

Performing precarity: middle-class anxiety and the alienation loop in "*The Semplica Girl Diaries*"

Jiayi Zheng

School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China

zhengjiayi229@163.com

Abstract. George Saunders' short story "*The Semplica Girl Diaries*" portrays a middle-class American man who responds to social anxiety by falling into the trap of consumerism. Using close textual analysis and theoretical interpretation, this study examines the story through the concepts of precarity, alienation, and consumer culture. Through the diary form, the protagonist reveals a deep entanglement between social insecurity and symbolic consumption. As he attempts to perform a stable identity through material displays, he inadvertently participates in a cycle that both masks and intensifies his sense of alienation. The paper argues that consumer desire, moral numbness, and the commodification of human life converge into a structure of precarious living, revealing the ethical and existential consequences of middle-class performance under capitalism.

Keywords: Judith Butler, precarity, middle-class anxiety, alienation, George Saunders

1. Introduction

In George Saunders' satirical short story "*The Semplica Girl Diaries*" (SGs) [1], the reader is granted access to the internal world of a suburban American man, whose fragmented diary shows his desperate efforts to keep up with the material expectations of middle-class life. As the narrator seeks to impress others and fulfill a normative image of family success, he becomes trapped in a cycle of symbolic consumption, moral avoidance, and emotional self-deceit. Through its unsettling use of first-person narration and its dystopian premise—the use of impoverished foreign women as decorative lawn ornaments—the story reveals how systems of consumption reproduce both social precarity and moral alienation.

This study examines SGs as a literary exploration of the performative pressures of middle-class life under the capitalism. By tracing the protagonist's spiral of anxiety, conspicuous consumption, and alienation, the story illustrates how individual subjectivity is shaped—and ultimately disfigured—by structural forces beyond its control. The protagonist's decisions are not driven by personal ambition or moral depravity, but rather by an acute sense of vulnerability within a competitive and image-driven society. This vulnerability is not simply emotional; it is systemic, rooted in class insecurity and a fear of downward mobility. In such a context, the desire to consume becomes not a choice but a form of social survival.

The critical framework of this essay draws upon key insights from contemporary theories of vulnerability, alienation, and consumer society. Judith Butler's concept of precarity emphasizes that social vulnerability is

not randomly distributed but structured by economic and political systems that render certain lives less livable and more disposable [2]. In SGs, both the narrator and the Semplica Girls exist within overlapping yet unequally distributed zones of precarity: the former fears a loss of class stability, while the latter embody the extreme commodification of marginalized lives. Karl Marx's theory of alienation, particularly his analysis of how capitalist labor relations estrange individuals from their humanity, further illuminates the moral blindness with which the protagonist participates in this system. The Semplica Girls are not perceived as people, but as decorative symbols—a transformation that reflects a deeper disconnection from ethical relations [3].

The story also resonates with Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry, which he argues manufactures false needs and standardizes desire through mass-produced symbols of success [4]. The narrator's pursuit of a socially approved lifestyle reflects this dynamic: he mimics status cues without questioning their origin or ethical implications. Zygmunt Bauman's reflections on consumerism and the "new poor" sharpen this analysis by showing how, in late modern societies, personal worth is increasingly tied to one's ability to consume rather than to produce. For the precarious middle class, failure to consume adequately equates to social failure [5]. These theoretical perspectives help uncover the deeper logic that structures the protagonist's choices: his actions are not simply misguided; they are indicative of a system that conflates visibility with value and performance with personhood.

By approaching the story through this conceptual lens, this essay situates SGs within a broader critique of neoliberal subject formation. The protagonist's experience reflects how the middle class—once positioned as the stable center of economic life—has become increasingly fragile, forced to define itself through consumption rather than production. In this setting, self-worth is outsourced to material goods, and ethical sensibility is dulled by the pressure to maintain appearances. The story's epistolary structure, with its halting syntax and self-justifying tone, reinforces the psychological fragmentation that accompanies this condition.

Ultimately, this paper argues that SGs captures the existential cost of performing stability in a world structured by insecurity. It does so not through overt political critique, but through the slow revelation of a man's moral disintegration in the face of economic and cultural demands he cannot fully name or resist. Through this lens, the story becomes more than a satire of suburban vanity; it is a portrait of alienated life under the sign of consumerism, and a disturbing allegory for how precarity reshapes not only what people own, but who they are allowed to become.

Structurally, the paper is divided into three sections. The first chapter, "*Anxiety-Driven Consumption*", examines how the protagonist's social insecurity fuels his desire to consume, turning material acquisition into a symbolic tool of self-worth. The second chapter, "*Consumption-Intensified Anxiety*", explores how these acts of consumption fail to bring relief, instead deepening the narrator's sense of inadequacy and social vulnerability. The final chapter, "*The Essence of the Circle: Alienation Logic in Consumerism*" analyzes how the cyclical structure of desire and failure leads to a complete ethical and emotional alienation, reducing both the narrator and the Semplica Girls to performances of hollow identity. Through this progression, the paper highlights how consumerism reproduces not only inequality but also psychic fragmentation, moral numbness, and the normalization of systemic violence.

2. The first link: *Anxiety-Driven Consumption*

The opening entries of SGs immediately establish the protagonist's state of latent anxiety and social inadequacy. At first, his writing is fragmented and self-conscious, from daily life to midnight dreams, and demonstrating how excited he is to leave the diaries for "future generations" [1]. The protagonist's stress stems from insufficient leisure/wealth to "sit on haybale watching moon rise" while in "luxurious mansion family"

[1]. Material poverty and persistent fear of falling behind—of being judged by peers, of failing to provide for his children, of losing access to a middle-class lifestyle—reveals his precarity in the deep mind. His daughter's disappointed expectation of her own birthday party after attending a wealthier classmate's birthday party becomes a catalytic moment. Especially there isn't a single Semplica Girl in their garden, which crystallizes the protagonist's growing awareness that to be middle-class is not to have enough, but to have visibly enough—to display success, not merely survive. His anxiety, then, is not merely emotional but social, driven by the performance demands of his class position.

This performance-based anxiety is exacerbated by the cultural logic of consumer capitalism, where success is increasingly judged by one's capacity to consume in socially legible ways. As Zygmunt Bauman observes that in a consumer society, not shopping well is the supreme social crime [5]. The narrator internalizes this logic, viewing consumption not as a means to an end but as an end in itself—a ritual that affirms belonging and prevents exclusion. His eventual decision to purchase Semplica Girls is framed not as an act of cruelty but of necessity, to show their family "really earn them" [1]. Here, the language of familial care masks a deeper anxiety: the need to appear prosperous in order to feel legitimate as a parent and provider. The Semplica Girls become both commodity and cure—a socially sanctioned solution to the narrator's fear of inadequacy.

The narrator persuades himself to believe Semplica Girls are "actually happy, given what their prior condition were like" [1] when Eva feels sorry for the girls. Judith Butler's concept of precarity provides a powerful lens through which to understand this behavior. Butler describes precarity as "a politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability" [2], and while the Semplica Girls most clearly embody this condition in their literal subjection, the narrator too exists within a more abstract form of precarity. He uses light and short sentences to make a deliberately casual decision: "Put cheetah on Visa, hope she is happily surprised?" [1]. When he decides to buy the most expensive figurine, it reveals not confidence, but its lack. Consumption is meant to provide structure to a life that is otherwise unstable—but the very need for consumption betrays the instability it attempts to mask.

The narrator's anxiety is not only internal but relational, shaped by the expectations of his family and their implicit participation in the economy of appearances. The awkward bumper incident while driving, Leslie's birthday party, Lilly's expectation, all contribute to the pressure he feels. While these demands are rarely voiced as commands, they function as powerful silent imperatives. In Marxist terms, one might say that the protagonist is alienated not only from the products of his labor, but from his familial relationships as well. Each member of the household becomes an implicit agent of consumer ideology. His efforts to meet their expectations through spending do not bring emotional closeness but deepen the distance between their desires and his own capacities. This contradiction reveals the structure of false needs Adorno and Horkheimer describe: "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises" [4]. The happiness the narrator seeks through symbolic spending is never realized, only deferred.

Within this framework, the protagonist's desire to consume emerges not from greed or vanity, but from desperation—a need to perform competence in a system that equates material visibility with moral worth. Even when the family's financial situation deteriorates, his instinct is to borrow, to extend credit, to maintain the façade. The narrator is aware, at some level, of the absurdity of his actions, but he lacks the language—and perhaps the cultural permission—to articulate an alternative. This is the core of consumerist anxiety: it allows no outside. The fantasy of consumption-as-redemption dominates the cultural imaginary so completely that the only available response to social failure is further investment in the system that produced it. As Bauman puts it, the new poor are not those who have nothing, but those "who cannot perform as consumers" [5]. The narrator's worst fear is not hunger or homelessness, but humiliation—of being seen as someone who failed to play the game.

Thus, the first link in the alienation loop is forged: anxiety begets consumption, which promises relief but delivers only more vulnerability. The narrator's efforts to perform middle-class success through spending do not bring genuine security, but reinforce a logic that makes security perpetually out of reach. His identity becomes tethered to appearances, and the social relations around him hollow out into symbolic gestures of value. In trying to protect his family, he unwittingly replicates the very structures that devalue both himself and others. As the next chapter will show, these attempts at self-affirmation through consumer performance only deepen the crisis they aim to solve, transforming anxiety into a cycle of ever-intensifying alienation.

3. The second link: *Consumption-Intensified Anxiety*

The narrator of SGs enters the realm of conspicuous consumption with the hope of alleviating familial and social tension. Yet, almost immediately after acquiring the Semplica Girls—a luxurious, morally questionable status symbol—his anxiety intensifies. Rather than offering peace of mind, the purchase produces new obligations, financial pressures, and moral contradictions, especially after Eva let Semplica Girls leave. The narrator's psyche becomes further entangled in the logic of debt, performance, and guilt. The SGs do not satisfy his desire for security or belonging; they merely raise the stakes of his already fragile sense of self. Each act of consumption becomes a wager that must be justified through further productivity, intensifying the very stress it was meant to resolve.

This paradox lies at the heart of what Karl Marx describes as the alienation of the worker in capitalist society. In Marx's analysis, the more the worker produces, the less he belongs to the product or the system that exploits him. The narrator's experience mirrors this contradiction: the more he consumes in order to assert social identity, the more distant he becomes from any authentic sense of autonomy or self-worth. Marx writes, "The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates" [3], and in SGs, the protagonist becomes spiritually and economically impoverished through his dependence on symbolic commodities. The diary form captures this deepening alienation: entries grow shorter, more confused, and punctuated by financial panic and emotional numbness. Far from being a therapeutic act of self-expression, the diary becomes a record of his psychic unraveling under the pressure of performative consumerism.

One of the cruelest ironies of the narrator's descent is that he is aware—however dimly—that the system he participates in is exploitative. He notes the discomfort of treating the SGs as property, even as he convinces himself that they are "well-fed", "happy", and "lucky to be here" [1]. This mental gymnastics is a classic symptom of what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as the culture industry's power to obscure structural violence through aesthetic packaging. "Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand effort", they argue, emphasizing how ideological entertainment replaces meaningful engagement [4]. The narrator consumes not only SGs but also the narrative of ethical comfort that comes with them—stories marketed to the middle class to soothe their complicity in systems of domination. He becomes anxious not just about appearances, but about maintaining belief in those appearances. Thus, his anxiety is no longer simply about being judged; it becomes a struggle to believe in the fictions he has bought into.

Butler's notion of precarity also deepens here: the protagonist is not just vulnerable to external judgment, but internally fragmented by the strain of maintaining contradictory roles—provider, consumer, moral agent. This internal dissonance produces a more insidious form of anxiety, one that resembles what Butler calls the "psycho-political" effects of systemic instability: "The differential allocation of recognizability produces a hierarchy of suffering" [2]. The narrator is recognized as a respectable citizen so long as he plays the role of consumer. But to maintain that status, he must ignore the suffering of the SGs, and in doing so, become alienated from his own ethical compass. The cost of recognition is the sacrifice of moral clarity. In this way,

his anxiety becomes ontological—it is about who he is allowed to be within a social order that rewards performance over integrity.

This second stage of the alienation loop reveals how consumption does not fulfill desire but displaces it, demanding ever more intense forms of performance and self-denial. The narrator's diary entries oscillate between excitement and disturbing: "you feel different about self, as if at last you are in step with peers and time in which living" [1], suggesting a cycle of anticipation and collapse. These emotional swings are symptomatic of a broader systemic condition, what Bauman might call "liquid modernity", where the stable coordinates of selfhood are constantly dissolved and reconstituted in response to shifting social expectations [5]. In such a world, anxiety is not an aberration but a structural feature: the cost of keeping up.

Ultimately, the narrator's anxiety reaches a breaking point not through external disaster but internal contradiction. When Eva frees the SGs out of compassion, the illusion collapses. The narrator cannot afford to replace them, cannot explain their absence, and cannot deny the moral implications of their prior presence. This moment of crisis reveals that consumption, far from securing identity or social belonging, merely postpones the inevitable confrontation with ethical and economic fragility. The more the narrator consumes, the more anxious he becomes—not because he is ungrateful or irresponsible, but because consumerism cannot provide the existential grounding he seeks. It can only offer the appearance of stability, at the price of growing alienation.

4. The Essence of the Circle: Alienation Logic in Consumerism

The narrative arc of SGs does not trace a linear descent but a loop—a cycle in which anxiety leads to consumption, consumption to deeper anxiety, and both to intensified alienation. This recursive structure is not incidental but essential, revealing what Karl Marx describes as the logic of alienation inherent in capitalist modernity. In Marx's early writings, alienation is not merely a feeling but a structural condition: the worker becomes estranged from his product, labor, species-being, and ultimately from other people [3]. Saunders' narrator enacts this progression in reverse—from estrangement from others (via comparison and status anxiety), to alienation from his own labor (as he works harder to pay off the consumption that offers no satisfaction), and finally to a profound loss of interior coherence. The diary, meant to preserve a sense of self, becomes a record of that self's disintegration under the contradictory demands of performative consumption.

This loop persists because consumption in capitalist culture does not resolve alienation; it rebrands it. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, the culture industry thrives on reproducing false needs—desires manufactured by the system in order to sustain itself. The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness" [4]. The narrator's impulse to consume is not autonomous but conditioned, shaped by the fear of inadequacy and the promise of visibility. In attempting to escape anxiety, he reenters it through a different door. The SGs, expensive and ethically fraught, are not simply objects of display—they are instruments of reification, transforming human life into aesthetic capital, and his conscience into denial. Each purchase is thus both an expression of longing and a reinforcement of submission: the desire for freedom becomes complicit with the structures that deny it.

Judith Butler's theory of precarity sharpens this analysis by exposing how subjectivity is produced through social recognizability. "Recognition becomes the mechanism by which social existence is granted or denied" [2]. In SGs, the narrator seeks recognition—not just from others, but from himself, from the imagined gaze of a society that equates consumption with competence. Yet this recognition is contingent, unstable, and tied to symbolic performances that exhaust rather than affirm him. The logic of the loop resides in this performative trap: he must appear successful to be recognized, but recognition requires displays of success that alienate him

from any genuine experience of fulfillment. The more he performs, the more precarious his identity becomes, as it is contingent not on intrinsic worth but on the maintenance of a social fiction.

Zygmunt Bauman's notion of the "new poor" complements this view by reframing poverty not as absence of income, but absence of access to the performance of consumer normalcy. "The poor are those who cannot consume in the manner and rhythm deemed normal by society" [5]. The narrator of SGs is not poor by classical economic measures, but he is saturated with fear of becoming so—fear of being unable to perform the rituals that mark one as a viable subject in the consumerist order. This fear drives the entire loop: consumption intended to prevent social death leads to further precarity, which in turn demands more desperate performances of affluence. The loop sustains itself because it is existential, not just economic—it touches the very conditions of selfhood, belonging, and perceived legitimacy.

Moreover, the loop is moralized. As Adorno warns, the culture industry does not merely entertain—it disciplines. By rewarding conformity and punishing deviation, it teaches consumers to equate ethical worth with market value. The narrator's anguish when Eva frees the SGs is not merely financial, but moral. In that moment, the entire ideological structure collapses, and he is left not with freedom, but with shame. Yet even this shame is not transformative; it does not enable resistance, only grief. The loop has conditioned him too thoroughly. He cannot imagine life outside the logic of value display, nor conceive of ethics apart from aesthetics. Alienation, in its final form, is the loss of the capacity to envision alternatives.

Thus, the essence of the circle in SGs lies in the transformation of economic alienation into affective and ethical paralysis. The narrator becomes the perfect subject of consumer capitalism: anxious, productive, compliant, and ultimately exhausted. His diary is a metaphor for the modern subject's inner life—fragmented, performative, haunted by the very desires it cannot fulfill. If the story is tragic, it is not because the protagonist fails, but because he never stood a chance. The system is built to ensure that consumption never satisfies, that performance never ends, and that alienation becomes not a symptom, but a structure of life itself.

5. Conclusion

George Saunders' SGs offers more than a satirical glance at suburban ambition; it lays bare the cyclical logic of alienation at the heart of late capitalist consumer culture. Through the narrator's descent into anxious overconsumption and ethical confusion, the story reveals how the pursuit of social legitimacy—framed by market values—produces, rather than alleviates, psychological and moral instability. Judith Butler's concept of precarity, Karl Marx's alienation theory, Adorno's critique of the culture industry, and Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of consumer-driven social stratification all converge to illuminate a system in which individuals are both compelled to perform and punished for failing to perform adequately. The diary form, intimate yet fragmented, functions as both symptom and archive of a subject trapped within a loop of self-exploitation. Ultimately, SGs warns that when consumption becomes the only means of recognition, and when performance substitutes for genuine connection, what remains is a hollow self—precarious, isolated, and estranged not only from society, but from its own ethical agency. The story compels us to ask not how to consume more responsibly, but whether it is still possible to imagine forms of identity, care, and community beyond the logic of capital.

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