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by Timo

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5 min 45 sec

reading
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Consumerism, Advertising, and Technology In “My Flamboyant Grandson”

“My Flamboyant Grandson” by George Saunders offers a satirical and critical perspective on the impact of consumerism, advertising, and technology on contemporary culture. It also highlights individuality and support for loved ones in the pursuit of self-expression and personal fulfillment. Through the experiences of the protagonist and his grandson, Teddy, the story explores the overwhelming nature of commercial messaging, the intrusion of technology into daily life, and the pressures of conformity. Amid this backdrop, the story champions the importance of individuality and acceptance, portraying the protagonist's unwavering support for Teddy's unique interests. This narrative provides a compelling critique of the dehumanizing effects of consumerism culture and technology and emphasizes the significance of embracing personal authenticity. Therefore, Saunders uses different literary techniques to critique the invasive and disruptive nature of consumerism, advertising, and technology.

Saunders first critiques consumerism using language and word choice to expose how it starts by collecting consumer data and using it to customize advertising. Consumerism begins with interested business brands and marketers collecting any relevant information about the consumers (Cesaratto). The narrator reveals that they are subjected to monthly Everly Preference

Worksheets where they state their personal preferences. The data collected in the worksheet is the primary input used to customize the adverts shown in the Everly Readers as controlled by the Everly Readers. Similarly, Saunders exposes how different business entities use tools like the Infraction Correction Form to collect more information about the people. At one point, Rob bragged, “isn’t that amazing, Mr. Petrillo, that we can do that, that we can know you so well, that we can help you identify the things you want and need?” (Saunders). Therefore, whether the data is collected legally or illegally, Saunders critiques how consumerism relies on the information sourced from the very consumers targeted.

With the diverse data collection tools, consumerism involves manipulating consumer data to make advertisements customized to the needs. Saunders uses vivid illustrations to insinuate that personalized or customized adverts are a product of manipulated consumer data. Mr. Petrillo - the narrator, claims, “every time a voice shot into my ear, telling me things about myself I already knew.” And the ads were “so perfectly tailored to his individual desires and anxieties that they were like little demons whispering in his ear” (Saunders). In another instance, a Cybec Sudden Emergent Screen shouted at him, “Golly, Leonard, remember your childhood on the farm in Oneonta? Why not reclaim those roots with a Starbucks Country Roast?” (Saunders). The advertising techniques portrayed in these instances are similar to real-world marketing, where ads use manipulated emotional appeal to the needs and preferences of consumers. The system first gathered data about the consumers’ background in Oneonta and then manipulated it to insinuate that such a past can be achieved in a Starbucks Country Roast. By doing so, the ads exploit the personal experiences of people to provoke demand for goods or services that the consumers may not need.

The disruptive and invasive nature of the technology used in consumerism and advertising is also evident in the imagery and language used in “My Flamboyant Grandson.” While technological advancements can enhance human experiences, the story depicts technology as a tool for manipulation and control. The constant data collection and personalization of messages suggests that technology can lead to a loss of privacy and individuality (Cesaratto). The disruptive nature of technology is evident in the ads that constantly bombard people and numerous kinds of technology. As if the Everly Stripes on shoes are not enough, there are Everly Readers on every corner of the street, Cybec Sudden Emergent Screens, Kakio Aural Focusers for sound, a Gene Kelly hologram, and a Citizen Helper. These invasive technologies constantly disrupt people with personalized ads, even when they are trying to do other things. For instance, Mr. Petrillo is “being interrupted by ads while he is reading, watching TV, and even talking to his grandson” (Saunders). Therefore, a technology used in consumerization is “so pervasive and insidious that it was like a second skin.”

The narrator’s feelings about his society’s rules and expectations are somehow ambivalent or indifferent. On the one hand, he seems to accept consumerism, a consumer society where materialistic and consumerist behavior dominates. The narrator is conscious of the invasive technologies, the rampant advertisements displayed everywhere, and the manipulation of these technologies to drive sales. He acknowledges that these ads “were like little demons whispering in his ear.” On the other hand, he also seems to be critical of his society’s rules and expectations. He describes the technology in his society as being “so pervasive and insidious that it was like a second skin” (Saunders). This suggests that he feels oppressed by technology and that he believes it is controlling his life. Moreover, his ambivalence is evident in the way

he describes his grandson, Teddy, as a flamboyant and non-conformist child, and he is often at odds with the expectations of his society. He seems to admire Teddy's individuality, but he also worries about how he will fit into a society that is so materialistic and consumerist. Therefore, the narrator is unable to resolve his ambivalence about his society's rules and expectations. He is aware of the problems in his society, but he is also unsure of what to do about them.

The story further Saunders suggests that consumer culture, government, and law enforcement are entangled in a complex and mutually supportive relationship. On the one hand, consumer culture is dependent on government and law enforcement to protect its interests (Lunt and Sonia). For instance, the government protects businesses, brands, and marketers through copyright laws to protect the intellectual property of corporations, and law enforcement protects the physical property of businesses and consumers. In return, consumer culture promotes business revenues, taxes, and fees that are a source of revenue for the government and law enforcement. On the other hand, consumer culture also influences government and law enforcement. For instance, corporations lobby the government to create policies that favor their interests, and consumer culture can shape public opinion and influence elections. Teddy is arrested for wearing flamboyant clothing because the government and law enforcement policies suppress individuality and creativity in favor of conformity to consumerist norms.

"My Flamboyant Grandson" depicts numerous trends that are evident in the advertising and information culture today. The data collection trend is so massive that every corporation today struggles to create Big Data collection points online and offline. This data-driven approach leads to tailored ads and content recommendations based on users' online behaviors and preferences. Secondly, invasive technology is like today's culture, where digital tools are

everywhere in the business chain. From social media, artificial intelligence, and machine learning to robotics, there are tech devices in marketing and product promotion. On the same note, Like Leonard in the story, we are constantly bombarded with personalized ads, both online and offline. These ads are tailored to our interests and desires, and they can be very effective at manipulating us into buying things we do not need. The government and law enforcement influence is also similar to today's culture, where consumer culture is dependent on government and law enforcement to protect its interests.

In conclusion, Saunders uses different literary techniques to critique consumerism, advertising, and technology while highlighting the power of love and acceptance in the face of socioeconomic pressures. The story made me reflect on my own use of social media and other online platforms. I am now aware of the extent to which these tools are used to collect my personal data, which is then manipulated to deceive me into buying goods and services. The story's protagonist made me realize that I need to be more mindful of the information I share online and the permissions I give to apps and websites. Secondly, I am not cognizant of the fact that advertisements are tailored to our fears and desires, and they are designed to make us feel like we should buy things to be happy. As such, I am now mindful of the ads and marketing messages that I see online. The story made me realize that social media and other online platforms can be used to suppress individuality and creativity. Therefore, I am now more informed about consumerization, advertising, and disruptive technology around me.

Works Cited

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