

Resolving Inner Ethical Conflicts: An Analysis of How Characters Overcome Moral Dilemmas in George Saunders's Short Stories

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Article Info

Article history:

Submitted Aug 07, 2026

Revised Aug 13, 2026

Accepted Aug 13, 2026

Published Aug 15, 2026

Keywords:

*Moral Dilemma Resolution,
George Saunders, Ethical
Choice, Short Stories, Literary
Analysis*

ABSTRACT

Moral dilemmas occur when an individual is confronted with competing ethical obligations, where every available choice carries both moral justification and unavoidable moral loss. This article focuses on a specific research question derived from literary analysis: **How do the main characters in George Saunders's short stories overcome their moral dilemmas?** Using a descriptive qualitative research design, this study examines three selected short stories from the collection *Tenth of December* (2013): "Victory Lap," "The Semplica Girl Diaries," and "Tenth of December". The analysis applies Gross's (2010) model of moral dilemma resolution alongside Perry's (2014) framework of ethical conflict. The findings demonstrate that the characters—Kyle, the Father, and Don Eber—resolve their internal ethical conflicts through a distinct six-stage process: awareness of conflict, emotional struggle, weighing options and consequences, choosing moral principles over self-interest, taking responsibility, and undergoing personal transformation. Saunders portrays moral resolution not as a simple choice between right and wrong, but as an emotionally demanding process where true ethical growth emerges through sacrifice, relational care, and compassionate action.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a profound medium for reflecting complex human experiences, societal structures, and philosophical questions. In modern prose fiction, the short story format provides a concentrated lens through which authors explore critical moments of ethical decision-making. Among contemporary American writers, George Saunders stands out for his agile prose, sharp satirical critique, and deep empathy for ordinary individuals placed under intense social, economic, or physical pressure. His characters often inhabit landscapes structured by strict rules, consumerist

desires, or personal despair, forcing them into situations where staying safe or conforming directly conflicts with doing what is ethically right.

A central feature of Saunders's narrative world is the presentation of genuine moral dilemmas. A moral dilemma is not merely a moment of temptation or personal failure where an individual struggles to resist a clearly wrong action. Rather, as Perry (2014) defines it, a moral dilemma arises when a person faces two or more mutually exclusive moral obligations, each backed by valid ethical reasoning. Fulfilling one duty inherently requires violating another. In such complex ethical situations, individuals experience intense inner tension, emotional distress, and psychological burden.

While identifying the presence and characteristics of moral dilemmas in literature is crucial, a vital research question remains: **How do individuals navigate and overcome these ethical deadlocks?** Examining the mechanics of ethical resolution offers insight into human agency, character development, and the nature of moral maturity.

Therefore, this article focuses specifically on analyzing the indicators and processes through which the main characters in George Saunders's short stories overcome their moral dilemmas. By examining Kyle in "Victory Lap," the father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," and Don Eber in "Tenth of December," this study clarifies how Saunders depicts the movement from ethical paralysis to transformative moral action.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Moral Approach in Literary Analysis

The moral approach to literature asserts that literary works do more than merely entertain; they provide valuable insights into human behavior, ethics, and social values. According to Abrams (1999) and Wellek & Warren (2012), evaluating literature through a moral lens connects fictional narratives to real-world ethical dilemmas. It allows readers to evaluate how characters respond to conflict, make choices under pressure, and bear the consequences of their actions. In modern literature, moral analysis does not aim to impose rigid dogma, but rather to examine the psychological and relational dynamics of ethical choice.

The Concept of Moral Dilemma

According to Perry (2014), moral dilemmas are characterized by four main elements:

- **Conflict of Ethical Duties:** Two or more valid duties cannot be simultaneously satisfied.
- **No Clear or Correct Answer:** Options are either over-determined (multiple good choices) or under-determined (all choices involve ethical loss).
- **Not Simply Temptations or Failures:** The crisis stems from conflicting values within the moral system, not personal weakness or malicious intent.
- **Emotional and Psychological Tension:** The decision-making process generates guilt, fear, and anxiety.

Murdoch (2012) further argues that resolving moral dilemmas is not merely an exercise in abstract logic. Instead, it requires clear vision, unselfish attention, and moral imagination to recognize the humanity of others despite personal bias or social pressure.

Indicators of Moral Dilemma Resolution

To analyze how characters resolve moral dilemmas, this study utilizes the framework outlined by Gross (2010), which identifies six key indicators of moral dilemma resolution:

- **Awareness of Conflict:** The character consciously recognizes that a situation requires a difficult moral choice.
- **Emotional Struggle:** The character experiences guilt, fear, empathy, or confusion, proving that they are morally invested in the outcome.
- **Weighing Options and Consequences:** The character evaluates potential actions and their respective impacts on themselves and others.
- **Choice of Moral Principle Over Self-Interest:** The character acts based on compassion, courage, or justice, even when it involves personal cost or danger.

Taking Responsibility: The character accepts the social, physical, or emotional consequences of their decision without making excuses.

Resolution and Transformation: The character undergoes psychological or ethical growth, achieving a renewed sense of purpose, identity, or empathy.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is well-suited for literary analysis as it focuses on interpreting textual data, dialogue, internal monologues, and narrative actions rather than numerical measurements.

The primary source of data is the short story collection *Tenth of December* (2013) by George Saunders. Three specific stories were selected as the focus of inquiry:

- "Victory Lap"
- "The Semplica Girl Diaries"
- "Tenth of December"

Data collection followed a structured documentation process:
Close reading of the primary texts to identify core ethical conflicts.

- Textual highlighting and extraction of relevant dialogues, internal monologues, and narrative descriptions.
- Categorization of textual evidence according to Gross's (2010) six indicators of moral dilemma resolution.
- Critical interpretation and synthesis within the context of Saunders's broader thematic goals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The detailed analysis reveals that across all three selected short stories, the main characters successfully overcome their moral dilemmas by progressing through Gross's (2010) six resolution indicators.

Stage 1: Awareness of the Conflict

A character cannot resolve a moral dilemma without first becoming aware that a conflict exists. In Saunders's short stories, this awareness often occurs suddenly through an unexpected external shock or gradually through quiet observation.

Kyle in "Victory Lap"

In "Victory Lap," Kyle Boot is a sheltered teenager raised under a strict set of parental "directives" designed to keep him safe from the outside world. His awareness of moral conflict occurs when he looks out his window and sees a strange man—Strang, disguised as a meter reader—grabbing his neighbor, Alison, by the wrist.

"Actually, he had her by the wrist. And was like tugging. That was weird. Wasn't it? Something had never been weird around here before." (Saunders, 2013, p. 10)

Kyle realizes that his situation is no longer routine. He recognizes that staying inside preserves his safety and obeys his parents' commands, but leaves Alison in immediate danger. This realization marks the birth of his ethical crisis.

The Father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries"

In "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the main character is a middle-class father struggling with financial debt and social status. He installs "Semplica Girls" (SGs)—impoverished women from foreign countries who serve as live lawn ornaments held by a microline wire—to give his daughter Lilly a memorable birthday party. His awareness of conflict grows as he observes the girls and listens to his younger daughter, Eva, question the practice:

"SGS have lived very different lives from us. Their lives brutal, harsh, unpromising. What looks scary/unpleasant to us may not be SO scary/unpleasant to them..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 100)

His attempts to rationalize the system reveal his growing awareness that his family's domestic prestige relies directly on human exploitation.

Don Eber in "Tenth of December"

In "Tenth of December," Don Eber is a terminally ill man who walks into the freezing woods intending to freeze to death so he will not become a burden to his loving family. His plan is interrupted when he notices a young boy, Robin, falling through the ice on a nearby pond:

"He was on his way down before he knew he'd started. Kid in the pond, kid in the pond, ran repetitively through his head..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 164)

Don's awareness shifts instantly from his private desire for self-erasure to the urgent need of another human being. He realizes that continuing his suicide attempt will result in the child's death.

Stage 2: Emotional Struggle

Moral dilemmas produce intense emotional turbulence. This emotional struggle demonstrates that the characters are not cold calculators, but caring beings deeply affected by ethical values.

Kyle's Psychological Panic

Kyle experiences intense fear, anxiety, and confusion. He has been taught that violating parental rules brings disaster, yet his conscience revolts against allowing Alison to be harmed:

"Oh God! What was he doing, what was he doing? Jesus, shit, the directives he was violating! Running in the yard (bad for the sod)..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 14)

His mind frantically races between fear of punishment and horror at the crime unfolding before his eyes.

The Father's Guilt and Financial Strain

The father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" feels trapped between his love for his family and his discomfort with societal cruelty. When the SGs are freed by his daughter Eva, he experiences sheer panic over the impending financial ruin and legal penalties, mixed with an underlying guilt:

"Can future reader imagine how agonizing it was to plod through normal boring day when all I wanted to do was rush home..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 113)

His journal entries reflect a mind racked by anxiety, status anxiety, and moral embarrassment.

Don's Physical and Existential Despair

Don Eber faces severe physical freezing alongside emotional conflict. He feels exhausted by cancer and longs for peace, yet he cannot shake off his natural empathy for the drowning boy:

"The shivering was insane. Like a tremor... This was scary. This was scary now. Every step was a victory." (Saunders, 2013, p. 162)

Don's emotional struggle pits his desire to escape physical suffering against his deep-seated instinct to protect a child.

Stage 3: Weighing Options and Consequences

Before taking decisive action, characters engage in internal deliberation, weighing their choices against potential outcomes.

Kyle's Calculation of Risk

Kyle evaluates the choices available to him. Staying inside ensures his safety and maintains his identity as an obedient son. However, he realizes that inaction carries a permanent moral cost:

"Forever he'd be the guy who'd done nothing... Leave, leave, leave, he thought, so I can go inside, forget this ever—" (Saunders, 2013, p. 14)

He weighs a lifetime of regret and cowardice against the immediate, terrifying risk of physical confrontation.

The Father's Rationalization vs. Integrity

The father reflects on his choices after the SGs disappear. He evaluates whether to hunt them down to save his money or let the situation fade away:

"My guess, my hope: cops have many similar cases, we are small fish, our case = low priority, all this will soon fade away. Wrong. Wrong again." (Saunders, 2013, p. 113)

He weighs the practical need to protect his family's home against the moral reality that recapturing the escaped women would enforce their continued bondage.

Don's Re-evaluation of Dignity

Don Eber weighs two definitions of dignity. Initially, he believed dying quietly in the cold was a dignified choice that spared his family pain. However, as he watches Robin struggle, he re-evaluates what true dignity means:

"Suddenly he was not purely the dying guy who woke nights in the med bed thinking, Make this not true make this not true..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 164)

Don realizes that dying while letting a child drown is not dignified, but selfish. Fulfilling his obligation to Robin becomes more important than his own escape from illness.

Stage 4: Choice of Moral Principle Over Self-Interest

The defining moment of moral resolution occurs when a character actively chooses ethical principle over self-preservation, safety, or convenience.

Kyle's Courageous Intervention

In "Victory Lap," Kyle breaks through his lifelong fear of disobeying rules. He picks up an ornamental geode stone, runs across the lawn, and strikes Strang to save Alison:

"He burst out of the creek, the guy still not turning, and let the geode fly into his head... Yes! Score! It was fun! Fun dominating a grown-up!" (Saunders, 2013, p. 15)

Kyle places his own life and well-being at risk to protect an innocent person. He chooses moral duty over personal safety.

The Father's Quiet Shift

While the father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" does not become a heroic activist, he makes a critical decision when the SGs vanish. Despite immense pressure to repair his reputation and recover his financial investment, he refuses to replace the SGs or hunt them down with hostility:

"Where are SGs now? In good place? Is it good when illegal fugitives in strange land have no money..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 109)

His choice reflects a subtle prioritization of human empathy over his previous obsession with material competition.

Don's Selfless Rescue

In "Tenth of December," Don Eber completely abandons his suicide attempt. He crawls through the freezing snow, pulls Robin out of the freezing water, and uses his own body to keep the boy warm:

"He snagged the coat off the bench. It was rescue. A real rescue, at last, sort of." (Saunders, 2013, p. 155)

Don chooses to extend his life and endure further physical suffering for the sake of saving a child.

Stage 5: Taking Responsibility

Resolving a moral dilemma requires characters to accept the consequences of their actions without fleeing or making excuses.

Kyle Stands His Ground

After knocking the attacker down, Kyle does not run away to hide behind his parents. He stands over the fallen abductor, taking full accountability for his violent intervention:

"Who's bossing who now? Gash-ass, jizz-lips, turd-munch... What else must he do? To ensure that Animal did no further harm?" (Saunders, 2013, p. 15)

Kyle accepts the scary reality of what he has done and remains present until safety is assured.

The Father Accepts Financial Ruin

The father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" faces harsh financial consequences, including threat of lawsuits and debt. Rather than blaming his daughter Eva or abandoning his family, he accepts the harsh outcome:

"Look, let's calm down, no need to get all- Eva's lower lip out in pre-crying way. Think: oh great, nice parenting..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 108)

He absorbs the financial loss and family tension, recognizing his own responsibility for engaging with an unethical system in the first place.

Don Embraces His Vulnerability

Don Eber accepts the physical suffering that comes with surviving. When help arrives, he allows himself to be taken to the hospital, accepting the vulnerability and loss of control he had previously tried to avoid:

"Wrapped fetally around the tree Eber traced the scar on his head... Reaching around the tree with both hands... he pulled himself up..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 163)

Don accepts the messy, painful reality of living with illness rather than seeking a quick escape through death.

Stage 6: Resolution and Transformation

The final stage of moral resolution results in lasting psychological and ethical transformation. The characters emerge from their dilemmas as wiser, more compassionate individuals.

Kyle's Liberation from Passive Fear

Kyle is no longer the timid, rule-bound boy who blindly follows directives. By acting courageously, he shatters his passive self-image and discovers his capacity to stand up for what is right:

"He'd never felt so strong/angry/wild. Who's the man? Who's your daddy?" (Saunders, 2013, p. 15)

His experience unlocks true moral autonomy. He is no longer defined by his fear of authority, but by his demonstrated ability to protect others.

The Father's Ethical Awakening

Although constrained by financial realities, the father undergoes a significant shift in perspective. He moves away from uncritical social comparison and begins to view human beings through a lens of empathy rather than utility:

"Dad loved in quiet, steady way... Only found out years later, when Dad, at end of life, told me all." (Saunders, 2013, p. 100)

His diary entries become more reflective, demonstrating a deeper awareness of the moral flaws inherent in consumer culture.

Don's Reconnection to Human Life

Don Eber's transformation is existential. Through the act of saving Robin, he realizes that human life derives its meaning from connection, care, and mutual responsibility rather than physical perfection:

"Robin himself was not the fastest wicket in would soon triumphantly congeal into linebackerish solidity... He doesn't have much time, Suzanne said..." (Saunders, 2013, p. 160)

Don re-enters his family life with renewed purpose. He realizes that allowing his loved ones to care for him during his illness is an act of love, not a burden.

Summary of Resolution Indicators Across Stories

The following table summarizes how each main character fulfills the six indicators of moral dilemma resolution:

Resolution Indicator	Kyle ("Victory Lap")	The Father ("The Semplica Girl Diaries")	Don Eber ("Tenth of December")
1. Awareness of Conflict	Sees Alison pulled by her wrist; realizes staying silent enables harm.	Realizes SGs are exploited human beings, not just lawn decor.	Realizes continuing his suicide attempt will cause Robin to freeze.
2. Emotional Struggle	Panic over breaking parental rules versus fear for Alison's life.	Guilt over human exploitation versus pressure to provide social status.	Despair over terminal cancer versus empathetic concern for a drowning child.
3. Weighing Options	Weighs personal safety against a lifetime of moral regret.	Weighs economic security against the moral evil of recapturing SGs.	Weighs immediate escape from pain against saving another person.
4. Moral Choice	Attacks the abductor to protect Alison.	Refuses to hunt down or replace the escaped SGs.	Abandons suicide attempt to rescue Robin from the icy pond.
5. Taking Responsibility	Stays at the scene to ensure the threat is eliminated.	Absorbs financial losses and debt without blaming his family.	Endures severe freezing cold and agrees to receive medical care.
6. Transformation	Gains moral independence and breaks free from blind obedience.	Re-evaluates consumerist values and develops moral empathy.	Re-discovers meaning in life through mutual human connection.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the main characters in George Saunders's short stories navigate and overcome genuine moral dilemmas through a structured process of ethical growth. By analyzing Kyle in "Victory Lap," the father in "The Semplica Girl Diaries," and Don Eber in "Tenth of December," this study confirms that moral dilemmas are resolved not through abstract logic, but through personal sacrifice, emotional engagement, and compassionate action.

The resolution process follows Gross's (2010) framework across six key stages:

1. **Awareness** breaks through social conditioning or private despair.
2. **Emotional struggle** reveals deep moral sensitivity.
3. **Deliberation** weighs personal safety against ethical duty.
4. **Decisive choice** prioritizes empathy and courage over self-interest.
5. **Responsibility** accepts the real-world costs of ethical action.
6. **Transformation** restores human dignity, purpose, and autonomy.

George Saunders presents a nuanced view of modern morality. He shows that while societal pressures, economic systems, and personal fear often push individuals toward passivity, human beings possess an innate capacity for ethical awakening. True moral maturity emerges when individuals choose to see others clearly, accept vulnerability, and act with compassion even in a flawed world.

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