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The Implausible American Dream

The American Dream—a loose ideal that often entails owning property, making a name for oneself, and living a comfortable life—is a prevalent philosophy in our society. Due to the various interpretations of the Dream, however, critics point to the degeneration of its true value. There seems to be a general agreement amongst these critics that the modern interpretation of the Dream is flawed in the sense that it often equates affluence to happiness. Thus, this definition renders it an impractical and unattainable ideal for most. Moreover, it confines those who strive for it to a life of discontentment. Saunders exemplifies this vicious cycle of dissatisfaction in his short story, “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” in which he criticizes the American Dream through the eyes of a working-class, suburban father with an inferiority complex. The nameless father’s tendency to value himself in regards to his possessions—which in this case are human garden ornaments, otherwise known as Semplica Girls—is a reflection of our own society’s unhealthy obsession with material goods. By implicitly comparing this fictional society’s materialistic ideology to our own, Saunders reminds the reader that happiness cannot be bought. He thereby urges us to redefine our interpretation of the American Dream so as to destroy the notion that one’s self-worth should be determined by the quality and quantity of his material possessions.

The primary element that Saunders employs in his criticism is the father’s self-perceived failure as a provider to his family. The father’s inability to find comfort in his financial situation and his ego-fueled need to prove himself ultimately hinders him in his quest for happiness. This

speaks to the flawed American Dream that our own society strives for in the sense that as a society, we hold on to this idea that middle-class is equivalent to mediocrity and, as a result, the majority of us are crippled by the belief that we are not as successful or happy as we could potentially be. Likewise, the father is not able to embrace his middle-class status and in attempt to distance himself from it, he seeks to befriend rich people like the Torrini's. Yet, since their excessive wealth makes him feel like a "dopey and inadequate" father, he finds himself even deeper in his entrenched disappointment whenever he is around this allegedly more successful family (Saunders 4). Even in the most festive situations, he is tormented by the fact that he is not worth as much as the Torrini's. The Torrini's birthday party, for example, only serves to remind him of his limitations as the head of his household, especially since his efforts are belittled by Mr. Torrini's criticism of his "degrading" job and by Mrs. Torrini's snobby remark regarding his "kitsch" cheap gift (Saunders 3-4). Thus, it is evident through his interactions at the Torrini's party that his biggest fear is for others to view him as he views himself: a mediocre father. His troublesome mentality is reflected in the drastic self-esteem boost that he receives from winning the lottery, despite the fact that he had previously vowed to himself to only be content with his riches if, unlike the Torrini's, he had "really earned them" (Saunders 5). Nevertheless, this new chance to prove himself through the means of retaliation is too vital to his ego to forgo. His decision to spend the lottery money on a flashy party for his daughter instead of saving it for her college fund, for instance, reveals the extent of his selfish fixation with achieving success, which to him means being able to flaunt the fact that he broke out of the middle-class. Yet, due to the fact that he allows his financial status to influence his perception of self-worth, his happiness is artificial and short-lived. In fact, when his younger daughter releases the Semplica Girls, a status symbol that makes him feel "at last in step with peers and time in which living," he returns to

being an insecure, average father whose Dream is far from attainable (Saunders 10). The father's ultimate failure to achieve happiness by definition of the American Dream forces us to reevaluate whether the Dream presents a valid definition of success and whether it is a sensible ideal to strive for.

While the flawed values of the father urge us to reflect upon the reasonability of our definition for the American Dream, the symbol of the Semplica Girls makes us question whether the American Dream is even possible for everyone in our society. The Semplica Girls' low social standing in Saunders' dystopia, which places them at a much higher disadvantage in their quest for the American Dream, forces us to realize how limiting our notion of success is in the sense that the term is not applicable to the less fortunate in our society. To further understand this concept, it is crucial to note just how low the Semplica Girls are in the social hierarchy. We get a sense of their worth simply through the fact that all these girls as a whole better fit the definition of a symbol in the story rather than individual characters; they are the material possessions that constitute the American Dream for the wealthy. In fact, they are never directly referred to by their real names but rather, all four of them morph into a single "she" when alluded to by the father (Saunders 22). The degradation of the girls is comparable to that of the child in Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." The oppression of both the Semplica Girls and the child plays a crucial role in the structure of both societies in the sense that the overall happiness of each respective city is dependent on the "abominable misery" of a select few (Le Guin 3). This serves to reestablish that not everyone has an equal opportunity at happiness in either of these societies. Furthermore, the lack of differentiation among the Semplica Girls, along with the fact that they aren't given a voice to express their individual dreams (although it is implied that their collective dream is to escape third-world poverty), speaks volumes about the importance we

ascribe to the dreams of Americans as opposed to those of the immigrants who come to our country. In Saunders' fictional society, the Semplica Girls' dreams are not equally valuable since it is implied that they are currently "happy, given what their prior conditions were like," or at least that they ought to be (5). Yet, their tragic existence as living garden ornaments is not as pleasant of an alternative as the father makes it out to be. They are clearly not oblivious to their miserable situation, given their willingness to escape and venture into an unknown land with no money, no papers, and no shelter. In their mutated state, it's a suicide mission for them to do so, an action that makes the father question their sanity: "What could she want so much, that would make her pull such a desperate stunt" (Saunders 22)? To him, a person who has never experienced poverty, their escape is an unnecessary risk. Likewise, to the reader, it is a predictably futile attempt to achieve the American Dream; one that makes us fear that poverty is an inescapable cycle and that success is exclusively for the innately wealthy.

Poverty, however, takes on two different meanings in "The Semplica Girl Diaries": one in which the true definition of the word is used to describe the underprivileged girls, and the other, in which the definition is distorted by the family to describe their relative social status. Saunders uses the family's ironic interpretation of the word "poor" to illustrate how our own society mistakes poverty for lack of excess. The family's liberal use of the word "poor" to describe their lifestyle is specifically ironic because their point of comparison is their extremely wealthy acquaintances. Obviously, when compared to "Gary Gold and his tan, sleek son, Byron" who go "wreck-diving off the Bahamas" whenever they please, the family is relatively not as well-off (Saunders 7). Yet, they are by no means poor. They don't strive to overcome poverty, as the father insists; they strive for the excess that families like the Torrinis have: the six cars, the nine horses, etc. Nonetheless, even the Torrinis, despite their financial success, haven't achieved a

version of the American Dream in which they are satisfied. They have a “red Oriental bridge flown in from China” and Leslie Torrini still complains because they don’t have a pond (Saunders 2,12)! It is because of this ungrateful attitude that the American Dream is so elusive, especially when the Dream equates happiness to the number of luxuries a person can afford. No matter how many material possessions a person has, there will always be more luxuries to long for. Thus, as long as we keep trying to live beyond our financial means in an attempt to achieve our flawed rendition of the American Dream, we will never be truly happy.

When the American Dream becomes a rat-race to be wealthier than one’s neighbor, as it does in Saunders’ “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” it loses its appeal and, most importantly, its practicality. As members of a society that is built upon consumerism, we often find ourselves in the position of the father, in which we are perpetually longing for a lifestyle we can’t afford. We are plagued by the fear that we haven’t reached the level of success that is epitomized by the American Dream and that as a result, our efforts aren’t good enough. What we often fail to realize however, is that in a failing economy it is becoming harder and harder to break out of the middle-class. Consequently, an American Dream that equates affluence to success is not a reasonable ideal. Instead, we should collectively put an end to our materialistic ideology and redefine the American Dream so that success is determined by one’s ability to adapt to their financial situation rather than by their financial situation itself.

Works Cited

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