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Illusion of Social Mobility: Reading Status and Social Honor in George Saunders' *Tenth of December*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the intersection of class, status and bureaucracy in George Saunders' selected stories from his *Tenth of December* through the theoretical framework of critical class analysis outlined by Max Weber. In contrast to traditional Marxism' emphasis on class struggle and economic exploitation, Weberian sociology outlines a more intricate perspective by delineating class as market position, status as social honor, and bureaucracy as institutional control. Saunders' narratives expose the illusion of social mobility**,** demonstrating how economic precarity, status anxieties and bureaucratic constraints shape individual agency and reinforce social stratification. This paper investigates how status-driven consumption, hierarchical exclusion and impersonal institutions perpetuate class-based insecurities into the stories. By analyzing the stories employing Weberian lens**,** the paper finds that Saunders' fiction serves as a socioeconomic critique of contemporary American society**,** wherein structural inequalities, symbolic markers of prestige, and bureaucratic rationalization function as mechanisms of disenfranchisement**.** This study contributes to broader discussions on class identity, cultural capital, and institutional power in literary discourse, highlighting the enduring tensions between economic determinism and social stratification in neoliberal economies.

Keywords: *Class, social honor, status, subjugation.*

Introduction

Unlike Marxist categorization of class into two, Max Weber's concept of class, status provides a different and more fitting approach to analyze the shifts taking place in the formation of working class in America. Mark's focus lies in the economic structures and class struggle where Weber's framework examines the intersections of class, status and party, which is economic position, social honor and political influence respectively that shape the class dynamics. In George Saunders' stories the satire to American corporate culture is often evident. The class division and dehumanizing bureaucracy are the cog in American machinery to determine market-driven class structure and status anxiety. Saunders' stories anthologized in *Tenth of December* (2013) depict the struggle of working-class and lower middle-

class individuals in contemporary America. Moreover, his narratives are not merely about economic deprivation but about the way social class, status anxieties, and bureaucratic structures that shape an individual's identity and agency. This study examines Tenth of December through a Weberian lens, analyzing how Saunders critiques the illusion of social mobility, the emotional consequences of status competition, and the bureaucratic structures that reinforce class divisions in contemporary America.

Literature Review

George Saunders has been credited for finding authentic American voice in his narrative. The characters primarily carry the voice of changing American society under the pressure of economic crisis, globalization, and migration. A range of critical engagement in his narrative reveals a deep sense of dissatisfaction with rapidly collapsing American values and concurrently voices an urgency to reinsert ethicality in living consciousness. In this context, Sian Cain evaluates that the stories are "all about people" and about "humanity and the meaning we find in small moments, in objects or gestures" (para 2) expressed through the motives such as family and domesticity. In Cain's words, "The picture Saunders paints of humanity is one that is united by its messiness, pettiness, self-awareness" but at the core of these dispositions there lies "an inherent, irresponsible goodness that only needs the right test to expose it" (para 6). Moreover, these matters of humanities are laced with working class anxieties such as inability to pay regular bill.

Saunders's characters are general representative of a commercial class and occasionally a social class as well. In the Weberian sense, they are class with skill working in antique business, animal farm and so on. Because of socio-economic condition, they are compelled to work, but they are not paid enough. Gregory Cowles hails his stories as "Ray of Hope" in the time of capitalist degeneration as his narrative "never succumbs to depression" (para 3). The stories are about the potential times when financial uncertainties gloom. Cowles further illustrates, "Money worries have always been figured in Saunder's work" this collection of stories have "deepened [them] into pervasive, somber mood that weights the book with a new and welcome gravity" (para 4). The financial crisis of 2008 must have a looming influence in creation of characters smitten by money-issue.

In fact, it has been difficult to identify and locate working class as a concept and a category. David P. Rando makes similar observation in his critical essay, "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class." Rando reflects on:

> In the last twenty or more years, for reasons that include the fall of the Soviet Union, the impact of poststructuralist theory, conceptualization of identity that more and more take race and gender into consideration alongside class, and the general cultural turn in class analysis, it has become increasingly difficult to write about class and unclear what value the "working class" has as a concept for social and cultural analysis or for literary representation. (437)

The category of class, as a part of Marxist aesthetics, has been on a defensive back foot due to the collapse of socialism and rise of multiple identity based studies such as gender and race. Though the concept of class has become a backstage category, Saunders fiction defines all these and "challenges us [the readers] to reconsider basic questions of class representation" (Rando 437). The representation of the characters in these selected stories demonstrate Sanders's "attempts to represent the realities of class

. . . [as] a differential field of experience and identity" (438). Rando calls them a postmodern working class.

Saunders' stories have accumulated praise for their unique style and realistic themes. U. R. Bowie rightly comments that his art tells about ordinary American problems. He illustrates:

> Saunders is great at portraying everyday people in today's America. In "Puppy" we meet Marie, another overprotective, gee-whiz-I'm-trying-my-best-to-be-an-ideal-mom American middle class mother. Marie strives to create a perfect life for her children, to make up for her own far-less-than-perfect childhood. She has a great middle-class husband named Robert the Jolly, who, whenever she brings home another exotic pet—such as an iguana that ends up biting him—never gets irritated. (para 12)

Bowie argues that the class situation is evident in Saunders' characterization. Most of the characters are the result of the widening social class in America which has further been worsened due to the economic crisis and its results. Similarly, in an interview with Benjamin Nugent, George Saunders lets readers know the process of his creation. In Nugent's question "You have known to spend a great deal of time on each story" Saunders explains some back-of-the-stage thoughts on his stories as:

> It ranges from a day, with a story like "Sticks," which is just a few paragraphs, to fourteen years, on 'The Semplica Girl Diaries." Typically it's . . . eight months? The one I'm working on now has taken over a year. I tend to get locked up at certain points. . . . When a story locks up and you get stuck, that's its way of saying, Hey, dummy, you are trying to solve me in the plane of your original conception. (78)

When an author shares the process of creation, it illuminates the reading experiences in unique ways. Saunders is not only sharing his experiences; he is historicizing the stories in spatiotemporal context. Similarly, according to Sam Chesters, Saunders embodies the postmodern sensibility of irony and humor with absolute honesty. Chesters puts his stance in the following words:

> Saunders's writing reflects the metamodern sensibility of the moment in which he writes, as his postmodern objectives are altered and transformed by the ultimately corrective nature of his writing. . . . Saunders's work represents a departure from piercing or venomous satires. He crafts instead narratives built on compassion. Though his work is saturated with absurdity and exaggeration, its underlying foundation is sincerity, a quality well-suited for the work of metamodern satire. (44)

Chesters argues that Saunders's writing embodies the metamodern approach which is a blending of postmodern techniques with a corrective and compassionate tone. Unlike harsh, satirical works of the past, Saunders's narratives focus on empathy and sincerity. Despite their absurd and exaggerated elements, his works ultimately aim to be sincere and compassionate, aligning with the metamodern style of satire that balances irony and earnestness.

In Saunders' stories, readers find the aspect of postmodern satirical aesthetics. Layne Neeper identifies it a significant aspect because of temporality: the postmodern satire in the millennium which stands as a unique reinterpretation of the traditional satirical formula. Moreover, his primary focus is on creating a clear and cumulative impact about American society. His stories, thus, are intentionally take

a moral stand: "committed to a definable, cumulative effect on readers that is unmistakably intended as moral, remedial, and salutary" (284). In the narratives, Saunders represents a unique reinterpretation of traditional satire, sharing many postmodern ideas. Unlike his twentieth-century peers, Saunders aims for a clear, moral impact on his readers. His stories accurately identify human flaws and absurdities within imaginative worlds, ultimately focusing on fostering empathy and improvement in his audience.

A unique artist, Saunders plentifully blends humor with social commentary. The stories are written in a variety of narrative styles, ranging from first-person stream-of-consciousness to third-person limited perspectives. This diversity in narration allows him to explore the complexities of his characters' mental status while maintaining a sharp focus on external societal pressures. Another aspect of his writing is that he employs wit and irony which often juxtapose absurd situations with deeply relatable emotions. For instance, in the story "Victory Lap," Saunders uses the inner monologues of his teenage characters to highlight the absurdity and tension of their everyday lives. This juxtaposition creates a unique reading experience, inviting readers to laugh while simultaneously reflecting on the serious themes beneath the surface.

The critical responses discussed above illustrate that Saunders stories have yet to be critically analyzed from the Weberian perspective of class. This paper makes an attempt to do that.

Max Weber's Concept of Class: A Theoretical Perspective

Max Weber's idea of class, status and party provides a useful framework for understanding Saunders' narratives. In Weber's terms, class is determined not just by ownership of capital—Marx has stressed it does—but also by one's position in the labor market and access to opportunities: "various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills each constitute a *particular* class situation" (302, emphasis original). For Weber, there are three classes: property class, commercial class and social class. The property class is marked with an "exclusive acquisition of high-priced consumer goods" and enjoys the privilege of "wealth accumulation out of unconsumed surplus" and thus can "control over executive positions in business" (303). Other than this, there is commercial class that enjoy stability and entrepreneurial skills and other "varying qualifications" (304) useful to establish their autonomy. And, there is social class who is "the propertyless intelligentsia and specialists. . . with considerable social differences depending on the cost of their training" (405) and this class depends on other classes to get recognition. Weber argues that status of an individual rests on these complicated layers of class realization. He details it out as:

> Status may rest on class position of a distinct or an ambiguous kind. However, it is not solely determined by it: Money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualifications, although they may lead to them; and the lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it. Conversely, status may influence, if not completely determine, a class position without being identical with it. (306)

The intersection between class and status offers a new and fresh view in Weberian conceptualization of class and status. In capitalist economy, status group can spring from different sources such as lifestyle choices, types of vocation, and by claiming and clinging to heredity status.

In contemporary America, status refers to social honor, lifestyle, and cultural prestige, while bureaucracy reflects the impersonal systems of control that shape daily life. However, class underwent

massive changes, as Sherry Linkson, and John Russo note, "the traditional characteristics of modern industrial capitalist society have been dramatically altered" (367). As a result, 90s has witnessed the increasing growth in economy driven by technology but affecting industrial working classes. Gradually, it started affecting all across the class hierarchies generating anxiety waves regarding "class identity and class relation" (368) However, Geoffrey T Wodtke's study on class, income and inequality during 80s shows that the "inequality trends are governed by changes in within-class income dispersion" (1375).

Kurt B. Mayer contends that the fundamental nature American class structure has become a changing category as individuals can move up and down in the social hierarchies outlined by Weber. He explains:

> [S]ocial position at any given time, [is] a fact which bedevils all one dimensional conceptual scheme of social stratification. At the same time, the increased mobility has also greatly weakened the inheritance of position, particularly in the middle ranges of the economic, prestige, and power orders. In modern, industrial societies, therefore, social classes still clearly inhabit both the top and the bottom of the rank hierarchies, but they are now beginning dissolve in the middle. (462-463)

In the reviews on social class from 1960s to 2020s—Mayer from 1960s, Linkon and Russo in the 2000s, and Wodtke in 2016—reveal the fact that social class in America has been a subject of debate, change and transformation. Yet, the literary representation of these class needs an attention because of the psychological effects it can have on individuals. This paper analyzes how social class in America has been realized in literary discourses. The analysis is based on four of George Saunders' stories collected in *Tenth of December.* In the light of Weber's lens of class and status, the paper explores and analyzes how his characters navigate economic precarity, status anxieties, and bureaucratic oppression.

Interpretation of Selected Stories from Weberian Lens

Class as Market Position: Precarity and Economic Struggles in Saunder's Stories

Saunders' stories in *Tenth of December* are collectively a narrative of social class in America. By including a wide range of characters, their predicaments, social relations, and involvement in different layers of class consciousness, Saunders extends the problem of class mobility into different layers of American life. Thus, these characters stand for different aspects of American people, psychology, and problems. The economic crisis of 2008 has been a source of the dark theme Saunders employs in the stories. The effects of financial crisis were so pervasive to the working class people that they are forced to sell their personal toys to mitigate the existing crisis in family. The stories run parallel to these experiences. This may be the reason, Saunders stories sounds employing Weberian narrators.

Weber's concept of class as market position is evident in Saunders' portrayal of working-class individuals who lack stable economic security. His characters often work in low-paying, insecure jobs where they have little control over their futures. In "AL Roosten," the title character struggles as the owner of a failing antique shop, Bygone Daze, while envying the economic success of Larry Donfrey, a wealthy businessman. Roosten's economic instability and limited market position reflect Weber's argument that class is defined by access to market opportunities rather than just wealth ownership. Roosten's self-worth is deeply tied to his class insecurity, as seen in his desperate fantasies about gaining Donfrey's approval: "Dinner at the mansion would go well. Soon he'd basically be part of the [Donfrey]

family" (103). Roosten's attempt to establish link with Donfrey family is a purposive attempt to climb social ladder.

Despite being open, class mobility is not an easy act particularly in the countries like United States where the class as a position comes as a product of market relation. The story in "Puppy" presents this idea through two women characters of different social class: Marie and Callie whose class positions shape their decisions. Marie, a middle-class mother, can afford consumerist fantasies, while Callie, a working-class mother, must sell her beloved puppy to make ends meet. Marie views Callie's life as a spectacle of poverty, failing to recognize her own class privilege: "It would be a nice field trip," Marie thought (37). Callie's social position depends on her ability to sell a puppy but failing to do so will jeopardize her status. Her precarity stems from the economic struggles she is having. Here, Saunders illustrates how market position limits personal agency, making it difficult for working-class characters to escape economic constraints despite their efforts.

Saunders masterfully depicts individuals struggling to navigate a rigid social order, where economic disparities, status anxieties, and systemic constraints shape human behavior and relationships. Weber distinguishes between class (economic market position) and status (social honor and prestige), arguing that social mobility is often illusory—a belief that one can ascend the social hierarchy through effort, when in reality, structural barriers prevent meaningful upward movement. This tension is evident in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," where the narrator's desperate attempt to gain status through conspicuous consumption exposes the illusion of class mobility. In this dystopian vision, impoverished women from third-world countries serve as living lawn ornaments for the wealthy, illustrating how status groups reinforce exclusivity through material displays. As Max Weber notes ,"A 'status group' means a plurality of persons who, within a larger group, successfully claim a) a special social esteem, and possibly also b) status monopoly" (306). Weber argues that the status groups define themselves through cultural markers that exclude outsiders "by virtue of their style of life, particularly the type of vocation" (306). Saunders' notes that the SGs become "monopolistic liturgies" which functions both as a commodity and a symbol soical status. The narrator's financial recklessness—maxing out his credit cards to maintain a façade of affluence—reflects Weber's insight that status-driven consumption often leads individuals to economic insecurity rather than true mobility. Similarly, in "Al Roosten," the protagonist experiences status anxiety, feeling humiliated in the presence of a wealthier, more socially esteemed peer, Larry Donfrey. Roosten's envy and internalized feelings of inferiority highlight Weber's argument that status competition fosters resentment among lower-status individuals who remain excluded from elite circles. Unlike a Marxist critique, which would frame Roosten's plight as a worker's struggle against capitalist exploitation, Weberian lens emphasizes how status hierarchies create deep-seated emotional and psychological suffering, even among individuals of the same economic class. Roosten's desperate fantasies about being welcomed into Donfrey's social sphere demonstrate how status distinctions are as rigid as class barriers, and shape one's self-worth and social interactions. Saunders also critiques the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic systems, which Weber describes as rationalized structures that strip individuals of autonomy.

In "Tenth of December" an ailing man, Eber, feels powerless within a bureaucratic healthcare system, fearing a loss of dignity as he succumbs to illness. His existential crisis embodies Weber's concept of the "iron cage"—the idea that modern institutions, driven by efficiency and impersonal rationalization, erode individual freedom and humanity. However, Saunders juxtaposes this bureaucratic

oppression with moments of genuine human connection, as the young boy Robin and the dying man develop an unexpected bond, challenging the impersonal forces that define their lives. By framing Saunders' narratives through Weber's model of class and status, it can be seen that his characters are not simply victims of capitalism but of a stratified social order that dictates their life chances, self-worth and interactions. Through economic precarity, status anxieties and bureaucratic entrapment, Saunders reveals the emotional and existential costs of a society where class is rigid, status is exclusionary and institutions are indifferent to individual suffering

Weber differentiates class from status, arguing that economic position does not always translate into social prestige. Saunders' characters obsess over status markers, but their attempts to climb the social ladder often lead to humiliation rather than success. In "The Semplica Girl Diaries" the narrator, a struggling father, believes that purchasing Semplica Girls (SGs)—poor migrant women displayed as human lawn ornaments—will elevate his social standing. His desperation to maintain middle-class respectability is reflected in his financial recklessness: "Visa full. Also AmEx full. Also Discover nearly full" (125). His pursuit of status symbols, despite being financially overextended, aligns with Weber's observation that status groups maintain exclusivity by enforcing cultural and material barriers. The narrator's failure highlights the false promise of class mobility—he can mimic wealth but never truly attain it. Similarly, in "Al Roosten," the protagonist's status anxiety manifests in his self-loathing and obsessive comparisons with wealthier individuals. Roosten's belief that money equals respect mirrors Weber's insight that status often overrides economic realities.

Bureaucracy and the Dehumanization of Workers

Saunders' "Tenth of December" presents a sharp critique of the American class structure, illustrating the ways in which individuals remain trapped within rigid social hierarchies despite the illusion of mobility. Through a series of interconnected narratives, Saunders explores the economic precarity, status anxieties and systemic constraints that shape his characters' lives. Families resort to selling puppies to ease financial burdens, a father celebrates a brief moment of upward mobility before succumbing to exploitative economic contracts, a small shop owner, Al Roosten, suffers status humiliation in the presence of wealthier peers, and a terminally ill man contemplates suicide to spare his family from financial hardship.

Rather than portraying class struggle purely in Marxist economic terms, Saunders' stories align closely with Weber's sociological framework, which distinguishes between class (market position), status (social honor), and bureaucracy (institutional control). Weber's analysis reveals how individuals are not only constrained by economic limitations but also by cultural and social forces that dictate their self-worth, relationships and opportunities.

Louis Tyson points out the difficulty of classifying American working people in class categories because there is "no distinction between owners and wage-earners" (51). The line between the workers and owners is so thin it does not separate these two. Rando depicts that it is not easy "to write about class and unclear what value the "working class" has as a concept for social and cultural analysis or for literary representation" (437). Saunders's characters reject the clear classical 'class ontologies' and subscribe to more affective and subjective collision with prevailing realities. In "Al Roosten," the man with the same name is crippled with the humiliation due to his small shop and processes this inferiority through imagining a lavish invitation in Donfrary's mansion as a gesture of gratitude: "Dinner at the

mansion would go well. Soon he'd basically be part of the [Donfrey] family" (103). Al Roosten and Donfray both have been a part of a fundraising for "LaffKidsoof-Crack and their antidrug clowns" (103) campaign in the request of Chamber of Commerce. But, he is too occupied with his own ontology. He bungles things up, does not attract much applauds, kicks Donfrey's key and wallet under the raiser, and imagines himself helping him and winning a reprieve of helping him find the keys.

Weber's theory of bureaucracy describes modern institutions as impersonal, rationalized systems that strip individuals of autonomy. Saunders critiques this bureaucratic control over human life, showing how individuals become trapped in corporate or systemic constraints. In "Tenth of December," Eber, a terminally ill man, contemplates suicide as he fears losing dignity within a bureaucratic healthcare system. His helplessness reflects Weber's argument that bureaucracies operate with cold efficiency, often disregarding individual suffering: "Something/someone bigger than him kept refusing. You were told the big something/someone loved you especially, but in the end, you saw it was otherwise. The big something/someone was neutral. Unconcerned" (231). Similarly, in "Escape from Spiderhead," prisoners undergo corporate drug testing, illustrating how bureaucratic control extends into the body itself. The characters are subject to scientific rationalization, reducing their emotions to corporate experiments—a perfect embodiment of Weber's "iron cage" of rationalization.

Political Subjugation: The Working Class and Voiceless

Weber's concept of party refers to political influence and access to power, yet Saunders' characters often experience political alienation and disenfranchisement.

In "Puppy" Callie, a struggling mother, is portrayed as incapable of making decisions for her own child, while Marie—a middle-class woman—assumes the right to call Child Welfare on her. Marie's moral superiority stems from institutional power, reinforcing Weber's claim that lower-class individuals often lack political agency.

Similarly, in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the SGs—migrant women from Moldova, Somalia, and Laos—exist as objects rather than political subjects. The narrator, despite his guilt, does not question the ethics of exploiting vulnerable women, reflecting how political and economic systems render the working class invisible: "No money, no papers. Who will remove microline? Who will give her job?" (167).

The SGs have no political voice; their fate is determined entirely by the wealthy elite who purchase them. This reinforces Weber's idea that political power is monopolized by dominant social groups, leaving the working class excluded from decision-making structures.

Conclusion: Saunders' Characters as Lacerating Individuals

The stories in Saunders's *Tenth of December* expose the lacerating effects on the working class people due to the intersection of class and status in a bureaucratic system. The stories demonstrate how class struggles in America are not just about economic deprivation but also about status anxieties and bureaucratic control. In such a tightly held system class becomes a market position that limits the working-class characters' economic mobility. Since their ability to move across, the class is held by an external force—market—the status competition leads to humiliation rather offering to an upward mobility. As in Simplica girls' case, political structures and its organelles control and inhibit any chances

of social change as they hold political structures completely. Saunders' narrative reveals the illusion of American meritocracy—his characters believe in self-improvement and social mobility, yet structural forces continually undermine their efforts. By exposing the hidden mechanisms of class, status and bureaucracy, Saunders presents a world where economic survival is a struggle, social aspirations are futile, and power remains concentrated in the hands of a privileged few.

In short, the stories provide a compelling exploration of social class and the socio-economic interactions that shape the lives of his characters. Characters like Al Roosten in the story "Al Roosten" are driven by their beliefs in a proper class order. This informs the nature of their class and their relationships and motivations in the stories. Roosten, for example, is consumed by jealousy and a desire for revenge against his friend Larry Donfrey, illustrating how class consciousness can fuel personal conflicts. Through a Marxist lens, Saunders's characters can be seen as embodying the struggles and ideologies that arise from capitalism, highlighting how class structures influence behavior and relationships.

Finally, Saunders skillfully portrays the everyday struggles of people in contemporary America, capturing the distance between their hopes and the reality of their situations. His characters' inability to adjust to societal norms and conventions underscores the challenges they face in navigating a complex and often inequitable world. Through these stories, Saunders sheds light on the diverse obstacles that prevent individuals from achieving happiness and fulfillment. By highlighting these struggles, Saunders encourages readers to reflect on their own lives and the societal structures that shape them, ultimately revealing the nuanced and often harsh realities of class distinctions in the modern world. After all, by highlighting the tensions between economic determinism and social status in neoliberal economies, this study expects to contribute to the literary discourse regarding the discussion of intersection between class identity, cultural capital, and institutional power.

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