

Unveiling American realities:

A thematic comparison of Saunders's *Tenth of December*
and Moore's *Bark*

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I hereby declare that, in line with the Faculty of Arts' code of conduct for research integrity, the work submitted here is my own original work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

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Abstract

This dissertation provides a comparison of the main themes and overall messages of George Saunders's short story collection *Tenth of December* and Lorrie Moore's *Bark*. Published in 2013 and 2014 respectively, they offer us an insight into what characterizes American writing in the 21st century. Based on a close reading of both collections, a deeper understanding of the secondary literature on short stories, the authors' writing styles and contemporary literary developments, as well as personal interviews with Saunders and Moore, this study first establishes how *Tenth of December* and *Bark* present violence, consumer-capitalism, technology and the American Dream as central elements of American life in the 21st century. I then demonstrate that Moore's and Saunders's stories are peppered with more timeless and global themes – love, death, time passing, work, etc. – that come to the fore in the everyday life of Americans in the 21st century. In brief, this study establishes how Saunders and Moore, using different strategies – from narrative empathy and compassion to wordplays and humor – include various contemporary themes but also much older ones – such as death or love – to depict today's America in their respective collections of short stories *Tenth of December* and *Bark*.

Keywords: short fiction, American literature, George Saunders, Lorrie Moore, narrative empathy, humor

1. Introduction

“People like to complain about the state of contemporary literature, but I can only assume they don’t read it very widely” said Laura Miller in her comment about the list of the best books of the year in 2013 – in which George Saunders’s *Tenth of December* could be found. Without venturing to say that Lorrie Moore’s *Bark*, if published a few months before, would have been on the list as well – if it’s and ands were pots and pans there’d be no need for thinkers – this dissertation will side with Miller’s remark by presenting two contemporary works of fiction that have been widely acclaimed.

This dissertation compares some essential themes that are common to Saunders’s *Tenth of December* and Lorrie Moore’s *Bark*. Being American contemporaries, both writers take a critical but candid look at their country, pointing at its vices, fears and problems. I further argue that both collections also encompass other well-known themes that are not tied to any specific time or place, thereby making their collections more universal than what one might think at first glance. Though unmistakably American in terms of their settings, main themes, and characters, *Tenth of December* and *Bark* also incorporate broader dimensions.

After mentioning a few debates on the main literary development succeeding postmodernism, I provide a general background on American short fiction and its most recent developments. I then briefly present Moore’s and Saunders’s biographies; their place in the contemporary American literary field; and the two collections that are to be compared, *Tenth of December* and *Bark*. This introductory section closes with a state of the art of the research on Moore’s and Saunders’s writings. Finally getting to the heart of the matter, the first main section will focus on American violence: presenting the importance of wars, terrorism and assault in both collections. Being central concerns and problems for Moore and Saunders, capitalism and materialism will be closely looked at in a second section. A third shared theme is the increasing importance of and dependence on technology in contemporary society. Lastly, this study investigates the well-known belief in the American Dream and how it is represented in both collections – not only the American Dream, but also the Americans’ dreams will be part of my analysis. Once the various themes characterizing America in the 21st century covered, I will turn to some of the more universal and timeless concerns present in the collections: from their shared interest in time passing to the constant references to love and death.

2. George Saunders, Lorrie Moore, and contemporary American short fiction

Lorrie Moore and George Saunders, being nearly exact contemporaries, have lived and written through postmodernism and what emerged out of it. The following sections will therefore present various insights from the scholarship on that literary development. Having both produced a contemporary collection of short stories, the place and importance of short fiction in the 21st century will also be discussed. This section will be followed by a biography of Saunders and Moore and a presentation of their collections. Once their centrality in today's literary world confirmed, I will focus on previous research about their works, writing styles and favorite themes.

2.1. Postmodernism & after

Several literary critics and authors have tried to define and name the main literary development characterizing our contemporary literature, engaging in fierce debates. Most agree on the characteristics that define American contemporary fiction – the 21st century witnesses an increasing interest in historical and biographical fiction, trauma fiction, postcolonial fiction, non-realistic fiction (science fiction, dystopia, cyberpunk, fantasy, magic realism, metafiction) with a focus on social and political criticism, real-life themes and concerns, life lessons and moral messages, feminism and violence, irony, search for identity, etc. (Mengham; Baym) What seems to pose a problem is rather the name that has to be given to that particular development. As Linda Hutcheon states in 2002, “the postmodern moment has passed [...], post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own” (165). Neither post-postmodern, postwar, digitalism, nor terms like hypermodern or pseudo-modern, went much further than the debates for which they were invented. The only exception could be metamodernism, which is on the rise in literary circles but has not completely broken out in the everyday language yet.

At first sight, one immediately notices the links that all those potential terms have with postmodernism, which is significant since this new literary development should not be seen as a clear break from it. However, there is a large agreement on the fact that “postmodernism tendencies are taking a new *sens*, a new direction and meaning” (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 60), which is why a new term is needed but which also implies that postmodernist strategies have not disappeared completely. Contemporary literature could be defined as “oscillating between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern

enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and purity, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (62). The fragmentation and vagueness of this definition correspond perfectly to the literary development that it is supposed to define. It is therefore useful to keep in mind that ‘metamodernism’, or whatever term we choose to refer to contemporary literature, “is a discursive category that has pedagogical legitimacy and utility but limitations as a frame for literary-aesthetic developments that might otherwise stubbornly refuse to synthesize” (Hoberek et al. 38).

March-Russel’s research sides with the aforementioned arguments in that the “attempt to periodize the postmodern (and after) is threatened by the word itself, literally meaning ‘after’ (post) ‘the now’ (from the Latin modo) [...] this undefinable quality is shared by both postmodernism and the short story” (222). Unable to periodize the postmodern, he rather listed its characteristics in the remainder of his book. The postmodern is firstly ‘undecidable’, not in the sense that the postmodern text has no meaning, but rather that it is “against the overdetermination of a founding principle. In suspending judgment, the postmodern celebrates the multiple options within the act of judging” (223). It is also ‘decentred’ and ‘unrepresentable’ since “the postmodern is always in a state of becoming so that its common characteristics are partiality, incompleteness and obscurity” (230). “Call[ing] into question the relationship between the narrative account and the world that it describes” (226), while “result[ing] in a style of writing that stays on the surface” (228), the postmodern can be linked to concepts like ‘simulation’ and ‘surface’. Concluding by answering negatively to the key question “Is it [postmodernism] over?”, March-Russel strikingly links the literary development to the two authors central to this dissertation: “it is true to say that postmodernism has become part of the literary tradition for younger writers, such as [...] Saunders and [...] Lorrie Moore” (234-235).

2.2. Short fiction in America in the 21st century

March-Russel has thus compared the undefinable quality of postmodernism with short stories. Critics have always argued about the birth of short fiction. While some think that the short story is one of the oldest literary genres (much older than the novel) – tracing it back to the oral tradition and its fairy tales, legends, fables, etc. (Harrison 84-99) – others see it as a modern literary development, tracing its birth back to the 1850s (Einhaus 71-142). Still others argue

that “its great diversity makes it impossible to describe the short story’s origins in evolutionary terms” (Korte 16). In America, where Poe and Hawthorne are seen as the inventors of the modern short story, most literary critics side with the latter argument: the short story

reveals itself as merely a special case, and particular development of the endless succession of distinctively short narratives which, since the world began, have dealt with those life-units that were simple, brief, and complete in their brevity. But it also differs from them in degrees if not in kind. (Beachcroft 121)

The ‘brevity’ mentioned by Beachcroft leads us to the definition of short fiction, as it is one of its central characteristics.

Not only the birth of the short story, but also its definition seems debatable: each author, literary critic has a different understanding of the genre: it is indeed defined by Poe as “a unity of effect”, by Mansfield as “a question put”, by Trevor as “an explosion of truth”, or by Hemingway as “writing as straight and true as you can” (D’hoker). Those various differences of interpretation – from the history to the definitions of the genre – make it clear that one needs to narrow the perspective on the short story – scaling it down to the American short story for its characteristics and directly to the viewpoints of Moore and Saunders for its definition. Lorrie Moore defines the genre by comparing it to the novel: “a short story is a love affair; a novel is a marriage. A short story is a photograph, a novel is a film” (Kelly 96). During an interview for this dissertation, George Saunders confirmed the broadness of the genre by defining it in as many ways as imaginable. In general, he “see[s] a story more as a transformative artifact than a document of truth. Its function is more to comfort and elevate than deliver some sort of objective ‘truth’” (Saunders and Bonten).

While short stories can strongly differ – as illustrated in the main distinction between plotless and plotted (Bader 86-92) – American short stories still generally share a certain number of characteristics: brevity with a limited plot and a limited number of characters, hybridity (combination with other genres, e.g. gothic fiction, detective fiction, etc.), openness, condensation and omission (‘show rather than tell’ strategy), importance of language (due to the fact that ‘every word counts’). In more recent years, we can also acknowledge a certain degree of experimentalism in short fiction by American writers as well as a recurrent use of Hemingway’s ‘Iceberg theory’, which links the notion of omission with the ‘show don’t tell’ one (May 299-324). Finally, another central characteristic of the genre in America is its literary

status since “in the USA, [...] the short story is regarded as a national artwork” (March-Russell 43).

Looking at the genre with a contemporary lens, it is clear that “the short story form, in its brevity and condensation, fits our age” (Botha 201). After losing its importance in the last century – partly due to its publication format – the short story seems to be on the rise again. Elizabeth Ray explains this revival of the short form as such:

Many people struggle to find the time to engage with a full-length novel when they’re dealing with emails every second of every day or having to meet deadlines or rush home to put the kids to bed. A short story offers the perfect antidote – it’s the equivalent of listening to a single track of music instead of the whole album. (March-Russell 17)

Literary critics seem to have regained interest in the genre as well, with many new studies being undertaken.

2.3. Contemporary theories on short stories

While the short story as a genre has been gaining importance at literary and educational levels all around the world, research and studies about short fiction seem to be particularly important in the States. What follows is a short overview of contemporary theories on short stories that are central in America.

A first dimension of the genre that has been in the spotlight recently is linked to the epistemology of the short story. Various recent studies focus on the epistemological differences between short and longer forms of fiction. Charles May analyzed how the nature of knowledge in short stories is often complex, fragmented and subjective, reflecting through the few characters the complexities and uncertainties of human life (131-143). Basseler’s research similarly concludes that,

as a literary and cultural “space,” the North American short story of the late 19th to early 21st century can be understood as a repository as well as a vehicle for the negotiation and recovery of meaning and a non-reductive sense of human life that includes phenomenological, metaphysical, linguistic, metaphoric, aesthetic, psychological, historical, and social dimensions. (38)

Sharing an interest in short fiction and epistemology, both insist on the depth and complexity of human experiences in short stories.

In contemporary literary studies, the importance of the reader and their own reading experiences casts a shadow on the New Critics' focus on close reading of texts. John Gerlach studied the entangled history of closure and the short form in America and concluded that "the anticipation of completion in all its various forms, in space, in time, and at the level of theme and idea, structures the story and the reader's experience of it" (160).

It is also important to be aware of the importance attached in recent studies to "the impact of the contexts and co-texts of a given magazine on the production, publication and reception of short stories" (D'hoker and Mourant 1). Reading a short story in a magazine, a collection or even an anthology might lead to many different interpretations of that same story (Kurowski 27-34). While the two publication formats lead to different readings of the stories, they are often linked since short stories published in collections nearly always first appeared in magazines. Authors also have to make a name for themselves – using magazine publications for instance – before being able to publish a collection of short stories since "the success of a collection depends upon the reputation of the writer" (March-Russel 50). The relation between postmodernism and short fiction (cf. section 2.1) is even more interesting when one looks at collections of short stories since "the multiplicity of the stories [in a collection] allows such books to straddle the divide between what is said and what remains unspoken. The gaps between stories in such collections are thus the ideal formal articulation of a problem of fiction since (post)modernism: how does the artist capture the ineffable?" (Smith 104).

Those various arguments show how contemporary American collections of short stories, symbolizing a whole country and culture, can be analyzed as fine examples of the literary development that emerged out of postmodernism. In the following sections, I will explain the choice of comparing George Saunders's *Tenth of December* and Lorrie Moore's *Bark*.

2.4. Biographies of George Saunders and Lorrie Moore

Born in 1958 in Texas, George Saunders was raised in Illinois. His job career was exceptionally diverse before he was engaged as a professor at Syracuse University. Among other smaller jobs, Saunders worked as a doorman, roofer, geophysical engineer and in a slaughter house. In numerous interviews, Saunders mentions how life has not always been easy for him. Feeling

as a victim of capitalism, which is often a central criticism in his works, he often struggled to make ends meet and therefore had to work alongside his parents in a restaurant for many years. In 1997, he started teaching creative writing at Syracuse University. Still teaching today, he mostly writes fiction and non-fiction independently. With more than a dozen works, from short story collections to fictional novels and non-fiction, Saunders has continuously been gaining in popularity since his career debut. However, even though his success eventually enabled him to leave those economically challenging years behind, he will never forget from where he came from (Saunders and Bonten).

Being only a year older than Saunders, Lorrie Moore, born in 1957, started as a writer much earlier. Indeed, in 1983, her first collection of short stories *Self Help* – composed mainly of works she had written for her master’s thesis – was published and widely acclaimed. From then on, she never stopped writing novels, short stories, and children’s books. While she remained in the literary domain throughout her career, her job history is – similarly to Saunders’s – very diverse. Before starting her M.F.A., which led her in a few years to her first published works, she worked as a paralegal in Michigan. Once her talent as a writer was confirmed, she never stopped working as a professor of creative writing (just like Saunders) at various well-known American universities: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Vanderbilt University, New York University, Cornell University, University of Michigan and Princeton. As she explains in an interview, the element of her childhood that contributed the most to her artistic identity is her love for the theatre, where she spent all afternoons from very early on: “I became if not stagestruck, then theater-struck, or art-struck” (Moore and Gaffney). While her writing career has always been stable – all her works were widely acclaimed and received several awards – she also shares economic preoccupations with Saunders: “Having a child, you can start to feel money pressure, and if you get a bad review, you might think, How’s my kid going to go to college?” (Moore and Gaffney).

2.5. Saunders and Moore in US literary culture

Lorrie Moore and George Saunders have a remarkable number of similarities. Both American citizens born a few months apart, they are passionate authors who have written short stories, novels and children’s books through postmodernism. They also have similar preoccupations, such as their concerns about the state of America or their own financial situations. In addition, they have a similar teaching job of creative writing at university.¹ Analyzing their recent works

is an interesting way to look at what emerged out of postmodernism (cf. section 2.1). Both writers are also prominent figures in the contemporary American literary world, as will be shown hereafter.

While section 2.3. mentions the importance of studies on the publication context of short stories, one should not overlook the relationship between magazines and the types of short stories that they publish. Publishing a short story in *The New Yorker* or in *The New Republic* is far from having the same standing. In order to remain objective, one needs to look at widely-accepted classifications such as the *Best American series*.² Using this classification, researchers have looked at which magazines publish those stories that are classified as being the “best American” ones. As shown by Manshel, “more than half of the works honored by the series come from just twenty periodicals, and nearly one quarter were originally published in just three: *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s Magazine*” (69). *The New Yorker* has been the top journal – as the magazine providing the most stories from which the “Best are drawn” (70) – since the 1940s. Another study, based this time on a classification of BASS (Best American Short Stories), insists on the importance of *The New Yorker* compared to other magazines in the publication of the Best American Short Stories. It argues that “this dominance is sustained and dominant, with *The New Yorker* publishing the most stories selected for BASS in every decade since the 1940s” (Glass 81).

Both Lorrie Moore and George Saunders are linked to *The New Yorker* as well as to the Best American series. In the 1990s, Lorrie Moore was the American author for whom most stories were listed in the Best American Series. In the 2010s George Saunders is also to be found on the list of authors who have produced the largest number of short stories listed in that series (Manshel 69). Moore and Saunders are also central authors for *The New Yorker* since both have provided the magazine with more than a dozen short stories each. Based on research covering the period 1925-2019, we learn that more than half of the authors who have published a short story in *The New Yorker*, have only published a single story, which makes the importance of Moore and Saunders in the magazine even more remarkable (Loong). By connecting those two elements – *The New Yorker* as the journal publishing the most ‘prized’ stories since the 1940s and Moore and Saunders as two authors contributing greatly to the magazine – one can only recognize the significance of these two authors in the canon of contemporary American short fiction.

An ‘objective’ (if this even exists) list of America’s leading artists can be found in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an honor society of American writers, composers, architects, etc. It offers us a classification that is, on the one hand, well-established and

recognized internationally and, on the other hand, still slightly subjective since many socio-economic factors might still be of some influence. Founded in 1898, the Academy elects 300 members who have contributed greatly to American arts (Fenton 435-440). The fact that Lorrie Moore was elected in 2006 and George Saunders three years later, says it all about their importance and popularity.

Another more objective and acknowledged way of classifying authors is via literary prizes. While mentioning all literary awards that both writers have ever received would be far beyond the purview of this introduction, I will mention a few interesting ones. With only a year difference, both writers won the well-known O. Henry Awards – a yearly literary award for short stories of exceptional merit – in first place for Moore in 1997 and second place for Saunders in 1998. While one of Moore's books was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2010, Saunders won the PEN/Hemingway Award in 1996 in his debut career. Among many other literary prizes – Booker Prize, New York Times bestseller, Folio Prize – Saunders won The Story Prize – an annual prize for outstanding short fiction – in 2013 with his collection of short stories *Tenth of December*. Interestingly, Moore's *Bark* was a finalist for the same prize in 2014. Those two collections are the ones I will be focusing on and will therefore be introduced in the next section (Kelly 74/102; Luebering).

2.6. Presentation of *Tenth of December* and *Bark*

Both collections, *Tenth of December* and *Bark*, published one year apart – in 2013 and 2014 respectively – are similar to each other in as many ways as they differ from each other. While *The New York Times* described Saunders's collection as “the best book you'll read this year” and Moore as “the most irresistible contemporary writer”, the *Sunday Times* described Saunders's collection as “dazingly surreal stories about a failing America”, and Moore in her collection as “brilliant – precise and evocative, running from the cute to the vicious in the space of a sentence” (Saunders; Moore “blurbs”). Both collections, as those praises reveal, have been positively acclaimed and received various prizes: *Tenth of December* was shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2013 and won, a year later, The Folio and Story Prize; *Bark* was shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award as well as The Story Prize (that Saunders won with his own collection) in 2014. The main element they share is that both collections – through their themes, settings and characters – represent 21st century America: its people, its lifestyle, its problems, its crises, but also its hopes and fears.

Tenth of December, containing 10 stories, provides a dark, sad and simultaneously touching picture of today's America. Using his well-known strategies of narrative empathy and New Sincerity (cf. section 2.7.2), Saunders tries to make the reader feel compassion for all characters – from a rapist and murderer to a desperate father. Using humor and satire as well as a cunning use of language, Saunders insists on the difficulty, atrocity and absurdity of 21st century life in the States. Through jokes, irony and sarcasm, Saunders then succeeds in bringing light, warmth and even hope into his collection. As *The New York Times* has it, “aside from all the formal invention and satirical energy of Saunders’ fiction, the main thing about it, [...] is how much it makes you feel” (Saunders “blurb”). While focusing on themes such as work, love, war, despair, or even class struggle, all the stories in the collection question our morality and humanity and invite readers to think more deeply about their own choices, judgments, and more generally, their own lives.

It is certainly not in *Bark* that one should search for a lighter read, since Moore joins Saunders in his profoundly dark depiction of contemporary American lifestyle. Seven from the eight short stories are set in America and in the last one, “Subject to Search”, Tom, the narrator’s (close) friend, mentions that he “has to fly back to the States” (162) at the very beginning of their holidays in France. The collections differ in their engagement with readers: while Saunders tries to make you feel what it feels like to live an absurd or difficult life – placing the reader in the mind of a rapist or a lonely veteran just back from the Vietnam War – Moore uses language, jokes, irony, sarcasm and above all striking metaphors to give the reader the amusement and fun that contrastingly lack in nearly all of her characters’ lives. Although Zora’s strange and depressing attitude in “Debarking” is “probably just [her] coming off [her] antidepressants” (42), the other main characters in the collection do not seem happier: the narrator in “The Juniper Tree” drowns in a troubled ‘regrets-dream’ after having lost her friend Robin to cancer, the narrators in “Wings” and “Referential” spend their lives taking care of sick children, and in seven stories the characters live in a very disturbed or difficult love relationship due to divorce, early death, cheating, etc. *The Literary Review* provides a succinct synopsis of Moore’s collection: “these eight stories are crawling with jokes, quirks, asides and comic observations to the point it’s almost possible to overlook how sad they are” (Moore “blurb”). Sharing many themes with Saunders’s collection – love, class struggle, divorce, war, etc. – *Bark* invites the reader to think critically about the meaning, shortness and singularity of our lives. With a compulsive use of stream of consciousness – just like Saunders – Moore makes the reader realize how challenges, dilemmas, fears, or even hopes are not individual problems but are common to a whole generation, a whole nation, maybe even the whole world.

This is exactly the point that this dissertation will make: comparing both works, using themes and motifs as *tertium comparationis* and using various short stories as illustrations, I argue that Saunders's and Moore's collections not only present themes and preoccupations typical of 21st century American lifestyle, but are also peppered with more universal and timeless concerns that come to the fore in the depiction of the everyday life of Americans in the 21st century.

2.7. State of the art

The previous sections have made it clear that George Saunders and Lorrie Moore play central roles in the American contemporary literary world. The following paragraphs provide an overview of their literary techniques, main areas of interest, and preferred themes as described in the secondary literature.

2.7.1. State of the art: Lorrie Moore

If there is one thing we need to mention about Lorrie Moore, it is her use of language. Her pervasive use of puns, similes and metaphors is probably the aspect that characterizes her the most. As always in terms of writing styles, some readers of Moore's fiction recognize the beauty of the metaphors and their deeper meanings, but others only see it as a show-offish strategy. As Macpherson has it, "Moore cannot fully be positioned as a feminist or as a postfeminist writer; instead, she playfully engages with aspects of both in her pursuit of humor. However, this humor has not been without its detractors (566). Chodat argues that people need to understand the role of her humor to be able to enjoy her writing: "her literary fusion of tone, plot, narrative perspective and character development does have philosophical implications, and to miss them can lead to a misunderstanding of the laughter that plays so prominent a role in her writing" (42-43).

As Chodat mentions in his study, the tone of Moore's writing is very recognizable and brings various additional layers of meaning in the stories. Kelly concurs with this analysis of Moore's works, arguing that "the tone of droll irony has become Moore's trademark: the more painful the experience, the likelier she is to make it subject of a joke" (1). As she mentioned in an interview, Moore's main artistic purpose is "to register the way we, here in America, live"

(Moore and Pneuman), which explains the choice of her collection for this dissertation. Even though her use of language deserves attention, we should not overlook the importance of studies that have focused on Moore's favorite themes and motifs, namely identity, the figure of doppelgänger, the complex relationships between parents and children, self-discovery, loneliness, mental and marital breakdown, and many more. In terms of themes, Moore's trademark is clearly "her emphasis on women's experiences" (Kelly 2).

Positioning Moore in one literary movement would result in reading her work through a certain lens, which would weaken her main message (Moore and Bonten). We mentioned already how Macpherson presents her as both a feminist and a postfeminist writer, which matches her obsession with women's lives. In her study she proposes this idea that Moore does not fit into one literary movement but rather into several: "Moore is experimental in form but also resolutely committed to deep characterization, a combination that sits uneasily between postmodernism and other forms of contemporary fiction" (566). Kelly also relates Moore to the literary development of postmodernism as well as to neorealism, but also views her as "a subtly political writer" (1). Section 2.1 has shown how Moore's work – especially *Bark* as a collection of short stories – is best analyzed as what comes out of postmodernism, which corresponds to the great majority of studies which position Moore's works similarly in the literary system.

Not only is Moore's humor predominant in her collection *Bark* – as well as in all her other works as has been researched extensively – but it also comes to the fore in interviews. In October 2023, I had the opportunity to talk to her about her work. We discussed the darkness of the collection: all characters in *Bark* indeed seem to live dogs' lives. When asked which strategies she used to counterbalance this negativity and provide the reader with a book that will not lead them straight to depression, she answered: "My approach to trying to keep readers engaged is occasional praying" (Moore and Bonten). While some might see this as humorous only, Moore actually provided the answer to the question: it is precisely her humorous writing style with her puns, metaphors and interest in language that makes her writing more exhilarating than depressing. Using metaphors or similes in crucial situations, Moore elevates us from the atrocity and absurdity of the scene described, to a humorous and therefore enjoyable reading. This is illustrated, for instance, in this passage from "Debarking" where Ira learns that his ex-wife has (an)other companion(s):

"Whatever," she said, her new word for "You're welcome", "Hello", "Good-bye", and "I'm only eight". [...] "Bummer," said Ira, his new word for "I must remain as neutral

as possible” and “Your mother’s a whore”. [...] “Besides,” she said. “I like Larry better. He’s stronger.” “Who’s Larry?” Ira said, instead of “Bummer”. “He’s this other dude,” Bekka said. “Bummer,” said Ira now. “Big, big bummer”. (11)

This example also illustrates Moore’s use of repetition which very often leads to a humorous effect that temporarily distracts the reader from the sadness or atrocity of the scene depicted. In other words, her humor elevates the reader to another level of the story, seeing it as an artistic construction and therefore weakening the connection that readers establish with characters, making the depressing stories and their underlying themes more bearable for readers.

Moore also often plays with idiomatic expressions, reflecting on their literal meaning. As Brockway indeed argues, “much of Moore’s humor arises from such attention to and delight in words. She approaches English like an intelligent foreigner, taking idioms and figurative language literally in order to rejuvenate them, forcing us to reexamine the cliché” (17). This is illustrated in “Subject to Search” in a flashback where the two characters discuss their regrets in life while checking bottles of wine to find one that would still be full: “I’d like to say optimistically that they were half full, not half empty, but these are just totally empty” (172). This is a witty and funny quote whose pessimism corresponds well to the general atmosphere of the collection.

Homophones are another of Moore’s favorite jokes as can be illustrated in “Wings” when KC politely refuses Milt’s invitation to share a muffin with him: “Oh, I can’t. I have to get home. Lot of things to tend to.” “Well, it’s not ten to. It’s ten past” (114). Moore is also famous for her extensive use of metaphors and similes: “many of Lorrie Moore’s stories are presented with puzzling or maverick elements: lines of dialogue, metaphors or actions that are striking or even startling, and that resist easy interpretation” (Kelly 212-213). A good illustration is to be found in “Thanks for Having Me” where Moore prefers to hide her highly far-fetched writing-style behind her character’s drinking patterns: “Aloneness was like riding a bike. At gunpoint. With the gun in your own hand. Aloneness was the air in your tires, the wind in your hair. You didn’t have to go looking for it with open arms. With open arms, you fell off the bike: I was drinking my wine too quickly” (182).

2.7.2. State of the art: George Saunders

Saunders's position in literature as a postmodern writer, as a typical postmodern satirist or practitioner of the New Sincerity,³ has been extensively studied and discussed. Neither the postmodern nor the satirist aspects of his work are surprising for a 21st century author. Yet, Saunders has a writing style that is immediately recognizable – another aspect shared with Moore, whose cunning language makes her works easily identifiable (cf. section 2.7.1.). However, his writing does not necessarily characterize itself by an acute interest in droll irony as Moore's writing does. While Saunders does join Moore in a certain use of irony and sarcasm, he is mostly known for having “a powerful ability to control language” (Rando 457). Hayes-Brady mentioned how “Saunders's engagement with language and ideas of freedom, [is] a persistent connection in his work” (24). Imitating different types of languages in his stories – totalitarian, commercial, corporate, etc. – Saunders makes us realize how language can manipulate, endanger but also save people. Most of his works indeed “examine the connections between verbal and ethical ugliness, power, and language” (Pogell 465). Mass-media, consumerism and capitalism are very often criticized by Saunders (cf. sections 3.2; 3.3.): he “argues that the dumbed-down, trivial language of commercialized U.S. mass media has ‘affected the quality and coloration of the thoughts’ of its viewers” (Hartley 171). In a nutshell, as has been extensively studied, the importance of language, more specifically the freedom of language, is a central element throughout Saunders's fiction since “to reduce language and communication to commodities, [...] is to rob humanity of its very essence” (Hayes-Brady 36).

Narrative empathy is similarly central to Saunders's fiction. Basseler, in his paper on Saunders's use of narrative empathy, provides an accurate description:

The originality of George Saunders's writing might be described in terms of how it involves the reader emotionally and engages her in a compassionate relationship with the characters. Despite all satire, surreal settings, outlandish protagonists, stylistic coolness, and deadpan humor, there is always Saunders's deep humanism serving as a counterbalance and, perhaps, constituting something like the aesthetic *and* ethical core of his writing. (153)

Neeper concurs with Basseler and argues that Saunders's “fiction identifies vice and folly with withering exactitude; he does so in widely imaginative and dramatic fictional worlds, but rather than stories ending with the emergence of some amorphous sense of correction, Saunders's

stories intend only one development: the empathetic improvement of his audience” (284-285). In the increasing attention given to readers in contemporary literary criticism, this notion of ‘empathy’ and its counterparts ‘compassion’, ‘sympathy’, ‘emotional contagion’, etc. – similar in some ways but differing in the reader’s engagement with the narrative characters (Coplan 141-149) – have become essential for the analysis of works from various writers: from George Eliot to Foster Wallace. While researchers have different understandings of the functioning of narrative empathy, they all agree to see it as “a complex imaginative process involving both cognition and emotion” (Coplan 143).

As with Moore’s, Saunders’s collection approaches themes that criticize our world, showing its problems and absurdity – depicting dehumanizing jobs, extreme poverty, shattered families, just to name a few. However, Saunders’s goal is not to correct or find solutions to those many problems. Rather, he wants readers to understand the characters’ pains, and feel compassion for those ‘losers of America’. As Pogell mentions, “Saunders still has hope for this country, the world, and the human race” (473). Throughout the stories from *Tenth of December*, the reader can find ‘rays of hope’ – losers who become small-scale heroes, parents’ failures in the education of their children which are counterbalanced by their profound love, etc. – which, similarly to Moore’s own linguistic strategies, allow the reader to find pleasure in reading. As G.E. Moore concludes, “Saunders moves beyond pure recognition – and vocalization – of social failures to actively use short fiction’s potential to generate social awareness and hope” (71).

Linking Saunders’s disgust of late-capitalism and his use of narrative empathy leads us to the settings of Saunders’s stories. As Del George has it,

“Saunders’s disgust at the artificiality of postmodern culture is mixed with an empathy for his characters that is evident in his use of magical realism [that can be seen] in his many ghost stories featuring advanced technology, corporations, theme parks, and other representations of the cultural logic of late capitalism” (126).

Saunders has set so many short stories in theme parks that many have started to see that setting as his trademark: “Theme parks and other artificial marvels of postmodernism are to Saunders’s supernatural stories what the “marvelous real” is to Leal’s definition of magical realism” (127).⁴ Other important settings for Saunders are very realistic settings (a typical home in America in the 21st century), corporate and institutional settings, near-futuristic settings (meant as criticism or warnings of today’s lifestyle), pastoral landscapes, etc.

Along with empathy and compassion, Saunders is also known for his belief in kindness. His speech about the importance of kindness and positive thinking in 2013 at Syracuse University went viral at that time and is still widely used to describe Saunders's main visions of life (Daalder 173-188). This leads us to an interesting difference between Moore and Saunders, which can actually be felt in their respective collections. Moore describes herself as follows: "I am a reluctant pessimist – an only half-disabused romantic" (Kelly 105). This pessimism finds its way into most of her stories, which end in negative ways, with characters being depressed, alone or in search of meaning for their lives. Saunders, on the other hand, argues that

a writer is not trying to be optimistic which can mean he sees hope where there might not be any, or pessimistic which can mean he ignores hope when there is some. Rather, a writer is just trying to see things as they are. But the thing is – to me, that's a fundamentally "optimistic" stance since - you'll excuse me I'm going to paraphrase Chekhov again [*laugh*] – "if you show a person to himself, as he actually is, he will change." Or, he *might* change. So, that's optimistic - it means art can improve things. (Saunders and Bonten)

While his stories often start with characters similar to Moore's – unhappy, lost in their lives, depressed, lonely – at the end of the story, a change occurs. This is not always positive – some characters are led to suicide, some regret their actions as in "My Chivalric Fiasco" – but Saunders still often emphasizes the possibility of change and how kindness, compassion and empathy can save the world. This idea is illustrated in the last story of his collection, where the characters – being selfish, alone and deeply sad at the start – find the strength to help each other and learn a great deal about themselves in doing so. For Saunders, kindness, empathy and compassion are essential and seem to be inherent to human nature: "Goodness is not only possible, it is our natural state" (Saunders 254).

While Saunders and Moore use different writing strategies to outweigh the absurdity and misery of our world, using among others narrative empathy and an acute interest in irony respectively, both writers share the idea that being funny or comic is natural and essential to an author's job. Moore famously said, "if you record the world honestly, there is no way people can stop being funny. A lot of fiction writing doesn't get that idea, as if to acknowledge it would trivialize the story or trivialize human nature, when in fact human nature is reduced and falsified if the comic aspects are not included" (Moore and Blades). This quote resonates very

strongly with Saunders's idea that "being funny is about as deep and truthful as I can be. When I'm really feeling life and being truthful, the resulting prose is comic. The world is comic. It's not always funny but it is always comic. Comic, for me, means that there is always a shortfall between what we think of ourselves and what we are" (Saunders and Sacks). Both authors are also frequently referred to as "satirical realists". The literary term has been described as "connections between satire and realism by attending to their shared interest in the accurate depiction of the ordinary and the ugly" (Novak 164). While Rando wrote a whole research paper on Saunders's use of satirical realism, Moore also recalled that "someone once called my work 'satirical realism'. Is that term still around? I kind of like it" (Moore *New Yorker*).

While the following sections will analyze and compare the two collections in terms of their themes, one should always keep those above-mentioned aspects in mind since they are Saunders's and Moore's most fundamental attributes.

3. Depictions of America in the 21st century

As previously explained, the following four sections highlight various contemporary American traits that are repeatedly mentioned in *Bark* and *Tenth of December*.

3.1. Violence, War, Terror

Do I fight? I don't fight I just, well, OK.

–Moore, "Paper Losses"

3.1.1. War

"Can we stop war?" (58). Moore and Saunders explore various paths to address this question. In "Escape from Spiderhead", Abnesti thinks that his new drug will solve wars by having all soldiers – or even enemy dictators – chemically falling in love with each other. "Paper Losses" is similarly optimistic, with Kit – the soon-to-be-divorced narrator – mentioning "I don't believe in fighting. I believe in giving peace a chance" (68). Yet, she goes on as follows: "I also believe in internal bleeding. [...] I'm also interested in those forensically undetectable dissolving plastic bullets" (68), thereby refuting this hopeful belief in peace. In "Debarking", Ira fears the outset of the war and as the story goes on, he gradually seems to lose his optimism:

“He wished [March] had a less military verb for a name. Why March? How about a month named Skip? That could work” (22). The messages “WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER” (30) written on the antiwar lawn signs in the same story give yet another dimension to Abnesti’s question, which closely corresponds to the moral message Moore and Saunders want their collections to convey.

In contemporary society, “the War Story has become such an integral and enduring part of American fiction that it is hard to conceive of the short story as a genre without it” (Marrs 118). Neither collection contains so-called ‘war-stories’ but rather, as Kelly mentioned, “war-conscious stories” (17). Using diverse and diverging strategies, Moore and Saunders criticize the absurdity and inhumanity of wars. While the narrator in “Home”, who is just back from the front, hardly ever talks about the war, Ira in “Debarking” seems absolutely obsessed with it. This illustrates both authors’ strategies: Saunders emphasizes the atrocity of war by showing his veteran as deeply traumatized and unable to talk about it in any way, whereas Moore “portrays the mindset and language of war as infiltrating her main characters’ private lives: violence, belligerence, fear, and distrust permeate international relations and personal relationships alike” (Kelly 18).

No other story can illustrate this in a better way than “Debarking”. Ira alludes to the war throughout the story, showing how much war impacts his daily life, and therefore his language: “I’m just a little gun-shy romantically” (18), or in his discussion with his daughter about her new cats’ names: “in time of war never argue with a fireball or a fireflake” (24). Ira and Zora’s sexual relationship – more specifically the words used to refer to their relationship: “brutish” (45), “to debark” (20), etc. – has even been paralleled with the increasing violence in Iraq, leading to an “analogy between the public and private waging of war” (Kelly 246). This is a common technique in contemporary literature as Demeyer and Vitse argue: “there are not any borders between the private and the public world in contemporary literature: experiences in the private domain are mediated by ideologic conflicts” (242 translation from Dutch mine). While the war has become Ira’s main concern, Ira’s daughter, being only eight, seems to be the only one seeing the inescapability of war: “War *is* the answer. It is the answer to the question What’s George Bush going to do real soon?” (30). Bekka’s innocent answer strengthens the absurdity of the war situation and points towards the meaninglessness of the anti-war signs compared to the unimaginable violence of war.

The absurdity of war is present in “Home” as well, in the only passage where the narrator finds the capacity to talk about it with two shopkeepers: “Like in your view, are we winning? Oh, what am I doing? I don’t actually care, that’s what’s so funny about it” (185).

Such an overt Orwellian reference – the banality and meaninglessness of wars being a central element of *1984* – is interestingly enough shared by Moore, since she purposefully plays with Ira's language in "Debarking" to make the reader realize how easily one can manipulate language: "when you have a war trumped with falsehoods and propaganda the language that proceeds from it, and continues to narrate it, also perpetuates the original dishonesty. Terms are invented; euphemisms deployed; candor corrupted; language is made generally to conceal rather than reveal" (Kelly 144). Returning to "Home", the fact that Mikey cannot really express to anyone how he feels about the war nor what he did there is one of Saunders's strategies to show war's atrocity. However, the reader, thanks to Saunders's constant use of stream of consciousness, still accesses Mikey's thoughts and therefore feels that the one thing Mikey really wants is not to be 'thanked for his service' by every person he meets, but rather to feel at home again: "Okay, okay, you sent me. Now bring me back" (201). This idea is strengthened by the various houses, rather than 'homes' Mikey visits – Renée's, his mother's, his ex-wife's – but where he never really belongs.

Saunders's writing strategy in "Home" concurs with the new form that the War Story has taken: "the War Story becomes a story about the difficulty, but also the necessity, of reintegration" (Marrs 127). Similarly to Moore who uses plenty of metaphors and humorous wordplays to refer to war, Saunders also uses comparisons to give a glimpse of the atrocity of war. Remembering a previous job where he had to clean a pond, Mikey compares the feelings he had of having to kill so many tadpoles with what he felt at Al-Raz: "What the dead and dying had in common was: their tender white underbellies had been torn open. [...] The difference was: the dying were the ones doing the mad fear gesticulating" (200). Though reversed, this quote illustrates Marrs's analysis of the War Stories: "the difficult task of assimilating one's experience at war into one's experiences at home is a major part of the genre in the twentieth century and beyond" (127).

While those are the most overt references to war, the authors also refer to it indirectly, implying that wars – even from far away – pervade the Americans' everyday lives. Saunders refers to Veteran Day in "Sticks", for instance, when the narrator's father disguises the pole as a soldier. In "Paper Losses", Moore indirectly alludes to the idea that wars are never far away from breaking out by associating it with a sudden divorce: "although Kit and Rafe had met in the peace movement, [...] now they wanted to kill each other" (65).

An interesting blend of indirect references to war and the difficulty and subsequent avoidance of war-talk is central to the plot of "Subject to Search" in *Bark*. We learn at the start of the short story that Tom worked for the army for a while and that he now has to fly back

urgently to the States because of a “scandal big as My Lai” (165). Tom seems to have difficulty talking about his past in the army – just like Mikey in “Home” – but still sporadically divulges elements which help to make the necessary links: “In London they are reporting torture incidents involving American troops in a Baghdad prison. Someone took pictures...” (164). While it becomes clear that the whole plot is centered around the scandal of Abu Ghraib, we only have access to the narrator’s thoughts and her understanding of the name of the prison as “the mome raths outgrabe” (165), which is phonetically close enough to confirm the Abu Ghraib’s hypothesis. Sally Bachner, in her book about violence in American fiction, argues that the Abu Ghraib scandal can be seen as a repetition of My Lai, “only with greater cynicism and a more entrenched sense of powerlessness” (143). This sense of powerlessness captures the collections’ messages about war to a tee: in various stories, Moore and Saunders refer to wars – directly or indirectly – and insist as much on their inhumanity as on their absurdity. Those various arguments – the absurdity, inhumanity, inescapability of war and this feeling of powerlessness – seem to hint towards a negative answer to Abnesti’s question: No. We cannot stop war. We have to “face this global craziness” (37).

The collections’ shared interest in wars – especially the Iraq war – might make us wonder about “the things that will start a war” (Moore 86), namely the importance of 9/11 and terrorism in both collections, since this has led the USA to military conflicts.

3.1.2. Terrorism

Just as it turned the whole world upside down, 9/11 left an indelible mark on literature. As Saunders mentioned in an interview: “I remember, after 9/11, thinking, ‘What in the world could we write right now? [...] there’s this huge thing happening in the world. The question is: do you write directly about that thing? For me, the answer is no. I can’t’” (Saunders and Treisman). This explains why 9/11 and more generally terrorism as such is hardly mentioned in *Tenth of December*.⁵ However, writing about the ‘War on Terror’ may take various forms, including the presentation of the world as extremely and increasingly violent (Houen 574-576), which is something that Saunders does represent in his collection. As for Moore, she rather thinks that “fiction has the same responsibilities after September 11th than it had before: and that is not to lie” (Kelly 143). In terms of 9/11-writings, Moore is mainly known for her book *A Gate in the Stars*, which is centered on the terrorist attacks. However, one can also find various direct and indirect references to terrorism in *Bark*.

The most obvious reference comes in “Foes”, a story based on a fund-raising dinner where the middle-class writer Bake – the main protagonist who criticizes the higher classes (cf. section 3.2.) – spends the evening discussing politics-related topics with his diner-neighbor: Linda Santo. Based on Bake’s thoughts and associations via stream of consciousness, Linda is negatively depicted as an “evil lobbyist” (86) who loves plastic surgery and fake nails. The whole plot is about their disagreements on politicians, and the current changes in America: neither of them seems open to understanding the other’s viewpoint. The tone of the story – and thereby our perceptions of the characters – changes at the end of the evening, when we learn that Linda is one of the Pentagon victims of 9/11. While this comes as a shock to the reader – just as it is a shock for Bake – Moore refers from the start to terrorism in this short story, which has been labelled a ‘9/11 story’ (Kelly 142-156). Bake indeed starts by mentioning that he won the Nobel Prize for Literature “right as the second tower was being hit” (87). They go on talking about Brocko/Barama – their different naming approaches for Barack Obama – and “his terrorist friends” (88). A bit further, their conversation turns to “that bomber who tried to blow up federal buildings” (88) and to criminality in Chicago. While the references to terrorism are relatively obvious, Moore did not want readers to make all the links directly. In “Foes”, Moore indeed makes use of narrative empathy, providing an interesting parallel with Saunders’s writing style. Judging Linda negatively is a prerequisite for the wave of shock – when we learn that she is actually just a victim – to hit us and leave us aghast. This first wave of emotions is immediately followed by a second one where, just as Bake, “pity poured through [the reader], he’d never before felt so sorry for someone” (92).

Moore alludes to terrorism in other stories as well. For instance, in “Subject to Search”, Tom “had had a close childhood friend on Mohamed Atta’s plane” (167). That reference to 9/11 is anticipated in the first sentences of the story with a universal image of terrorism: “The suitcase stayed at the table, like a bomb” (161). In “Thanks For Having Me”, the entrance of the bikers at the marriage with the leader taking “out a gun and firing it three times into the air” (188), brings directly a terrorist attack to mind. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed in the following scene where the guests are either completely shocked or start screaming – picturing a scene of total chaos. However, we then realize that Moore actually makes fun of the characters – and therefore the readers – via the speech of the “biker with the gun and the puppy ears” (188) in which her technique of repetition can be seen (cf. section 2.7.1.): “[...] Also? We were abused as children and as adults and moreover we have been eating a hell of a lot of Twinkies. Also? We are actually very peaceful people. Also?” (188). The clash between the fear of a terrorist attack and this completely absurd speech is strengthened by the biker’s phone

call after he realized the bride speaks Portuguese: “Yo! Joe. I don’t think you gave me the right address ... yeah ... no, you don’t get it. This ain’t Caitlin’s place... What? No, listen! What I’m saying is: wrong addressee! This ain’t it. No speaky zee English here” (189). Although the references to terrorism are clearly less direct than in “Foes”, Moore refers to our constant fears of terrorism as well as the absurdity – and sometimes atrocity – linked to not being at the “right place at the right time” (166).

Even if Saunders did not include any 9/11 story in his collection, this motif of constant fear linked to a violent world is very much present, which is one way to address terrorism in fiction (Scanlan 1-19). In the first story, “Victory Lap”, this idea of being at the wrong place at the wrong time is central to the plot. This is indeed how ‘Beloved Only’ thinks about the kidnapping situation: “He was just a kid. There was nothing he could do. [...] He would just look at that [the geode] until they left” (19). He then gradually understands how serious the situation is – namely that Alison, her lovely neighbor, is going to be raped or even murdered under his own eyes. Kyle eventually decides to break his parents’ strict rules when violence kicks in – with the kidnapper’s first blows – and tries to save her. In doing so, he also presents another aspect of his personality: a very violent one. He hits the kidnapper again and again and sees him as an “animal” and not even as a human anymore.

Saunders, as often in his works, does not only want to point out how violent and scary our world can be. With a witty mixture of stream of consciousness and narrative empathy, he also makes us understand who those violent people are – murderers, rapists, demented – by making us identify with them, or at least by showing how their education and past explain to some extent how deeply troubled they have become (cf. section 2.7.2.). This can easily be illustrated in the passages where the kidnapper is the focalizer, since he keeps thinking about his deranged past: the loss of his mother, the loss of his friend, people ridiculing him, calling him “stupid”, etc. Another illustration is Kyle’s violent outburst, since it is a direct outcome of his strict education, which Saunders precisely depicted throughout the story. Kyle’s life has always been governed by his parents’ stringent upbringing. This can be illustrated in the many “directives” he must follow, or the severe limitations placed upon him, including restrictions on his freedom of thought, as he hears his parents’ orders in his head. Eager to take charge of his own life, Kyle soon becomes “out of control”: “I’m the boss of me” (23). Saunders openly links Kyle’s violence to his upbringing in the passage where he smashes the geode on the kidnapper’s head: “Yes! Score! It was fun! Fun dominating a grown-up!” (22).

Not revealing it in the least with its cute title, “Puppy” yet similarly bursts with violence. While Saunders refers indirectly to Callie’s violent husband – who hits and rapes her

when he has had a bad day – he also alludes to animal violence that is an increasing interest in contemporary literature (Donovan 202-204). The aforementioned passage where Kyle in “Victory Lap” sees the kidnapper as a “cunt-probe dick-munch ass-gashing Animal” (23) can be seen as an anticipation for this theme of animal violence. In “Puppy”, Callie does not see the problem in tying her son to a tree, but she remembers how horrible it had been for her husband to have to kill kittens and decides to abandon their newborn puppy to spare him the unpleasant experience. Moore also introduces preoccupations about animal welfare in her collection, especially in “Paper Losses” where Sam seems to be the only one finding fault with the activities around turtles and dolphins.

The depiction of a violent and dangerous world is also to be found in “Escape from Spiderhead” in the description of Jeff’s ‘fateful night’ where he could not stop himself hitting Mike Appel – we do not know much about him, except that “they were both wasto” (76) – until he died. Similarly to Callie’s husband in “Puppy”, Saunders includes a rapist in “My Chivalric Fiasco” where he indirectly makes us reflect on the culture of silence around rape, manipulation, and violence that exists in today’s world (cf. section 3.3.). As illustrated in those four stories, Saunders depicts America as a very violent place – not only at the domestic, but also at the societal level – which can be interpreted as an indirect way of mentioning the ‘War on Terror’.

In a nutshell, both Saunders and Moore refer to tragic events, whether it be wars, terrorism or the increasing violence of today’s world. Roger Luckhurst has analyzed those references to war and terrorism in contemporary literature and concluded that: “to confront the traumatic past, Freud suggested, was to pit remembering against the fateful and uncontrollable repetition of trauma. [...] It is this that urges cultural narratives to fight repetition with remembrance” (81). Using their language (from humor and irony to narrative empathy) so as not to write “a depressing story – a story in which the elements are arranged so as to deflate hope and thereby discourage positive action (and make life miserable)” (Saunders and Bonten) – Moore and Saunders still want people to remember and understand the violent past – but also present and even future – of America to prevent such events from breaking out (again).

3.2. Materialism and capitalism

Three cars for two grown-ups. What a country!

–Saunders, “Home”

That consumer-capitalism is a shared theme of both collections should not be surprising since I mentioned already how both writers can be placed in the literary development emerging out of postmodernism. Understood as a broad cultural paradigm, postmodernism is indeed often seen as intimately linked to our late-capitalist modern society, which can be characterized by post-industrialism, consumerism and mass-media (Drabble 806). While mass-media and technology will be analyzed in another subsection (cf. section 3.3.), I illustrate in this section Moore’s and Saunders’s critique of American consumer-capitalism through their short stories. Even though capitalism and consumerism are different, they will be addressed together, as American capitalism encourages consumerism and materialism in many ways and both systems neglect social and human values to promote materialistic and individualistic ones.

Saunders has been interviewed repeatedly about his many references and critiques of consumer-capitalism in his works. He always mentions how often he struggled to make ends meet: “When you butt up against capitalism in that way, it leaves a scar that stays [...] [Then, as a writer] you’ve got something to work with for the rest of your life” (Jain, et al. 82). This explains Saunders’s obsession with American consumer-capitalist culture in many of his stories. Moore also expressed herself about the importance of including such themes,

as a reminder that the wealth of the American upper middle class, and the suburban materialism of its lifestyle, is not old news, already sufficiently taken up by literary writers of previous decades. In the excessive ways it is experienced now, American affluence is unprecedented, socially and globally isolating in a manner that is new, overwhelming, and sinister to those looking on. (Kelly 148-149)

Both quotes highlight the social and cultural challenges presented by America’s current economic system.

It is interesting to note that Moore and Saunders differ from other traditional postmodern writers in their critique of capitalism. Hayes-Brady mentioned how “many of his [Saunders’s] narratives approach Jameson’s commodification of culture by way of capitalism, not as an exhausted theoretical framework, but as a practical means of working within the

world” (33). Saunders very often criticizes capitalism by making the readers feel – through the use of narrative empathy – how hard life can be as a victim of it. Moore either criticizes capitalism openly: “It’s all just some dirty capitalist’s idea of a philosophy” (Moore “People Like That”) or more subtly by representing characters as deeply lonely and depressed as a result of the country’s political and economic system (Kelly).

In *Bark* and *Tenth of December*, different strategies are used to imply a criticism of consumer-capitalism at various levels. A first technique used by Saunders and Moore is to present the characters’ “desires to compete with others, and to display the home as modern and fashionable” (Humble 125), which is one of the main characteristics of middlebrow literature. In “Debarking”, this desire is clear from the start when Ira compares his house which could “fly away in a windy day” (6) with Mike and Kate’s perfect house which smells of “historical preservation tax credits” (6). Dreaming of a better house seems to be a recurrent motif in Moore’s writing since that same “impossible dream” (6) is shared by KC and Dench in “Wings” where they rent a house with “something rotting in the walls” (116) while dreaming of a life in Milt’s house “with its portico and porch and two stone chimneys, its wings that stretched east and west and one out back smaller and south-facing, with a long double sleeping porch” (111). The difference with “Debarking” is that for KC the ‘impossible dream’ becomes possible, since she eventually inherits Milt’s house. While Dench thought that “the end result might be, well... we’d all be a little happier” (115), Moore’s critique of this ‘always wanting more’ attitude – typical of consumerist societies – emerges at the end of the story, in KC’s depressing rendering of her life in her new house where far from being happier, she “missed the good parts, [...] and now there are no more good parts” (145).

The exact same strategy is used by Saunders in “Al Roosten” where Al’s description of his ‘friend’ Donfrey as “a snobby fake [...] living in the Donfrey house, a literal mansion on a hill” (96) bursts with envy and jealousy. In the “The Semplica Girl Diaries”, the narrator, longing for more money, a nicer house, and a nicer life in general, writes in his journal “Someday, I’m sure, dreams will come true” (129). ‘Someday’ happens to be the very next day when the narrator wins ten grand in a scratch-off ticket. While no anticipation is needed to expect things will go wrong, Saunders builds the suspense – it is the longest story of *Tenth of December* – providing plenty of examples of how consumerism, capitalism and money make people happy: “Why happy? Nice to win, be winner, be known as winner” (137). Saunders’s hate for this late-capitalist society eventually emerges: “household in freefall. Everything chaotic” (165), a chaos that results from Eva’s action of releasing the SGs. Having established a connection with our many desires so typical of a consumer culture, Saunders illustrates “an

America where consumerism has evolved to the point that affluent families have taken to ornamenting their yards with living human beings imported from countries where, according to the narrator's wife Pam, 'opportunities are not so good'" (Miller 22).

An interesting comparison between Bekka in "Debarking" and Eva in "The Semplica Girls Diaries" can be made, since both are first presented as far too young to understand the adults' world, and completely innocent – Bekka as a young child suffering from her parents' divorce and Eva as "sweetest kid. Biggest heart" (112) – but finally turn out the opposite. We mentioned in section 3.1.1. how Bekka is the only one to see the inescapability of war. As the story evolves, she is increasingly portrayed as a teenager rather than as a child: "He couldn't imagine Bekka as a teenager. Or rather, he could, sort of, since she often acted like one already" (13). Moore goes so far as to represent her and her primary school friends "discussing their hypothetical stock market investments" (39). Although Eva is not innocent since she freed the SG's – which is seen as a crime in the story world depicted by Saunders: "releasing SGs = felony (!)" (160) – Saunders's narrator keeps referring to her as a child, contradictorily emphasizing how young, unknowing and innocent she is: "Eva, source of all mayhem, sleeping like a baby. Felt like waking Eva, telling Eva all will be well, she has good heart, is just young + confused" (166). Those two characters and stories represent "the literary potential of childhood in its inherent dualism, in the range of its associations with contrastive binaries – from innocence, purity and vulnerability to the negative, even the dystopian sense of 'evil'" (Kanti Bera and Bhaumik xv). The dualism surrounding Eva – as both innocent and "source of mayhem" – is present in the character of her father as well: he tries his best to be a good dad, a good American man, without realizing how awful his actions are. This contradictory feeling – of judging the narrator for all his mistakes while understanding and therefore forgiving him some of them – comes directly from Saunders's use of narrative empathy. As precisely summarized by Miller,

by inviting us to empathize with a fellow victim of materialism while simultaneously exploring the degree to which our very participation within consumer culture implicates us as accessories to the perpetuation of systematic global expression, "The Semplica Girls Diaries" uses diffused satire to present the complex moral uncertainties underpinning our post-postmodern cultural moment. (23)

As often in his stories, Saunders makes us indeed reflect on the ethical implications of our acts, which is also central to Moore's writing strategies as I have illustrated with "Wings".

The ‘moral uncertainties’ characteristic of our contemporary society and their connection with consumer-capitalism seem to be a concern for many more writers than Moore and Saunders only: “the American [writer] can only lash out at materialism, hypocrisy, the dreary artificiality of a commercialized society, but he has nothing to put in their place, no personal faith he can believe in in a time of ethical uncertainty and moral chaos” (Poznar 598). Saunders himself recognizes that his critique will not bring about any change, since “in our time, I think, capitalism has just won. There’s no question. It’s just an overwhelming victory of capitalism” (Saunders and Silverbatt). However, it does not mean that it cannot become worse, which is why both Saunders and Moore present near-futuristic, slightly dystopian settings which “combine the hyperreal technology and mediation of late consumer capitalism with all too real material squalor, decay and violence” (Kelly 88) to prevent their country to fall further in its “excesses of [...] individualism and selfishness” (Jain, et al. 83).

Representations of the excesses of consumer-capitalism can be found in both collections. In “Exhortation”, Todd writes in his memo that “our numbers are not to go down” (88), presenting a firm in a near-futuristic dystopian America where the only thing that matters is to make profit, no matter the (human) sacrifices:

Regardless of all else, forgetting for the moment all namby-pamby thoughts of right/wrong etc., etc., wasn’t that something to see? [...] Are the actions Andy did, in terms of the tasks I gave him to do in Room 6, being undone by his boo-hooing, [...] are people suddenly walking out of Room 6 feeling perfectly okay again?. (87-88)

The almost immediate association of Room 6 with Orwell’s “Room 101” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be stretched to Orwell’s and Saunders’s purpose in writing such scenes. Saunders’s moral message in “Exhortation” can indeed be seen in the light of Orwell’s use of political symbols “to relay his political messages and alarm future generations of the danger of totalitarian regimes” (Albloly and Nour 5647). Representing the “deeper indictment of the average American consumer’s role within the systems of globalized oppression that afford us the luxuries to which we have been conditioned to aspire”, Saunders – in his “story that explores the real human cost of American materialism” (Miller 22) – warns us about the dangers of unrestricted consumer-capitalism.

The considerable importance of making profit compared to the human cost it requires is implied in “The Semplica Girls Diaries” as well. The narrator is supposed to supervise a new worker and takes notes of all the mistakes he makes: “made Ergonomic error, by throwing from

far away, missing, having to get up and rethrow. Then made second Ergonomic error: did not squat when picking up Tab to rethrow, but bent at waist, thereby increasing risk of back injury” (124). While those ergonomic errors could be seen as ways to protect the worker’s health, the general atmosphere of the story-world – where money is clearly the most important aspect of life – points towards another interpretation: time is money, they cannot waste time and have to be as efficient as possible, no matter how “arcane, degrading” (117) and uneventful their job is. The narrator confirms this interpretation when mentioning how he then “made no errors. Threw no cans in bucket. Made no Ergonomic errors but just sat very still at desk” (125).

Victims of capitalism are present in Moore’s collection as well. In “Foes”, Suzy and Bake are supposed to attend a fund-raiser where “the hustle for money met the hustle for virtue and everyone washed their hands in one another” (81). While Bake describes the event as “the parasitic mixings of art and commerce, literature and the rich” (81), we soon learn that he and his wife Suzy do not really belong there: “staying at a B&B to save a little money” (82), he is “supposed to charm the patrons [...], the rich who would be paying five hundred dollars a plate” (91). In “Foes” Moore therefore sides with “Saunders’s interest in depicting the isolation and despair of the individual in the midst of contemporary mass society, [tracing its root causes back] to the very structure of our consumerist, technophilic society” (O’Connell 123). Nowhere else than in “Al Roosten” can this despair and isolation be better illustrated. Returning to his “failing shop” (99) after having embarrassed himself at a local auction, Al Roosten refers to the depression of his current life: “Jesus, he couldn’t stand the thought of going in. He’d sit there alone all afternoon. Why did he have to do it? For what? For who?” (108). Saunders’s naming approach deserves some attention, since his character Al could be referring to ‘all’, meaning that the character represents the ‘everyman’ – which fits perfectly Saunders’s critique of capitalism as destroying many people’s lives. This hypothesis works only if it is pronounced as /ɔ:l/, which would make sense for the rhyme in his imaginary slogan “AL ROOSTEN, FRIEND TO ALL” (107). His family name, Roosten, could be seen as referring to the idiomatic expression ‘the chickens come home to roost’, especially due to the focus on chickens in the story as well as his different daydreams in which he keeps thinking about what and how events could impact him.

Another technique shared by both authors to criticize materialism is to show our dependence on the ‘materials’. In “Paper Losses” it comes to the fore at two different levels: while we are led to funny, relieving passages by Kit’s humorous rendering of missing her luggage, Moore also adds a more serious criticism:

She overbaked herself in the colonial sun; with the resort managers she shared her moral outrage at the armed guards who kept the local children from sneaking past the fence onto this white, white beach; and she rubbed a kind of resign into her brow to freeze it there and downplay the creases – to appear younger for her departing husband, though he never once looked at her. Not that she looked that good: her suitcase had gotten lost and she was forced to wear clothes purchased from the gift shop – the words LA CARIBE emblazoned across every single thing. (72)

Indeed, the combination of ‘colonial’, ‘local’ and ‘white, white’ emphasizes “Moore’s disgust with the Caribbean-going American [white] middle classes” (Kelly 148). This reference to a gift shop, and therefore to the tourism industry, enables Moore to criticize the modern trend of flying to the Caribbean, a consequence of our late-capitalist societies. Saunders also presents the difficulties of losing our belongings in “Home” where movers have to empty the narrator’s mother’s house because she cannot pay for it anymore. While the mother’s insistence on the fact that her son is a veteran and that she works in a church has a certain comedy effect through its repetition pattern, it also serves to remind Saunders’s broader goal throughout the collection: having more compassion for the ‘losers of America’.

More generally, empathy and humor are the only elements Moore and Saunders bring in against capitalism. Rather than writing politically engaged stories, they indeed believe that “the function of humor [for Moore] and the need for compassionate judgment [for Saunders]” (Hayes-Brady 34) are the best weapons against it.

3.3. Technology

*He had a chip implanted in his head
– a headache cure, experimental, cutting-edge
– Moore, “Subject to Search”*

Writing a short story collection in 21st century America means, among other things, writing about the increasing importance of technology in our societies. In 2013, when Saunders’s collection was first published, “the artist Hito Steyerl announced ‘The Internet is dead’. [...] There is no discrete experience of being online anymore; everything is online. This sentiment encapsulates the sense of contemporary postdigital life as one in which we are always digitally

mediated – as data, statistics, profiles, nodes, traces – regardless of our discrete encounters with devices” (Dinnen 163). Technology has become such an important characteristic of our society that Lorrie Moore was surprised that young people loved one of her collections because, in her opinion, “there is no technology in those books” (Moore and Allardice). Yet, both collections are concerned with the importance of technology (in all its forms) and the impact it can have in the world. One of Saunders’s techniques to present his concerns about technology is the use of futurist dystopian settings, but he also shares another strategy with Moore. While the increasing importance of social media, telephones, computers, video games, FaceTime, etc., is supposed to facilitate communication, *Bark* and *Tenth of December* present many characters who are incapable of communicating properly, nearly always as a result of technology.

In both collections, the authors follow the contemporary trend of presenting technological advancements in terms of medication, namely in the forms of pills and drugs: “linking the words ‘science’, ‘technology’, and ‘innovation’ [...] is very common and implicitly conveys a linear progression from scientific research to technology creation to innovative products” (Ferguson 209). In *Bark*, though “Debarking” presents a contemporary setting with the onset of the Iraq war, Moore introduces a ‘futuristic’ pill, which is supposed to help people sleep. After the scene where Ira and Zora take that pill, the following sentences present how Ira “staggered through his days [...] At the office he misplaced files. Sometimes he knocked things over by accident” (22), which the reader immediately sees as secondary effects of this mysterious drug.

In Saunders’s collection, powerful and innovative drugs are obviously central in “Escape from Spiderhead” where Jeff serves his sentence by allowing himself to be ‘used’ as a scientific test subject. Saunders introduces drug names that are unknown to the reader but still sound very ‘pharmaceutical’ such as ‘VerbaluceTM’, ‘DarkenfloxxTM’, ‘VeriTalkTM’ or their scientific names like ‘ED289’. Usage of similar drugs is to be found in “My Chivalric Fiasco” as well, where Ted, promoted from Janitorial to Pacing Guard – a way to silence him after he has witnessed his boss raping a colleague – receives a “Dixie cup with a yellow pill in it” (208). In this medieval theme park setting, this new medication is supposed to help him improvise so that he is more successful in his job. The drug is so powerful that Ted feels self-confident enough to talk about his colleague’s rape in front of everyone. The disastrous outcomes that follow – losing his job, therefore his house since he is the only one to work at home, the potential suicide of Nate, etc. – are linked to the dangers of drugs, and such advanced medications...

In “Home”, we encounter ‘MiiVOXMin’ and ‘MiiVOXMax’ in the shop where Mikey meets two other veterans. Saunders’s purpose is to make the reader feel as alienated as Mikey, who cannot find his place in society anymore: “‘Where are you Mikey?’ she said. ‘Nowhere,’ I said” (199). As clear from this short conversation with his sister Renée, everything has been different since Mikey came back from the front: nothing has a purpose anymore. That is exactly what we feel about those two products: we do not recognize what it is; every question that we ask ourselves is asked by Mikey in the shop – “What is it?”, “What’s it for?”, etc. (183) – but is always answered by another question, which does not enable the reader to make any sense of the scene. We might interpret it as a drug, since Saunders presents many of them in other stories, but the reader might also associate the ‘Mii’ with the Nintendo ‘Wii’ and then see the products as some games or advanced technology, without knowing its actual purpose. This allows the reader to make further connections between technology and this feeling of alienation, which close relation can be traced back at least to Marx’s thought (Wendling 13-60). As illustrated in those three stories, Saunders modernizes this well-known relationship by presenting innovative drugs as the main instance of the way technology leads to a sense of alienation.

Media – from social media to video games – seems to be another technique used in both collections to depict the links between technology and alienation. Saunders and Moore indeed side with the ever-growing research on the damage of the media on younger generations (Richards 1153). Feeling alienated from technology and therefore from younger generations is a central element of “Puppy”. Marie expresses throughout the story how disconnected she feels from her children. She longs for real family conversations or shared experiences, but the reader realizes – once more via stream of consciousness – how little communication there is in that family... This is best illustrated in this passage where, on their way to buy a new puppy, Marie helplessly tries to engage with her children, “But no. When she, a third time, said, ‘Wow, guys, check that out,’ Abbie said, ‘Okay, Mom, we get it, it’s corn,’ and Josh said, ‘Not now, Mom, I’m Leavening my Loaves’” (32). As crystal clear from Josh’s answer, one of the main reasons for this lack of communication is the children’s use of video games – the other being Marie’s very passive husband who answers “Ho HO” to every situation. While Marie is shocked by the way Callie – the woman selling the puppy – raises her son, namely by treating him like a dog and tying him to a tree, the reader also judges Marie’s own educational values. Indeed, Marie is aware that this inability to communicate is linked to her children’s constant use of video games, but she reacts to it by “studying the Noble Baker [one of the video games] manual” (34). As often with Saunders, the readers’ judgments are then shattered by new information. In

this case, we understand that everything Marie and Callie do is just a result of love: “These were well-loved kids” (34) says Marie, before mentioning her traumatized childhood where her mother did not care about her at all. Callie’s stream of thoughts concludes: “Who loved him more than anyone else in the world loved him? Her. She did.” (43).

While almost all the stories from *Bark* include characters who are unable to communicate – because of divorce, generation gap, divergent political opinions, etc. – “Debarking” should be singled out, since it joins Saunders’s “Puppy” in the contradictory relationship between technological advances and the worsening of communication. Ira, who grows more and more obsessed with the war as the story progresses, decides to give his TV to Zora’s son because he cannot handle any bad news about the war anymore. Even though Bruno’s relationships with people – be it his own mother or Ira – are peculiar from the start of the story, he is then depicted as completely addicted to the screen. While Dinnen “posits the screen as a significant interface of our digitally mediated lives” (14), Moore presents it as an addiction, which transforms Bruno into a kind of ghost whose only interest is digital, which is illustrated in the following quotes: “The boy said nothing, transfixed, perhaps not hearing him” (40), “Bruno remained riveted” (41), “Bruno was laid out in a shirtless stupor” (43). Saunders and Moore relate to the increasing struggle felt by most Americans of having to deal with “the digital and mobile media in modern life, [...] which makes life with children more challenging” (Clark 299).

In Saunders’s collection, the relation between technological and interhuman contact is more ambivalent than in Moore’s, where it is always negative. Indeed, leaving the younger generations aside, in *Tenth of December*, some instances can be found where technology seems to facilitate communication. This is the case, for instance, in “My Chivalric Fiasco” where Ted’s ability for improvisation increases enormously once “the KnightLife R [had] kicked in” (209). Ted’s language is completely different then: he uses many ‘medieval’ terms and capitalizes random words. Words flow out of his mouth without him thinking about it, everything seems very easy, which clashes greatly with his limited ability to communicate efficiently without the drug where he always “struggles to explain in his own lonely language” (213) what he wants to express. Drugs have this exact same function in “Escape from Spiderhead” where Jeff, drugged with ‘Verbulace™’, is able to word the difference in his language with and without the drug, (which he could not have done without having taken the drug obviously): “like instead of just saying the sex-type things we had been saying (such as ‘wow’ and ‘oh God’ and ‘hell yes’ and so forth), we now began freestyling re [for] our sensations and thoughts, in elevated diction, with eighty-percent increased vocab, our well-

articulated thoughts being recorded for later analysis” (48-49). While those two stories illustrate how technology can improve communicative skills, Saunders might be less ambivalent in his views on technology and communication than what one could originally think. The satirical tone of both stories coupled with their ‘fatal’ endings – Jeff’s suicide and Nate and Ted’s probable suicides (cf. section 4.2.) – clearly hints at a critique or even warning against such advances in technology.

Returning to Moore’s collection, in “Subject To Search”, the inability to communicate is central to the plot, since Tom and the narrator have never been able to really express what they feel for each other. In this short story, the difficulties of communication are linked to the use of different languages, since the narrator expresses how bad she is at languages except English, which leads to several humorous scenes, so characteristic of Moore’s writing: “And then like a deaf person she made a little gesture of a cross with the index fingers of each of her hands, but it came out as a werewolf ward-off sign. Inept even at sign language. A Freudian slip of the thumb” (171). Rather than being presented as causing the lack of communication, advancements in technology are presented as a potential solution for it. Tom has repeatedly had to isolate himself because of severe headaches, which should be cured by the implantation of a chip in his head. However, those experimental trials are far from being successful. Similarly to the depiction of the dangers of drugs in various stories – as mentioned in the previous paragraphs – this short story registers concern about the arrival of such advanced technological possibilities.

Tom’s implanted chip seems interestingly similar to Saunders’s “The Semplica Girls Diaries” which presents, as I mentioned in section 3.2, a nightmarish picture of near-futuristic America where Lawrence Semplica has invented a way “to route microline through the brain [of SGs] that does not damage and causes no pain” (142) to transform immigrant women into yard decorations. The narrator’s comments on those SGs are clearly manipulated by adverts or general beliefs about those technological advances. As Hayes-Brady convincingly argues,

by immersing the reader in the protagonist’s restricted or incomplete vocabulary, by highlighting its absurdity, the reader is necessarily attuned to the absurdity of the struggle for linguistic independence, and by extension the struggle for independence from the commercial and political forces that govern and prescribe available vocabularies. (37)

This short story takes the form of a personal journal in which the unnamed narrator “embark[s] on grand project of writing every day in this new black book” (109). Since the reader only accesses the narrator’s journal entries, it is at first impossible to understand that SGs are actual human beings. The reader realizes only progressively the horror of the situation. The manipulation of the characters’ language – through ads, or other forms of technology – is clearly represented in the passage where the whole family tries to convince Eva that “they want to [being hung in people’s yards]. They like applied for it” (135). They can only use catch-up phrases that probably come from Greenway’s own advertising campaigns, and realize how little they actually know when checking in the folder with all the personal information about the SGs: “Laotian (Tami) applied due to two sisters already in brothels. Moldovan (Gwen) has a cousin [...] who is sex slave in Kuwait (!). Somali (Lisa) watched father + little sister die of AIDs...” (135). Contrary to Moore’s failed trials, this new technology seems as efficient as it is awful. Not only does this short story warn us about the dangers and fears of technology, but it also includes many other problems that resonate in our contemporary society, such as the depiction of women as objects or the increasing problem of immigration (cf. section 3.4.1).

In a nutshell, throughout their respective collections, Moore and Saunders present the dangers and excesses linked to technology. Both authors illustrate how technology – from innovative drugs to digitalized societies – can hinder human relations, warning us about the “supremacy of technology and transnational corporations, and [as an outcome] the alienation and exploitation of workers” (Elijas 3).

3.4. The American Dream

Smelling that American Dream, baby?
–Saunders, “*The Semplica Girls Diaries*”

From the American Dream to the American Dreams or the Americans’ dreams, this section highlights various dreams – or nightmares – that are presented in *Bark* and *Tenth of December* at various levels: the mythical American dream, real dreams of characters, or even daydreams.

3.4.1. Pursuing the American Dream: barking up the wrong tree?

Although Saunders's successful climbing of the American social ladder – from being a plumber to a celebrated writer – can be seen as an illustration of the famous American Dream, all stories from *Tenth of December* are centered on the losers of American society, precisely those who work hard and as best as they possibly can, but still cannot manage to make it all work. In seven of the eight stories of *Bark* – excluding “The Juniper Tree” where it is less central – Moore's narrators (five middle-aged women and two men) are also disillusioned by the American Dream: “a dream of land in which life should be better, richer, and fuller for every man” (Adams 404). Many critics have argued that there are actually various American Dreams: it can indeed be defined in terms of “money, religious transformation, political reform, educational attainment, sexual expression, and so on” (Cullen 7). No matter the differences, all of them share a deep belief in a country where success can be achieved, which is the stand from which the American Dream will be analyzed in this section. But what's in a name? Well, in this case, pretty much everything: the American Dream is only a dream and Moore and Saunders prefer to show the nightmare that life in America can be.

In *Bark*, characters are disenchanted by the American Dream: they are depressed and stuck in their non-rewarding lives mainly because of romantic failures. This makes the whole idea of the American Dream “which brings happiness, wealth, and expanded opportunities to move forward [to every family]” (Su 839) an impossible goal, since a happy family, or even just a non-shattered family, seems unreachable. Saunders's stories are less focused on failed romances but they rather “dramatize the failures of American exceptionalism by specifically targeting the claims to democratically free speech, social mobility, foundational myths of innocence and openness to diversity that permeate US nationalist discourse” (G.E. Moore 60), some aspects I will now underline in the short stories.

“Exhortation” and “Escape from Spiderhead” indeed illustrate well the manipulation that exists around democracy: the free speech exaggeratedly promoted in those stories is in fact no less than a cover for totalitarian discourse. In “Exhortation”, Todd's insistence on the fact that the workers of Room 6 are more than welcome to come and chat with him if they have doubts about what they do – which remains a mystery – and, even more so, his insistence that it will obviously remain confidential, refute his own actions. It is probable that honest workers who do share their doubts will have to be “clean[ed], clean[ed], clean[ed]” in Room 6 (89). This totalitarian picture is facilitated by another intertextual reference to Orwell's “Room 101” (cf. section 3.1.1.). Linking those two story-worlds leads to interesting parallels between Todd

and O'Brien as characters – even as manipulators – inviting people to ‘talk’ in their office with the similar outcome of being sent to Room 101/Room 6... Another short story where workers having a say is only an illusion – or a dream – is to be found in “Escape from Spiderhead” with Jeff’s ‘job’ as a prisoner who has to test experimental hard drugs. We first believe that Jeff is always free to refuse a drug if he does not want it, since he has to say ‘Acknowledge’ every time they want to give him another drug from his MobiPak™. However, Saunders then forces us to abandon this hopeful belief in free choice by introducing a new drug: ‘Docilride™’ which makes the person do or say whatever Abnesti – one of the leading scientists of the experiment in the prison – wants them to say.

The second element mentioned in G.E. Moore’s quote, social mobility – which is absolutely central to the concept of the American Dream (Su 838) – is also brought to pieces in various stories of *Tenth of December*. In “My Chivalric Fiasco”, Ted’s promotion does not improve his financial situation, which seems extremely low, since the extra money would have allowed him to buy medication for his parents’ aches and to repair windows which let snow enter the house during winter. As contradictory as it may seem, Ted’s promotion at work actually leads him to lose his job and therefore to fall even further down: an open end which leaves us wondering whether he will be able to get up at all... This impossibility of climbing the social ladder is obviously present in “The Semplica Girls Diaries” as well. From the first journal entries (cf. section 3.3), it is clear how much the narrator dreams of belonging to higher classes: “When will I have sufficient leisure/wealth to sit on haybale watching moon rise, while in luxurious mansion family sleeps?” (112). As already mentioned, his dream eventually comes true (cf. section 3.2). However, Saunders is not more positive or hopeful in this story than in the previous ones: the whole family falls from the social ladder as quickly as they climbed it. Similarly to the final scene of “My Chivalric Fiasco”, this open ending leaves us wondering about the disasters that are possibly yet to come. While losing their house seems inevitable to repay Greenway, the narrator and his wife Pam could also fail to keep Eva’s secret of having freed the SG’s. Both parents having a hard time keeping a clear head and the detective being “here for duration” (164) are indeed two elements pointing towards the imminent collapse of the whole family.

The first journal entry can be used in another way to break the belief in the American Dream. The narrator indeed mentions how he writes for later generations, for “whoever, all are welcome (!) to see how life really was/is now” (109). The word ‘really’ strongly implies a clash between what people think America looks like – or should have looked like – and what it

actually is, which is typical of literature insisting on presenting the American Dream as a myth rather than a reality (Su 837-839).

The last dimension of G.E. Moore's quote, the American "foundational myths of innocence and openness to diversity" can also be torn apart by the various references to America's past history of slavery in both collections. This is touched upon by Moore in "Foes" when Linda and Bake argue about the prejudices of being black or a woman in the run for presidency. Linda also hints at the dark American history of slavery by referring consistently to the founding fathers or more directly when she criticizes Bake for writing a biography of George Washington: "Talk [rather] about people who have toiled hard in this country" (89-90).

Mixing the American Dream and slavery is central in the last story of Moore's collection: "Thanks For Having Me". While the reference to the musical could already be guessed in the name of one character – a Portuguese immigrant called Maria – the intertextual reference to *West Side Story* is literally mentioned by Maria's ex, the musician Ian, who was invited to play music at her second wedding: "Last night I had a dream that I was in *West Side Story* and had forgotten all the words to 'I like to be in America'" (185). Combining the reference to Martin Luther King's speech and the general description of the musical as representing the difficulties immigrants face in the USA (Stilgoe) sheds light on the underlying critique of the American Dream in Ian's speech. The song that Ian – and therefore Moore – is referring to is "America", where every other verse presents an idealized American Dream, which is then counterbalanced by the harsh reality of the immigrants' lives: "Life is alright in America, If you're all white in America" or "Buying on credit is so nice, One look at us and they charge twice" (Bernstein and Sondheim). I mentioned in the introduction how every single cultural reference used by Moore had a specific purpose in her stories (cf. section 2.7.1.): forgetting the lyrics of that song has therefore a much deeper significance than the simple fact that Ian has a bad memory. It is indeed another of Moore's strategies to satirize the American Dream in contemporary society.

The diverse parallels between slavery and the SG's system in "The Semplica Girls Diaries" have been an interesting topic for many researchers. G.E. Moore, in her analysis of the short story convincingly argues that

parallels with the history of African-American slavery in the United States resound, and Saunders admits that in constructing the oppressed/oppressor psyche of "Semplica Diaries" narrator, "I thought a good bit about our slavery days," particularly about "the

average guy,” blinded to the atrocities of the system by his own fears and his desire to get ahead. (66)

The story can therefore easily be analyzed as a way of breaking those American myths of innocence as well. Interestingly, Saunders deconstructs this notion of innocence in another way in the short story: not only the foundation of America as the greatest country on Earth, but also the general belief in children’s innocence (cf. section 3.2.). Saunders’s use of irony in this short story is a perfect example of what Tobin and Israel have called “a stable irony”, by which they mean that the “particular disparity [central to irony] is between what a narrating character or persona takes herself to mean and the deeper or higher significance that the implied author seems to intend the reader to understand” (Tobin and Israel 37). An interesting intertextual reference to Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be mentioned here. In both stories, we have ‘innocent’ children – Huck/Eva – who are doing a good deed while thinking they are committing a sin – freeing the slave Jim/freeing the SGs (I mentioned the links between slavery and the SGs previously) – and therefore become even more virtuous for us. Although Saunders presents Eva as a ‘sinner’ from her family’s and society’s perspectives, from our own viewpoint, she seems to be the only one to be mentally sane and to see the atrocities of the society in which they live. She seems to question her family’s way of life by “refusing to eat meat, sit on leather seats, use plastic forks made in China” (140). Her objection is compared by her father to a game of ‘Whac-a-Mole’: “a kid ‘pops up’, i.e., registers complaint, requiring parent to ‘whack’ kid, i.e., address complaint (141). This comparison strengthens the lack of ethics and morality of the narrator’s capitalist world.

Although this story world is breathtakingly dark, Saunders has accustomed us to finding ‘rays of hope’ in his stories. We could already feel relieved by the fact that the narrator seems to have finally understood how horrible this system is – “note to self: call Greenway, have them take ugly thing away” (167) – but the real hope to be found in “The Semplica Girls Diaries” is Eva. Her father mentions that “Kids = future adults” (163), which means that we might hope for a next generation of Americans who recognize all humans for who they are: humans, and not yard decorations.

As I mentioned in the introductory section, an interesting difference between Saunders and Moore is that the former is a real optimist while the latter is more of a pessimist. Although Saunders sees hope in the next generation, Moore sees just the opposite. We already mentioned the stock-market investments in primary schools and the screen-addict Bruno in “Debarking” (cf. section 3.2.), but Moore’s depictions of children remain fairly negative throughout the

collection. While in “Wings” and “Referential”, they are all sick or dying, the narrator’s description of Nickie in “Thanks for Having Me” does not give a more hopeful view of the future: “Nickie knew how to terrify” (182). While Sam in “Paper Losses” seems to be conscious, kind and down-to-earth – with his awareness of animal welfare etc. – Moore still finds a way to break this potential optimism: “[Kit] was worried about Sam, their sensitive fourth grader, who now sat across the airplane aisle moodily staring out the window at the clouds. [After the divorce,] he would scuttle and float a little off and away like paper carried by wind” (72). This is a twist in personality that more generally reflects one of Moore’s main points in the collection: representing how good and kind people can be changed or even broken by the instability and dangers of the contemporary world – at a political, economic, but also intimate level.

Looking at the above-mentioned references to the American Dream in both collections and recalling the overall critique of materialism in section 3.2., we can conclude that both writers side with the argument that in 21st century literature, the American Dream “does not represent ‘a better, richer and fuller life’ any longer. Instead, it is deformed by the harsh social reality and degenerated into material possession and sometimes the means to fulfill this dream cannot be justified” (Su 837). Indeed, characters – the narrator in “The Semplica Girls Diaries”, Ted in “My Chivalric Fiasco”, Bake in “Foes”, etc. – are not trying to become happier, to have a better life and better opportunities for their families, as they just want more money, they just “aspire to be rich” (118) for the sake of it.

3.4.2. From the American Dream to the dreams of Americans...

Not only does the American Dream, or rather its criticism, have an important place in Saunders’s and Moore’s collections, but the dreams of Americans also find their way into *Bark* and *Tenth of December*. From Moore’s and Saunders’s own dreams to their fictional characters’ dreams or even daydreams, in both collections, dreams can be analyzed on multiple layers. Saunders mentioned on numerous occasions that

“The Semplica Girls Diaries” was based on this incredibly vivid dream in which I went (in my underwear) to a (non-existent) window in the bedroom of our house in Syracuse and looked down into our backyard. [...] I was getting this incredible feeling of happiness and well-being and deep satisfaction, as in, Wow, I finally was able to really

step up for our family. [...] Then the yard came into focus, and what was out there was ... as I describe in the story. And the weird(er) part was that, even having seen that, the “I” in the dream continued to be happy. (Saunders and Treisman)

In 2005, Lorrie Moore explained how “The Juniper Tree” is “a ghost story based on a vivid dream I had when my friend Nietzsche Keene died” (Moore *Reading*). Both Moore and Saunders have transformed those ‘vivid dreams’ into gloomy stories.

“The Juniper Tree” is indeed the shortest, darkest and probably most destabilizing story of the whole collection. Based on one of Moore’s dreams, it also contains a ‘dream’ – even though some might prefer to read the whole story as surrealist from the start as “encompassing dream narrative, ghost story, and even fairytale” (Kelly 18). As Chodat concluded, “the power of both Moore’s satire and her realism [...] arises from her effort to move between dream and reality” (58): in “The Juniper Tree”, it is indeed nearly impossible to know if the narrator is dreaming or if the story is meant as a ghost story where the ghost Robin is not the result of the narrator’s dreamy imagination but a real appearance. In this experimental short story, Moore applies Freud’s well-known belief in dreams bringing repressed feelings back to the surface. The narrator cannot really express how shameful and regretful she feels of having delayed her visit to Robin – her friend dying of cancer – but also of being proud to have “won him [her current boyfriend who once was Robin’s]” (50). She tries to persuade herself that she made the right choices, but the grief and guilt that consume her reveal themselves through her dream, which makes up three quarters of the story. This strategy of using dreams to provide more insight into characters is found in “Debarking” as well, where the reader recognizes Bekka’s cunning identity in her dreams: “I had a dream last night that I was walking with two of my friends and we met a wolf. I said, ‘Don’t eat me. These other two have more meat on them.’ And the wolf said, ‘OK,’ and we shook on it and I got away” (30).

Saunders works differently: instead of including real dreams, in nearly half of the stories from *Tenth of December*, he presents characters who live in daydreams (to various degrees) which are rendered through an overall use of stream of consciousness. In “Victory Lap”, Alison indulges in various daydreams: she is first “trading on this marble staircase in her mind” (4) and then she makes up a strange story about a baby deer whose mum has just been killed, until a knock on the door (by the kidnapper) brings her back to real life. Daydreams also make up most of Kyle’s own narration, since he keeps picturing different possible scenarios: helping Alison and envisaging the “many directives, Major and Minor, he was violating” (17), or not helping her and being “forever the guy who’d done nothing” (21). Comparing those daydreams

with Bakhtin's concept of "microdialogues", Wilson concludes that "Saunders's stories are rich with comic, marginalized, socially silenced characters who possess vast internal worlds populated by numerous voices" (233). Those numerous voices can also be heard in the rapist's narration where Saunders goes so far as to give a voice to a dead character: "Put up your hands, Melvin said, defend yourself. [...] Melvin was dead fifteen years. Mom dead twelve" (20).

Saunders's use of internal voices is even more characteristic of the last story, which gave its name to the collection. Indeed, Eber's daydreams in "Tenth of December" take the form of voices he hears in his head – often two contradictory ones emanating from two different characters. Those voices bring back various memories, which he dreamily – or perhaps feverishly due to his severe sickness – re-experiences. Daydreams are yet even more constitutive of Robin's character: a lonely young boy. He invents a whole world full of "Nethers", those imaginary creatures that he needs to fight. In his daydreams, he is a real hero, a knight who saves his princess: Suzanne, a classmate with whom he is completely in love. In reality she does not even know his name, but in his daydreams, Robin pictures her claiming that he is "by far the most insightful boy in the class. [...] No one can compare" (219). Robin's imagined life clashes strongly with his real life where he is more depicted as an anti-hero (lonely, ugly, overweighed, bullied at school, etc.). The beauty of the story is that, starting from his silly daydreams in which he plays the hero, he really saves Eber's life and, therefore, becomes a hero in real life as well. After what we might call this 'epiphany', he realizes that "that was stupid, talking in your head to some girl who in real life called you Roger" (240).

While the characters in "Tenth of December" get out of their daydreams and seem to embrace the real value of life after their 'epiphanies', Al Roosten, whose daydreams are fundamental to the plot, stays stuck in them. His life is so depressing that he tries to survive by imagining the life he could have if he was richer, if he had more self-assurance, etc. After 'waking up' from his daydreams, he then realizes the absurdity of the situation he was dreaming of and starts daydreaming about what would probably really have happened in such a scenario, which leads to a vicious circle that he will probably never be able to break. Those constant daydreams could be interpreted as an intertextual reference to James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Different elements in the story support that argument: most of Walter and Al's daydreams are interrupted by an external sound, as when "an odd inadvertent sound of contentment jerked Roosten out of his reverie" (104); both wake up from one of their daydreams on a parking lot; they picture themselves as heroes who always control every type of situations as a contrast to their everyday life; finally, Walter's wife and Al's mother – even

though the latter is dead – seem to share a bossiness, coldness and dominance over their respective husband and son.

In a nutshell, in *Bark* and *Tenth of December*, dreams and nightmares are used at different levels – from being the core of the plot (e.g. in “Al Roosten”) to being humorous additions lightening the darkness of the main plot (e.g. in “Debarking”) – and with different intentions. Moore’s and Saunders’s use of dreams – using various and diverse approaches – achieves the double effect of offering a better insight into the characters’ personalities and highlighting the absence of the one dream all characters share: the American Dream.

4. Today, but yesterday and tomorrow: “Sensing the eternal in the ephemeral”

To wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral

–Saunders, “Escape from Spiderhead”

The previous chapters have shown how Saunders’s and Moore’s collections can be seen as representing main aspects of American life in the 21st century: the victory of consumer-capitalism, the omnipresence of technology, the fears of wars and terrorism, and the disillusionment with the American Dream. A closer analysis of both collections reveals how much more they contain: they are not just self-absorbed accounts of 21st century America. Rather, they are peppered with themes, values and messages that are more global and timeless. Saunders literally refers to that dimension of his collection in “Escape from Spiderhead” where Jeff – after being drugged with some ‘VerbulaceTM’ – mentions: “It was as if I could suddenly discern, in this contemporary vignette, the ancient corollary through which Plato and his contemporaries might have strolled; to wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral” (46). Similarly, Saunders’s and Moore’s collections – interpreted as ‘contemporary vignettes’ – broaden the scope and offer us an insight into the less time-specific concerns that can be found in the everyday life of Americans in the 21st century.

When I explained to Saunders my interpretation of his collection – as a depiction of contemporary America which is also peppered with more timeless themes – he first mentioned how “exactly right” I was and how he has “always been slightly frustrated by some critics’ tendency to treat [his] stories as purely satirical vehicles”. He then went on about how he used

the façade of that critique [technology, the American Dream, capitalism and violence in America] to talk about those deeper things [I] mention (death, time passing, love, class struggle, work). [...] and [he] think[s] that by using those categories, [I] will be able to get at some really interesting truths, and some things that Lorrie and [he] share in [their] approach and worldview. (Saunders and Bonten)

Critics have indeed found a similar tendency in Moore's fiction. Bostrom convincingly argues that Moore's stories "lend themselves to the expansion of each story's meaning from extreme particularity to a broader and more universal meaning" (Bostrom 29). Nadia Falfoul further argues that "the 'comic spirit' [in Moore's stories] constitutes an effort to defend and celebrate those permanent human values or 'ancient aspirations': love, peace, goodness, compassion, intelligence, and the value of life itself" (302). Not only those, but also the themes of death, class struggle, work, time passing, and many more, are worthy of attention. The abundance of such references in *Bark* and *Tenth of December* makes it impossible – due to length restriction – to provide a detailed overview of each of those topics. I will rather present a few examples from both collections to illustrate how Saunders and Moore "bridge the past and the future, reminding us of the enduring magic of words and stories in our collective human experience" (Chaudhari 54).

4.1. Time Passing

If only they'd had more time!

–Moore, "Paper Losses"

Bridging the past, the present and the future with their various settings and themes, both collections seem to share an interest in the representation of time passing. Time passing makes up the whole plot of "Sticks", Saunders's one-page long story. The unnamed narrator summarizes his father's life using his fascination for a pole that he disguised for every occasion, thereby providing a picture of a cyclic, chronological passage of time: "Thanksgiving night, [...] Super Bowl week, [...] Fourth of July, [...] Veterans Day, [...] Halloween [...], Christmas Eve [...], birthday parties, [...]" (29). The 'speed' of life is even more prominent in Baker's fears in "Foes": "He did not know how much time he and Suzy might even have left together, and an endgame of geriatric speed dating [...] might be the real circle of hell he was destined

for” (93). Time seems to be a concern for younger characters as well in Moore’s collection, like Bekka in “Debarking”, who reflects on time in one of her poems: “Time moving, Time standing still, what is the difference? Time standing still is the difference” (31). Her father seems even more preoccupied by “the illusion of time flying” (33), since it can “make people think life could have more in it than it actually could” (33). Such pessimistic reasoning corresponds to Ira’s gradual change of personality: as time moves on, his initial humor and cheerfulness turn into cynicism and misanthropy. Portraying this as the result of “all that’s happening in the world” (36), Moore highlights once more the disastrous impacts of war and divorce on people’s lives.

One recurring representation of time passing in both collections is the description of hair colors. Saunders uses this technique in various degrees: from very explicit – “When I was a kid, she’d had long brown hair, past her waist. During the trial she cut it. Then it went gray. Now it was just a white poof about the size of a cap” (68) – to much more implicit when he replaces the whole concept of time passing and aging by ‘etc.’ – “to check bold spots etc., etc.” (120). In Moore’s collection, the descriptions are all fairly explicit – “Perhaps all three had gotten old together, although it showed mostly on her, the mother, with [...] her now graying hair undyed” (149) – but Moore’s trademark is to be seen in her use of peculiar words and metaphors (cf. section 2.7.1.): “She smoothed his hair, which had recently become a weird pom-pom of silver and maize” (82), “tall and bright-haired [...] His hair was now the color that strawberry blond become in middle age: bilious and bronze, as if it had been oxidized and then striped with white like a ginger cat” (164).

Reflecting on time and how fast it goes using humorous strategies, as the above-mentioned wordplays, justifies Saunders’s and Moore’s inclusion of all the other themes mentioned in their collections (cf. section 3). Combining slightly futuristic settings with a description of time flying strengthens the various criticisms and warnings present in the collections – from the excesses of late-capitalism to the psychological damages of war – since it implies that actions need to be taken now if one wants to avoid a “failing America” (Saunders “cover”).

An interesting side note should be mentioned since characters’ reflections on time depend on their wealth and social positions in both collections: time does not pass in the same way for rich and poor people, for children and adults, for men and women, etc. This illustrates how often themes are intertwined in *Bark* and *Tenth of December*. Moore uses humor to temper her characters’ fears of death, time passing and amnesia when the old Milt in “Wings” mentions: “I keep thinking of the hereafter: I walk into a room and say, What am I here after?”

(141). Saunders also links various themes together as illustrated for instance with work, class struggle, and the perceptions of time in the conversation between Emmett Torrini – the part-time surgeon and very rich father of Lily’s best friend: Leslie – and the narrator from “The Semplica Girls Diaries” who does not have any time for himself or his family because of his ‘boring job’: “Asked about my work, I told. He said well, huh, amazing the strange arcane things our culture requires some of us to do, degrading things, things that offer no tangible benefit to anyone, how do they expect people to continue to even hold their heads up?” (117).

4.2. Death

Which of us will die tonight?

–Saunders, “The Semplica Girls Diaries”

In both collections, some characters indeed cannot hold their heads up anymore. Taken literally, the best illustration of this is the dead Robin in “The Juniper Tree”: “Robin stepped out, looking pretty much the same, though she had a white cotton scarf wrapped and knotted around her neck. [...] This scarf is the only thing holding my head on” (55). Looking at it figuratively, one can investigate the notion of suicide that is repeatedly mentioned in both collections. Both Saunders and Moore present suicide in a very explicit way in “Escape from Spiderhead”, “Tenth of December”, and “Referential” respectively. Saunders’s depictions of suicide in those two stories have been interpreted as a comment on the many philosophical debates about suicide – especially on Kant’s rejection of suicide which he sees as ‘immoral’ – since in both stories it is represented ‘positively’ as freeing the characters from their pains (Ng 192-193). While seeing “Escape from Spiderhead” as a commentary on Kantian philosophy might be a bit far-fetched (but possible), one must acknowledge the two supporting facts that “Tenth of December” is a story centered on suicide and that Kant is literally and repeatedly mentioned in the story. Indeed, Eber defends his decision to kill himself by explaining how he does not want to impose the same last days as Allen’s – his stepfather – on his family: “Once the suffering began, Allen had raged. Said things no one should say. [...] Went from a shy man, always placing a reassuring hand on your back, to a diminished pale figure in a bed, shouting CUNT! Except with some weird New England accent so it came out KANT!” (223-224). Despite the numerous allusions to suicide in the story, Saunders finally decides to save his character, bringing in hope and warmth. A ‘positive’ ending, which is interestingly similar to

“Escape from Spiderhead”, the difference being that Jeff does eventually kill himself. His death, far from being presented as peaceful or painless – “in the end, here’s how bad it got: I used a corner of desk” (79) – still conveys a feeling of peace and freedom: “From across the woods, as if by common accord, birds left their trees and darted upward. I joined them, flew among them, they did not recognize me as something apart from them, and I was happy, so happy” (81).

In *Bark*, suicide is also central to the plot of “Referential” in which the narrator keeps referring to her son’s attempts: “the cutting scars on her son’s arm” (151), “the last time her son had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor’s words, morbidly ingenious” (154). Even though her son is locked up in a facility to prevent him from hurting himself, the three phone calls the narrator receives – with only silence on the other end – open the way to the interpretation of the narrator’s son finally succeeding in killing himself... The fact that the story is a very close rewriting of Vladimir Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” (Holt 222-224) seems to confirm that suicide hypothesis. Indeed, while Nabokov’s story ends “abruptly with the ringing of a third call” (Vergara 2) – which has led, among many other interpretations, to the ‘hopeful’ ending of the son calling to explain how he escaped from the hospital – Moore leaves us a few seconds more in the story world, presenting the mother answering the phone a third time, “but there was nothing at all” (157). The title of Moore’s story – as a direct reference to Nabokov’s story in which the son’s sickness is called “referential mania” – coupled with this last sentence – as an obvious deviation from Nabokov’s possible happy ending – strengthens the interpretation of the boy’s suicide.

In *Tenth of December*, Saunders also ends a story, “My Chivalric Fiasco”, with a vague allusion to suicide. “One last bit of Pill got digested by me, seemed like. Producing one last brief. But powerful surge of Return. [...] I took me to the Banks of the River, and tarried there awhile, as the lowering Sun made one with the Water, giving generously of Itself & its Divers Colors, in a Splay of Magnificence that preceded a most wonderful Silence” (214). While Saunders leaves the ending open, the repetition of “last”, associated with “the most wonderful Silence” works as a hint towards Ted’s final jump in the river – where “Divers” is then a form of diving, and “Splay” recalls “splash”...

Those various examples from *Bark* and *Tenth of December* illustrate how suicide affects our contemporary society: not only sick people but also young adults and even teenagers are impacted. More broadly, this theme of suicide can be associated with the many fears – including the fear of death, but also the fears of late-capitalism (cf. section 3.2), wars and terrorism (cf. section 3.1), etc. – that define many characters’ personalities in both collections.

Suicide and fear of death are neither unique to America, nor confined to the 21st century. By addressing these themes, Moore and Saunders give their stories a deeper dimension and build bridges between America and other cultures – since death and suicide are global concerns and fears – and between older literary themes and more contemporary ones – death and late-capitalism for instance. Indeed, as Kelly argues,

Moore's fiction may seem preoccupied with private emotions that are universal in nature: the loves and losses, dreams and disappointments that human beings experience the world over. In subtle ways, however, the individuals in her narratives are placed in the specific context of the United States in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. (4)

This can be illustrated at two different levels by looking at the references to the “main killer of the 21st century”: cancer (Perry and Bernasek 10). The inclusion of cancer in both collections allows Saunders and Moore to link this century-long fear of death with a very contemporary disease. In Moore's collection, no matter how old you are, cancer leaves you no chance: from the children in “Wings” described as “ghosts in white nightgowns” (145) or the depiction of the middle-aged Robin's decline as “precipitous” (51) in “The Juniper Tree”, to cancer as “the silent killer” (134) gradually taking away Milt's last years of life. In Saunders's collection, cancer is sometimes referred to implicitly – as a “lump” (171) or a loss of hair: “‘Might be a hair in it,’ she said. ‘Lately it's like I'm beeping shedding’” (172) – but also very explicitly as in “Tenth of December” where Allen and Eber's respective degradation is very precisely – and therefore poignantly – described. Knowing that “it is argued that distinctive features of corporate capitalism [...] are particularly pernicious in worsening cancer mortality rates” (Perry and Bernasek 10), the many deaths by cancer in *Bark* and *Tenth of December* can be seen as another layer of criticism against America's current political and economic system.

To sum up, in both collections, the themes of suicide and death achieve the double and contradictory functions of relating the stories first to less time-specific concerns – since death has always been a central topic of American literature (Fiedler) – and then to the other main concerns of the collections – such as the link between late-capitalism and cancer – which are closely tied to 21st century America. Playing with time and contradictions, Saunders and Moore make us reflect on aspects of American contemporary life in a new light.

4.3. Love

Every human is worthy of love.

–Saunders, “*Escape from Spiderhead*”

Even though we cannot mention every theme that Saunders and Moore have included in *Bark* and *Tenth of December*, one cannot help but recognize the importance of love in both collections. I already mentioned mother-love and its link with Saunders’s use of narrative empathy in section 3.3 and the importance of failures in love in Moore’s collection (cf. section 3.4.1). Leaving those aside, we can also see notions of love – in very diverse degrees of intensity and explicitness – in all stories from both collections. Just as the relation between cancer and capitalism, Moore and Saunders, include the most common literary theme: love (Fiedler), and relate it to contemporary life. Not only does Moore insist on divorce – which has been on the rise for the past few decades – but also on the uncontrollability and subsequent dangers of love, as in “Wings” where KC’s first meeting with Dench – leading to their ‘love-hate relationship’ – starts as follows: “Would it be impossible not to love him? Would not wisdom intervene?” (99). The biggest danger that Moore presents in various stories is how love can blind you: “Dench’s sexiness, his frugal, spirited cooking (though he was no Jim Barber), his brooding gaze, his self-deprecating humor, all had lured her in. But it was like walking into a beautiful house to find the rooms all empty” (117). Since playing with language is Moore’s favorite way to convey her messages, she even makes fun of that danger by taking the idiomatic expression literally: “Where are you?” (19) asks Ira after having had sex with Zora for the first time.

Alongside humor, making comparisons and metaphors – like the aforementioned one with the house – is also one of Moore’s favorite techniques (cf. section 2.7.1.) to tackle love and divorce: “Oh divorce will do that to you. [...] It’s like a trick. It’s like someone puts a rug over a trapdoor and says ‘Stand there.’ And you do. Then boom” (18) or in “Paper Losses” when Kits compares love with “being snowbound with someone’s demented uncle: Should marriage be like that? She wasn’t sure” (66). Making fun of marriage – more specifically its conventions that nobody cares about anymore – is another technique used by Moore to modernize the love-theme. In “Thanks For Having Me”, she starts by mentioning how “it felt important spiritually to go to weddings” but then we realize how meaningless, spiritually speaking, Maria’s marriage “to a local farm boy, for the second time—a second farm boy on a second farm” (179) is. Other conventions of marriage are mocked in the story: when Ian

explains how ‘legal’ the marriage will be: “They’re going to say ‘You do’ after the other one says ‘I do’. Double indemnity” (186) or when Nickie criticizes the choice of Maria’s dress color: “‘I can’t believe Maria’s wearing white,’ said Nickie. I shrugged. ‘What color should she wear?’ ‘Gray!’ Nickie said immediately. ‘To acknowledge having a brain! A little gray matter!’” (183). As convincingly summarized by Falfoul, Moore’s

pervasive irony runs through most of her stories, which manage to be both heartfelt and humorous at the same time. The techniques of colloquial dialogue, repetition, wordplay, and attention to tiny details are used in her stories to cover the same themes: the constant search for love and the impossibility of communication and hope. (298)

All of those themes – love, difficulties of communication and lack of hope – are indeed present in *Bark* and were analyzed in the previous sections.

Turning to Saunders’s collection, love has been presented in the other sections mainly from parents’ viewpoints – in “Puppy”, in “The Semplica Girls Diaries”, in “Victory Lap”, etc. – which is probably the purest and oldest form of love. Although completely absent from *Bark*, Saunders does present love in its simplest form in various stories. After his ‘epiphany’, Eber finally realizes how much he loves and is loved: “For the love of his dad. Oh, kid, you had it, you have it, Tom, Tommy, Tommikin!” (244). Love is then represented as more powerful than anything else: “Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them?” (249). While the use of surnames – “Rye-King” or “Mart-Heart” (178) – and some passages – “‘Love you’ I heard him say. ‘Love you more,’ she said.” (178) – might give an impression of artificial love in “Home”, Evan and Mikey’s ex-girlfriend seem to feel the real thing: “It was hard for me because I felt like shit. [...] It was hard for her because she felt like shit. It was hard for us because while feeling like shits we were also feeling all the other things we were feeling, which, I assure you, were and are as real as anything, a total blessing” (187). Yet, Saunders also presents love as being artificial, even chemical, in his collection. Indeed, in “Escape from Spiderhead”, Saunders joins Moore in her modernization of the love-theme by presenting it as the result of a futuristic pill. While Jeff first experiences it in a very positive way, once the effects of the drug have disappeared, love seems to lead to an overwhelming feeling of sadness: “I guess I was sad that love was not real? Or not all that real, anyway? I guess I was sad that love could feel so real and the next minute be gone, and all because of something Abnesti was doing” (55). In addition to representing love as naturally unreachable, Saunders uses another technique that can be compared with

Moore's trademarks (cf. section 2.7.1). Indeed, in the same passage, he makes a cultural reference to popular music with John Lennon's and Paul McCartney's "All You Need Is Love": "Say someone can't love? Now he/she can. Say someone loves to much? We can tone that shit right down. [...] Say someone is blue, because of true love? We step in: blue no more. [...] You say 'All you need is love'? Look, here comes ED289/290" (58).

Once more, Saunders and Moore have included a very global theme in their collection, love, but have made it fit into their depictions of America in the 21st century: love can be scientifically created, love is influenced by the outside world: by war, by sickness, by capitalism, etc. It can be as pure as devastating. Using themes like time passing, death and love, Moore and Saunders manage to convey less time- and place-specific concerns, values, and messages, albeit in a collection that is primarily a depiction of 21st century America. While Saunders literally refers to the "eternal" dimension of *Tenth of December* in "Escape from Spiderhead" – as explained previously – the same dimension can be found in Moore's fiction: "with her comedic perspective, Lorrie Moore reinvigorates subjects like mortality and motherlove and romance. She honors with her honesty our common struggles, refuses to ban 'the mundane' from the purview of literature--undermines, indeed, the very banality of banality" (Brockway 16).

5. Conclusion

We're all suckers for a happy ending!

–Moore, "Subject to Search"

I have argued throughout this dissertation that George Saunders and Lorrie Moore, in their respective collections of short stories, *Tenth of December* and *Bark*, not only accurately represent contemporary America and its current problems or dangers, but they also relate their stories to more universal matters, thereby transcending the borders of time and place.

After providing an overview of the secondary literature on the topic, I explored how violence is represented by both authors as a significant component of current American life. As a matter of fact, in both collections, violence seems to be part of the everyday life of characters: from the Iraq war dictating Ira's thoughts and actions in "Debarking" to the constant fear of terrorism in "Foes" or "Thanks for Having me". In addition to being violent, Saunders's

and Moore's story-worlds are governed by capitalism and materialism. By setting their stories in slightly futuristic settings – where everything seems similar to our 21st century life except a few new elements (medications, jobs, events, etc.) – and by leaving various endings open, Saunders and Moore make us ponder on what societies completely governed by consumer-capitalism could become. Rather than openly criticizing that *laissez-faire* economy, they leave readers make the necessary links between some of the atrocities presented in the stories – from human beings bought as yard decorations to profit-based firms without ethics – and the economic and political systems governing those stories, which are easily interpreted as further developments of our current late-capitalist world. Another topical issue of today's society, portrayed throughout *Bark* and *Tenth of December* is the increasing importance of technology. Not only screens and social media, but also scientific advancements in the form of pills and drugs are presented in various short stories. Rather than acclaiming such new technologies, Moore and Saunders seem to regret them by highlighting how much it can weaken human relations. The last element explored in their depiction of contemporary American features is the improbability of the American Dream. Indeed, the few characters who still believe in the American Dream – especially in Saunders's collection, since in Moore's most characters seem to have lost hope from the start of the story already – soon realize how quickly it turns into a nightmare: the narrator of "The Semplica Girls Diaries" mentions how "everything [is] chaotic" (165), Ted in "My Chivalric Fiasco", "what a clusterfuck" (214) it is. In Saunders's and Moore's collections, the American Dream is still seen as the climbing of the social ladder, but they do not focus on the ascension, but rather on the fall and its disastrous outcomes: from poverty to suicide to shattered families.

Since after all, "we're all suckers for a happy ending" (173), I presented in the last section of this dissertation some more universal themes shared by both collections. They demonstrate that *Bark* and *Tenth of December* not only reflect America today, but in the process also induce us to reflect on more global and timeless questions. Reflections on time passing, death and love, as recurring interests in both collections, therefore concluded this dissertation.

Returning to where we started, namely with Miller's rejection of the current skepticism about contemporary literature, this dissertation suggests that contemporary literature does not have to be seen as completely distinct from earlier forms. It is indeed precisely "through literature that we know the past, govern the present, and influence the future" (Gillman 35), which is, as we have demonstrated, exactly Moore's and Saunders's goal in those two books. Since Saunders's "hope is that the book does something that is impossible to reduce" (Saunders and Bonten), we should conclude by acknowledging how much more *Bark* and *Tenth of*

December contain. Indeed, I decided to focus on the authors' criticism of contemporary society, thereby highlighting problems and fears and leaving a slightly brighter dimension of the collections aside, but one should always remember that "a writer is always trying for a "greater than the sum of its parts' feeling." (Saunders and Bonten). While linking the various sections of this dissertation is a good start to see that "the short stories are trying to tell a bigger story", some of the symbols, themes, and exhilarating powers of *Bark* and *Tenth of December* are inevitably left out of the picture. So before turning the page, let's not naïvely "Think: Life beautiful" (Saunders 149) as it is clearly not the message conveyed by the collections, but let's rather "Note to future generations [of readers]: Happiness possible" (131).

6. Notes

1. Different studies, especially McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of creative writing* (2009), have shown how those creative writing programs shape the contemporary literary world, especially in America.
2. Launched in 1915, *the Best American Series* is "the premier annual showcase for the country's finest short fiction and nonfiction" (*HarperCollins*).
3. In literary circles, the term was coined by Adams Kelly. He describes sincerity as "a congruence of avowal and actual feeling. It places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others" (Kelly 198).
4. "the essence of magical realism is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. The existence of the marvelous real is what started magical realist literature" (Leal 122).
5. It should be mentioned though that Saunders did write some '9/11 stories' in other works (for instance "The Red Bow").

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