

The injustices of
capitalism as
depicted in
"pastoralia" and "sea
oak"



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Many of George Saunders' works are focused around capitalism, which is a recurrent concept in several short stories of Saunders' Pastoralia. However, Pastoralia not only focuses on the general workings of capitalism, but also enumerates the hardships the poorer working class faces. Saunders slowly reveals the reality for the impoverished throughout the book, and how every individual must sacrifice a part of their humanity to simply survive. The narrators of many of the short stories work unusual and sometimes unrealistic jobs —such as stripping or acting as a living caveman— yet face the same trials as wealthier working class citizens, if not more. By developing unrealistic jobs but realistic experiences, Saunders “ creates an environment both deeply strange and uneasily familiar” (Hower). He meticulously crafts such environments in works like “ Pastoralia” and “ Sea Oak,” where he exposes the injustice of capitalism through the exploitation of the impoverished working class.

In both “ Pastoralia” and “ Sea Oak,” the main characters are “ pathetic, trapped in soul-sucking existences, with demeaning jobs and dysfunctional relationships” (Magee). Despite their atrocious jobs, they are motivated to remain with their careers by financial shortages back home. The narrator of “ Pastoralia” works at an exhibit park as a living caveman. He is expected to embrace his role as thoroughly as possible by doing things like skinning and eating a dead goat, not speaking English while on display, and even living at work in a separate area. His job is incredibly demanding and humiliating, but it is revealed that he has a sick child and wife at home who are dependent on the paychecks he receives. Nelson, the narrator's son, has a condition that causes his muscles to stiffen up to the point of immobility. Doctors have

prescribed him a medication which lessens the stiffness but also causes a painful amount of muscle swelling. While describing the situation, the narrator states that “ They have a name for what they originally thought he had, but when the medication made him swell up, Dr. Evans had to admit that whatever he had, it wasn’t what they’d originally thought it was” (Saunders 18). Because the family is tight on money, they may not be able to afford a doctor that can properly diagnose and medicate Nelson, and so they settle for the affordable —albeit lackadaisical— treatment, and unjustly misdiagnose him. In a fax to the narrator, his wife Louise mentions Nelson’s health and that “ the Evemplorine went up to \$70 for 120 count. God, it’s all drudge, drudge, drudge, you should see me, I look about ninety” (Saunders 34). This once again implies that they are settling for the cheapest treatment options for Nelson, because in modern times, \$70 is a fairly inexpensive price for medication —especially medication to treat such a rare disease— and the fact that Louise mentions it with such exasperation indicates the price hike may be breaking the bank.

Later on in the fax, she also states that, “ a big strip of trim or siding came floating down as we were getting in the car and nearly killed the twins. Insurance said they won’t pay. What do I do, do I forget about it?” (Saunders 34-35). Louise asking whether or not she should forget about the trim falling from the house is her way of asking if the narrator thinks they have enough money to fix it, now that the price of Nelson’s medication has risen. Louise does not work, so any and all necessities must be financed by the narrator, meaning that his job can ask him to do ridiculous things and he must follow orders or face being “ remixed” (Saunders 16). If the narrator’s family can’t

afford to fix their home because of Nelson's medication, they most likely can't afford much else, leaving the narrator with no choice but to remain at his job no matter how unjust the treatment.

Like the narrator of "Pastoralia," the nameless narrator of "Sea Oak" also works a degrading job. As a male stripper at Joysticks, he relies on the tips of his customers to sustain he and his family. Although the narrator is not the only one bringing home a paycheck in his household, his income is the largest, and there are six people — himself, Aunt Bernie, Min, Jade, Troy, and Mac— dependent on his income, not just three as in "Pastoralia." Aunt Bernie also earns a wage, but she was recently demoted after fifteen years as cashier to greeter at Drugtown, reducing her already meager paycheck. When Aunt Bernie dies, it places even more of a financial strain on the family, because now the narrator must cover the cost of Aunt Bernie's funeral proceedings as well. The narrator experiences emotional turmoil over Aunt Bernie's death, but not enough to discourage him from going in to work the next day. However, his boss Mr. Frendt notices his lack of enthusiasm while trying to entertain a table and pulls him aside. When the narrator explains what has happened and that he needs the money now more than ever, Frendt replies, "Am I supposed to let you dance without vigor just because you need the money?" (Saunders 111). Frendt perfectly embodies the injustice of capitalism on the working class because of his indifferent attitude and his unwillingness to help unless services are offered in return.

Later on, undead Aunt Bernie also serves as a symbol of capitalism's injustice for the working class. When Aunt Bernie returns from the grave, she warns the family that if they do not move somewhere safer than Sea Oak, "<https://assignbuster.com/the-injustices-of-capitalism-as-depicted-in-pastoralia-and-sea-oak/>

Troy's gonna get caught in a crossfire in the courtyard. In September. September eighteenth. He's gonna get thrown off his little trike. With one leg twisted under him and blood pouring out of his ear" (Saunders 119). The narrator feels the need to protect his family and move them out of Sea Oak, and is " fueled by care, but also by a patriarchal initiative and feelings of masculine responsibility" (Rando). The narrator is the only man in the house, which would traditionally indicate that he is the provider. However, his need to step into such a traditional male role may also be fueled by the emasculation he endures in his line of work. The narrator feels as though he is not manly enough because of his job, and must prove his masculinity by providing for his family.

Nevertheless there is no conceivable way the family would be able to move at the narrator's current income rate, so Aunt Bernie concocts a plan to move them out. To expedite the process, she tells the narrator to " start showing your cock. You'll show it and show it. You go up to a lady, if she wants to see it, if she'll pay to see it, I'll make a thumbprint on the forehead. You see the thumbprint, you ask" (Saunders 111). The narrator sees a woman with a thumbprint marking the next day, but cannot bring himself to follow through with Aunt Bernie's plan. Not only is he compromising his morality in the name of money, but also risking being fired. Although exposing himself to the specified women may earn him extra money, he will lose his job if he is caught, which effectively pits his conscience against his needs.

However, after much deliberation, the narrator decides to go through with Aunt Bernie's plan. He begins to expose himself and sleep with willing
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customers for extra money. He knows that his actions are “ sleazy” and “ gross,” but rationalizes it by thinking “ of September. September and Troy in the crossfire, his little leg bent under him etc. etc.” (Saunders 125). The narrator’s decision exemplifies the injustices of capitalism faced by the working class by forcing him to choose between upholding his morality or living in poverty and potentially putting Troy in harm’s way. He must choose between two risky decisions, ultimately having to decide which decision he could live with more. Saunders himself said that “ every happy man should have an unhappy man in his closet with a hammer, reminding him by his content tapping that not everyone is quite so fortunate” (Saunders and Bhar). If the narrator were the wealthier, happier man, he wouldn’t have to worry about such decisions because he would be able to move his family from Sea Oak without a problem. However, since he is the impoverished, unhappy man, he depends on his job —and in essence, capitalism— which can exploit him and his services however it pleases.

Capitalism has created hardships for all echelons of the working class, but most prominently on the impoverished end. These individuals rely on capitalism to succeed, or sometimes simply stay alive. The lower-level working class is caught in a never-ending cycle because most times they are forced to choose between financial stability and their own belief system. Integrity and morality are often compromised just for a paycheck, thus continuing the unbreakable cycle for those on the poorer end of the working class, because they work so hard to merely survive, yet still sacrifice their peace of mind to do so. To earn enough money to survive and begin savings, such individuals would have to either devote themselves wholly to their job

like the narrator of "Pastoralia," or break rules to gain their advantage like the narrator of "Sea Oak." However, they cannot escape the vicious grasp of capitalism without surrendering either money or morality, thus creating a cruel and unmerciful cycle that they may never escape.