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Sea Oak by George Saunders, a summary by Christian Rangel

George Saunders is a critically acclaimed American author from Chicago. His short story *Sea Oak*, first published in 1999, offers an interesting mix of comedy, mystery, drama, and zombies. This story includes a number of incredibly authentic and memorable characters. However, it makes sense to focus in on the main family. This family lives in a small apartment in a not-so-glamorous subsidized housing complex. The narrator works as a male stripper at the strip club just over and through the strip of forest by their apartment. Then there's the narrator's sister, Min, and their cousin, Jade. Not the brightest those two, but they mean well. They are also both single mothers, with Troy being Min's little boy and Mac being Jade's. Neither of them has a job. They mostly sit around watching TV all day. The last one in the apartment is their aunt, Bernie. She's the sweetest character with the most pitiful life. She somehow manages to find joy in the tiniest things while living a life of complete disparity. She's an older woman in her sixties, works most days for little money, and has never had children or even a lover of her own. This quote is one of many that give a good glimpse into this family, "For dinner it's beanie-wienies. For dessert it's ice cream with freezer burn. 'What a nice day we've had,' Aunt Bernie says once we've got the babies in bed. 'Man, what an optometrist,' says Jade."(Saunders 95)

It's also important to throw in the narrator's mother, who's also Bernie's sister, and her 'man,' Freddie, the phone poller. This passage sums up Freddie pretty well, "Dad's dead and left us nada, and Ma now lives with Freddie, who doesn't like us, plus he's not exactly rich himself. He does phone polls. This month, he's asking divorced women how often they backslide and sleep with their exes. He gets ten bucks for every completed poll." (Saunders 97) Ma and Freddie only come around after Bernie suddenly passes away in the apartment from quite literally being frightened to death. To sum up the plot, Bernie comes back to life as a zombie, but she doesn't come back as the same old cheerful, sweet aunt they knew before. She comes back with fury and vengeance. In her necrotic state, she lashes out at them, ordering them around and laying out her grand plan in phases. For phase one, she looks at Jade: 'Get a job!' She looks at Min: 'Learn how to cook!' Then she looks at the narrator: 'Show your cock!' This new Bernie doesn't play around. She's no longer laying down and taking the shit that life throws at her and the family. She's going to uplift this family with everything she can and also get herself a lover! Sadly, her second life begins to quickly rot away. Quite literally, she begins to quickly fall apart until she's just a resentful head. Her parting words are a true testament to this fantastic story, as seen in this passage. "Why do some people get everything and I got nothing?' she says. 'Why? Why was that?' 'I don't know,' I say. 'Show your cock,' she says, and dies again." (Saunders 123) In *Sea Oak*, there are aspects of comedy, drama, mystery, and zombies. Saunders does an incredible job blending multiple different genres into one cohesive narrative that still manages to create a wildly funny, dramatic, and impactful storyline.

Humor

How does humor work in this story and why is it being used? Is this an example of parody, satire, high comedy, or something else? This story has specific aspects of both satire and high comedy.

High comedy involves a more subtle form of humor compared to slapstick or physical comedy. It focuses on witty dialogue and irony. This concept pops up throughout the story. Like the TV shows, the two are always watching. It's always something along the lines of '*The Worst That Could Happen*, a half-hour of computer simulations of tragedies that have never actually occurred but theoretically could.' Or maybe something like 'Min and Jade are feeding their babies while watching *How My Child Died Violently*.' (Saunders 93) There are also delicious little specs of irony sown across the names of everything. Like the actual name of the apartment complex, Sea Oak. "At SEA OAK, there's no sea and no oak, just a hundred subsidized apartments and a rear view of FedEx." (Saunders 93) I love this stuff so much. There are so many other ways of describing the place, but this way just feels right. It scratches a certain part of your brain. I'm not sure I can describe it. I feel it's the best way to describe the place. The TV show names are also so obvious and in your face to what they are foreshadowing that it's easy to just miss it entirely.

This story also has some aspects of satire. It has crazy family dynamics, workplace exploitation, societal norms, and dark humor in the face of tragedy. Overall, without humor in the way that it's utilized, the story and the characters would be nowhere near as three-dimensional and interesting. I picture this just being a serious family drama, and the zombie Bernie would make absolutely no sense.