to economic stability, but as immigrant women, they are excluded from the dream and reduced instead to symbols of success for others. Notably, Saunders explores the tension between complicity and aspirations, inviting readers to confront the moral cost of capitalist ideologies and reflect on whether empathy can, however sincere, offer a meaningful response to structural inequality.

The American Dream is a foundational ideology in American society. Its origins can be traced back to the formation of the nation itself. Peter Müller argues that as early as the 16th century, America symbolized a land of promise for European settlers withdrawn from the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation. Protestants envisioned a new earthly paradise, and the New World seemed to offer the ideal space in which to realise it, shaping America's development with the belief that it "was the place to consciously create a new order based on ideal philosophical, religious, political, and economical principles, unspoiled by history" (19). This vision established the mythos of the American Dream, placing it between idealism and the realities of structural inequality.

It is at this moment in time that the belief of "America as an innocent and pastoral country" (Müller 19) emerges, marking the first foundational element of the construction of the American Dream: the image of an Edenic America. Drawing on Peter Freese, Müller explains how Europeans held a "mythic projection of America as a land of milk and honey and an El Dorado in which the Fountain of Youth bubbled forth in a pastoral landscape" (Freese, as cited in Müller 20).

This idealized vision of America as an Edenic, pastoral paradise is subverted in George Saunders' "The Semplica Girl Diaries" by creating a dystopian society that effectively reflects real-world problems. In the story, the narrator aspires to cultivate an idyllic garden to evoke upward mobility and social status within his society. However, the garden's beauty is built upon the exploitation and objectification of immigrant women. In this sense, Saunders exposes how the mythic image of an innocent and abundant America masks systemic inequality as he transforms the pastoral garden from a symbol of purity into one of complicity and unethical practice. The SGs, suspended as decorative status symbols, embody the hidden violence and commodification that underpin the American Dream. Karl Marx, in *Early Writings,* develops the notion of

alineation as objetification, contending that under capitalist wage labour, the labourer "objectifies and alienates his own 'essense'" producing commodities that are "the objectification of human subjectivity itself" (Marx 50). The SGs materialise alienated labour in which their subjectivity is commodified to serve the aspirations of upper-middle class. What the narrator perceives as a beautiful marker of success is, in fact, the transformation of human essence into an object. The SGs become objects owned and controlled by others, both physically, through the microline, and symbolically through their estrangement from their own personhood.

Undeniably, the illusion of liberty stands at the heart of "The Semplica Girl Diaries". In the story, liberty is commodified, available only to the wealthy, rather than upheld as a universal human right. The SGs are deprived of their freedom and transformed into luxurious items, underscoring how liberty is commodified under a capitalist system.

The narrator's unreliability is established from the beginning, as he misses diary entries almost immediately: "Oops, missed a day. Things [are] hectic" (80). The tone is casual and inconsistent; such stylistic choice invites readers to question his reliability and to actively read between the lines. In this way, Saunders aims to dismantle the reader's trust in aspirational narratives. Related to this idea, Richard Lee comments on the narrator's syntax:

> The syntax—choppy, paratactic, and telegraphic—signals indeterminacy and gaps about how the world works, about character awareness of work and the consumerism that flows from it. Readers fill in their own gaps, of course, but here is a signal of false consciousness and the need to choose. (78)

The narrator's syntax reflects his failure to articulate the exploitative system he participates in. Saunders uses form to expose the narrator's false consciousness and the hollowness of the aspirational narrative he tries to maintain encouraging the readers to engage critically with the narrator's reflections. This narrative technique allows Saunders to use dramatic irony to expose the gap between the narrator's perception and the

economic and moral reality of his actions. In *The Rethoric of Fiction*, Booth discusses the effects of narrative distance and unreliable narration on readers' engagement and judgement. He emphasises "the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator." (Booth 158) Saunders, by means of this narrative distance, guides the reader to take a critical stance, transforming the narrator's limited perspective into a broader social critique.

Instances of dramatic irony appear early in the story. In a scene, after strolling through the affluent neighborhood of Woodcliffe, where "everything [is] lavish" with "200 yards of perfect grass" (87) the narrator encounters "fifteen SGs hanging silently, white smocks in moonlight. Breathtaking" (87). Here, the narrator gazes at the SGs in awe, unaware of the irony embedded in his words. Saunders constructs this voice deliberately to invite the reader's critical distance, aligning with Booth's notion of "stable irony"—where the reader and author share an implicit understanding where the narrator's obliviousness of the SGs' suffering contrasts with the reader's awareness of their exploitation. The contrast creates dramatic irony, which arises when a character's words carry one meaning for the character but a different, often contradictory, one for the audience (Zhang 10). As Ronggen Zhang explains, dramatic irony is achieved through textual elements that emphasize the disparity in awareness between the character and the audience (10). In this passage, the narrator's limited perception blinds him to the exploitation embedded in the SGs' conditions, while the reader easily perceives the disturbing reality.

This binary understanding —implicit understanding between reader and author— reinforces Booth's notion of stable irony, which is intentional, covert, fixed, and finite (Booth 5-6). The effectiveness of stable irony depends on common conventions and

shared contexts (Colebrook 44). As Booth asserts, irony "cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns" (13). Thus, when irony succeeds it "reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds" (Booth 13), which runs counter to the postmodern idea that individuals are locked into solipsistic experiences. In this way, irony works by appealing to the reader's emotions, uniting reader and author through these common conventions, and creating intimacy and critical empathy between them that is central to Saunders' political project.

Saunders' irony effectively criticises a capitalist society where liberty is a commodity gained at the expense of others' labour and, simultaneously, liberty is a privilege only wealth can provide. This critique is further reinforced by the narrator's romanticisation of the SGs' presence: "Makes one think of ancient times and affluent men of those times building great gardens, roaming through while holding forth on philosophy, bounty of earth, having been lassoed for the pleasure" (87).

The narrator admires the SGs because they embody a marker of social and economic success. He believes upward mobility will grant him privilege, power, status, and an idealized form of freedom, transforming him —and anyone who possesses wealth— into a counterpart to these aristocratic men. Saunders uses this romanticized image to criticize the narrator's unawareness of the exploitative systems that sustain his dreams while also foreshadowing how his pursuit of wealth and happiness does not free him but rather deepens his entrapment within capitalism's oppressive structures while simultaneously alienating his capacity to feel.

The narrator's emotional alienation is illustrated by the surrealness of the SGs. Due to the suspended pose the SGs must mantain, he continues to perceive them as

ornaments, not real human beings, as described in the scene when he finally acquires the arrangement:

> Effect [is] amazing. Having so often seen similar configuration 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 [you are] living. (96)

This passage reveals the power of status symbols: the narrator's home looks richer, thus he feels richer and better about himself as a person. He is incapable of considering the SGs' feelings, as the focus is solely on the aspirational appearance. This shift in perception illustrates how the American Dream operates as performance, often at the expense of those rendered invisible by the system. Joseph M. Gorman states that the narrator's preoccupation with catching up economically with his peers "exposes the way in which American society has become increasingly divided and defined by the wealth gap" (52). While his motivations may rise from fatherly protection towards his children's experiences, his anxieties only dissipate when "he feels that others' perceptions of his own economic status are on par with the social elite" (Gorman 52). In this manner, capitalism takes advantage of individuals' desire to fit in and exploits them emotionally to ensure their participation in systemic injustices. Saunders exposes the dream's dehumanizing underside by using magical realism to illustrate the human cost of social mobility.

Magical realism channels the tension between liberty and privilege in capitalism. The SGs are described as "hanging" (87) and "three feet off ground… swaying in light breeze" (96), evoking a sense of freedom, yet they are attached and interconnected through a microline lasered to their brains, hindering their movement and spatial control. When the family installs their own SGs, the narrator observes as the SGs get in placement: "holding microline slack in hands, like mountain climbers holding rope. Only no mountain (!)" (95). Here, the narrator's wit masks deeper ethical contradictions and distances him from uncomfortable truths, for instance how the SGs holding the microline

evoke the image of manacles or slave chains. The microline, an element of magical realism, represents literal bondage, underscoring how under capitalism the image of liberty is repurposed as spectacle. In this manner, Saunders effectively intertwines magic with irony to amplify the capitalist society's emotional alienation from the reality of marginalized social groups.

Furthermore, Del George contends that Saunders creates the perfect example of a contemporary author implementing magical realism, which is "a postmodern form of the fairy tale" (625), to resuscitate its inherent sense of justice and give voice to the unfortunate, those who "have been drowned out by modern history" (627). She contends that magical realists bring to the readers' attention "endangered wisdom" (627), namely compassion.

Compassion plays a crucial part in the narrative, especially through Eva's action, when she liberates the SGs. Eva offers a moral antithesis that constrasts with the narrator's benightedness. Early in the story, Eva expresses her discontent with the SGs display, to which her parents answer convincingly: "Pam: Where they're from, the opportunities are not so good. Me: It helps them take care of the people they love" (97). In this passage, the adults rationalize oppression by minimizing the SGs' suffering while young Eva is the voice of morale. Clearly, the parents internalize capitalist ideology and justify it, believing they are helping the SGs, while in fact they are perpetuating a systemic exploitation.

This self-justification is further deepened when Saunders uses situational irony. Rather than appreciating Eva's empathy and morality, the narrator appears exasperated by her ethical values: "Eva seems to have somehow gotten the idea that sensitivity = effective way to get attention … this tendency to object on principle starting to feel a bit precious" (101). Here, the expected nurturing and ethical fatherly response is replaced by

the narrator justifying the oppressing system to Eva, as he explains, “SGs have lived very different lives from us. Their lives [are] brutal... What looks scary/unpleasant to us may not be so scary/unpleasant to them, i.e they have seen worse” (103). This demonstrates the narrator’s false consciousness, which is defined as a misperception of social reality and human interactions produced from living under capitalism (Eyerman, 49). In his distorted perception, the narrator believes that the SGs’ unequal situation is only natural due to their cultural origins, implying that the system is fair for every individual regardless of their conditions. Instead of recognising that their situation is a product of global inequality, the narrator believes that hiring them is a charitable action.

In this context, Saunders’ use of an unreliable narrator assists in intensifying the social alienation under capitalism, by which “human beings come to see their relations with other people and people as such as instruments to ends that become harder and harder to identify” (Eyerman, 49). With this, the narrator once more renders the SGs as instruments to upward mobility rather than human beings denied of their freedom and commodified for the wealthy’s entertainment. As Richard Lee notes, the narrator “fears awareness or is oblivious to his complicity in a cycle, as a disconnected cog” (78) because his detachment is what allows him to keep chasing the dream. Thus, the narrator’s moral blindness fuctions as a tool for Saunders’ critique on false consciousness and ideologies encouraged by capitalism. False consciousness maintains individuals as “sleepwalkers through life” (Gronert Ellerhoff 202) perpetuating systemic injustice while chasing the American Dream.

Saunders also exposes how the American Dream is gendered and racialized, privileging white, upper or middle class men while exploiting women, particularly poor, racialized women. Drawing on Honschild, Hollie Adams argues that the first tenet of the American Dream, in which “anyone regardless of background or identity may achieve

success" (6), has historically excluded women, empoverished men and racialized groups, limiting them to "a narrow range of electable futures" (6). In the story, the nationalities of the SGs turn their identities into marketing details: "Laotian Tami...Moldovan Gwen… Somali Lisa...Filipina Betty" (97). Their cultural backgrounds not only serve as exoticized symbols of global inequality but also they mirror the gendered and racialized dynamics of the American Dream. Like the narrator, the SGs also seek economic stability and a better future, however, unlike him, their gender, race, and immigrant status place them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Undeniably, women in this position are often dehumanized and marketed as passive in capitalist societies. Their only access to the American Dream is through self-sacrifice and exploitation, performing suffering and passivity for the comfort of others. Hence, the surrealism in SGs working as lawn ornaments allows Saunders to critique the patriarchal structures that render these women's suffering invisible, as the SGs hang, silent and restricted, in the narrator's yard.

Furthermore, by depriving the SGs of voice and internal worlds, Saunders also further emphasizes the cultural marginalization behind these practices. The narrator's observation tha they are "[mumbling] foreign phrases…in [their] own lingo" (87), reflects not only the real-world cultural discourse, but also underscores linguistic and cultural marginalization. Basseler argues that the commodification of the SGs as lawn decorative ornaments is "only a slight intensification of what is already happening in global capitalism's exploitation of labor force, particularly in countries of the Global South" (6). Eva, who as a child "has not yet fully internalized this narrative" (Basseler, 6) —namely, capitalist ideology—refuses to be a part of this practice and her response is dominated by empathy. She protests in her drawings on behalf of the SGs: "OUCH THIS SURE

HERTS[3]" and "WHAT IF I AM YOUR DAUHTER[4]" (102). This act is significant as Eva attempts to give voice to the women, humanizing them and acknowledging the suffering her parents seem to ignore.

To further complicate matters, the narrator seems to momentarily recognize the oppressive nature of the practice, though it soon reveals itself to be verbal irony; a rethorical speech aiming at the opposite meaning of words (Chen in Zhang, 9). In a scene where the narrator takes Evaaround town and shows her an eight-SG arrangement, "holding hands, nice (paper-doll) effect" (102), the narrator says, "Wow. That looks pretty miserable" (102). Apart from the recurrent objectification of the SGs, this passage illuminates how, despite acknowledging the exploitation, he does so ironically to catch his daughter's attention: "Eva [is] witty. Hence will often joke w/Eva" (102). But Eva, by refusing to validate his shallowness and by not responding to the remark, implicitly confirms his statementthat is, they do look miserable.

Beyond dramatic, situational, and verbal irony, Saunders also employs cosmic irony to emphasize the futility of the narrator's pursuit of the American Dream. Cosmic irony, which implies the idea that the universe, or a higher power, is indifferent to human struggles (Zhang, 12) arises when Eva liberates the SGs, leading the family to face emotional distress and legal repercussions: "If SGs not located … we will become responsible for full payment of the required Replacement Debit" (110). The narrator reflects on this derisively: "Won Scratch-Off, greatest luck of life, quickly converted greatest luck of life into greatest fiasco of life" (112). Here, Saunders illustrates how the pursuit of alluring but unattainable ideologies can often lead to undesirable results.

[3] The prase is quoted directly from the source text including capitalization and misspelling of *hurts*. See George Saunders, *Tenth of December*.
[4] The phrase is quoted directly from the source text including capitalization and mispelling of *daughter.* See George Saunders, *Tenth of December.*

Ironically, the narrator's quest for upward mobility and social status mirrors the SGs' lack of freedom, as his actions entrap him within the same capitalist system that denied the freedom to others.

Contrasting with the narrator's internalization and justifications of such a system, Eva stands as an alternative perspective, opening a path to empathy. Her actions, releasing the SGs, and her protest against such practice urge the readers to reflect on empathy's power and limitations. Eva's defiance embodies the possibility of ethical resistance, even in a world shaped by structural blindness. While Eva shows empathy towards the SG early on, the narrator empathises too late: "SGs [are] very much on my mind tonight, future reader. Where are they now? Why did they go? Just not get" (120). While he does not seem to grasp the reasoning behind their escape, his questions show a subtle shift towards their humanity:

> Who will remove microline? Who will give her job? … When will she ever see home + family again? What in the world was she seeking? What could she want so much, that would make her pull such desperate stunt? (121)

For the first time, the narrator refers to the SGs as individuals using the pronoun *she* instead of using the collective pronoun *them*, suggesting an incipient but finite recognition of their individuality. The narrator experiences an epiphany, which Lodge defines as a "descriptive passage in which external reality is charged with a kind of transcendental significance for the perceiver" (147). This marks the end of the story with emotional ambiguity. In this way, Saunders shifts the perspective and leads the readers to empathy, complicating the satirical tone of the story. The third section of this dissertation will explore Saunders' use of narrative empathy to question its limits within literature. It will also delve into whether emotional awareness can be an appropiate response to challenge systemic dehumanization or merely coexist with it.

Ultimately, "The Semplica Girl Diaries" lays the groundwork for understanding how Saunders uses irony and magical realism to interrogate the ethical contradictions of

the American Dream. This theme resurfaces in “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”, where structural violence and moral complicity are explored through a dystopic lens. The next chapter will extend the analysis on irony and magical realism in this story, demonstrating how both stories parallel each other in their portrayal of failed moral agency, systemic exploitation, and the limits of individual empathy.

"Is this the life I envisioned for myself?": Irony and Magical Realism in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline".

"CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" was published in 1996 as part of the short story collection under the same name. It was Saunders' first book, and it soon received praise for his unique writing style and satirical vision of America by critics such as Michiko Kakutani. The collection earned a space on the Notable Book list by *The New York Times* and was a finalist for the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award. The book features stories narrated by miserable and lonely characters looking to belong in a dystopian, declining America. In this collection, Saunders explores themes of social aspirations, bureaucracy, and guilt within simulated worlds, creating absurd microcosms that reflect macro realities of contemporary American society. Reflecting on the social and political context of his works, Saunders identifies the heart of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* lying in the question: "Why is the world so harsh to those who are losing?" (Saunders). He recounts the hardships of securing decent middle-class conditions for his family even as someone who had benefited from socio-political privilege:

> If life could be this harsh/grueling/boring for someone who'd had all the advantages, what must it be like for someone who hadn't? A thread of connection went out between me and everyone else. They, too, wanted to be happy. They, too, wanted to succeed…They, too, were doing some weird uninteresting job in order to ensure the security and happiness of those beloved people of theirs. (Saunders)

These empathetic reflections illustrate the moral framework that underpins this collection. Saunders' satire does not emerge from detachment, rather, he writes with an honest desire to capture the essence of those seemingly ordinary, marginalized people navigating life under a brutal economic system. This is especially applicable to the short story "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" whose unnamed narrator —just like in "The Semplica Girl Diaries"—struggles to dignifiedly secure beneficial socio-economic conditions for himself and his family. The narrator works in a deteriorated historical theme park inspired by Civil War-era America, completed with actors and periodical props, but it is plagued

by vandalism and gang violence: “Last month [the gangs] wounded three Visitors and killed a dray horse. Several of them encircled and made fun of Mrs. Dugan in her settler outfit as she was taking her fresh-baked bread over to the simulated Towne Meeting (2). The narrator is ethically challenged when an ex-Vietnam soldier and war criminal, Samuel, is hired as a guardian and murders innocent visitors in an attempt to safeguard the park from gangs. Disturbed but desperate to keep his job to support his family, the protagonist disposes the bodies at the command of his boss, Mr.A. Ultimately, his efforts to secure the dream prove to be futile when his wife, unable to forgive his moral compromises, leaves him and takes their children. Disheartened and corrupted, the protagonist is haunted by the park’s ghosts in a moment of self-reflection and repentance. In the end, he gets murdered by Samuel, becoming one of the many ghosts in the park and acknowledging his complicity in a corrupt system and his powerlessness to change it.

By this gruesome ending, Saunders subverts the American Dream ideology by illustrating how it seduces individuals into moral complicity to ultimately render them disposable. In Marx’s words, under capitalism “all the productive powers of social labour appear as the productive powers of capital” (Marx 50), which means that the true source of value is alienated from workers and attributed instead to the system that exploits them. The narrator’s erasure —first morally, then physically— literalises how capitalism exhausts and discards the workers once their utility is depleted.

In light of this, this chapter will analyse “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”, focusing on the use of different forms of irony and magical realism to critique systemic violence, economic precarity and the illusion of the American Dream. Similarly to the previous section, the reading will follow a layered and interwoven structure focusing on verbal, situational, and dramatic irony blended with magical realism to deepen the narrator’s

moral conflict in a failing system that ultimately renders him disposable. Importantly, cosmic irony further underscores the futility of his complicity while simultaneously opening space for inward and outward empathy. The analysis will focus on three key elements: the narrator's emotional labor as a form of exploitation, the symbolic role of ghosts as embodiments of historical trauma and collective guilt; the commodification of history through the theme park setting. Ultimately, I will argue that Saunders uses irony (verbal, situational, dramatic, and cosmic) not simply for satirical effect, but to expose the ethical absurdities in late-capitalist America and to question the possibility of moral agency within it.

To understand Saunders' moral vision more fully, it is useful to consider how his personal experiences shaped the themes in his fiction. It is not far-fetched to assume that George Saunders' experience of precarity in early adulthood shaped the moral and political vision behind his stories, particularly in their portrayal of capitalism's dehumanizing effects. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Saunders vividly recalls feeling the failures of American society's values when he was unable to find a job despite having bachelor's degree:

> 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 firsthand, I think you've got something to work with for the rest of your life. (Saunders as cited in Brockes)

Eagleton's assertion can be identified throughout Saunders stories. Many of his characters are employed in degrading and surreal jobs where they are subjected to exhaustion, humiliation, and even physical harm. These doomed characters are the epitome of capitalism's reductive nature to the human body as useful machines, draining it of any capacity to feel, rest, and enjoy. This *scar* —that Saunders refers to— represents a deep emotional toll**.** As Gillian Moore affirms:

> In Saunders's works, the logic of late capitalism and corporate globalization constructs an almost totalizing environment of systematic, dystopic oppression that nonetheless continues to promote exceptionalist ideas of America's potential for success, freedom, and democracy—with his characters participating in sophisticated systems of social and personal disavowal to uphold the fantasy of exceptionalism. (60)

Moore's observation resonates with "CivilWarLand", where the story unfolds in a dystopian capitalist society whose inhabitants cling to the fantasy of American exceptionalism. The protagonist, passive and compliant, clings to the belief that he can provide his family stability and dignity through hard work —a key tenet of the American Dream— even as this dream is eventually exposed as idealistic and unattainable under late-capitalism ethics.

An ironic tone is established early on when the narrator's first description and tone towards his exploitative workplace are mixed with meekness. The theme park, battered and violent, becomes a site of emotional investment for the narrator. As Antonio Elijas notes, Saunders subverts settings like theme parks —typically associated with enjoyment— by presenting them as joyless and dehumanizing workplaces that diverge from the cheerful public image (18). Drawing on Bryman's theory of the *Disneyization* of society —a process in which the Disney parks' principles increasingly dominate other life's spheres— Elijas highlights emotional labor as a key element in Saunders' fiction. Bryman explains how corporations, such as Disneyland, scripted and monitored employees' interactions, emotions, and attitudes to convey the image of them enjoying themselves, even when they are not (19). Saunders seizes this real-life corporate control and exposes it as not only emotionally exhausting and dehumanizing but also deeply ironic in that a seemingly cheerful place exploits employees and historical trauma.

This ironic detachment is evident in the narrator's tone, whichmasks the precarity of his environment with detached, ironical humor as a form of emotional labor; however, grim reality soon surfaces for the readers' assessment. The story is narrated through an

autodiegetic narrator that, as Basseler argues, allows directness and authentic insights, promoting empathy by character identification, as it requires readers to temporarily adopt the protagonist's perspective (162). Basseler also describes Saunders' recurrent autodiegetic narrators as "the average Joe" (162), that is, ordinary individuals trapped between American ideals and harsh reality that these ideals generate. Drawing on Rando, Basseler argues these protagonists are forced to "live and labor beneath the weight of ideology and just above the cold, material bottom" (Rando as cited in Basseler, 163).

Saunders efficiently illustrates this contrast by employing verbal irony, which arises between the narrator's corporate-like speech and the satirical portrayal of the corporate world. From the opening paragraph, the narrator explains how visitor Mr. Haberstrom, founder of Burn'n'Learn and potential investor, is a big figure in the country: "Burn'n'Learn is national. Their gimmick is a fully stocked library on the premises, and as you tan you call out the name of any book you want to these high school girls on roller skates" (1). Pretending this absurd concept is respectable, the narrator says "I tell him I admire his acumen. I tell him some men are dreamers and others are doers" (1). The narrator's ironic adulation reveals his resignation to the logic of the corporate world, in which employees cannot challenge absurdities for their job's sake and instead are forced to perform polite admiration as part of the expected emotional labor. Consequently, Mr. Haberstrom, depicted as a trivial figure by wearing a sweatsuit and smoking a cigar, expects this adulation from subordinates: "He asks which am I and I say let's face it, I'm basically the guy who leads the dreamers up the trail to view the Canal Segment. He likes that. He says I have a good head on my shoulders" (1).

Another instance of verbal irony appears when the narrator recounts emotional events with a tone of casual indifference. After Mr. Haberstrom reacts emotionally during a tour around the Erie Canal Lock, the narrator says: "Not to be crass but I sense an

impending sizable contribution." (2). Momentarily, human connection is possible, but the narrator instantly reduces it to a transactional opportunity. Despite the hedging phrase, the narrator reveals a crude thought: emotional reaction is valuable if it leads to profit.

Saunders also employs verbal irony to critique how corporate language sanitizes suffering, making horror seem routine. Explaining the distribution of historical roles within the park, the narrator says the roles of the slave and Native American are assigned "equitably among racial groups" (7) while emphasizing its apparent fairness: "Anyone is free to request a different identity at any time" (7). His bureaucratic tone mimics corporate inclusivity language, but the practice is in reality deeply unethical: treating historically traumatic roles as interchangeable costumes. The word *equitable* deepens the verbal irony as it masks structural violence as fairness. The narrator continues, recalling a lawsuit from a worker traumatized by his role as a hangman, "He claimed that for weeks afterwards he had nightmares" (7). Rather than feeling empathy, the narrator dismisses the man's psychological suffering with a flat "Big deal is my feeling" (7). The gap between the horror of events and the language used to describe them intensifies Saunders's verbal irony in depicting suffering as background noise to profit.

The narrator's own career progression also exemplifies situational irony. He describes working as a "lowly Verisimilitude Inspector for nine years with no promotions" (2) —a direct contradiction to the American Dream's belief that hard work leads to advancements. However, he admits getting a promotion to Special Assistant by "lifting ideas from the McKinnons" (9), a ghostly family from the 1860s whose estate was now CivilWarLand Park's territory. While the American Dream ideal promotes the belief that success and upward mobility come through merit, the narrator advances in his career absurdly by stealing ideas from ghosts. This absurd twist exposes a system that rewards unethical behavior, making the participants accomplices.

When he briefly contemplates quitting, the narrator chooses to “eat [his] pride and sit tight" (2), not because his job fulfills his career dreams but because it enables him to pay the bills and support his family: "I think of my car payment. I think of how much Marcus and Howie love the little playhouse I’m still paying off” (2). In this passage, the belief of freedom in a capitalist society is again presented as an illusion that traps individuals economically and emotionally. The narrator is miserable but stays because his job allows him to perform a culturally idealized version of fatherhood, one that equates love with material provision. This point is further underlined in a later passage where he reflects:

> Is this the life I envisioned for myself? My God, no…But I have two of the sweetest children ever born …. You should see their little eyes light up when I bring home a treat. They may not know the value of a dollar, but it’s my intention to see that they never need to (6).

Here, the narrator invokes the the classic American Dream imagery of self-sacrifice for one’s children. The contrast between the draining realigy of his work and the joyful image of his children highlights a dramatic irony: the narrator’s sacrifices are presetned as honorable, wnile the reader understands the crippling toll they have taken on him. Saunders infuses this tender statement with irony to highlight how consumerism has supplanted meaningful parental care. The narrator’s determination to save his children from poverty is well-intentioned, but his internalization of capitalist values leads him to equate love with the ability to purchase material goods — rather than the ability to provide joy, quality time, and morality. This ironic sacrifice of emotional connection for the pursuit of economic security echoes Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, where Willy Loman relentlessly chases the American Dream but ultimately alienates himself from his identity and his family.

As in “The Semplica Girl Diares”, Saunders blends magical realism and irony in “CivilWarLand” to deepen his social critique of capitalist decay and systemic violence.

In particular, the haunting presence of the McKinnon family symbolizes unresolved historical trauma, especially violence and war. The ghost of Mr. McKinnon, a Civil War veteran who reenacts involuntarily the murder of his family, "mirrors the violence of society" (Moisy 4). However, the narrator fails to realize how the McKinnon come from the past to haunt the present as he comments naively: "Something bad must have happened to them because their spirits are always wandering around at night looking dismayed" (10).

For the narrator, Mr. McKinnon is mostly a tragicomic ghost who haunts the parking area, "calling the cars Beelzebubs and kicking their tires" (10). Saunders' supernatural elements embody a form of magical realism that offers "resistance to the bewildering and dehumanizing forces of late capitalism" (Del George as cited in Moisy 4). Drawing on Kroger and Anderson's theory on spectral identities, Moisy argues that the ghosts in "CivilWarLand" represent the desire for visibility, as they parallel the liminality of any marginalized person or group rejecting further invisibilization and demanding to be recognized (Moisy 3-4). Their haunting presence forces the past into visibility, disrupting the park's sanitized narrative. Despite the narrator's obliviousness to it, the readers can recognize the ghosts' quest for resolution.

The narrator remarks about the McKinnon family: "They don't realize we're chronically slumming [the park]; they just think the valley's prospering." (10). Here, Saunders' use of magical realism satirizes capitalist decay, where appearances mask precarity. Moisy argues that Saunders' spectral characters "make minority voices heard and to suggest the excesses of society" (Moisy 3).

The ghosts' presence critiques not only the denial of historical violence but also its commodification. The narrator's frivolous take on Mr. McKinnon being "a gold mine of war info" (10) useful for ideas on the park's development shows how real and

traumatic historical events are marketed as entertainment. In an interaction with the narrator, Mr. McKinnon recalls the war and the horrific image of rodents preying human corpses, however, the narrator is unable to genuinely engage with the violence of war and instead remarks, “Mr.’s a loon” (15). Saunders presents the narrator’s desensitization to violence as a reflection of the theme park’s moral decay, highlighting how capitalism normalizes brutality by turning historical trauma into an entertainment form.

One of the most catalytic moments in the story occurs in a moment of self-recognition that reveals the limits of guilt as a redemptive force, reinforcing the story’s tragic logic and its use of cosmic irony. Reflecting on his complicity in the murders by burying the hand of one of the victims, the narrator says: “Burying a hand isn’t murder. It doesn’t say anywhere thou shalt not bury some guy’s hand” (16). Here, the narrator attempts to justify his actions with litigious language, but his hurried admission—“What am I saying? I did a horrible thing” (16) — underscores a central theme in the story: realization of guilt does not guarantee redemption. Instead, the narrator remains caught in a system that punishes moral integrity, mirroring an “overreaching hubristically irresponsible macrocosm, a social system [where] man cannot act virtuously” (Moisy, 4)

Saunders introduces cosmic irony when despite the narrator’s sacrifices and good intentions, fate ultimately undermines his efforts and dismantlers his life; his wife leaves him, and the investors retract from the park’s development, which leaves him alone and unemployed. This climax emphasizes the narrator’s delayed moral awakening, which is rendered tragically ineffective by the narrative’s fatal outcome. In a final interaction with the ghost of the boy, the narrator says: “I'm done living… I screwed up” (21). The boy, symbolizing consciousness and morale in a similar way as Eva, confronts him with the consequences of his action: “You've got amends to make” (21). The narrator grapples with guilt as he is ultimately murdered by Samuel. The final moment captures the

emotional and metaphysical weight of his failure: “I’m madly framing calming words in my head as he drives the knife in. I can’t believe it. Never again to see my kids? Never again to sleep and wake to their liquid high voices and sweet breaths?” (21). As the narrator becomes one of the ghosts, magical realism marks this transition as a moment of epiphany and unresolved trauma: “I see the pain I’ve caused. I see the man I could have been and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam’s body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone” (22).

By becoming a spectral figure, the narrator faces his inability to achieve the American Dream and deals with the emotional and metaphysical cost of his complicity. In this way, Saunders highlights by means of irony the futility of moral awakening in a system that punishes goodness and rewards violence. Saunders also gestures toward the possibility of emotional connection by longing and remorse. Nevertheless, this connection is faint in the narrators’ spectral figure, thus, Saunders’ hint that empathy is not enough to create systemic social change. This tension between emotional insight and complicity sets the ground for further exploration on empathy and its implications within the New Sincerity movement, which will be developed in the next section. To sum up, “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” presents American Dream’s ideals like hard work, family support, and sacrifices as vain in a society deformed by late capitalism and apathy that even posthumous regret fails to bring about change.

Narrative Empathy in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" and its limits.

The previous sections have demonstrated how Saunders' narrative voice aligns with the New Sincerity Movement, not by rejecting irony outright, but by examining its roots and consequences, and by attempting to move beyond it toward a renewed sense of ethical engagement. In a cultural moment dominated by postmodern irony—characterised by detachment and and scepticism— the return to sincerity appears both urgent but complex. Authors associated with this movement are particularly concerned with the possibility and limits of empathy: how, and whether, it is possible to genuinely feel for others in a fragmented commodified society.

For authors within the New Sincerity movement, the problem with empathy arises when irony and language shifted from being tools to being an environment (Kelly 8). Drawing from Colebrook, Adam Kelly claims this shift occurred due to poststructuralist and postmodern theory undermining the notion of a stable, expressive subject of the self (Kelly 5). Consequently, earlier conceptions of language as a neutral medium are dismantled, and rather it is positioned as contaminated and performative. This shift complicates the appeal of empathy as it casts doubt on the language of emotions and sincerity. Thus, the New Sincerity Movement is born out of the necessity to write fiction that is a positive affirmation without abandoning critical distance. This dilemma is succinctly expressed in the question: "Can one maintain an ideal and practice of sincerity without a grounding notion of expressive subjectivity?" (Kelly 6). In a world where in — Trilling's words— "if we speak, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony" (Trilling as cited in Kelly 4), the New Sincerity authors attempt to reclaim sincerity despite the cultural discomfort it creates.

Saunders' short fiction, more specifically "The Semplica Girl Diaries" and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline", engages with this dilemma by using irony and sincerity

to create new emotional effects. As demonstrated in previous sections, Saunders' narrators are not reliable nor stable; rather, they are often fragmented, alienated, and complicit, yet, Saunders still invites empathy from the reader. As critic Moore observed about Saunders' work:

> [It] disseminates a kind of epiphanic knowledge in its attempts to gesture toward discrete selves who can —on occasion— reflect meaningfully on the metaphysical and social truths of their lives, even while his stories affirm the constructed entrapment of self and society. (68)

In this light, while the stories' endings do not offer relief or moral revolution, they do allow the characters and readers to reflect meaningfully and empathetically on their society. Basseler highlights this as Saunders' personal mark in fiction, in which many of his main characters are forced to confront another character's suffering, raising the questions:

> What are we supposed to do if we are confronted with unmistakable misery, especially if it happens directly in front of us? Do we act even if this may have negative consequences for ourselves? And if we act, what does morally right behavior look like? (159)

Considering this observation, rather than presenting empathy as a definite positive response, Saunders poses empathy as complex and costly. Suzanne Keen defines empathy as a "vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (4). However, as Basseler argues, narrative empathy cannot be forced by the author, rather, it depends on the readers' willingness to engage empathically with the text (157).

In Saunders' stories, empathy may urge characters towar action, as in the case of Eva, but those actions can backfire emotionally or physically, such as leading the family to economic collapse, or they might come too late to be succesfully effective, as in the case of the narrator in "CivilWarLand". In neither story does Saunders allow his narrators to become moral heroes. Nonetheless, he does endow them with the ability to reflect on others' suffering even when they are trapped themselves. Through this nuanced narrative,

Saunders encourages the readers to do the same, leading them "to ponder the big questions" (Miller 2). As Miller argues, these stories demand the readers to reflect on the role of kindness in contemporary culture and to consider how its absence has an effect on the individual and collective ability to access the most enlightened of ourselves (Miller 2).

Moreover, other scholars such as Den Dulk and Del George frame the final act of empathy as a form of sincerity, suggesting that emotional truth and moral clarity can emerge even within systems defined by irony and exploitation.

Den Dulk, in his analysis on sincerity in postmodern literature, argues that characters like Don Gately and Hal Incandenza in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* overcome their ironic detachment "by realizing the transcendent character of the self…show[ing] that, to achieve a meaningful existence, consciousness has to be connected to the world outside itself" (245). Likewise, the narrators in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" surpass their ironic attitude and alienation through a late —but earnest— desire to turn to other people empathetically, aiming for meaningful connections and taking responsability. Nevertheless, their attempt at redemption comes belatedly, inviting the readers to confront the contradictions embedded in American ideals: a man who conformed to the expectations of the American Dream still is unable to transform his life and others'.

Empathy thus extends outward, prompting the reader to recognize the humanity in those trapped in exploitative systems who, despite their flaws, deserve emotional recognition, like the narrators in both stories. Del George expands on this interpretation, stating that Saunders' ghost stories and surreal elements suggest, by means of their flawed characters who manage to find their ability to love and truthfulness despite all, that the human soul endures and ultimately escapes "the empty

images and systems that surround it" (132). Thereby, Saunders' use of magical realism "provides emotional orientation to the postmodern reader…by restoring to the lonely self some sense of community and a place in the cosmos" (Del George 132). Saunders' fusion of irony and magical realism ultimately posits a comforting truth: even in a world defined by violence, commodification, and systemic failure, the desire for connection and redemption, even if flawed or belated, still endures in human nature.

Saunders' fiction places the readers in a state of existential ambivalence, as he withholds clear moral solutions and does not offer any concrete model for systemic change. But this method invites reflection, which Keen sees as a crucial first step toward social change. Drawing on Larry P. Nucci's research, Keen argues that for literature to inspire prosocial action requires more than just reading, it also necessitates discussion (201). Thus, Saunders' preoccupation with adressing contemparary themes with earnestness provides space and literary material for both informal and formal dialogue, debates, and possibly guidance that could ultimately deepen empathy and turn it into ethical mentalities or actions.

Aligning with Keen's stance on literature's limited power to directly influence society, fiction should not be expected to cause inmmediate moral and social reform (168). Notwithstanding, fiction that invites further discussion on human virtues can support the pursuit of justice around the world. Saunders seems to agree with Keen's view on fiction's role: "If novels do cultivate readers' empathy, and if empathy undergirds both caring and justice in society, then fiction apparently has a vital job to do today" (20). While this process may not result in immediate social change, it remains a meaningful and worthwhile effort.

Conclusion

This TFG has examined how George Saunders uses various forms of irony and magical realism to critique the ideological motivations of the American Dream in his short fiction, particularly in “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”. Can By giving the narrators epiphanic final moments, Saunders also explores the possibilities and ethical limitations of empathy as a response to injustices and systemic violence.

The first analytical section focused on “The Semplica Girl Diaries, exploringhow Saunders uses an unreliable narrator, whose journal reflects self-deception and aspirational mimicry, to expose the internalization of exploitative ideologies. Moreover, the magical realism, the SGs hanging through microlines, functions as both literalization of commodified human life and a surreal indictment of the normalized brutality within global capitalism. Finally, Eva’s act of resistance and empathy highlights ethical consciousness and its fragility as it struggles to surface within a culture bent on spectacle, status and self-interest. It is argued that irony is not merely stylistic but channels the tension between the narrator’s values and the reader’s growing sense of moral urgency, leaving the reader with the uncomfortable message about the human cost of capitalist aspirations.

The second section explored “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”, where irony once more shapes the structure and guides the reader’s emotional and ethical response. The analysis included how the narrator’s emotional detachment mirrors the corporatism within capitalists societies. Also, the inclusion of ghosts introduces a magical realist element that embodies guilt, repressed histories and unresolved trauma on violence. Here, Saunders uncovers the persistence of ethical failures across generations. Finally, the narrator’s epiphany of complicity comes too late, underscoring the cost of apathy and the difficulty of meaningful resistance within a system designed to hinder dissent.

Both stories demonstrate how Saunders navigates the postmodern legacy of scepticism, while striving for emotional authenticity. His works revealambivalence aboutirony: he uses it to signal distance and critique, but also to create connection by disrupting complacency and unawareness. Magical realism intensifies his message by externalizing the moral irresoluteness of his stories, complicating a complete straighfoward conclusion on empathy.

Crucially, this dissertation has argued that Saunders does not present empathy as a simplistic or redemptive solution. Moments of emotional epiphany punctuate both stories but they fail to represent sustained ethical action. This aligns with the New Sincerity movement and its critique on the limited power o empathy. In both stories, Saunders' characters frequently feel deeply, yet remain trapped and complicit within structures that prevent those feelings from altering theirs and others' conditions. Thus, empathy in his fiction is both necessary and insufficient: it fosters recognition and discomfort, but also highlights the insufficiency of individual emotion in confronting collective injustice.

His work invites readers to feel, to question, and ultimately to reflect on their own position within systems of power. Nonetheless, he does not retreat into sentimentality nor offer a certain morality. Alternatively, his use of irony and magical realism warns readers that clarity and catharsis is not easily attained in a world shaped by exploitative practices.

In conclusion, Saunders' short fiction challenges readers to confront the dissonance between American ideals and their effects on the real world. Through irony, magical realism, and narrative empathy, Saunders creates stories that are loaded with ethically disruptive messages but emotionally resonant moments. In doing so, he opens

way for self-reflection on what it means to care, to resist, and to remain human in a world set to dehumanize us.

This discussion could be further enriched through future research examining how Saunders' work intersects with that of other contemporary American authors who address similar themes, such as Dave Eggers. In particular, I would like to analyse the evolving dynamics of irony and sincerity in post-postmodern literature. Additionally, further investigation is needed into the role of magical realism in critiques of late-capitalist ideology, especially its role in providing emotional grounding. Such research could broaden the understanding of magical realism as a narrative strategy for ethical and political engagement.

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