

# “Now is the Time for Me to Win”: Social Dysfunction and “The New Sincerity” in the Works of George Saunders

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*Over the past two decades, the central conceit at the heart of George Saunders' work has remained the same: to re-introduce values of compassion and sincerity to American literature. Often he does this by placing resentful antiheroes in bizarre narrative positions where they must learn to appreciate the singularity of all humans. This impulse associates Saunders with "The New Sincerity," a loose assemblage of writers who have turned their backs on postmodern irony and cynicism. In this essay, I analyze one short story, "Winky," to demonstrate Saunders' rhetorical strategies and their connection to The New Sincerity.*

## I

*“The order of the day is compassion, and I think that fiction has a part to play in urging us, as a species, towards compassion.”*

*(Saunders and Wylie, “An Interview with George Saunders”)*

The works of George Saunders provide readers with an extended meditation on the impact imagination has on characters' ability to sympathize with others, either connecting with them through the power of compassion or rendering themselves isolated through resentment. Resentment has, of course, been associated with the antihero tradition since its inception, but often without this Saunderian counterbalancing function of epiphanic compassion, which his characters

use to "correct" their ways of perceiving their lives as full of quiet desperation, loneliness, and rebuffed dreams. Sincerity, in this way, operates as a form of conceptual therapy, a re-mapping of his characters' place in the world, subverting the traditional conventions of the antihero by emphasizing our imaginative capacity to promote empathy, connection, and compassion in both the character and in the reader.

What I'm positing, in other words, is that Saunders often designs an initial story-frame based on resentment, selfishness, and failure, and then torques the narrative by introducing an event which, in however attenuated a fashion, "re-boots" his character's mind-set, transitioning his characters from spiteful antiheroes to sentimental American "losers," unable to live up to the ambitions, aspirations, and expectations American culture has taught them they deserve. In the end, however, through sincerity, empathy, and compassion, the characters perceive the humanity in their greatest nemeses and the glory in their un-great, un-romantic, un-glorious lives.

This emphasis on compassion and empathy connects Saunders' work with an emerging tradition of American art, referred to often as post-postmodernism or "The New Sincerity," in the parlance of Adam Kelly. Although The New Sincerity subsumes many media, artists, and dates of origin,<sup>i</sup> perhaps its initial expression in contemporary literature occurs in David Foster Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: TV and U.S. Fiction," published in 1993 and included in his 1997 collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do Again*. In this manifesto, Wallace describes how formal experimentation and antisocial irony, as utilized by his great postmodernist forebears such as Coover, Barth, and Nabokov, had become exhausted, rendered obsolete by their absorption into televisual and advertising practices. Instead, he hypothesizes the emergence of a new way of writing that, by exploding or remediating irony, succeeds in re-introducing sincerity into American literature. As he speculates (in one of the most quoted passages in contemporary non-fiction),

*the next real literary 'rebels' might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels ...who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh, how banal." ("E Unibus Pluram")*

Saunders' agreement with this assessment can be seen in his work, but is also evident in his many observations regarding Wallace, many of which, like the following, focus, not on Wallace's pyrotechnic prose or encyclopedic knowledge or tragic death, but rather his conviction that real writing, real art, functions as a conversation between reader and writer, providing them both with a way to escape loneliness. Readers familiar with Saunders' fiction will appreciate how this conversational model, and its ability to endorse and create sincerity and compassion, is central to his aesthetic agenda as well. As Saunders describes it in *Five Dials*, a memorial issue following Wallace's death, his appreciation for Wallace regarded the latter's ability to emotionally connect with the reader:

*This alteration [an emotional change following reading Wallace] seemed more spiritual than aesthetic. I wasn't just "reading a great story"—what was happening*

*was more primal and important: my mind was being altered in the direction of compassion, by a shock methodology that was, in its subject matter, actually very dark. I was undergoing a kind of ritual stripping away of the habitual. The reading was waking me up, making me feel more vulnerable, more alive. (Five Dials; emphasis added.)*<sup>ii</sup>

Saunders, I argue, likewise uses a "shock methodology"<sup>iii</sup> to awaken his readers to the centrality of compassion in human life. Many of his stories start off as quirky, consisting of bizarre characters and silly jokes, making the reading experience especially pleasurable and passive. However, this pleasurable experience of initially funny scenes lulls the reader into a false sense of security, one which they get "shocked" out of once Saunders introduces his idiosyncratic plot-turns and the story turns dark, sad, forcing the reader to re-imagine the story's meaning. While his strategies and rhetorical approaches involving The New Sincerity certainly differ from David Foster Wallace and other authors belonging to The New Sincerity "movement," among them David Eggers, Zadie Smith, and Jeffrey Eugenides, it's eminently clear that he does this with a virtuosity and self-consciousness rarely equaled in contemporary literature.

While examples of this dynamic can be found across Saunders' oeuvre—from his first published *New Yorker* story in 1992, "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz," to his heralded 2013 collection *Tenth of December—Pastoralia* (2000) may contain the densest collection of this narrative dynamic involving the loser's gradual sense of appreciation for the dull, quotidian, and traditional virtues of compassion and sincerity. Among these stories, I'm thinking of "The Barber's Unhappiness," in which a lifelong bachelor finally gives love a chance even with the "biggest fat girl he has ever seen," and "The Falls," in which a pathetic "corpse-like" father with a dysfunctional family is distracted from his reverie of childhood ambition and adult disappointment by the screams of young girls he attempts to save from drowning. But the greatest example of this Saunderian New Sincerity can arguably be found in the short story "Winky."

## II

*"It was sad yes, a little sad, but if greatness were easy everybody would be doing it."*—"Winky"

"Winky" begins at a motivational group meeting led by a guru resembling Tony Robbins or Tom Cruise's character in *Magnolia*, spouting such mottos as "Now is the Time for Me to Win" and "If You're Losing Someone's Doing It to You." He refers to the principles in his book, *People of Power*, which consists of advice on how to focus on your needs and not allow others to distract you from attaining your ambition or the state in which you were born, which he characterizes as "perfect, happy, and good" (*Pastoralia* 71). According to his model, a model in opposition to the New Sincerity, anybody that gets in your way from being perfect, happy, and good, is, in his words, "crapping in your oatmeal" (*ibid.*). Consequently, he advises the crowd of approximately 80 "losers" to sign up for individual sessions to identify whom is "crapping in your oatmeal" and learn how to "Identify, Screen, and Confront" them in order to become successful and powerful (72).

These passages, which are initially written in a distant third-person, quickly become vocalized more closely and emotionally through the character of Neil Yanicky, "a big stupid faker" who lives with his

insane, bizarre-looking, hyper-religious sister Winky and "ha[s] no career, really, and no business, but only soldered little triangular things in his basement, for forty-seven cents a little triangular thing, for CompuParts" (74). Like the protagonists in "The Falls" and "The Barber's Unhappiness," Saunders' describes Neil Yanicky as not only a loser, but a self-conscious loser, tiny and balding, one who obsesses over what's gone wrong in his life and how he has failed to live up to the American ideals of accomplishment, ambition, and greatness outlined in the guru's book *People of Power*. At the same time, Neil is ineffectual and resentful, consumed by memories of how the "world had beaten the shit out of dad" and how it was beating the shit out of him (76). After a session with the guru, he identifies his sister Winky as the person to blame for all his problems, and he walks home in a frenzy prepared to "screen" and "confront" her.

The point-of-view changes at this point in the story, as Neil Yanicky walks home to confront Winky. Saunders exposes the reader to the disorganized, almost schizotypal, interior monologue of Winky. As she cleans the house, she reflects happily on how good "Neil Neil" behaves and how lucky she is to have him as a brother. As described above, this change in perspective operates as part of Saunders' "shock methodology." He never let the reader remain complacent and passive, but always instead forces he or she to consider the different perspectives of his characters. Winky's outlook is positive and founded on "the healing power of love." Unlike her brother, everything she experiences she conceives in simple, spiritual terms, resembling Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin as a portrayal of a contemporary Christ-figure (80). She recalls one particular interaction in detail, in which a homeless man with urine on his pants accosted her:

*When she told the pee-man at the Rexall Drugstore that he was looking dapper and he said loudly that she was too ugly to fuck, she had only thought to herself, Okay, Praise God, he's only saying that because he's in pain, and she had smiled with the lightest light in her eyes she could get there by wishing it there, because even if she was a little ugly she was still beautiful in Christ's sight. (84)*

In the end, she concludes, "*The world was a story Christ was telling her*" (84; emphasis added).

Meanwhile, as Winky reflects on the world as a story Christ tells her, Neil approaches the house imagining how great his life will be once he confronts Winky and evicts her from his house. In a typical Saunderian move, for instance also evident in "Al Roosten" and "The Semplica Girl Diaries," this imaginative sequence unravels into pages of hyper-detailed, recursive fantasies about driving these same streets with his "sexy wife" and "riding crop" and a "Benz," his mansion decorated with "golden statues of geese, classy vases, big porcelain frogs, whatever, when his ship came in he'd have it all, because when he was stoked nothing could stop him" (84). "He was going to succeed," he reflects, "like the men described in *People of Power*, who had gardens bigger than entire towns and owned whole ships and believed in power and power only" (84).

Ultimately, however, he fails to confront Winky. The detailed fantasies of power and imaginative scenarios of greatness evaporate as he approaches the door to his house. While still invoking his "Now is My Time to Win" mantra up the porch steps, he begins, almost against his volition, to sympathize with Winky, to understand that evicting her would be the morally wrong thing to do, that she needs his help and he should consider himself lucky to be able to offer that help. Further

ramifying these themes of sincerity and compassion, Saunders has Neil recall childhood memories he shared with Winky:

*Yes, she'd been a cute kid and, yes, they'd shared some nice moments, yes yes yes, yes she'd brought him crackers and his little radio that time he'd hid under the steps for five straight hours after Dad started weeping at dinner, and yes, he remembered the scared look in her eyes when she'd come running up to him after taking a hook in the temple while fishing with the big boys, and yes, he'd carried her home as the big boys cackled, yes, it was sad. (87)*

Consequently, when Winky opens the door to greet him, instead of confronting her and screaming, "Now is My Time to Win," he shoulders past her and mumbles his way up the stairs. He can't deny and suppress his practical feelings of kindness or generosity for his troubled sister.

The poignancy of this ending, I posit, consists exactly in its moral realism, in its depiction of Neil as someone who's doing the right thing even though he doesn't know why. Since he doesn't know why, necessarily, the reader is implicitly asked to answer why, to put him or herself in Neil's place and imagine, through the story's simulation, how he or she would act in this situation. The lack of resolution, therefore, makes the reader realize that Neil's struggles with Winky will be continuous *off the page* and that he must actively work to remain kind and compassionate for her. By no means does Saunders suggest this will be an easy thing. Neil will, every day, have to be "newly sincere; every day he will have to "re-awaken."

Adam Kelly has suggested that this "off the page" strategy is essential to The New Sincerity's quest to connect with the reader and burrow into his or her heart:

*It is only by invoking the future off the page that dialogue can be engaged, and that both reader and writer can be challenged by the dialogic dimension of the reading experience. This call for a two-way conversation not only characterizes Wallace's work, but all the fiction of the The New Sincerity. (Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction, 145).*

The New Sincerity, therefore, with its focus on imagination, empathy, and connection with the reader, provides us with a template through which to see how Saunders moves from the tradition of the resentful anti-hero to the humane, sympathetic loser. However bleak, gray, and depressing his characters' lives appear, he manages to find within each a soul's flickering flame, a recognition of the unique spark in each person's soul, even the souls of "losers." As Winky perceives the world as a story Christ is telling her, we are fortunate to imagine Saunders' oeuvre as a textual world that the author is telling *us*, reminding us to never forget the small, numinous, miraculous moments occurring all over the world, every day, every minute, every second—now *is* the time for us to win, but just not in the way imagined by the promoters of power, greed, and success, but rather by following Saunders' innovative example of replacing the idea of "winning" with a more robust concept of sincerity and compassion, augmented by a recognition of the human, all-too-human pathos that often underlie it. Echoing his words about Wallace, Saunders' writing alters our minds in the "direction of compassion."

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## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> According to the [The New Sincerity Wikipedia Entry](#), the term originated in the 1980s to describe various bands in the Austin, TX punk scene. However, I will follow Adam Kelly in using it in a specific sense dedicated to contemporary literature. Cf. <http://www.ijasonline.com/Adam-Kelly.html> and "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," published in *Consider David Foster Wallace*.

<sup>ii</sup> [Five Dials: Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace](#)