

## Unveiling The Satirical Allegory: George Saunders' The Brief And Frightening Reign Of Phil

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### ABSTRACT

*The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* by George Saunders is the subject of this research paper. The novella, which was released in 2005, is an allegory of modern America and its conflict with Iraq. Saunders spent six years, from 1999 to 2005 working on this novella. Critics have drawn comparisons between this work and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell in terms of topic and absurdity. Even Saunders is linked to Samuel Beckett's vision and the light-heartedness of Monty Python. It's a satirical take on rich nations like America and their nature of infringement on immigrant rights. Saunders says the character of Phil is a reference to Osama bin Laden, but the critics consider the speech of Phil to be a reference to Bush's rhetoric. The sinister eye with which America looks at the other or Orient nations causes violence and hysteria that results in the abhorrence of the immigrants. Saunders stands for the victims in questioning the narcissistic tendencies of capitalistic countries that demean the orient.

**KEYWORDS:** Satire, Allegory, Absurdity, Capitalism, Immigrants.

Saunders' satire evokes empathy for the characters, who are meant to be a reflection of actual people. In addition, he used sarcasm and comedy a lot in his writing. A few of his pieces have addressed the narcissistic and political unrest in America. He concentrated especially on how America's foreign policy affected Afghanistan and Iraq. With caution, he applied his satire so as not to moralise the populace but rather to extend the concept of kindness and offer suggestions for showing empathy for the enemy. His humour has an upbeat tone and has the power to change the thoughts of the lifeless.

*The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil's* characters are abstract shapes that are non-human. This novella's ridiculousness is a response to Lane Smith's challenge. Seven Inner Hornerites are crammed into a small place when the novella opens. As others wait in the neighbouring Outer Hornerite country, they take turns remaining in the nation that is appropriate for the single Hornerite living there. The Outer Hornerites' country was much larger and more open than that of the Inner Hornerites. "... and in fact could often be seen drinking coffee at the spacious Outer Horner Cafe with their legs thrown out in the aisles, causing the Inner Hornerites to wonder: Jeez, couldn't those jerks spare us a couple hundred extra square yards of that vast unlimited country?" (1-2)

Across the border, there is resentment between the Inner and Outer Hornerites. The fact that Saunders is attempting to bring up the subject of immigration in the Outer Hornerites community may seem relevant to readers today. Saunders' Amazon.com piece, "Why I Wrote Phil", explains that "the story came to be about the human tendency to continuously divide the world into dualities and, soon after, cast one's lot in with one side of the duality and begin energetically trying to eliminate the other" (n.p.). Cal has a "gigantic belt buckle with a blue dot affixed to it" (5), but there are no people in the story, only abstract shapes. "On his tremendous sliding rack that occasionally fell out, causing his brain to slide rapidly down his rack and smash into the ground" (6), Phil's brain is held in place by a bolt. The female Carol is described as having "translucent oscillating membranes and glossy black filaments; the delicate curve of her exposed spine is attractive" (4). According to Saunders, they are "conglomerates" (5) made up of human flesh and mechanical components. The Outer Militia is alarmed by the Inner Hornerites' entry into the Outer Hornerites' forbidden territory in the story, particularly Elmer and three-quarters of his body. The border of the Inner Hornerites is delineated by a green string, and it is a breach of border security to cross it. Outside Militia: Melvin, Larry, and Freeda consider carrying out a strategy against those inside the Hornerites. They are advised to tax the Inner Hornerites by Phil, the infamous leader of the outside faction. Prior to this, Phil tries to court Carol, the Inner Hornerite, and falls in love with her. He was moving around Inner Horner once. Carol, however, falls in love with Cal, a belt buckle, defying his wishes. Phil spills machine oil on Carol's wedding day. It suggests that there is bleeding in his heart. The reader laughs out loud because the belts, black filaments,

bolts, spade-like tails, and racks have all been associated with human characteristics, such as falling in love and experiencing heartbreak.

Devastated by rage and hate, Phil taxes Inner Hornerites for going beyond border security. After taxing them, they take possession of nothing. Phil's brain malfunctions, causing it to slide, descend to the ground, and crash into a ditch. To make up for his physical deformity, he speaks to his troops in a "stentorian voice" (6) that abruptly turns patriotic. He goes on in a self-satisfied manner that intertwines national identity with an obvious dislike of the ridiculous as he finishes his remarks. In Phil's remarks, it is evident:

I've been thinking about our beautiful country! Who gave it to us? I've been thinking about how God the Almighty gave us this beautiful sprawling land as a reward for how wonderful we are. We're big, we're energetic, we're generous, which is reflected in all our myths, which are so very populated with large high-energy folks who give away all they have! If we have a National Virtue, it is that we are generous, if we have a National Defect, it is that we are too generous! Is it our fault that these little jerks have such a small crappy land? I think not! God Almighty gave them that small crappy land for reasons of His own. It is not my place to start cross-examining God Almighty, asking why He gave them such a small crappy land, my place is to simply enjoy and protect the big bountiful land God Almighty gave us! (6-7)

According to Saunders, the novel was originally intended for young readers, but as it went on, it became more and more focused on the genocide that some regions of the world experienced. America and other similar nations denigrate other nations because they believe themselves to be better. In the interview with Roy Kesey, Saunders shares his genuine inspiration for writing this novella. He says:

I had in mind, at various times, Rwanda, Bosnia, Hitler (especially the way he took over power in Germany), and then bits and pieces from the post9/11 world, Phil has a touch of Bin Laden about him, but also some Abu Ghraib, and he's got this tendency to inefficient language that Orwell talked about being the sure sign of a despot. Basically, he became kind of a lab test for the question: What does it look like when someone goes genocidal, by which I mean, when they negate the humanity of their opposition, to kill them more easily, and how do they defend it to themselves? (n.p.)

After Phil and the Militia check on the Inner Hornerites the next day, Phil gives the Militia the command to collect taxes from them. Inner Hornerites sleep standing up when the inner nation gets smaller. Upon awakening, they individually stretch to prevent the other Inner Hornerites from unintentionally pushing outside the Short-Term Residency Zone. The Inner Hornerites claim that they are left without any money or property when Phil orders them to collect taxes. Phil reacts violently, saying, "Oh, you people", . . . "What did you have in mind? Living in our beloved country for free forever? Do you know what we do? In our country? We work. We believe that time is money" (10). Subsequently, Phil requests that Larry inventory the resources in their nation. An apple tree and a three-cubic dry creek are the resources they are counting. Phil requests that the militia remove the apple tree, excavate the stream, and transport it back to the house. Leon follows Phil's advice and creates a large hole in the Inner Hornerites' territory.

The Inner Hornerites met late that evening to discuss Phil's administration's results. Even simple decisions take a long time to make. Old Gus advises going on a hunger strike, while Wanda urges staging a protest. However, given that they are already in danger of hunger and death, this option appears foolish. At last, Cal's son Andy devises a plan to write a letter to the president of the Outer Hornerites, who has seven large bellies and five white moustaches, pleading with him to support their cause, which was started in Phil's honour. The president remembers his early years in the Inner Hornerites' land with a girl named Mona by the brook beneath the apple tree when he arrives at the border the following day. The president comes across as being very disorganised and forgetful. He believes, mistakenly, that Phil killed his Mona and removed the apple tree and stream. Phil argues that he has carried out the president's previous decree. It was as though the president had forgotten his proclamation. He decides to gather the Outer Hornerites' viewpoint in order to determine whether or not he has issued the decree.

In a hilarious turn of events, the advisers solicit input from Phil's kind-hearted followers, the Outer Horner Militia. They all cast their votes in agreement with Phil, endorsing the short-term residency zone tax. There is cheering from every Outer Horner when the president shows gratitude for Phil. Gathering input from the Outer Militia may be seen as a representation of the Bush administration, which had introduced a motion in the parliament calling for an invasion of Iraq, with a particular focus on Saddam Hussein, on the grounds that he was a terrorist and possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Seizing the opportunity, Phil informs the President that, despite his appointment, he was not the Special Border Activities Coordinator. Phil gains control by manipulating the president's memory of his weakness. The advisers unanimously vote in favour of Phil when the president requests that they gather feedback from Outer Hornerites regarding their satisfaction with Phil's appointment as Special Border Activities Coordinator. As soon as the advisors realise that Phil is not wearing the Presidential Appointment Medal, they bring it over and tie it around his neck. The Inner Hornerites leant out over the border and piled on top of each other the following morning. Phil and his business respond angrily, stating: "My God, look at those people", said Melvin. "So uncouth", said Larry "Animals", said Melvin. "How do they live with themselves? . . . No wonder we treat them so unfairly", said Melvin, trying to counter Larry. (24)

Subsequently, Vance and Jimmy, two exceptional pals who have enormous strength and can effortlessly carry large weights, are enlisted by Phil. They are enlisted by Phil to serve as his bodyguards and to test them out on the Inner Hornerites. When the Special Friends arrive in the Inner Hornerites' territory, they strip off their garments, leaving them nude. Since he was exposed in front of all the Hornerites, Cal feels bad about staring at his wife in her undies. The genuine story of brutality against both men and women at Abu Ghraib is symbolised by the nude Inner Hornerites. According to author Luke Harding, it was a woman named 'Noor' who brought the issue to light rather than the photos shot by Joe Darby. While incarcerated, she was able to write a letter to an attorney in December 2003. According to the note, American prison officers are raping women inside the facility; some of them have even gotten pregnant, while others are made to stand in front of the guards. To ensure that they died with dignity, she asked the Iraqi resistance force to blow the prison. There were numerous other crimes committed against males, particularly against women who were made to expose their breasts by having a gun pointed at them. According to Luke Harding, the Bush administration withheld the release of these graphic images of violence out of concern that they would incite more attacks against US soldiers in Iraq and "to prevent further domestic embarrassment" (n.p.). Not even Iraqi society accepted the abused women. They could have disappeared suddenly and without warning, or they could have been slain.

Phil strikes a deal with the Inner Hornerites, requesting that Carol be delivered to him as a wife in exchange for a tax reduction. Cal, furious by this truce, lashes out at Phil, only to be stopped by the bodyguard. In response to his fury, Phil chooses to dismantle Cal. Hanging in midair, Cal calls, "This is the right moment! It's either now or never! Come with me! Come battle with us!" (43). The other Inner Hornerites watch the brutality with helplessness. They believe it is wise to remain silent. Freeda examines her inner conscience because of the incompetent way in which the agony caused by the Inner Hornerites is handled. In her visions, Freeda sees her sister Gertrude being mistreated by Phil. So, she writes a letter to the president over the ruthless rule of Phil:

Dear Mr. President, it read. Today Phil, whom I previously so much respected, disassembled a fellow, an Inner Horner fellow, who seemed nice enough, and even had a family. Is this what we stand for here in Outer Horner? I hope not. Our country is big, let us be big. Phil is out of control, sir, and must be stopped. Please do something. We're all counting on you. (47)

The President calls Phil to get an explanation for this charge after reading the memo that Freeda sent. The president loses track of Phil's actual purpose for coming after his arrival. Using this to his advantage, Phil muses, "It was suddenly obvious that he, Phil, was his floundering nation's only hope, "although he had a hazy impression when at the border that the president was not nearly as sharp as himself" (55). Seizing the moment, Phil gives his guards the order to move the presidential residence to his place.

The president's advisors walk out and give way to President Phil, the new leader. Later, Phil tells the people that the Inner Hornerites would no longer pose a threat since he would completely remove them from their territory. He starts by asking the group members to sign a document titled "Certificate of Total Approval" (61). Phil requests that the media be present when the Inner Hornerites are being driven out. The small media men follow their new president to the border, shocked to discover him there. "NEW PRESIDENT VOWS TO ELIMINATE BORDER THREAT!" exclaimed the first small man, according to the media. The second exclaimed, "NEW PREZ TO THE NATION: YOU SHALL KNOW PEACE!" (65). Saunders has an obviously cynical viewpoint on social networking. He describes it as being completely poisonous for individuals to be thinking at the speed of light. He claims he has little interest in social media. He continues, saying, "I'm not it. And I refuse to be, because I genuinely believe it is killing us. I genuinely do" (n.p.)

The neighbouring country learns of the new president and evaluates the former president's chances and location. The neighbouring country, Greater Keller, decides to extend an invitation to the new president to visit them. Dale accepts Keller's invitation and is chosen to receive it. The Inner Hornerites, who felt almost threatened by Cal's tragedy, are appalled by the scene at the boundary. Along with his helpers, Phil revokes the property by barbecuing the wire encircling Inner Hornerites and putting up a sign that reads, "Peace Encouraging Inclosure" (72). Phil remembers how he went from being a pitiful little child to becoming the leader of the country. He also recalls the fight between his father and the Inner Hornerites and how he threw a stone at them in jest, earning him a reprimand from the guard. Phil's father walks out of the room, humiliated. Phil gives Freeda the order to deconstruct every Inner Hornerite right away, in response to which Freeda says, "I'm not sure about this" (75). Phil names her disloyal and demands that she kneel so that her parts are readily accessible for disassembly. Phil is furious with her for her defiance. Jimmy dismantles her, and the media reports, "INSURRECTION NIPPED IN BUD!" and "PREZ DOES WHAT PREZ MUST DO!" (77).

Phil gives the order to take Curtis, an Inner Hornerite, off. While Vance firmly ties Curtis's top portion, Jimmy first separates the lower portion. Later, Dale, the Greater Keller's ambassador, saw the crimes. He was severely injured and purposefully fled towards his country to learn about the true events. One may fictionalise The Dale as a metaphor for Joe Darby, the Abu Ghraib affair whistleblower. He was in excruciating pain about what was occurring at the prison. He tried to alert his higher officials, saying, "It violated everything I personally believed in and all I'd been taught about the rules of war" (n.p.). He then gave the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command the evidence. He performed noble and courageous things, yet the community did not think favourably of him.

As soon as Dale, the diplomat, provides the information, President Rick of the Greater Keller Nation takes urgent action. Phil attempts to dismantle Carol and her son Andy at that very moment. Everything appears to vanish out of thin air as the army of the Greater Keller Nation comes. When Phil's guards realise that the Greater Keller's Army is bigger and more powerful than they are, they flee and refuse to comply with his orders to arrest the army. The Inner Hornerites are released by the army and told to live their lives. The reporters who were present during the loss instantly shifted their focus and said: "HOW WAS NATION SO EASILY DUPED?" shouted the first little man "WHY DID NATION IGNORE REPEATED WARNINGS BY MEDIA?" shouted the second. "NERVOUS-LOOKING ADVISORS LEAVE AREA AT FAST WALK!" shouted the third" (86).

Then the old memories vanished completely from the minds of a new race of Hornerites. After placing Phil's body on the platform and placing a plaque underneath it that reads "PHIL" and "MONSTER" (89), his brain is thrown into the stream, where fish started eating it because they thought it was an apple. Though the new Hornerites notice it, they ignore it as gorgeous scenery covers it. Critics who linked the novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* to the Iraq war dispute with Saunders. Saunders refutes this attachment in an interview with Josh Abraham, stating:

But I started this way back in 1999, with Rwanda and Bosnia in mind. Then came 9/11 and Iraq and Abu Ghraib. And many of the things that might make a reader think of the Bush administration the stolen Presidency, the jangled syntax, the Patriot Act-reminiscent 'Loyalty Oath', the stripping and humiliation of prisoners were all written before Bush was even elected. (n.p.)

Saunders refuted any affiliation with Bush, but detractors nevertheless draw parallels between his speech and Bush's. Bethany Albertson, as mentioned by Hayes Brady, pointed out 'dogwhistle politics' in George W. Bush's address.

Bethany Albertson comments on the ways in which President George W. Bush and other politicians use such evocative language, identifying it as a strategy to communicate on an emotive level with a specific segment of the electorate. Such language, of course, is common in revolutionary as well as mainstream religious and political rhetoric, and is termed 'dogwhistle politics' for its capacity to elicit responses from 'trained' elements of an audience. (26)

Al-Qaeda had no ties to Iraq, the United States targeted the terrorist organisation following the 9/11 attacks. However, the United States of America waged war on Iraq, citing Saddam Hussein's possession of weapon management development. These accusations are unproven, though. The United States' desire to put a stop to terrorism was met with venomous responses from torture facilities like Abu Ghraib, which infuriated a lot of terrorists. The United States tried, but failed, to use intelligence to prevent violence. The Coalition Provisional Authority was founded in 2003 by the United States through the overthrow of Ba'athist Iraq. Making the US responsible for the creation of ISIS, Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem highlight two US decisions. They say: "The subsequent rise of ISIS has been precipitated by two fateful decisions on the part of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA): the de Baathification of Iraq's government and dissolving the Iraqi army. These decisions sowed the seeds for Iraq's sectarian conflicts from 2006 to 2007 that pitted Sunnis against the Shia" (6).

The pain of terrorism recalls the events of 9/11 for Americans. America, the superpower that tried to bring about peace, has come under attack. America has been characterised by its detractors as a rapacious country that seeks to control the entire globe. Like terrorist attacks, anarchy has already broken out, and hostilities persist. While the stories of America in Afghanistan and Iraq show that the United States intended to combat terrorism, the actual results were less favourable. Instead of stopping the acts of terrorism, the attacks made them more frequent.

According to Saunders, America feels threatened and is self-absorbed in its culture. Furthermore, he believed it was eroding. It gambled on becoming a superpower while engaging in indirect conflict with other nations. America has been known as the 'city on a hill' for a long time. That served as a ray of hope for future generations. However, the nation has lost its lustre, and diversity is in disarray. America made a conscious effort to set itself apart from other nations. It voluntarily distanced itself. Saunders' interpretation of the 'city on a hill' is not the same as an idealised picture of America. He scoffed at the idea of an American foreign policy. He disapproved of its needless involvement in other nations' foreign affairs and disregard for its own domestic problems.

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