



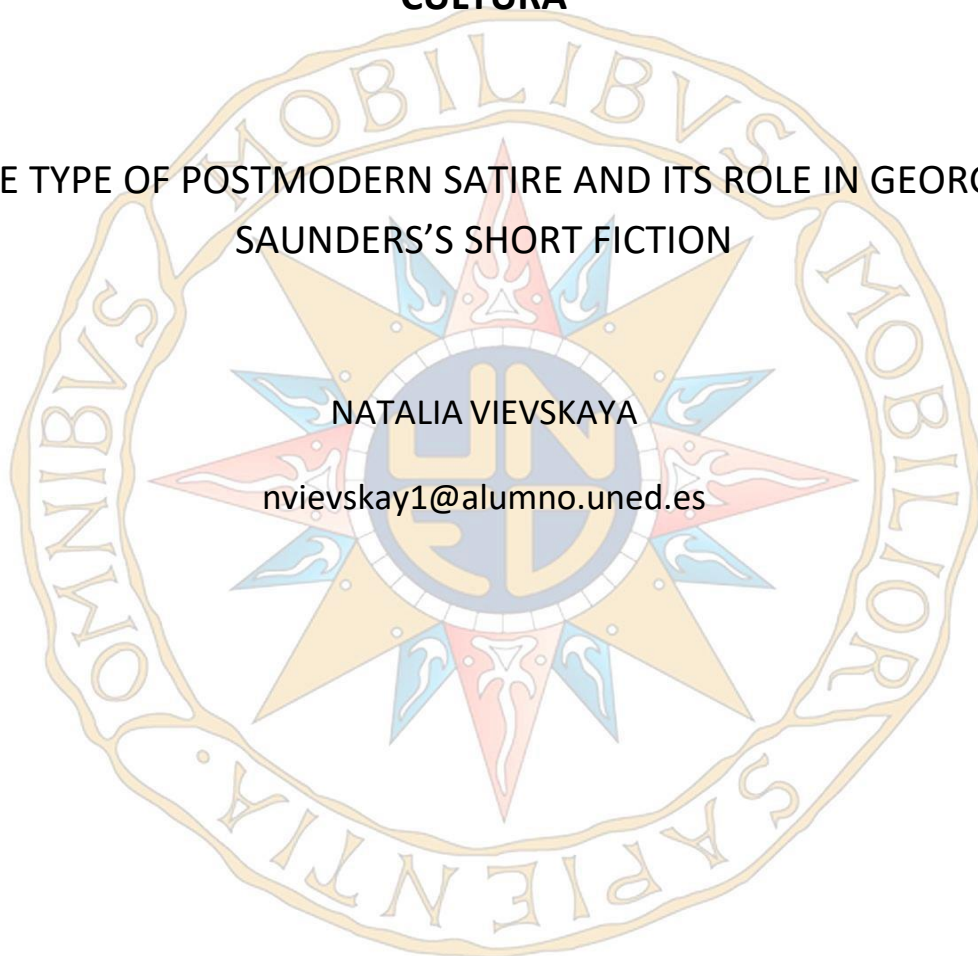
TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y
CULTURA**

THE TYPE OF POSTMODERN SATIRE AND ITS ROLE IN GEORGE
SAUNDERS'S SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

This work analyses the type of satire that George Saunders employs in his short fiction, in particular in its relation to the postmodernist movement and postmodernist theories on satire and its use in literature. It especially focuses on the theories of “degenerative,” “diffused” and “sincere” satire as the dominant types in contemporary American fiction. As a result, it examines how George Saunders’s distinct nature of satire is capable of generating an affective response in readers towards characters, simultaneously destabilizing and undermining preconceived ideas and beliefs which are based on well-established cultural myths and discourses.

Keywords: George Saunders, satire, American postmodern fiction, empathy, metanarratives

Table of contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Satire and postmodernism	8
2.1. Traditional approaches to satire and their conflict with the postmodernist thought.....	8
2.2. The shift in satire’s position within postmodernism	12
2.3. George Saunders: a postmodern satirist.....	17
3. George Saunders’s satire at work.....	22
3.1. “Escape from Spiderhead”	23
3.2. “The Semplica Girl Diaries”	28
3.3. “Home”	34
4. Conclusions	38
5. Works cited	40

“Satire as I understand is all about simultaneous love/hate. Or attraction/revulsion. It’s about, I think, the miracle of love (or the miracle of the potential for love) existing in the face of aversion”
(George Saunders)¹

1. Introduction

George Saunders, one of the most renowned present-day US writers, holds a special position in contemporary literature. The success of his works is doubtless, as is seen from the awards he obtained for his books, such as the 2017 Man Booker Prize for best work of fiction in English (for one of his most recent books, *Lincoln in the Bardo*), the National Book Award, Folio Prize and the Story Prize (for his collection *Tenth of December*) among others. He is also the winner of the Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships and in 2013 was considered one of the most influential people by *Time* magazine.² His fiction is widely recognized as satirical by most contemporary critics, although the type of his satire, as well as the belonging of his literary works to postmodernism, are the source of ongoing controversy. In regard with the latter, while Layne Neeper emphasizes that “Saunders is widely held to be postmodernist” (283) and many scholars place his works within the second generation of postmodernism (Hadaway 40), others, for example, Alex Miller, following such literary critics as Robert McLaughlin, Jeffrey T. Williams and Marc McGurl, believe that contemporary US authors, including George Saunders, are different from traditional postmodernists in their desire to “resonate with [their] readers’ lives and therefore [they] possess the potential for real impact” (13). Miller insists that this new generation of writers has moved towards the “new sincerity” proposed by Adam Kelly meaning that their literature has become more affective. Therefore, he questions the appropriateness of attributing their fiction to postmodernism and claims that we have entered a new literary period, namely post-postmodernism.

¹ Saunders, George. “George Saunders Interview.” Interview by Gary Percesepe. *New World Writing*, 2012. newworldwriting.net/back/summer-2012/george-saunders-interview/

² For more information on George Saunders’s see <https://www.georgesandersbooks.com/about-george-saunders>.

This lack of unity over the classification of Saunders's work within postmodernism is mainly caused by his use of satire. While some critics see satire as a common trait of postmodern literature, others argue that postmodernism and satire as such are two mutually exclusive concepts and that the recent increase in preference for satirical fiction among American writers should be understood as the beginning of a new era of post-postmodernism with its shift towards affection and a recovery of at least some moral bases and standards in literature. In light of this debate, Saunders's satire is both regarded as more traditional or, according to Steven Weisenburger's classification, "generative" but with a clear presence of postmodern features by some scholars (Hadaway 39), and is recognized by others as representative of a new "sincere satire" type, due to its emphasis on empathy. Other critics (for example Miller) take a step further and name it "diffused," applying Kathryn Hume's term and insisting that this new type breaks away with the postmodernist tradition and signals the beginning of post-postmodernist movement in literature (Miller 11).

To understand satire's debatable position it is important to take into account postmodernist rejection of any universal certainties and truths on the one hand and satire's apparent dependence on some stable moral codes on the other. This view of satire may be explained by the theoretical corpus which determined the perception of the genre by both literary critics and the reading audience as "militant irony" in the words of one of the main theorists of satire, Northrop Frye (223). Frye claims that satire requires "at least an implicit moral standard" (224), while another important theorist, Leonard Feinberg, insists that the satirist holds an evaluating and judgmental attitude in his fiction (Díez Cobo 68), pointing again at the moralizing nature of satirical works.

This understanding of satire has been dominant throughout the second part of the twentieth century and although it has been challenged since the 1990s, there is still an ongoing debate on how contemporary postmodernist satire should be approached. Following Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Menippean satire, critics such as Theodore D. Kharpertian disputed the moral character traditionally attributed to the genre and defended "la relevancia del sentido de subversión carnavalesco y la heterogeneidad formal y material que abre el concepto de la sátira menipea y que entroncaría a la perfección con las preocupaciones de los literarios postmodernos" (Díez Cobo 87). Weisenburger in turn introduced an

even more relevant change into our understanding and perception of satire in the postmodern period in his study *Fables of Subversion*, in which he distinguishes between two main types: “generative” and “degenerative” satire. According to this classification, the former type corresponds to the more traditional understanding of the genre as “a rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” (1), while the latter is more appropriate and useful for postmodernist rhetoric as it “functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (3).

Hume is another critic who proposed a new, in her opinion, more suitable for the twenty-first century understanding of satire using the term “diffused” to refer to the kinds of satire with “lower emotional intensity,” arguing that the existent definitions are not sufficient to represent contemporary American fiction. According to her view, “diffused” satire is “nuanced, often ambiguous,” it is not “righteous or punitive. It is less judgmental, more provocative of doubt and questions” (325) and thus more preferable by some critics to deal with the satire present in the works of American twenty-first-century writers.

In regard to all the different viewpoints on Saunders’s fiction, it may be argued that his use of satire and his critical treatment of contemporary US society contribute to the special effect his works produce on the reader. So far, this effect has been approached from two main lines of analysis. One is empathy, related to the “new sincerity” and the presence of “sincere satire” in his works. The other is Saunders’s biting critique of the capitalist system, with his works’ special attention to its ideology, which determines the position of the most vulnerable within this cultural paradigm. Gillian Elizabeth Moore puts in the following way:

In Saunders’s works, the logic of late capitalism and corporate globalization construct 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 (par.1).

In line with these scholarly approaches, my objective in this work is to explore how Saunders’s satire is used not only to create empathy making the reader understand the characters’ intentions, although simultaneously disapproving of some of their decisions and actions but also, and precisely

through this empathy, to undermine grand discourses present in the United States today, “subvert[ing] hierarchies of value” in Weisenburger’s words. This way I intend to show how Saunders’s satire, which is at first sight directed towards the character, making the reader recognize the social ills that determine the character’s behavior and decisions, rebounds on the grand discourses and the capitalist ideology itself undermining their apparently unquestionable legitimacy.

For this purpose, this work is divided into two main parts. The first part provides the theoretical basis necessary to carry out the practical analysis of some of George Saunders’s short stories in order to explore the way in which satire is used in them and the effect which it produces. Thus, the first part offers an overview of the position which satire has occupied in the literary arena from the second half of the twentieth century to the present moment, in particular, in relation to the postmodernist movement. As has already been mentioned and as I will discuss below in more detail, satire has not always enjoyed acceptance as a legitimate genre within postmodernism due to the theoretical corpus that has influenced critics’ attitudes towards it. Therefore, in this part of my work, I aim to briefly review the most prominent critics’ view on the definition of satire and its presence in postmodern fiction. I will particularly focus on Weisenburger’s analysis of “generative” and “degenerative” satire and Hume’s view of “diffused” satire as particularly relevant for my work. Finally, I will attempt to define the position of George Saunders’s fiction in contemporary American literature.

The second part of this work offers the analysis of three of Saunders’s short stories, all of which belong to his collection *Tenth of December*, namely “Escape from Spiderhead,” “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “Home.” In this analysis, I aim to explore how the rhetoric of American exceptionalism is presented in form of the country’s different fundamental myths and discourses, such as the ideas of freedom, equality, scientific progress, every person’s unquestionably equal right to economic growth and prosperity and the justifiable nature of warfare and the necessity of human sacrifice required by it. I also intend to show how these predominant cultural conceptions are undermined by Saunders’s distinctive use of satire, which provokes an empathetic response towards characters on the one hand and subverts the main postulates of the exceptionalist rhetoric on the other.

2. Satire and postmodernism

The theoretical corpus on satire, relevant for the completion of this work, has been developed starting from the second half of the twentieth century. It may be generally divided into two main categories: the traditional or formalist approach, which was mainly in vogue until the last decade of the previous century, and more recent views on the genre, here particularly presented by Weisenburger's theory on "generative" and "degenerative" satire and by Hume's exploration of "diffused" satire as a new type especially important for an understanding of the twenty-first-century fiction.

2.1. Traditional approaches to satire and their conflict with the postmodernist thought

Satire, although a renowned genre existing from the days of classical antiquity, lost its significance and appreciation among most literary critics during the second half of the twentieth century and became considered, in Alan Wilde's words "a minor form in modern times" (qtd. in Weisenburger 2).³ Others went even further with Frye's claim that "[the satirist cannot] speak for the twentieth century because satire [has] gone stale and mouldy" (qtd. in Díez Cobo 79) and David Worcester's pronouncement of "the death of satire" (qtd. in Weisenburger 9).

To understand these statements and twentieth-century scholars' view of the genre it is important to briefly review the theoretical corpus that dominated satire until the decade of the 1990s when the general critical opinion began to change. Thus, according to Rosa María Díez Cobo, the most prominent theories related to it developed during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (78) and still influence many critics' attitude towards the genre even today.⁴ These theories, later

³ Although in this work I mainly refer to satire as a "literary genre" for convenience, it is important to notice that the concept of genre has been reconsidered within postmodernism. As Díez Cobo explains in her book *La nueva sátira en la ficción postmodernista de las Américas*, "en el ámbito de acercamientos deconstruccionistas y postestructuralistas, si bien en ocasiones se ha llegado a postular el rechazo total del concepto de género." Thus, many postmodern critics chose to switch their focus of attention from the notion of genre to "una noción fundamentada en la capacidad de dispersión o radiación infinita e intertextual de significados" (73 – 74).

⁴ Despite the change in critical attitude towards satire that has taken place in recent years, as will be explained further in this work, satire is still viewed by many in a traditional way. Thus, if we turn, for example, to *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* we will find the following definition

promoted by more and more scholars, took their origin in Yale and Chicago. As Díez Cobo explains, Yale theorists (e.g. Maynard Mack, Martin Price, Alvin Kernan, Robert Elliot or Ronald Paulson), in the 1940s and 1950s, produced the so called “rhetorical theory of satire,” according to which “la sátira erige como el arte retórico por antonomasia a través de la disposición antitética de sus componentes en torno a una estructura de *laus* y *vituperatio*, plasmado a través de un enfrentamiento ficcional entre el bien y el mal” (78). These theorists placed their focus on the qualities of the text paying less attention to the historical context in which it was produced. On the contrary, Chicago critics (e.g. Sheldon Sacks, Matthew Hodgart, or Edward Rosenheim) paid special attention to satirical texts’ close link to the historical moment which influenced their creation. Hence, this latter approach highlights a close relationship between satire and the author’s intentions, thus establishing satire’s dependence on an external context.

Despite these apparent differences between the two literary schools, “[a]mbas corrientes proclamarán la entidad genérica de la forma satírica” (Díez Cobo 79) and as a consequence of those theoretical approaches, throughout the following years, the view of satire as a genre that aims to attack vices and follies of the external reality, always contrasting its object of attack to some clearly defined universal moral principles, consolidated. In Frye’s words, “satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (223). According to this critic, satire is distinguished by two essential things: “one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack.” In addition, Frye highlights the idea that “the content of a great deal of satire [is] founded on national hatreds, snobbery, prejudice, and personal pique” (224).

These attitudes towards satire changed little throughout the following decades. On the contrary, it is safe to affirm that they were further reinforced by other literary critics.⁵ Thus, Feinberg, in a prominent study on satire, *The Satirist:*

of satire: “The genre [... in which] the author attacks some object, using as his means wit or humour [...]. Its attempt to juxtapose the actual with the ideal lifts it above mere invective” (211).
⁵ In this section, I mainly review the so-called “formalist” theories on satire. However, it is important to point out that despite their dominance in the critical corpus on the genre, these theories were not the only present in the literary arena of the second half of the twentieth century. Due to satire’s complexity and ambiguity, some critics distinguished between its two main types: high and low satire. Thus, formal satire would be the high genre, it is “más rígida en su forma y temáticamente orientada a la reprobación y censura de vicios.” This satire is opposed to the low type, or Menippean satire, a more popular type, which is characterized by “la mayor libertad estructural y

His Temperament, Motivation and Influence, defines the genre in the following way: “[the satirist uses] for his material the moral values accepted by his society because satire deals with deviations from a norm” (qtd. in Díez Cobo 68). In the same way, Gilbert Highet reinforces the accepted views on a satirist affirming that “[h]e is always moved by personal hatred, scorn, or condescending amusement” (qtd. in Díez Cobo 68).

Outlining the main characteristics of satire, almost universally accepted by twentieth-century critics, Weisenburger names four most dominant elements:

First of all, satire in its purest forms was held to be a profoundly *rhetorical* mode, a persuasive literature at least and at most an openly polemical discourse. Second, it followed that satire would be unthinkable without some *target of attack* in the ‘real world’. Third, in opposition to that target, the satire was defined as proposing a *corrective* or ameliorative course of action. Finally, this course was unthinkable without reference to some absolute moral code; in short, satire had to be universally *normative* ... (15).

Taking into consideration all these predominant definitions and views of satire, it comes as no surprise that the genre was considered to be in strong opposition with the movement of postmodernism that entered the literary arena in the 1960s. This idea is well formulated by Neeper, who explains that “[p]ostmodern fiction’s renowned distrust of ontological certainty or any meaningful metanarrative authority would seem to render it radically antagonistic to the stable codes so apparently necessary to the functioning of satire” (281).

Indeed, if we briefly overview the main postulates of the postmodernist movement, what we will probably mention first will be its “incredulity towards metanarratives” in Jean-François Lyotard’s words (qtd. in Barry 88). Thus, postmodernism is dubious about any universally accepted knowledge and aims to deconstruct all certainties that have been taken for granted throughout centuries. As Craig Owen claims, postmodernism is a “crisis of all cultural authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions” (qtd. in A. Lee x). In its view, all reality is a mere construct, sustained through language, traditions and social system. In her book *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction*, Alison Lee argues that “[p]ostmodern texts place the subject firmly within political, social, class, racial and gender forces acting upon [the self]” (xi)

[su] carácter cómico y burlesco” (Díez Cobo 70 – 71). This latter type has generally received less critical attention in comparison with formal satire and was noticed mainly due to Bakhtin’s works.

highlighting the constructed nature of any ideology. According to this author, “common sense and the transparency of language – as well as subjectivity, truth, meaning, and value – are terms and concepts ... which postmodern novels try to question and draw attention to as conventions” (x).

Another important aspect of postmodern literature is “the death of the author” as was announced by Ronald Barthes. In his essay of the same name, Barthes declares the text’s liberation from being conditioned by the author’s intended meaning. As he explains, “it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is ... to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (143). Thus, the focus is displaced from the authorial control of the work to the text’s independence of any external reality. Therefore, the text itself becomes the source of its own meaning, as well as the product of its intertextual relations with other texts. In Barthes’s words,

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture (146).

As a consequence of this understanding of a literary work, the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the meaning. Thus, the meaning of any literary work becomes dynamic, unstable and changeable, contained within the text itself and not in an external reality outside of it.

Although there are many more aspects of postmodern fiction that are as important as the ones outlined above, they are beyond the scope of this work. However, the aforementioned features of postmodernism are highly relevant for the critical attitudes towards satire as they contradict the formalist definition of the genre that has been described, as satire in its traditional understanding of the concept uses universal truths as the desirable ideal which is compared to the target of attack. Moreover, in traditional satire, the figure of the author is paramount for the intended meaning. It is therefore not surprising that satire has been discarded by most postmodern literary scholars. For example, M.D. Fletcher in his book *Contemporary Political Satire* comments on the clear divergence between the concept of satire and the main postulate of postmodernism as “satire ... is aggressively referential [whereas] post-modern literature attempts to

respond to the insight that reality is ultimately uninterpretable” (qtd. in Díez Cobo 85, 86). Other critics, like Robert Scholes, prefer to use the concept of “black humor” instead of satire to refer to postmodern literary works as, despite its satirical nature, “it assumes no moral absolutes or ethical certainty” (qtd. in Díez Cobo 86). Thus, it may be inferred that most twentieth-century scholars preferred to avoid any direct references to satire withholding its position as a rightful postmodern genre.

2.2. The shift in satire’s position within postmodernism

A change in critical views of satire took place around the 1990s and was mainly due to the existence of a large number of postmodernist literary works which contained clear satirical elements.⁶ At first, some critics’ attention was drawn to the Menippean satire and its direct opposition to the formalist attitudes to the genre. Thus, Michael Seidel in his work *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne* discusses satire’s potential for discursive subversion and questioning of formalist and historicist parameters due to its indefinability (qtd. in Díez Cobo 80). This same view is further developed by another critic, Frank Palmeri, who believes that satire written in prose contains a series of “levelling strategies” through which high and low elements converge. Palmeri’s analysis of satire follows Bakhtin’s theories on narrative or Menippean satire and according to this scholar, “[n]arrative satire does not claim access to a truth that transcends particular social and cultural conditions. Fully dialogical narrative satires parody an established, traditional perspective, and also the perspective implied by such an attack ...” (17).

This characterization of satire breaks away from the orthodox view of the genre, revealing its new facets which had previously been ignored. According to this new perception, satire destabilizes accepted beliefs in universal truths instead of perpetuating them. John Snyder, in turn, distinguishes between “ordinary satire [of] straight and narrow critique” and Menippean satire which he describes as “sustaining complex ironies” (qtd. in Díez Cobo 80).

⁶ For example, Weisenburger mentions the works of such postmodern authors as Mary McCarthy, Philip Roth, Terry Southern, Robert Coover, John Hawkes and Thomas Pynchon (27). Undoubtedly, Kurt Vonnegut should also be included into this list as a renown twentieth-century satirist.

Another supporter of Menippean satire as a relevant genre in the second half of the twentieth century is Kharpertian. In his theoretical work *A Hand to Turn the Time*, he follows Bakhtin's theory on Menippean satire and argues that the use of satire present in postmodern literary texts is a continuation of a long-lasting tradition of Menippean satire which takes its origin in works produced during the times of classical antiquity. The author rejects those theories that highlight intrinsically moral character of satirical works and defends the genre's capacity of carnivalesque subversion and its formal heterogeneity. He, thus, asserts satire's obvious connection with postmodern lines of thought. However, Kharpertian maintains satire's corrective nature, stating that "[the] Menippean text as the vehicle of a metaphor rhetorically functioning to correct inadequate or erroneous conceptions of experience forms the ground of the Menippean effect" (qtd. in Díez Cobo 87).

Dustin Griffin, another prominent theorist on satire, considers it paramount to redefine the mainstream theories on satire blending the two traditionally antagonistic types of the genre, formal and Menippean. He claims that historicity is essential not only for understanding satire itself, but also its interpretations. He also argues for the necessity to review the existing canon regarding satirical works opening the genre for new interpretations. According to Griffin, it is important to reconsider the generalized notion of "satiric plot" as he suggests the use of a more flexible concept of "satiric discourse" which would lead to a reassessment of the aesthetic analysis of satire and the examination of its contextual aspects (qtd. in Díez Cobo 82).

One more scholar who questions the traditionally accepted notion of satire's extratextuality is Fredric V. Bogel. Bogel argues for the genre's "textual constructedness" as well as questioning the traditionally accepted concept of moral identification in relation to the position adopted by the satirist and the reader (qtd. in Díez Cobo 82).

However, the theorist who introduced a completely new approach to the genre in the postmodernist period is Weisenburger, suggesting the concepts of "generative" and "degenerative" satire. According to his view, "generative" satire corresponds to the traditional understanding of the genre. This is the type of satire decidedly discarded by postmodernism as useless following Worcester's announcement of the "death of satire" as has been explained above. The other

type of satire, “degenerative,” appears in clear opposition to the previous one and is the type that is the vehicle for postmodern thought. The purpose of “degenerative” satire is “delegitimizing” and “it functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (Weisenburger 3). Therefore, it does not rely on some kind of universal ideal against which social faults are measured and derided. On the contrary, it participates in Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarratives” due to its subversive nature. As Weisenburger explains, “[t]he postmodern satirist suspects *all* kinds of codified knowledge” and “degenerative” satire is “a major form by which the postmodern writer interrogates and subverts authority” (5 – 6). Hence, this type does not reinforce any universal codes, against which human deficiencies are ridiculed. Instead, its “intent [is] to ridicule and disfigure the codes themselves” (Weisenburger 12). Its purpose is not to correct the social flaws perceived by the satirist, thus incentivizing a return to the desired order as would be the case of traditional, “generative” satire. Conversely, it lacks any stable center, “a steady narrative voice, specific ‘targets’, and fixed norms or corrective goals” (Weisenburger 14).

In his work, Weisenburger revises the four elements traditionally attributed to satire with an intention to question and reconsider them. As has been mentioned above, these elements are satire’s rhetorical mode, the presence of a target of attack, its corrective nature and its normativity (15). However, some other elements, which are generally associated with the genre, although as secondary and less important – the presence of the grotesque, carnivalesque settings and regressive plotting – are brought to the fore. Thus, the grotesque becomes one of the main allies of postmodern satire “because only the grotesque can inscribe, in a mere figure, those disruptions of codified knowledge peculiar to the new satire” (Weisenburger 24). The topos of carnival is another aspect that is widely present in postmodern satires, in which it appears as a popular or mass-cultural phenomenon. It implies a heterogeneous combination of discourses, including slang, professional jargon, taboo slang, standardized English, etc., “opening the field of permissible discourse” (Weisenburger 25). Finally, satire’s regression is another key feature of postmodern fiction, “[s]u objetivo primero es el de quebrar las acostumbradas linealidades narrativas promoviendo [...] una trama repleta de *lepsis* y *elipsis* destinadas a desenmarcar el gran fraude cultural

de Occidente: la 'metanarrativa del progreso'" (Díez Cobo 98). Thus, the grotesque, the topos of carnival and regressive plotting are the three main elements foregrounded by postmodern satiric fiction, while the four traditional ones, regarded as universal by the formalist theory, are generally set aside.

The significance of Weisenburger's analysis of satire lies in his definite departure from traditional views on the genre. Unlike the other theorists mentioned above, who mainly distinguished Menippean satire as a possible term to be applied to postmodern fiction, Weisenburger decidedly breaks away from those theories and, though accepting some main characteristics of Menippean satire (as developed by Bakhtin and his followers) as extremely relevant in postmodern literary works, takes a step further, arguing that postmodern satire is different from traditional in that it is "an explicitly oppositional art devoted to resisting dominant social interests" (259). Therefore, instead of erecting new referential values, the objective of this new type of satire is to deconstruct any totalizing knowledge.

Finally, another relevant analysis of postmodern satire was suggested by Hume in her article "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction." In her work, she offers a general overview of the most significant theories on the genre, suggesting another type commonly present in postmodern fiction, namely "diffused" satire. According to Hume, all the previous classifications of satire prove somewhat imprecise when it comes to the analysis of literary works "where the satiric flavor interferes with our ability to explain how the novels work in nonsatiric terms yet does not yield clear results when conventional satire analysis is applied" (302). Hume suggests the term "diffused" satire to refer to the type that is "differentiated by its lower emotional intensity" and is a "version of satire [that] starts by undermining our ontological certainties" (302 – 303).

Hume views satire as a family (instead of a genre or a mode) characterized by a number of features that allow us to define the work of fiction as such. She identifies the total of nine features, such as (1) attack, (2) humor or wit, (3) the "author's glorifying in his or her literary performance," (4) the presence of exaggeration, extrapolation and fantasy, (5) the possibility to recognize moral or existential truth, as well as (6) authorial malice, disgust, righteous indignation or mockery and irony, or sometimes (7) "inquiry rather than confident condemnation," and finally, (8) a moral standard and (9) "the rhetorical aim of

reforming the audience's behavior" (305). However, as Hume explains, only some of these features may be present in a work in order for it to be recognized as satire.

Another aspect Hume considers important when dealing with satire is its intensity through which the attack and the authorial intention are identified and the text appears to demand the audience's response and even action. The intensity is high in traditional satirical works, whereas "[d]iffused satire of a sort now common ... works at a much lower emotional temperature and often lacks these various forms of intensity associated with the satiric tradition" (305). In regard to the main characteristics of satire, Hume explains that the more of them are present in a work of fiction, the more easily we identify satire as traditional. On the other hand, in "diffused" satire these qualities are attenuated and thus the work is "more resistant to straightforward rhetorical interpretation" (306). Therefore, the traditional characteristics of satire, working at a low-intensity level lose their strong effect on the reader, and passionate persuasion, whose aim is to correct one's values, ceases to be the main objective of the work. The lack of intensity in postmodern fiction contributes to our uncertainty when dealing with a satirical text and "leaves us less sure about how to read ... a work" thus leading to the effect of "our ontological discomfort" (Hume 322). This is mainly due to the presence of fantastic elements and futuristic extrapolation that are so common in contemporary fiction. Another reason for uncertainty is the target of attack which appears nebulous due to "either ... multiplication of targets or through unarticulated but somehow implied targets" and is sometimes difficult to recognize (Hume 323). Therefore, Hume continues, "[t]hese relatively unfocused satires force readers to articulate their own values" instead of being forcibly imposed the values of the author (324), which results in complexities impossible in traditional satires. "Diffused" satire is more sophisticated, more nuanced, "less judgmental, more provocative of doubt and questions, sometimes self-reflexive" (325) and consequently more appropriate for the postmodern fiction which distrusts any moral certainties.

As we may conclude from the review of the various theories on satire and the evolution of views and attitudes towards it from the second half of the twentieth century until the present time, satire has been and still is a controversial and complex concept and a matter for an ongoing debate. However, as some

contemporary scholars, like Weisenburger and Hume prove, satire is not in any way antagonistic to the principles of postmodernism. On the contrary, it is clearly one of the perfect vehicles for the expression of postmodernist preoccupations and ideas due to the complexity it engenders. Obviously, satire is not “dead” despite Worcester’s predictions. Instead, it is more and more present in the works of contemporary writers.⁷

My brief outline of theories on satire is far from offering a complete review of them as this kind of study would exceed the scope of this work. However, it provides the necessary theoretical basis for the development of the arguments I will present in the following section, in particular, the examination of satire written by George Saunders based on the analysis of his three short stories “The Escape from Spiderhead,” “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “Home.”

2.3. George Saunders: a postmodern satirist

George Saunders entered the American literary arena in the 1990s and almost immediately was recognized by critics and scholars as one of the most promising contemporary writers. From the very beginning, his works obtained the status of satire, regarded as “savage” and “biting” (Neeper 282) by some, while “sharp” but humane (Sanai) by others.

However, in recent years most literary theorists’ attention turned towards the affective nature of Saunders’s satire. As Neeper explains, “George Saunders’s postmodern fiction serves as the exemplar for early twenty-first-century American satire’s new attention to affect – to empathy – [which] allows us to delineate a potent strand of the postmodern satiric aesthetic in the new millennium” (282).

Saunders’s emphasis on empathy is a recurrent trend in most of his works, which places his fiction within a general tendency, also recognized in the fiction of other contemporary American writers who, according to Neeper, “are practitioners of the so-called *New Sincerity* in American Fiction” (283). The term

⁷ Here we can mention such contemporary American satirists as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Chuck Palhniuk, George Saunders, Joshua Ferris, Karen Russell, and Jonathan Safran Foer to name just a few.

was coined by Kelly, according to whom “sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others” (199).

“New sincerity” fiction entered the literary stage in the last decade of the twentieth century and its most prominent representatives are considered Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace among others. Although George Saunders was not at first included in this list, in his essay “Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders’s New Sincerity,” Kelly identifies him as one of the leading participants of this trend pointing out that Saunders’s works are noticeable for his “emphasis on sincerity,” a sincerity of a new type, which, as Kelly explains in his essay “The New Sincerity,” invites the reader to actively participate in the text and to “judge the sincerity of the character’s, and the writer’s, words” (205) as the fiction belonging to this literary tendency is “ultimately defined by [its] undecidability and the affective response [it] invites and provokes in [its] readers” (206).

Therefore, Saunders’s satire, instead of being a corrective exposure of social faults and imperfections, as traditional satire would be, evokes a strong feeling of empathy in readers towards his characters rather than condemnation: “Saunders’s fiction only intends to place us in proper relation to our flawed fellow humans, and he abjures all other potential targets for satiric correction in his stories” (Neeper 287).

Miller, also draws our attention to the affective nature of Saunders’s satire, claiming that Saunders, along with other contemporary American satirists participate in the “affective turn” that is so noticeable in recent American literature (13). Following Kelly’s concept of “New Sincerity,” Miller believes that in contemporary American fiction irony is replaced by sincerity (13) and that Saunders’s works “encourage his reader to empathize with the victims of the injustices exposed in his stories – even in the instances where these victims are revealed to be active participants in the perpetuation of the injustices their narratives appear to satirize” (15).

George Saunders’s emphasis on sincerity and affection is also recognized by Alex Millen who asserts that his fiction receives special praise “for how it makes us *feel*” (127). Similarly, Emma Sullivan indicates that “in Saunders’s fiction, the potential cynicism of satire is checked by the sweetness of his unassuming narrators, and our attachment to them” (68) and Thaddaeus

Hadaway depicts Saunders's satire as "provoking empathy and hope [...] through [its] persuasive creation of affect" (88). Michael Basseler claims that "[t]he originality of George Saunders's writing might be described in terms of how it involves the reader emotionally and engages her in a compassionate relationship with the characters" (par.1). Finally, Amanda Bigler highlights George Saunders's and other contemporary writer's focus on "cultivat[ing] empathy for a character" in their fiction through the implementation of various narrative strategies for the purpose (18).

In addition to the empathetic reaction which Saunders's satiric fiction produces in the reader, another of its distinguishable traits is its questioning of the contemporary power relations within US society. As David Rando explains in his article "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class," "George Saunders peoples his stories with the losers of American history – the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history's winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth" (437). As the reader is lead towards empathizing with these characters, victims of social and political injustices, s/he is able to see "how cultural ideologies help to reconcile characters to their class positions" and how these ideologies perpetuate the long-standing myths, such as "the myth of American individualism and self-determination" (Rando 442 – 443).

Millen establishes a direct parallel between Saunders's satire and his examination of the effect of neoliberalism with its "wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights" on social reality, which is far too different from the idealized rhetoric (128). In his article, Millen draws our attention to some well-established credos of capitalist societies, such as the belief in positive thinking, self-improvement and freedom, which finally place all the responsibility upon the individual, who is consequently to praise for his/her achievements and to blame for failures. However, the real outcome of such firm convictions is the perpetuation of social inequalities, due to which the wealthy and affluent are always superior to the rest, as the capitalist ideology justifies their position. On the other hand, the less privileged are condemned for their defeat as those who did not manage to achieve fulfillment.

Miller is another scholar who emphasizes the political strain of Saunders's satire, stating that "his fiction interrogates the politics of the day" through "overt

political satire” directed towards “materialism and class anxiety” among other issues (15). Finally, according to Gillian Elizabeth Moore, Saunders’s works critically deconstruct “exceptionalist ideologies” as “Saunders’s narratives dramatize the failures of American exceptionalism by specifically targeting the claims to democratically free speech, social mobility, foundational myths of innocence and openness to diversity that permeate US nationalist discourse” (par. 3).

Following the different critical views, outlined above, we may conclude that the distinctiveness of Saunders’s fiction lies in his satire’s empathetic nature as well as his works’ overt interrogation of existing myths and ideologies. However, despite this unanimous recognition of Saunders’s satire as affective and sincere, disagreements arise when scholars approach the type of satire he writes. Thus, Hadaway attributes Saunders’s satire to the “generative” type, according to Weisenburger’s classification, as the empathy created by it arouses hope for change in the reader, being a possible, although not certain solution to social ills (39, 89). As affection gives a possibility of individual transformation, it, therefore, constitutes a hope for the society as well.

Neeper also considers Saunders’s satire to be “generative,” identifying its “moral, remedial, and salutary” effect on readers (284). He similarly claims that the main intention of Saunders’s fiction is its “empathetic improvement of [the] audience” (285), making reference to another scholar, Sarah Pogell, who also recognizes the moral nature of Saunders’s works asserting his “unapologetic advocacy of humanist ideals” and stating that he “still has hope for this country, the world, and the human race” (qtd. in Neeper 285). However, it is important to note that although, according to these critics, Saunders’s satire may be classified as “generative,” they still highlight its difference from traditional satire, as it cannot be referred to as corrective, its empathetic nature being the key to its understanding.

Miller, on the other hand, using the terminology suggested by Hume, appreciates the “diffused” nature of Saunders’s satire. Although he agrees with the scholars previously mentioned about the affective strain of Saunders’s fiction, he considers that it cannot be classified as “generative” as it does not present a high moral norm according to which society should be reformed. On the contrary, he believes that Saunders satire is (in Hume’s words) “generated by an acute

perception of moral and ontological uncertainty” (Hume 325) as it avoids imposing any values as an alternative to those satirized (Miller 14).

Finally, George Saunders’s belonging to the literary movement of postmodernism is another controversial issue. Miller, announcing the “diffused” type of Saunders’s satire argues that the age of postmodernism in US literature is over and it is time to reconsider our understanding of contemporary literary trends. He makes reference to other scholars, such as McLaughlin who declares the beginning of “post-postmodernism” starting from mid-80s; Williams who names the current period “contemporary” due to the “levelling effects of globalization;” McGurl who offers the term “the program era” as an alternative to refer to the recent “shift towards literary institutionalization” as a consequence of creative writing programs popular in the US in the last years; and finally Christian Moreau who suggests the term “cosmodernism” to reflect the response of contemporary fiction to the current geopolitics (Miller 12). Finally, he names Rachel Greenwald Smith who identifies the “affective turn” in contemporary American literature as the one that breaks away from the postmodernist writing (Miller 13). Miller himself opts for the term “post-postmodernism” as more suitable to speak about the changes that have taken place in the literary arena, especially, due to the emergence of “sincere” fiction.

Other scholars, on the other hand, argue for a clear connection of Saunders’s fiction with postmodernism. Thus, Neeper refers to Saunders as “a second-generation postmodern satirist” claiming that “Saunders’s postmodernist affiliations are widely documented and vigorously maintained” (283). He cites other critics, for example, Pogell, who assert the presence in Saunders’s fiction of many “postmodern tropes like self-conscious narrator-protagonist, near-futuristic settings, broad parody ... making him the natural heir to such old-guard postmodern greats as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vonnegut, and Barthelme” (qtd. in Neeper 283). Rando is another scholar who pays attention to the wide presence of “postmodernist techniques” in Saunders’s works.

In line with Neeper and other scholars mentioned above, I will refer to George Saunders as a postmodernist writer in this work, as his fiction clearly displays some of the most characteristic postmodern traits, which I hope to be able to show through my analysis of his short stories. Regarding Saunders’s satire, although his fiction perfectly fits the definition of “diffused” satire proposed

by Hume, as many of his short stories are futuristic dystopias, full of exaggeration and fantastic elements, lacking an easily-identifiable target of satire and contributing to our “ontological discomfort” through their complexities, my intention is to show that it also partakes of some features of the “degenerative” type, according to Weisenburger’s classification, due to its capacity to question and destabilize long-standing myths and beliefs, “subvert[ing] hierarchies of values.” Thus, in the following chapter, through my analysis of the three short stories I have chosen for this work, I intend to illustrate how Saunders’s distinctive use of empathy and affect in his satiric fiction contributes to undermining of some of the core US myths, the main of which is the myth of American exceptionalism. However, the complexity of Saunders’s satire, as I hope will be demonstrated, lies in the fact that despite his obvious questioning of the leading metanarratives dominant in the US society, his satire still eludes a clear-cut target or discernible solutions, inviting the reader to become an active participant and decide what interpretation his work deserves.

3. George Saunders’s satire at work

As has been mentioned above, the objective of this chapter is to show how George Saunders’s satire questions and subverts the leading US metanarratives based on the country’s well-established myths. The principal myth, to which I will pay special attention, is the myth of American exceptionalism. As Gillian Elizabeth Moore explains, “US American exceptionalism is typically associated with sweeping grand narratives and self-confident myth-making” (pr. 1).

At the time of its foundation the United States was perceived as a Promised Land by its inhabitants. The myth of the “City upon the Hill” entered the imagination of the country’s puritan founders who saw themselves as chosen by God to establish a nation that would be the example and the light for the rest of the world. As Wilber W. Caldwell notes in his book *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority*, “the American national identity was built on audacious visions of chosen-ness, destiny, and mission” (8). This belief in their “chosen-ness” determined the conviction of US people that all the ideas and ideals proclaimed by their country were infallible, becoming the “Absolute Truth”

for all (8). Caldwell claims that such ideas of superiority “still engage the American mind” today (6).

The analysis of the three short stories “Escape from Spiderhead,” “The Semplica Girl Diaries” and “Home” that I will provide in this section is closely related to this idea of American exceptionalism. Although in every story the myth that is questioned is different, as Heike Paul explains, the myth of American exceptionalism is “the dominant ideological paradigm” under the arch of which all the other myths appear (14). Thus, Saunders’s subversion of these discourses contributes to undermining the leading idea of US superiority that could be considered the greatest metanarrative in the country’s ideology.

3.1. “Escape from Spiderhead”

This short story is a dystopia, set somewhere in the near future or an alternative present-day reality. It deals with a young convict, Jeff, who serves his sentence for murder in a research facility where new drugs are experimented on humans. These drugs – such as Verbaluce™, which enhances the person’s vocabulary, making it ampler and more sophisticated; Vivistif™, which increases sexual pleasure and desire; VeriTalk™, which forces a person to tell the truth even against his/her will; Darkenflox™, which causes deep depression and suicidal impulses; and many others – are administered through a MobiPak™, surgically implanted into the person’s body, and manipulate the person’s capacities, mood, thoughts and attitudes. Through this “one of the most frightening of [his] stories” (Millen 139), which at first glance looks “like science-fiction ... but ... turns out to belong to our world as well” (F. Moore 51) Saunders explores such complex ideas as freedom, the influence of science on our lives and human relationships within power systems.

The first of these ideas, freedom, is also a deep-rooted belief that holds one of the leading positions in US people’s imagination. In the United States, the conviction of every human’s right to freedom became dominant from the moment when the first pilgrims stepped on the new land, which they considered to be granted by God, to be “the promise of future freedom and salvation” (Paul 144). This idea of liberty as an indisputable right of every citizen in America has perpetuated in people’s minds since then.

For most Americans their freedom is unquestionable, and therefore, as Millen, quoting John Rapley, explains, “freedom ... resonates so strongly in the common-sense framework that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open a door to the masses,’” turning into “a sugared pill [while] rhetoric is doing the sugaring” (137). Although freedom appears to be undeniable and the dominant discourse convinces people that they are free in their choices and decisions, the world depicted by Saunders makes us question these taken-for-granted truths.

In “Escape from Spiderhead,” the characters, apparently, preserve their indisputable right to freedom. Every time an experimental drug is administered to them, they have to grant their permission, saying “acknowledge.” Thus, they appear to be in control of everything that happens to them. On the other hand, the drugs are so powerful that their free will ends with accepting their administration. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, a young man of a lower social position, judging by his vocabulary, is participating in an experiment in which he is required to describe the garden he observes. At first, he qualifies it as “really nice” and “super-clear” (“Spiderhead” 45), using the informal style, which represents his normal speech. However, as Verbaluce™ begins altering his capacity to express himself, we notice a change: his words improve and the garden turns into “a sort of embodiment of the domestic dreams forever intrinsic to human consciousness” (“Spiderhead” 46). Although the ideas remain similar in a way, the vocabulary modifies our perception of the protagonist, whose own personality disappears behind his elevated diction. As Millen puts it, “the narrator finds his voice [but] he also loses it. His vocabulary expands, but it is not really his; we might say the same for his freedom” (138). Another drug, ED289/290 is capable of altering the protagonist’s sentiments, making him deeply in love with two other convicts, first with Heather and then with Rachel. Thus, we, as readers, observe how Jeff’s capacity to speak, feel and love is manipulated throughout the story dehumanizing him, as he is left devoid of any control over his own self.

Moreover, freedom in the story is also questioned in a wider way. When we learn about the crimes committed by some of the convicts, we cannot ignore the circumstances that influenced those crimes. Jeff, of lower-class background, committed a passionate crime, killing a peer simply because he was losing in a fight. Social influence, so important in conflictive environments, is brought to the fore when he recalls: “Around us, watching, was basically everybody we knew.

Then he had me on my back. Someone laughed. Someone said, ‘Shit, poor Jeff.’” (“Spiderhead” 76). Rachel, in the past probably another difficult teenager from a family of low social standing, had been arrested several times for drugs and prostitution. After various intents of rehabilitation, she committed “a triple murder – her dealer, the dealer’s sister, the dealer’s sister’s boyfriend” (“Spiderhead” 73). We can only imagine the reasons which conducted her to the crime, social factors definitely playing an important role. Therefore, Saunders’s presentation of his characters is ambiguous: they certainly deserve disapprobation, while it is clear that they are not totally in control of their own destiny. This idea is further developed at the end of the story when Jeff commits suicide in order to save Rachel from being administered Darkenflox™ and his spirit hovers over the research center as its rightful judge:

... killers all, all bad, I guess, although, in that instant, I saw it differently. At birth, they’d been charged by God with the responsibility of growing into total fuck-ups. Had they chosen this? Was it their fault, as they tumbled out of the womb? Had they aspired, covered in placental blood, to grow into harmers, dark forces, life-enders? In that first holy instant of breath/awareness (tiny hands clutching and unclutching), had it been their fondest hope to render (via gun, knife, or brick) some innocent family bereft? No; and yet their crooked destinies had lain dormant within them, seeds awaiting water and light to bring forth the most violent, life-poisoning flowers, said water/light actually being the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation that would transform them (transform us!) into earth’s offal, murderers, and foul us with the ultimate, unwashable transgression (“Spiderhead” 78-79).

Another of the ideas explored in the story is human relations within power systems and it is closely connected with the idea of freedom discussed above. As Clare Hayes-Brady notes, “‘Spiderhead’ offers an unusually savage microcosm of the arbitrary power systems Saunders’s work investigates, showing both the poisonous nature of power and the challenge of maintaining a coherent self in the face of such unpredictable brutality” (pr. 2).

The experiments are carried out by two people, Abnesti, the leading scientist in the research facility, and Verlaine, his assistant, two “comically benevolent scientists [who] torture ... and supervise” the prisoners, as David Huebert refers to them (par. 1). They are the ones who administer experimental drugs to the convicts, carefully registering the effects. Although, as has been mentioned above, the inmates maintain an illusion of control over the administration of drugs, accepting it with the word “acknowledge,” their

dependence on the scientists' final decision is obvious. When Jeff refuses to allow the application of Darkenfloxx™ to Heather, Abnesti makes use of his personal influence and power on the young man, first dropping hints about Heather's "violent and sordid" past ("Spiderhead" 67) and then emotionally blackmailing the protagonist, offering some extra time on his skype conversations with his mother which Jeff finds impossible to reject.

However, these power relations are not as simple as they might appear at first glance. As we see from the story, the necessity to administer Darkenfloxx™ is not Abnesti's decision, it is the decision of the Protocol Committee who considered the results of the previous experiment, in which Jeff only had to decide whether he would choose either Rachel or Heather as the person to receive Darkenfloxx™, "too subjective" ("Spiderhead" 65). Therefore, the Committee opted for the administration of the drug to the girls independently of the protagonist's choice in order to observe Jeff's reaction to Heather's state under Darkenfloxx™ and evaluate if he still harbors any romantic feelings for her, previously induced by ED289/290. When, after the experiment which unexpectedly results in Heather's death, Jeff refuses to approve the administration of Darkenfloxx™ to Rachel, we see that there is greater power beyond Abnesti, who, dependent on the demands of the Committee, decides to obtain a waiver that would void Jeff's decision. Here we clearly visualize the ruthless system which operates over Abnesti and Verlaine, turning them into mere puppets manipulated by superior forces. Thus, human freedom and will appear irrevocably subdued to greater powers.

While human beings are mere puppets manipulated by the system, science is the strings used for their manipulation. As the power system, within its exceptionalist conception, is justified as the bearer of the "Absolute Truth," it uses science as one of its reliable instruments which attribute superior meaning to any action however repugnant it may be. As Juliana Nalerio, quoting Foucault, asserts, "[t]he establishment of science as the official discourse of knowledge – 'an indefinite discourse that observes, describes and establishes the "facts"' – endow[s] the medical/scientific community with alarming power" (97 – 98). When Heather kills herself under the influence of Darkenfloxx™, Verlaine explains that it was nobody's fault: "It's not even us ..., it's science" ("Spiderhead" 74). Science and its discoveries become the ultimate good worth human life and human

suffering. Abnesti, in his intent to convince Jeff to approve the experiment on Rachel, tells him that “[a] few minutes of unpleasantness for Rachel [are] years of relief for literally tens of thousands of underloving or overloving folks” (“Spiderhead” 74). Thus, human life becomes an offering on the altar of the possible benefits achieved through scientific breakthroughs, even if these benefits are rather questionable, because, as we learn earlier in the story, the final objective is to create a drug that would be able to alter any person’s feelings. Abnesti, explaining the importance of the experiment to Jeff, exults:

We have unlocked a mysterious eternal secret. What a fantastic game-changer! Say someone can’t love? Now he or she can. We can make him. Say someone loves too much? Or loves someone deemed unsuitable by his or her caregiver? We can tone that shit right down. Say someone is blue, because of true love? We step in, or his or her caregiver does: blue no more. No longer, in terms of emotional controllability, are we ships adrift (“Spiderhead” 57).

However, despite Abnesti’s elation, the crude reality that emerges from his words is that the final objective of the experiment is to gain complete control over human will and personality.

Saunders’s satire is complex in this story. As it is typical of postmodern satire, its targets are difficult to pin down. Futuristic settings, the presence of irony, which is mainly constructed on the incongruence between such inhumane behavior as causing human torturing and death and Abnesti and Verlaine’s apparent incapacity to recognize the wrong they are inflicting; Abnesti and Verlaine’s grotesque personalities as their blindness to the suffering of others reaches incomprehensible heights completely justified by science and its needs, all point at the satiric nature of the story. However, it is not easy to identify its purpose. We could argue that the main objective of the story is to ridicule the cruelty and insensibility which Abnesti and Verlaine reveal through their attitude towards the convicts whom they use for experiments. However, although they clearly could be considered the target, in the story, Abnesti is presented as a loving father of five children and a supervisor who remembers the prisoners’ birthdays and takes care of them to the extent to which his work allows him to do it. Although we cannot sympathize with him, the only thing we can reproach him is his blind belief in goodness of scientific progress, which he considers to be the highest moral standard, subduing all other human values to it. Ironically, he is

sincere when he laments Heather's death on the one hand and considers it a necessary sacrifice on the other:

This is science. In science we explore the unknown. It was unknown what five minutes on Darkenfloxx™ would do to Heather. Now we know. The other thing we know, per Varlaine's assessment of your commentary, is that you really, for sure, do not harbor any residual romantic feelings for Heather. That's a big deal, Jeff. A beacon of hope at a sad time for all ("Spiderhead" 71).

Here we have an example of "sincere satire," suggested by Neeper. As Hayes-Brady notes, "Saunders is steadfast in his championing of the individuals who make up the system, it is the system itself he finds fault with" (par.2). Therefore, our attention switches from Abnesti to society, as it is the society with its unshakeable beliefs in the "Absolute Truth" it worships that produces people like Abnesti, with their values and principles subjected to the dominant power structures that possess the right to manipulate others. In the light of this discovery, such ideas as our unquestionable right to freedom are deemed naïve and dubious. Hence, as has been mentioned above, Saunders's satire undermines our fixed understanding of such concepts as power, freedom and the indisputable benefits of scientific progress and using Weisenburger's words, "interrogates and subverts authority" (6). On the other hand, it provokes "our ontological discomfort" (Hume 322), as it leaves us without any definite answers, making us question our fixed understanding of the world.

3.2. "The Semplica Girl Diaries"

"The Semplica Girl Diaries" is another of Saunders's short stories, which, like "Escape from Spiderhead," displays futuristic or alternative present-day settings. David Galef points out that the story "is arresting in part because of its near-future scenario" (148) and Jessica Norledge identifies it as "an exaggerated future vision of a materialistic and covetous American society" (77). On the other hand, Kasia Boddy insists that despite the presence of "fantastical elements, Saunders nevertheless depicts a recognizable America of ever-increasing 'work-and-spend', and debt" (par. 7). Saunders himself indicates that the culture pictured in the story is an exaggerated version of contemporary US reality, although "[i]t is more intense. It's more direct in enacting its desires. It [is] richer

... it's taste is more refined and strange and perverse/decadent. It is a more demanding, narcissistic culture" ("This Week in Fiction"). Thus, despite the presence of fantasy in the story, the contemporary United States are easily recognizable: the narrator uses an OfficeMax notebook for his diary, drives a ParkAvenue car, pays with Visa, AmEx and Discover credit cards and dreams of travelling to Hawaii or Europe. The narrative becomes an even clearer representation of our world with the protagonist's words "Please know I was a person like you" ("Semplica Girl" 109). Again, the ubiquitous presence of irony and fantastic elements in the story clearly points to satire. However, the similarity of the world it portrays to contemporary America makes this satire more unsettling.

As well as "Escape from Spiderhead," "The Semplica Girl Diaries" satirizes the domineering ideology of exceptionalism, deeply rooted in US society. However, in this story, exploring such concepts as the reality of people's freedom and the essence of human relationships within power systems, Saunders links them to the long-standing myth of the American Dream or the myth of the Self-Made Man, showing, how, skillfully employed by power structures, it manipulates people according to the needs of capitalism. In the United States, this is another myth that has been perpetuated since the time of the country's foundation. As Paul explains, "[b]esides notions of religious predestination, political liberty, and social harmony, the imagined economic promises of the 'new world' constitute another important dimension of American exceptionalism and US foundational mythology" (367). Traditionally, US society saw one of its main distinctions from Europe in "the notion that upward mobility in US society is unlimited regardless of inherited social and financial status" (Paul 367). This notion still dominates most American people's imagination, as they firmly believe in the equality of opportunities existing in their country for all. However, as a consequence of this conviction, "hegemonic versions of this powerful myth – or fairy tale – ... still very successfully obscure its role in legitimizing and perpetuating immense structural social inequalities" (Paul 405). This idea is clearly visible in "The Semplica Girl Diaries."

The protagonist and the narrator of the story is a lower-middle-class family man, father of three children, who decides to embark on the project of writing a diary in order to allow "kids & grandkids, even greatgrandkids, whoever, all are

welcome (!) to see how life really was/is now” (“Semplica Girl” 109). The story, narrated through his informal, full of ellipsis, diary entries, illustrates his vision of the world, revealing his unconditional belief in the promises of the American Dream. From the beginning of the story, the family’s low economic level is emphasized: the bumper falls off the protagonist’s car when he picks up his children from school and the history teacher helpfully “retriev[ing] the bumper ... sa[id] he too once had car whose bumper fell off, when poor, in college” (“Semplica Girl” 111), clearly pointing at the family’s inferior status. Nonetheless, the narrator, although frustrated and disillusioned, maintains hope in his family’s bright future: “Have a feeling and have always had a feeling that ... good things will happen for us!” (“Semplica Girl” 112).

However, further in the story we learn that the protagonist’s unshakeable confidence in the possibility to climb up the social ladder as a result of hard work is nothing more but a product of his blind confidence in his country’s convincing rhetoric. Comparing himself to the affluence of the rich Torrini family and feeling “dopey and inadequate” (“Semplica Girl” 118), he continues envisaging his future social and economic growth which he hopes to achieve through diligence: “And when we finally do get our own bridge, trout, treehouse, SGs, etc., at least will know we really earned them...” (“Semplica Girl” 118). Importantly, this conviction is perpetuated from generation to generation: after the incident with the bumper, Lilly, the protagonist’s oldest child “put all in perspective, by saying who cares about stupid bumper, we’re going to get a new car soon anyway, when rich, right?” (“Semplica Girl” 111), revealing an attitude instilled into her by her parents and society. As Gillian Elizabeth Moore points out,

the narrator bolsters imagery of an exceptional America, where class background is no obstacle, and critical dissent is merely the whining of self-made failures in a fair and generous system. Under this narrative, success is inevitably the result of hard work rather than circumstance (par.5).

Nevertheless, self-delusion is the only foundation of these claims, as real-life examples, like the protagonist’s father who worked hard all his life but achieved only a “job almost as good as original job he had lost” (“Semplica Girl” 126), prove otherwise. Moreover, ironically, when the narrator manages to improve his social status and his prayers not to “fall further behind peers”

("Semplica Girl" 121) are answered, it happens as a consequence of his winning the lottery rather than obtaining a promotion at work.

Another concept, closely linked with the myth of the American Dream and its bountiful promises, is social status. Those in power are the ones who set the rules of the game, making others rush into following them. Thus, in the society depicted in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," one of the most notorious indicators of somebody's privileged position is the presence of SGs – poor immigrant women hung by means of a special wire passing through their brains – displayed in that person's yard. Admiring the yards in a wealthy neighborhood the narrator enjoys the view: "There in the dark, fifteen (I counted) SGs hanging silently, white smocks in moonlight. Breathtaking" ("Semplica Girl" 120).

Not surprisingly, after winning the lottery, the protagonist and his wife decide to acquire the most popular ornaments, including four SGs, for their yard instead of liquidating their credit card debts. The SGs, a valuable status indicator, immediately change the narrator's perception of himself: "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" ("Semplica Girl" 132). Other people's attitudes to the protagonist change as well. His colleagues admire the photos of the yard, he is suddenly addressed by those who never noticed him before and even the Torrinis grant their presence to his house to appreciate the decoration. Curiously, no one, except Eva, the narrator's eight-year-old daughter, seems to notice the unfair and inhumane treatment of SGs.

Therefore, the idea of freedom vs. oppression is intimately related to the one of social status and achievement of affluence. Miller warns that "reading 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' as merely science fiction risks overlooking its deeper indictment of the average American consumer's role within the system of globalized oppression that affords us the luxuries to which we have been conditioned to aspire" (22).

Displaying human beings, suspended in yards by means of a wire surgically passed through their brains, exemplifies one of the cruelest pleasures possible. However, the whole society approves of it, regarding it as innocuous. In response to Eva's protests against having SGs in their yard the rest of the family explains that the SGs "applied for it" because "where they're from, the

opportunities are not so good” and “it helps them take care of the people they love” (“Semplica Girl” 134). Thus, the obvious subjection of one human being to the will of another turns into a generous act of providing for poor women whose conditions in their countries of origin are even more unfavorable. The fact that one kind of oppression substitutes another is widely ignored. Moreover,

‘Semplica Diaries’ is more invested in representing a late-capitalist, ostensibly politically correct America. This society nods toward the Semplica Girls’ origins: children are encouraged to proudly and openly discuss SGs’ multicultural ‘background info’ at school show-and-tell. This supposedly liberal vision is undercut by the objectifying content of this ‘info,’ which erases these women’s abject, traumatic histories of wretched poverty, illness, and sex slavery (G. Moore par. 9).

It is important to notice that SG’s thoughts and attitudes are always represented by other characters in the story. The protagonist, admiring them in somebody else’s yard and hearing their sighs and foreign phrases, imagines that they are “saying good night” (“Semplica Girl” 121). We learn their stories through the information provided by the Greenway company which organizes the decoration. We also see them through the interview Lilly has carried out as part of a school project and through Eva’s sad paintings. However, we never hear anything from SGs themselves. Norledge points out that “[t]hroughout the text the Semplica girls are denied speech or thought” (92). This silencing is an important symbol of oppression as a person who cannot speak cannot exercise his/her free will. Nalerio, in turn, argues that

The dehumanization of the Semplica Girls as product and docile bodies that can be bought, sold, and strung out on a line as an adornment is mirrored by their place in the narrative – they are not even characters in their own right. In our diarist’s account they are purely background, never really stepping into the foreground... (95).

Like in “Escape from Spiderhead,” the apparent oppressors are the characters in the story who exalt at displaying SGs in their yard. However, power relations in both stories are much more complex and on closer examination, we clearly see that the oppressors are also the oppressed. Miller asserts that “[t]he narrator, like many of his readers, is a victim of the ideologies of consumerism” (21), while Nalerio claims that “Saunders reveals discourse as one of the mechanisms used to rationalize the irrational and humanize the profoundly inhumane” (101). Saunders himself explains the narrator’s dependence on the

dominant ideology which makes him blind to cruelty: “His heart is in the right place but he is awash in the cultural mindset, and so, when he decides, ‘I must do a good thing for my family,’ he reaches into a flawed bag of tricks so to speak” (“On ‘Tenth of December’”). Thus, like Abnesti and Verlaine in the previous story, the protagonist and his family are mere puppets manipulated by the powers of capitalism.

The morality in the story is further complicated by the fact that SGs actually did apply for their job, although, obviously, the reasons that forced them to do it were complete desperation and misery. When the narrator explains to Eva that for SGs this work is a way to provide for their families, he is undeniably right, although it does not undermine the savagery of displaying human beings as ornaments. When Eva frees the SGs from her family’s yard and they escape, the worries expressed by the narrator about the women’s future are not without foundation as, after their escape, the SGs become illegal immigrants persecuted by the system. Eva, on the other hand, having liberated the SGs has brought on her family’s economic collapse. The sad irony is that a humane act entails disastrous consequences for all. In Saunders’s own words, “[a]nother thing the story ended up being about, at least for me, was this notion that you can do everything right and still bring the whole house down...” (“This Week in Fiction”).

Therefore, in “Semplica Girl Diaries,” Saunders creates a complex satirical web, whose targets, like in “Escape from Spiderhead” are difficult to identify with certainty. Again, apparently, one of the targets is the narrator with his distorted values. However, as Nepper explains,

Saunders radically destabilizes the simplistic satiric method in “The Semplica Girl Diaries” so that in the end what Saunders demands from readers is not the censuring of the story’s narrator but our empathetic understanding of a character who has been led to detestable acts for reasons we might judge to be good and worthy (295).

Thus, Saunders’s “sincere satire” enters the stage, as the protagonist is shown as a loving father and husband who is ready to sacrifice everything for the well-being of his family. Addressing the reader, the narrator remarks: “You may say, safe in your future time: Wouldn’t it be better to simply not do thing you can’t afford to do? Easy for you to say! You are not here, in our world, with kids, kids you love, while other people are doing good things for their kids” (125). Although,

we, as readers, may reproach him his attitude, we cannot deny that opposing the whole society is not an easy task and can only hope we would act more justly in a similar situation. Again, the satire in the story rebounds on the power systems and their exceptionalist rhetoric that condition social behavior. Thus, according to Miller, the story “manages to suspend its judgment of the consumers who collectively embody consumer culture by presenting their competitive struggles as an insidious, though inevitable, feature of contemporary American life” (21). Norledge, in turn, asserts that “[m]aterialism is the driving satirical impetus of ‘The Semplica Girl Diaries’ exemplified by the exaggeration of real-world objects and the ironic cross-world mappings of familiar societal discourse structures, such as wishes for relief or advancement” (88).

Satirizing the hollowness of the American Dream and the pursuit of a better social position, related to it, Saunders undermines the dominant rhetoric and values that govern society and make it blind to injustices it sustains. It is the rhetoric, which justifies the most repugnant attitudes and impulses in the hands of the powerful, disguises atrocities as charity. As a consequence, inhumane behavior is seen as benevolent, making the protagonist wonder at the escape of his SGs: “Why would she do? Why would she ruin it all, leave our yard? ... What in the world was she seeking? What could she want so much...?” (“Semplica Girl” 167). Again, “hierarchies of value” are subverted, and our certainties are undermined, inviting us, as readers, to participate in the final conclusions as Saunders’s satire resists any definite answers.

3.3. “Home”

“Home” is another dystopia located somewhere in an alternative present-day reality. It recounts two days in the life of a war veteran, Mike, who returns home from his mission. Unlike the two previously discussed stories, it lacks any futuristic elements, this way exhibiting an even more disturbing similarity with the contemporary US. Although some details mentioned in the story, like MiiVOX_{MAX} and MiiVOX_{MIN} (two products which the protagonist sees in a store wondering about their purpose) and the war in which the narrator participated, Al-Raz (sounding strikingly similar to Iraq), displace the setting to some unknown world, the story, in general, depicts an easily-recognizable contemporary United States.

Again, American exceptionalism and its dominant rhetoric emerge as the focus of this narrative. However, in “Home,” Saunders brings to light such issues as war discourse and the belief in cultural superiority, showing how they corrode people’s minds and personalities.

Warfare rhetoric is presented as closely linked to the idea of exceptional America, as the reason for any war and human suffering related to it is justified by the righteous image of the country, which holds “Absolute Truth.” As Caldwell, quoting the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., explains,

Those who are convinced that they have a monopoly on Truth always feel that they are saving the world when they slaughter heretics. Their object remains the making of the world over in the image of their dogmatic ideology – their goal is a monolithic world, organized on the principle of the infallibility of a single creed (8).

Thus, ideology becomes a useful political instrument, adaptable to wider national interests at home and abroad. People, on the other hand, manipulated by the indoctrinating discourse of exceptionalism become obedient implementers of necessary ideas, losing their true selves as a result.

This is exactly what we see in “Home.” Mike, returning from his military assignments in Al-Raz, finds his country leading a peaceful life far away from the brutalities of real combat. However, war, is clearly part of society’s political discourse fervently supported by some and treated with indifference by others. Thus, the in-laws of Mike’s sister, Renee, are, undoubtedly, champions of the purpose, possibly in their intent to reproduce the ideas popular in the higher social circle in which they aspire to be accepted. On the other hand, two salespeople, whom Mike meets in the store where MiiVOX_{MAX} and MiiVOX_{MIN} are sold, show their complete ignorance about and lack of interest in anything related to the war as they are not even certain if the war continues or whether there are two wars or one.

These superficial attitudes are in stark contrast with the protagonist’s psychological exhaustion which results from his deeper understanding of the true essence of war. His inner thoughts reveal his emotional devastation: “Mom, Mommy, let me kneel at your feet and tell you what me and Smelton and Ricky G did at Al-Raz, and then you can stroke my hair and tell me anybody would’ve

done the exact same thing” (“Home” 192). Here the protagonist is presented as a young person desperately lost in the destructiveness of war experiences.

However, the idea of war is at least superficially praised by society, hence everybody’s hollow gratitude for the veteran’s service. Importantly, the protagonist never responds to these expressions of recognition, probably because people’s indifference contrasts too strongly with the deep psychological damage the war inflicts on an individual as the perception of warfare rhetoric irreversibly changes in real combat. According to Richard E. Lee,

The ... story’s ideological center is one that we can see developing from the returned soldier’s refusal of the expected response to ‘thanks’. That core is a questioning of patriotic service, of American exceptionalism, and of a belief that things are going very well in the fading empire. The soldier ‘prefers not to answer’ because there is no answer that does not ignite questions about purpose: about what ‘service’ means, about belief, about imperialism, and about sacrifice – work – for disturbing purposes (par. 5).

In addition, ironically, everybody’s apparent gratitude is not an impediment for their cruel attitude towards the protagonist. His sister refuses to let him hold her baby on the insistence of her husband, and the whole family appears at the door of Mike’s ex-girlfriend and her husband as if in order to protect them from him. He is rejected by almost everybody: even his mother, who is undoubtedly happy at his return, constantly mentions his war experience in hope to achieve her own purposes, such as remaining at the house from which she is evicted. As a consequence, the protagonist “goes from disillusioned to severely alienated” (Galef 149) towards the end of the story.

Cultural superiority is another concept which Saunders explores in “Home.” This superiority is inevitably linked to social status on the one hand and the general exceptionalist discourse on the other. Renee’s in-laws are a clear example of people absorbed by the idea of class and national supremacy, which is intensified by their desire to be accepted by the higher classes. According to the narrator satirical remark, “Ryan’s parents had sonorous/confident voices that seemed to have been fabricated out of previous, less sonorous/confident voices by means of sudden money” (“Home” 174). In the episode of Mike’s visiting Renee’s house, we see her husband’s parents discussing the generosity of some affluent family, the Flemings, “who flew a planeload of [Russian] babies ... with harelips” in order to save them “from being disabled in a collapsing nation [and

to] set [them] for life in the greatest country in the world" ("Home" 175) and hoping that one day if their current business prospers, it will provide them with sufficient money in order to be able to save some Russian children. This desire to be charitable is strikingly undermined later in the story when Mike and Renee's mother, evicted from her house, is denied the opportunity to stay with her daughter and son-in-law due to her inferior social position.

Nonetheless, like in "Escape from Spiderhead" and in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the oppressors are also the oppressed, in this case by means of language. As Hayes-Brady explains, "the ironic quasi-metafictional devices with which Saunders peppers his voices move away from being an artistic commentary, becoming a socio-political analysis of how language and linguistic control liberates and restricts society..." (par. 22).

Thus, although economically powerless, Mike's mother, Harris (her partner) and Mike himself are not constrained by the necessity to use speech patterns imposed on them by their social status. Ryan's parents, on the other hand, are compelled to comply with the norms which rule people's behavior in higher classes, "overcompensating for their low origins" (Sullivan 70). In Sullivan's words, "[t]he supposedly impoverished vernacular is the source of clarity and authenticity, while those forms associated with class privilege are shown to be deeply inauthentic" (73).

Therefore, in "Home," Saunders's satire successfully subverts such ideas intimately related to the discourse of exceptionalism as the glorifying nature of warfare and national or social superiority. Again, however, at first glance, it may seem that the main targets of satire are the people that populate the narrative. Nevertheless, on closer examination, it becomes evident that the people in the story are mere propagandists of domineering rhetoric, too absorbed in it to be able to perceive its deficiencies. Although they deserve to be satirized as individuals, Saunders's satire strikes society in general with its postulates that promote cruelty and extreme individualism, in such a way that even family members reject each other on the demand of their new social status. As a consequence, the belief in the benevolence of war and in the superiority of one human being over another due to their social and economic position fade into insignificance, diminished by Saunders's satirical effect. Thus, again, in "Home,"

like in the previous stories, grand narratives of American culture become irrevocably subverted.

4. Conclusions

The objective of this work was to analyze George Saunders's use of satire in his fiction, using the example of three of his short stories from *Tenth of December* collection, in order to identify the type of satire present in these stories and its relation to the postmodernist movement as well as the empathetic response it provokes in readers. However, my principal aim was to show how the satirical effect produced by Saunders's fiction rebounds on America's long-standing grand narratives, subverting their validity and significance.

As I hope to have been able to show in my work, Saunders's satire undoubtedly belongs to the type which Neepor identifies as "sincere" due to its clear evocation of affection, even when his characters appear to be worthy targets of satire. The short stories "Escape from Spiderhead" and "The Semplica Girl Diaries" definitely produce a strong empathetic response towards their characters whose actions, on the one hand, surely deserve our condemnation, while we have to simultaneously acknowledge the motifs which determine their decision. Saunders's capacity to foreground his characters' humanity undoubtedly increases the complexity of his satire, making it less straightforward and more ambiguous. In "Home" we, as readers, definitely sympathize more with lower-class characters, like the protagonist, his mother and her partner, deploring the other characters' actions, while still being able to recognize social pressure as the engine of their behavior. Thus, although, affection is not in some cases the logical response to some of Saunders's characters' attitudes, the author's focus on social, political and cultural reasons that lead people to such practices make his satire more nuanced.

Furthermore, George Saunders's satire may undeniably be classified applying Hume's term "diffused." It certainly acts at a much lower intensity level, which is the main reason for its empathetic effect and complexity. Fantastic elements or signs of an alternative reality, present in all three works, fill Saunders's satire with ambiguity, inviting us, as readers, to identify the possible targets of his works. The low intensity level at which Saunders's satire functions

is also evident in the lack of authorial intervention into his works. It is always the task of the reader to discern the possible meanings implied by his satire, while the authorial voice, fiercely pointing at human vices and follies is absent. This lack of authorial participation is unquestionably a way to “destabiliz[e] our ontological certainties” (Hume 324) as it leaves us without any evident answers.

However, despite the possibility to classify Saunders’s satire as “diffused,” my primary intention was to show that it nevertheless partakes of the “degenerative” type suggested by Weisenburger. As is seen from the analysis of the three short stories, the empathetic response towards the characters shifts our attention from human imperfections and deficiencies to society in general and in particular to the grand narratives which represent the core manipulative force on which people’s ideas y conceptions are undeniably dependent. Thus, Saunders’s satire questions the powerful discourses that determine social behavior and values, in this particular case, the discourse of American exceptionalism with its related myths and cultural beliefs. Besides, Saunders’s satire is certainly intratextual, as, although it depicts a recognizable contemporary US, it creates a world in itself never providing an idealized model which would be a perfect alternative for the corrupted and flawed existence depicted in his stories. On the contrary, Saunders never offers any definite solutions, inviting the reader to become an active participant in the narrative, drawing his/her own conclusions.

Finally, considering all these features and particularities of Saunders’s narrative, we can easily attribute it to the movement of postmodernism due to its “incredulity towards metanarratives,” which Lyotard identified as one of the main characteristics of postmodern fiction; the primary role of the reader as the one who interprets the narrative, while the authorial absence from the work is obvious; and finally, its exploration of the constructedness of culture and society in general as their dependence on dominant rhetoric is foregrounded.

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