

Offloading for mrs. schwartz essay



In this essay I will examine the main character in George Saunders' short story, "Offloading for Mrs.

Schwartz." I will discuss how Saunders' nameless narrator regards himself compared to how minor characters in the story feel about him. Finally, I will describe the multifaceted personality of the narrator, explaining my reasons for why I think he behaves the way he does. The narrator describes himself as a loser and a man in despair. He is steeped in depression over the death of his beloved, Elizabeth, 3 years prior. "I don't shower. I don't shave. I put on the same pants I had on before.

It's too much" (229). The author's humor disarms in the scene where the narrator breaks down and telephones Guiltmasters, a brother/sister psychiatric practice featured on late-night television ads. It becomes apparent, after spilling his guts and then being curiously brushed off, that even Guiltmasters cannot help him now. He thinks of fleeing the city "or setting myself on fire downtown" (229). Instead, he works. Saunders' main character operates a futuristic personal interactive holography franchise that he opened with the money Elizabeth left him after her death. He is in the business of escape. He's good at the escape part, but lousy at the business part.

His equipment is outdated and his clients are few, yet regular and satisfied. The narrator displays outward affection toward them but at the same time, he is reluctantly generous. He curses under his breath when Theo Kiley laughs off his outstanding bill, and then refers to the armless Mr. Feltriggi as a friend. In any case, there's a question whether the narrator's actions

toward his clients are entirely genuine. Perhaps, because of his own grief, he can identify with their need to escape their dreary realities. He doesn't seem to be very concerned that his business is failing, except that he needs money to care for Mrs. Ken Schwartz, an ElderAid client, to whom the narrator has lost himself in service as a means of grief management.

Attending to Mrs. Schwartz is how he spends every moment of his "free" time. He describes her as "my real job, my penance, my albatross" (232). He is angry, and he directs that anger at Mrs. Schwartz. This causes him to feel even worse: "No, I think, I'm a man without a life, due to you. Then I feel ashamed and purposely bash my shin against the bedframe while tucking her in" (233). Eventually we learn that the narrator's profound guilt and anger are due to the fact of an argument with Elizabeth the very day of her death.

The fight began when he accused her of flirting with a neighbor. He was jealous "and implied that she couldn't keep her boobs in her top to save her life" (233). He called her an awful, memorable name. She stormed out of the house and was that evening hit and killed from a car driven by a drunk driver. His last memory of her is, "The awful look on her face as I called her what I called her" (237). It completely overshadows his fonder memories of holding her hand in Estes park, kissing her cheek in a bed of tulips, the birthday banner she made of scarves in their place on Ellington. Mrs. Gaither from the franchise's corporate office might describe the narrator as professionally incompetent and personally self-absorbed.

She has no idea of the narrator beyond her business interests. She feigns concern for his length of grief when she says, “ Let’s talk briefly about personal tragedy. No one’s immune. But at what point must mourning cease?” (231). It is further clear that, for Mrs. Gaither, the bottom line is the narrator’s miserable disbursement ledger when she remarks of the armless Mr. Feltriggi, “ That type of a presence surely acts to deflate revenues” (231). The narrator is facing franchise agreement cancellation.

Conversely, Mr. Feltriggi would describe the narrator as both generous and talented. All the armless man has to offer as payment for escape are amusing cookbooks. For that, the narrator gives him a sweet fantasy of fully functional limbs. There is no doubt that Mr. Feltriggi feels genuine affection toward the narrator when he “ rams his head into my chest as a sign of affection” (231). The failing Mrs. Ken Schwartz also thinks of the author’s main character as sweet and completely good.

“ You’re a saint” (233), she replies when he strokes her forehead and hums to her after the Royalty Subroutine holograph he provides for her. During a short period of Mrs. Schwartz’s lucidity, the narrator explains her predicament, and his. She agrees to give up her memories of the 60’s so that the narrator can earn enough money to continue his seemingly selfless regimen of care. This implies, on her part, a deep trust toward the main character. Mrs. Briff, the principal at the Lyndon Baines Johnson School for Precocious Youth, has mixed feelings about the narrator. At first she is thrilled with the holograph he provides for her students and finds him competent and capable.

Here again, the author disarms with humor when he describes the wry, yet somewhat disturbing, offloaded memories the children are given from the would-be robber, Hank. The narrator subsequently provides Mrs. Briff with Mrs. Schwartz's memories of the 60's, but they don't deliver the punch of Hank's memories, and Briff is left disappointed. She begins to think the narrator might not be as competent as she initially believed: " Finally, Briff calls, hacked off. She says she wants some real meat" (236). Her school board position depends on whether the narrator can deliver, and she is becoming doubtful that he can. There is an implied lack of trust.

. I don't think I can use the words " good" or " bad" to describe the narrator. Though he is a poor businessman, he has ability to deeply empathize with his clients' need to escape their realities and their limited means to do so. This might give him a small feeling of redemption or deeper purpose. However, it is only his own grief that enables him to do this, not some greater, inner strength or spirit that drives him to be kind and generous. In that way he is selfish. Even his care for Mrs. Schwartz is borne of a need to heal himself.

He acted cruelly toward Elizabeth out of jealousy, knowing the awful name he called her hurt her deeply. But even so, I feel sympathy for him because he feels so awful about how he behaved prior to her death. And the reality is that it could just as easily be any one of us in the narrator's place. We've all said things that tragedy would make us regret. In the end he offloads all his memories from 1951 - 1992, including Elizabeth, as a cure for his grief and guilt. For that, I feel the narrator deserves the blank-slate redemption he's granted himself in the note pinned to his shirt that reads, " You've never

done anything unforgivable or hurt anyone beyond reparation. Everyone you've ever loved you've treated like gold" (238).