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Materialism and Virtue in a Profit Oriented Society

Philosopher and social critic Bertrand Russell once claimed, “it’s the preoccupation with possessions that prevents us from living freely and nobly.” If one is constantly chasing after the next, trendy gadget with which to boast his financial or social status, then he is neither free nor noble. In George Saunders’s “The Semplica-Girl Diaries,” readers get a glimpse of how one man’s obsession with wealth causes him to lose touch with morality and become a slave to the material objects that he covets. Saunders’s depiction of the middle class, suburban neighborhood in which the story takes place underlines the materialistic ideals that are present within society as is observed through the main character’s behavior. The father’s objectification of the Semplica girls, which he purchases to display as living lawn ornaments, represents the lengths to which he is willing to go in order to feel valued by his family and peers, thus reinforcing Saunders’s criticism of the gravity of materialism in today’s society. By drawing a comparison between the wicked practice that is the exploitation of human beings for decoration and our own culture’s fixation with wealth, Saunders prompts his audience to reflect upon the values that build our communities and exhorts readers to reconsider their priorities.

One example of the fixation with wealth that Saunders criticizes in “The Semplica-Girl Diaries” is the narrator, who becomes a representation of materialism in our society. Throughout the story, the main character remains anonymous. The simple style in which the father writes and Saunders’s decision to leave him nameless are representative of the widespread issue that is materialism. Much like the characters in the story, there is an overwhelming amount of people in

today's society who are obsessed with getting more and for whom greed is a bottomless pit; these individuals will never be satisfied with what they do have because they constantly seek something greater. Such individuals become selfish as a result and develop an inability to feel sincere joy for the achievements of others. These qualities are present within the father and apparent in his journal entries. After a particularly eventful day during which the bumper of his car falls off, he reflects in his book and asks, "When will I have sufficient leisure/wealth to sit on hay bale watching moon rise, while in luxurious mansion family sleeps? At that time, will have chance to reflect deeply on meaning of life, etc., etc." (2). The father is so busy longing for a life unlike his own that he seems to miss out on the truly important aspects of life, such as spending time with his family. In the last sentence it is evident that instead of living in the moment and being appreciative, he places value on material objects and allows his happiness to be determined by these possessions. He is an accurate portrayal of what can be seen all around us and even within ourselves at times. The narrator's discontentment is plain in his writing, especially when he recounts a party at his daughter's friend's house. The sentence, "Very depressing birthday party today at home of Lilly's friend Leslie Torrini" is telling of his inability to feel happy for another person's good fortune because to him, it is a reminder that he does not possess the luxuries that they do (2). Saunders intentionally creates a setting in which the reader can effortlessly imagine being the main character, thereby symbolizing how rampant materialism is because it could easily be any one of us. Unfortunately, just as we see within the story, the luxuries enjoyed by materialistic societies are nearly always at the expense of the poor.

Saunders effectively conveys the negative effects that occur as a result of society's obsession with wealth by directing attention toward the exploitation of the poor. The family's participation in the Semplica-Girl display and their treatment of the young women is emblematic

of such abuse. While the concept of using human beings as ornaments may initially strike readers as egregious, Saunders deliberately introduces this idea to make a statement. By doing so, he illustrates the misconduct that is often committed against people in impoverished, third world countries as a result of consumers in wealthier nations. A prime example of such occurrences is the unethical treatment of factory workers. In the story, Saunders draws a comparison between these real life injustices and the family's attitude toward the Semplica girls in the part where the father writes, "[The] Greenway folks [who] come by 3x/day to give SGs meals/water, take SGs to SmallJon in back of van, deal with feminine issues, etc. [are] hard at work" (12). The father's nonchalant tone as he diminishes the girls to mere objects that need to be tended to makes it clear that he does not view the young women on the same level as he does his own daughters because the Semplica girls differ in one, key way: they come from nothing. The girls are reduced to only using the bathroom, eating, and drinking three times per day. The indifference with which the father writes about this makes it known that to him, this is no cause for alarm but rather a trophy to be proud of and brag about. The objectification of the Semplica girls is reinforced by the fact that they are merely referred to by the narrator as "the SG display." Not only does this show how his obsession with material objects has compromised his humanity, but it also represents the exploitation of the poor that occurs in actuality. Like the characters in the story, the majority of people in first world countries find themselves preoccupied with issues such as whose family owns the larger house. By incorporating the Semplica girls into the story, Saunders contrasts materialism in today's society with the suffering of some people in impoverished countries who often do not know when they will have their next meal, let alone how impressive their lawns look. An example of people in our society who can be compared to the Semplica girls are individuals from developing nations who resort to human trafficking in order to help feed their

families. In a 2015 Ted Talk, journalist Noy Thrupkaew revealed that human trafficking is much more common in the United States than people realize. During her talk, she discussed a particular case in which traffickers profited by luring girls to New Jersey and forcing them to work. According to Thrupkaew, “Once everyone arrived in New Jersey, the young girls were taken away, and put to work for 14-hour days, seven days a week, for five years. They made their traffickers nearly four million dollars” (Thrupkaew). Similarly to the Semplica girls, the young women were brought to this country believing that they would be given a better life, but instead, they were degraded for profit. This is the brutal reality that the majority of Americans are oblivious to, yet it does occur and can indisputably be likened to the practice of having Semplica-Girl displays in the story. Saunders uses the father to represent the numerous individuals in our society who are obsessed with wealth and material objects. Through the Semplica girls, he symbolizes the harsh effects that these tendencies have on the poor who are objectified in the process.

Although Saunders’s commentary sheds light on the pervasiveness of materialism and human exploitation, there is one character, Eva, who he includes as a glimmer of optimism in an otherwise backward society. Despite the readiness with which the rest of the characters in the story accept the notion of a living human display, Eva’s youthful innocence obstructs her from rationalizing the deplorable act. This is demonstrated during an exchange between her and Mrs. Torrini at the Torrini’s house, where it becomes obvious that the other characters do not share Eva’s ability to sympathize with the Semplica girls. When Mrs. Torrini asks if she would like to approach their Semplica-Girl display, Eva apprehensively declines the offer. Then, when her own family gives in to the societal pressure to buy a Semplica-Girl display, she tenaciously expresses her disapproval through acting out at home and drawing pictures at school that depict

the Semplica girls as miserable and in pain. Saunders's utilization of Eva as a symbol of hope is strengthened by the fact that her father has to try to convince her that the Semplica-Girl display is ethical. The narrator describes in his book how he justifies the exploitation to his daughter as he writes, "Explained: Lilly at critical juncture. Next year, Lilly will start high school. Mommy and Daddy want Lilly to enter high school as confident young woman, feeling her family as good/affluent as any other family, her yard approx. in ballpark of yards of peers, i.e., not overt source of embarrassment" (14). Here he likens the Semplica girls to objects by attempting to teach his daughter that they are a source of pride without which Lilly would suffer from embarrassment. He speaks about the girls in the same manner with which he compares the size of their backyard to the backyards of their peers; once again illustrating how he objectifies the Semplica girls. Saunders's inclusion of Eva as a symbol of hope in society is also representative of the contrast that exists in our own world between right and wrong as is indicated through the juxtaposition of Eva and her sister, Lilly. While Lilly takes after her father, Eva is unique to the story in that she is the only one who displays virtuous qualities. Despite living in a society in which the majority are corrupted by materialism, she remains untainted by their ideals, even after her father tries to justify the exploitation to her. Predictably, Eva takes the moral route and sets the Semplica girls free in spite of the pressure that she receives from everyone in her community to accept the dehumanization of the young girls. This resistance against members of an overwhelmingly unscrupulous society can be seen today within our own communities. Eva's nonconformity to the covetous norm is mirrored by the actions of individuals who oppose the unethical treatment of the less fortunate. Through Eva, Saunders represents those who reject the consumerist principles by which the majority choose to live, such as individuals who buy fair trade products. Due to the presence of materialism in this society, not everyone takes the time to

educate themselves on the treatment of other people from less developed nations. Of those who are aware, some justify their actions to support their greedy habits, much like Eva's father justifies his ownership of the Semplica-Girl display. Naturally, when Eva's father learns that she has set the girls free, he is furious. His ownership over the Semplica girls was indicative of his status and now that he has lost them, he feels he has been lowered back to the bottom of the social ladder. His anger towards Eva is indicated by a journal entry in which he vents, "Am so mad. Eva has made huge mess here. Huge mess for us, yes, but also for SGs. Where are SGs now? In good place? Is it good when illegal fugitives in strange land have no money, no food, no water, are forced to hide in woods, swamp, etc., connected via microline, like chain gang?" (18). Evidently, the father has convinced himself so thoroughly that the girls are better off as ornaments in his backyard that he cannot imagine how escaping could possibly benefit them. Although he has managed to convince himself that he was doing the moral thing by keeping the young girls as his property, Eva clearly remains uncorrupted by the nefarious influences that surround her. While Saunders ends the story with the family in a state of distress, he leaves readers with a sense of hope. Decency is not totally lost, even in the most corrupt situations.

Saunders's cautionary story illustrates the detrimental effects of living in a superfluous society. His connection between the treatment of the Semplica girls and the exploitation of the poor that transpires all around us demonstrates the extent to which greed prevails in this world and emphasizes the urgency with which his message should be received. The middle class neighborhood in which the story is set depicts aspects that mirror those of our own communities and is something that readers should not disregard, considering the consequences of consumerism that are apparent within the story. Through his analysis of this dystopian world, Saunders impels readers to scrutinize their own morals and re-determine which aspects in life

should hold higher value. It is only once we have embraced Saunders's message that we can truly live a life of integrity and enjoy the freedom of not being chained to our possessions.

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