

Tripartite Division In The Very Persistent Gappers Of Fripp: George Saunders' Satire On Coercive Liminality

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Abstract

The perpetual attack of Gapperson goats belonging to three neighbouring families at the seaside village of Fripp pronounces surface meaning of the satire by George Saunders. As to how he develops most of the critical perspectives in his stories, the underlying meanings open possibilities to different interpretations that connect to the realities of the world rather than sticking on to the fictional plots, the settings and its characters. This research paper analyses George Saunders' fable The Very Persistent Gappers of Fripp for its critical angle related to the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist power structures. The attack of the gappers, slack behaviour of the neighbours, helpless situation of the affected, and the resilience through their innate identity resembles the exploitation of capitalism, disunity of the working class, victimisation of the affected due to the swing that occurs in-between their innate identity and the coercive other, and the resilience through a permanent acceptance of innateness respectively. Through the satiric fable, Saunders draws the consequences of being in the liminal state due to the coercive liminality produced by the power structures of capitalism. Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage and Victor Turner's theoretical insights on Liminality are used for describing the in-depth connotations of the fable. The perspectives shared in the research would help to add knowledge to the areas discussing the consequences of capitalist exploitation over the working class.

Keywords: American literature, capitalism, exploitation, George Saunders, liminality.

1. INTRODUCTION

The more familiar theme of conflicts between capitalism and working-class in George Saunders' short fictions continues to present its complex influence in the 2001 satiric fable titled *The Very Persistent Gappers of Fripp*. The graphically illustrated layouts and designs of the independently published work would make one relate it more closely with the genre of children's literature. Lane Smith's illustrations go in pace and tone with the third-person narration of the tale by Saunders who seems to be solely interested in describing the direct plot of the fable. The various colour tones in representing the illustrative art have provided a notion that the fable does not discuss any matter that is complexly related to relevant social issues. The use of illustrative portrayal of the incidents in the fable has given an extra advantage in bringing the story more closely to the reader by directly influencing the minds to recognise the humour behind the descriptions effectively and elegantly. On 22nd January 2016, the editor's choice of *The New York Times* recommended reading the fable by commenting on its significant contribution to the idea of community and sharing life's

burden. The disunity among the neighbouring families and their slack attitude to the problems happening at the next door signifies the selfish attitude of the families threatened by an equal antagonist referred to as the gappers that feed on the goats and destroys their peaceful and undisturbed existence at Frip. In the same way how Saunders' advocates for the practice of kindness and compassion in the society, this fable is also framed to convey the same idea to his readers. These moral aspects of the fable are significant in distinguishing the works of Saunders from that of others. *The Guardian* reviews the tale as, "This is a rich, enjoyable morality tale for everyone aged seven to adult" (Gardner, 2001).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been a few pieces of research based on the morality tale by George Saunders. These lists of previous literature help in adding knowledge about the primary source through different interpretations and perspectives. Shumway, Justin (2017) conducts a study through the criticism of Saunders' work, theoretical concepts applied to Gappers and the pedagogical morality presented by the writer. The class struggle, reality and human relationships are discussed. The theoretical concept of simulacra by Baudrillard is applied to understand how Capable constructs her reality and retains the meaning within that reality. The study also distinguishes the pedagogical impacts of the tale arguing that the adult readers focus on the class struggle whereas the children get more attracted to the illustrations and the moral qualities of friendship, forgiveness and literacy. Kaiser, Kevin (2018) analyses certain selected works of Saunders for its posthumanist ethics with regards to human and non-human animal encounters and relations. In the thesis, the scholar identifies *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* as the most direct writing of Saunders unlike the other which provide complex themes and identities. Nel, Philp (2019) considers the radical aesthetic for children's literature to resist codifying. In the description, he explains the morality tale of Saunders to comment at the tale reminds children to trust and learn from their experiences. He highlights the example of Capable who proved to be capable of overcoming her struggling situation. Finbow, Steve (2006) reviews the morality tale suggesting it to be more than a children's book as it documents prejudice, snobbishness, falsity, and hypocrisy in the form of a political fable. Millen, Alex (2018) writes about neoliberalism in George Saunders' fictions that evoke affectivity. In the analysis, he mentions *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* that does not necessarily strengthen emotional beliefs that underpin neoliberal subjectivity rather describe the tale as a radical defence of tenderness. Boddy, Kasia (2017) mentions about Saunders' rejection of the self-orientation of the traditional form of self-help that commits to producing self-culture. He emphasises on to become best selves by quoting the capability shown by Capable in *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*. The essayist provides the hint that it is necessary to work smarter than to work harder.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

From the analysis of the previous literature related to the morality tale, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, a perspicacity on different angles of interpretation are provided that helps to identify that the insights of this research are different from them. The textual analysis and interpretation of content in this research paper would search for the possibility of a forced form of liminality, which is termed as coercive liminality in the three neighbours living in Frip. The liminal status of the three neighbours, especially that of Capable is related to as a representation of the liminality experienced by the vulnerable group of working-class due to the exploitation from the power structures of capitalism. The argument of the research states that Saunders describes the morality tale to express the similar invasion of capitalist forces onto the identities and sustenance of the working class. The return of the neighbours at

Frip to their traditional fishing is a reflection of the permanent stability attained by the perpetually transiting working-class in-between their self and the other identity enforced by the power structures. The analysis of the primary text is conducted with the help of Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage or tripartite structure and Victor Turner's insights on Liminality. The theoretical aspect of the study would help in dividing the stressful situation of the neighbours into three phases that metaphorically relate to the rites of passage and the intermediate phase of liminality. The insights of the research would contribute to add knowledge to the areas discussing the consequences and threats of capitalism in contemporary society.

Gappers and the Villagers: Capitalists and the Working class

The extremist situations in life where an individual is disturbed with the conflict within the state of mind of the person can be either invoked by an internal or external force that rules over the person in one or the other possible way. They may be produced as incidents or events that are anticipated, unanticipated or as non-events (Goodman et.al. 2006, 34-35). The presence of a dominant force on the individual would create instability in the state of mind when a gradual subjugation in the enforced status develops in the individual. The analysis of the primary text has to be conducted in two phases. The first would examine the tale for its surface meaning. The denoted identity of *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* revolves around the conflict between the gappers and the neighbours living in the seaside village called Frip. Their struggle with the perpetual attack of the gappers is the base of analysing the direct aspect of the tale. The second phase would extend the scope of analysis onto the real-world issues of the conflict between capitalist power structures and the vulnerable working class. The attack of gappers can be identified as the hegemonic invasion of the power structures in the society controlled by the ideology of capitalism. The neighbours who struggle to situate themselves onto a particular position resemble the vulnerable working class that often get swung in-between their innate identity and the identity provided or developed due to the enforcement conducted by the capitalist forces.

Tripartite Division: Analysis of Liminality

The repeated attack from the gappers, though it challenged the neighbours for a short while, Saunders informs that they managed to overcome the threat only to repeat the same process of brushing the gappers with a break of three hours. Saunders provides a detailed explanation to the attack of gappers that seems to be permanent by informing that the gappers planned to concentrate their attack on goats belonging to one single family at a time among the three neighbours at Frip. According to the rites of passage or also known as tripartite structure introduced by the French-Dutch anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), there are three phases applicable to analyse the process of transition in a person. They are the pre-liminal, liminal or the post-liminal phases often called within the context of ritual studies as "the rites of separation from a previous world, pre-liminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world post-liminal rites" (Gennep, 1960, p. 21). The insights provided by van Gennep became the ground for the British cultural and symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner to research on the intermediate phase representing liminality. Liminality – "term allows us to understand how anguishing situations of uncertainty can emerge" (Szokolczai, 2017, p. 232). Leaving behind the repetitious temporary attacks of the gappers on the goats, if the attention is towards the attack of the gappers for a comparatively longer period on the three neighbours, the period until the recognition of the attack from the gappers can be considered as the pre-liminal phase. It separates the usual and

normative state of the neighbouring families from that of their liminal period where the struggles initiate and progress into more complex situations.

Let Capable be the representative of the other two neighbouring families as a better part of the tale revolves around the girl. When she came to brush the gappers as a usual procedure of her daily routine, she saw “every single one of her goats lying on its side with a mortified look on its face, completely covered with shrieking orange gappers” (Saunders, 2005, p. 13). This shifts her previous state of mind onto the next where she unknowingly experiences the characteristic changes or qualities of being in the liminal phase. The combined attack of the gappers was not a known fact for Capable as she had not experienced such a crisis before. The first coping strategy used by the girl was to ask for help from her neighbours. As the response was unexpectedly negative, she tried her ways to overcome the situation. She tried “hiding the goats under blankets, setting the goats on tables, building fences around the goats and shaving the goats” (Saunders, 2005, p. 28-29) as her step to overcome her liminal phase. These activities provide the sketch of Capable’s state of mind that gets into the complex levels of uncertainty about the extent or duration to which she has to struggle with the brushing of the gappers and ambiguity about what happens around her and what is to be done to survive the situation. This “condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion” (Turner, 1970, p. 48) of what would make the situation better or into the state of the normative structure of life. Saunders writes about the critical situation of the village inhabitants that, “... if there’s no goat milk, there’s no money, and if there’s no money, there’s no food or housing or clothing” (Saunders, 2005, p. 2). The intermediate phase immersed in struggles and instability gets into a conclusion when Capable decides to sell her goats at Fritch (p. 42) and to return to fishing which was the traditionally followed occupation of the villagers in Frip before they were mesmerised with the income from the goats. This attempt takes her out of the suspended entrapment of her liminal phase onto the post-liminal phase or the new normal of her life.

Similar to the situation of Capable, there were threats to the other neighbours. When Sid Ronsen sees Capable who came up with her big gapper-sack full of fish, he asks “And maybe you could also teach us to fish. And maybe also we could live with you awhile” (Saunders, 2005, p. 69). The transition from the liminal phase to the post-liminal phase of the other two neighbours occurs at this moment when they accept the reality and act accordingly. There are several ways to escape the negativity of the liminal phase which is subjective in nature as it closely relates and changes according to the characteristics of the contexts and situations.

Likewise, the connotative meaning produced through an interpretation of the tale also has to be analysed to understand the intended social reality behind the fiction. Saunders’ fictions, as always, do not reveal the intended connotative meaning on a surface reading of the primary source. It has to be identified by having an idea about the general theme in Saunders’ short fictions and novellas. Saunders admits himself as a victim of the domination enjoyed by the capitalist forces when he was working as an engineer in the mines of Sumatra. The chain of criticism towards power structures, especially the capitalist forces in his writings is a resultant of his personal experience through such similar situations. The encroachment of capitalism on the innate identities of the working class is criticised through the tale. Saunders mentions about the hypocrisy of gappers saying about the less stupid gapper with the sticking-out brain that “he proposed that they stop loving goats. The goats had never returned their affections. The goats had taken them for granted. Goats stunk, actually” (Saunders, 2005, p. 79). Similar to the situation, power structures of the society do not recognise the hard work by the working class towards the last when they are exhausted from being active anymore due to the continuous exploitation by the capitalists. The pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal

phases in the tale are also applicable and relevant in analysing the vulnerable situation of the working class under the dominant rule of capitalism.

Coercive Liminality: In Fiction and Beyond

The gappers usually “split into three groups, one per goat yard, only to be brushed off again by the same weary and discouraged children” (Saunders, 2005, p. 6). This process occurred throughout the hours of a day with a gap of three hours. This repetitious process of giving space for the gappers to inch their way across the ocean floor to attack the goats again can be seen as the transition of the vulnerable groups swung in-between their innate identity and the identity enforced by the capitalist forces. The process of being there and here or “neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere, and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’” (Turner, 1970, p. 48) leads to the experience of liminality. This hint at the beginning of the tale gives an idea about what would be discussed in detail throughout the tale. The in-depth details of the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases of the neighbouring families in *Frip* can be equated to the liminal situation of an individual under the dominance and threat of capitalism. They can be identified as *communitas* as they are equal in their experience of liminality and pass through their liminal phase. They “develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized” (Turner, 1977a, p. 95). These people belonging to the group of *communitas*, in the context of a working atmosphere, would certainly be in their state of uncertainty, anxiety and dilemma as they neither can stick on to their innate desires or identity nor can completely be equality the identity provided by the capitalist forces. They tend to transit in-between these extremist positions without stability and permanence.

Capable’s act of escaping the liminal phase leads to the idea that there is only one option for the vulnerable group of the working class to get relieved from their liminality. It is to either lose their innate identity permanently by sticking on to the other identity provided by the enforcement of the power structures of capitalism or to admit the loss to be in their innate identity. The innate identity of Capable and other neighbours are shown in the tale through the representation of the occupation of fishing which was once their primary source of income. The potentiality of the liminal phase helped Capable to divert her attention to fishing rather than being immersed in the complex depths of liminality produced by the gappers. Likewise, the threat of job security, incapability of gaining another job due to unfortunate situations, long term bonds that cannot be broken etc. would be the common factors that make vulnerable groups of the working class who turn as *communitas* to avoid themselves from attaining their self-identity far from the forced or coercive identity by the power structures. Being the liminal personae exhibiting the characteristics of liminality, they often stay in the “threshold” (Turner, 1977a, p. 94) which is often known as the “state and process of mid-transition” (Turner, 1977b, p. 37).

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis based on the two aspects of interpretation of *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, the finding of the research is that the tale by Saunders indirectly points to the rising tensions among the working class that are subject to exploitation through invasion into matters within and beyond the formal working atmosphere. The uncertainty and angst of the vulnerable groups are traced through the representative character of Capable and the other neighbours. The critical situation in their life is related in the research paper to the indecisive and ambiguous state of minds in the working class who often are instable in one identity rather shifts from one to the other i.e. between their self and the other developed due to the

enforcement or to an extent, the enslavement by the power structures. As per the Marxist theory of capitalism, it leads to the dominant mode of surplus extraction from waged labour (Kennedy, 2009, p. 49). This particular extraction is visible in the tale where the gappers feed on the goat by reducing their productivity of milk and gradually making them of no use to its owner. A similar mode of extraction happens when one gets affected by the exploitation conducted by the capitalist forces. It leads to an identity crisis in the vulnerable group of *communitas* as they cannot be stable in their self-identity, but continuously shift from one to the other

All the perspectives of the writer and interpretations by various researchers, though different in approaching the content of the tale, converge into a single stop that Saunders always makes sure to be a significant facet of his fiction. The single stop of a majority of interpretations would be the essential need of the contemporary world to have empathy and compassion to each other. He advocates for a mutual exchange of the moral qualities which would enhance the positivity of the world. Saunders highlights “kindness, generosity, compassion, and community” (“The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip”, n.d.) through the act of forgiveness shown by Capable to her neighbours. It expects power structures of capitalism to be kind and compassionate to their employees, thus not letting them either experience or continue in their liminal status.

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