



The Metaphorical Conceptualisation of Emotions as Weights and the Identification of a Sinthome in George Saunders' "Sticks"

Dr. Mehdi Morchid

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

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Abstract— This article offers a dual-perspective reading of George Saunders' short story "Sticks" (1995/2018) by combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) with Lacanian psychoanalysis. The study identifies a dominant metaphorical pattern whereby emotions are conceptualised as physical weights that must be externalised. The father's ritualistic behaviour of decorating a metallic pole in the yard frame joy, guilt, grief and love as tangible burdens offloaded through acts of dragging, suspending and fastening. Through Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome, the father's idiosyncratic relationship to the pole is interpreted not as a symptomatic expression of repressed desire, but as a sinthomatic practice, a singular knotting of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real that sustains his psychic survival. In this light, "Sticks" emerges as a focused depiction of a sinthome based on the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights.



Keywords— Literary criticism, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Psychoanalytic Analysis. Short Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

George Saunders' short story "Sticks" (1995/2018) compresses into two short paragraphs a complex portrait of a father who obsessively decorates a metallic pole in the family's yard. Narrated from the perspective of the son, the story focuses on the father's idiosyncratic behaviour, described as his "only concession to glee" (Saunders, 1995/2018, p. 29). The scholarship on George Saunders predominantly focuses on his representation of ethics and political philosophy (Coleman & Ellerhoff 2017), his deployment of **satire** to expose social hypocrisy (Neeper, 2016) and the minimalist yet impactful quality of his prose (Millen, 2018). Although Saunders' fiction attracts substantial academic attention, there remains a **dearth of studies devoted exclusively to "Sticks."** Mathew and Pandya's (2020) article, "Animate and Inanimate Love: Deciphering Carpe Diem in George Saunders' Sticks," is amongst the very few to focus on this text directly. Their study is **original** in combining Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love with Victor Turner's concept of

liminality to argue that the father's attachment to the pole constitutes "empty love" and a liminal existence, culminating in a *carpe diem* reading. Yet, this interpretation risks oversimplifying the text by reducing its complex narrative to a singular, didactic *carpe diem* message, especially that Saunders is emblematic of resisting facile moralising. Furthermore, limiting the story to as simple a message as "living in the moment" is atypical of the depth that literary analysis proffers. Such a reading undermines Saunders' deliberate ambiguity and stylistic minimalism. Additionally, although the invocation of Sternberg's love triangle is interesting, the article does not convincingly demonstrate how the father's connection to the pole fits within Sternberg's paradigm.

After reviewing the literature surrounding the work of Saunders, it appears that engagement with his metaphors and the psychoanalytic dimensions of his characters remain underexplored. This paper pursues two interconnected lines of inquiry. First, it examines the conceptual metaphors that structure the father's actions,

particularly the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights. Second, it situates the father's peculiar relation to the decorated pole within Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic distinction between the symptom and the sinthome (Lacan, 1975/2016). The central question is whether the father's behaviour is best understood as a symptomatic expression of repressed desire or as a sinthomatic practice sustaining his psychic coherence.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) framework (Charteris-Black, 2004) to analyse dominant conceptual metaphors in "Sticks." Charteris-Black's CMA provides a systematic and structured framework for a focused examination of metaphors. It integrates cognitive linguistics, especially Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, with discourse analysis to reveal how metaphor shapes meaning in context (Morchid, 2025). This paper employs CMA to identify all instances where emotions are metaphorised as physical weights, to reconstruct the cross-domain mappings between source domains and target domains and to interpret the conceptual entailment from the mappings.

The text was coded manually first by extracting all concordance lines related to the conceptualisation of emotions as weights. Then, each instance was subjected to analysis. The Pragglejaz Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (The Pragglejaz Group, 2007) was applied to determine whether each word within the lexical domain of physical weights was used metaphorically or literally. The MIP helped minimise subjectivity in determining metaphoricity. First, the text was read for overall understanding. Then, every lexical unit related to the semantic field of weight was extracted. Each unit was analysed by comparing its contextual meaning with its most basic meaning, especially one that involved concrete bodily or spatial movement. If the two meanings were sufficiently similar, the unit registered as non-metaphorical. If they differed, it registered as metaphorical. These steps made determining metaphoricity less reliant on subjectivity and imparted on the process rigour and replicability.

To interpret the psychoanalytic dimension of the father's behaviour in "Sticks," Lacan's theory (Lacan, 1975/2016) was applied with emphasis on his distinction between symptom and sinthome as developed in *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*. Applying Lacan's psychoanalysis to fiction follows Žižek's (1991) analysis of literary and cultural artefacts through a Lacanian framework. This approach moves beyond merely searching for hidden meaning to tracing how texts reflect the structures of human

subjectivity. Žižek's ideas were particularly important to this study, especially through his emphasis on how literary texts represent the impossibility of fully articulating the Lacanian Real (Žižek, 1991). Further secondary scholarship on Lacan was also pertinent to this study. For example, Fink (2017) and Homer (2004) were drawn upon to clarify how the father's behaviour in "Sticks" may be read analogously to Lacan's interpretation of James Joyce's writing as a sinthome.

2.1 Methodological Justification: combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Psychoanalysis

This study employs a hybrid analytic framework that integrates **CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)** with **psychoanalytic interpretation** (Lacan, 1975/2016) to capture a comprehensive account of the symbolic dimensions of George Saunders' "Sticks." The rationale for combining these approaches is threefold. First, **CMT offers a systematic method for** examining how emotions are metaphorically conceptualised in the text, enabling analysis of the underlying conceptual structures that shape meaning beyond the textual surface. Second, **psychoanalysis complements these findings by** addressing the affective and unconscious forces underpinning the father's idiosyncratic behaviour in "Sticks." While CMT focuses on how meaning is cognitively structured through language, psychoanalysis foregrounds the drives and desires that escape typical articulation. Third, the combination of the two approaches is justified because of their theoretical compatibility. Both presuppose that surface-level tokens mediate deeper structures of meaning that are accessible only through conceptual analysis. This methodological hybridity aligns with an established tradition of interdisciplinary literary studies that combine linguistics and psychoanalysis to access multiple layers of meaning (Žižek, 1991). By integrating the two approaches, the study demonstrates how Saunders' deceptively simple narrative encodes a complex mode of expressing emotions and configures it as a Lacanian sinthome.

III. THE METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF EMOTIONS AS WEIGHTS

A dominant conceptual metaphor in "Sticks" is **EMOTIONS ARE WEIGHTS**. The father does not verbalise his feelings. Instead, he externalises them through physical acts of dragging, draping, hanging, taping and fastening objects to the pole in his yard. Each action represents emotion as a tangible burden that must be offloaded, as it can be observed in the following concordance lines.

JOY IS A BURDEN.

He dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix (Saunders, 2018, p. 29).

The celebration of Christmas is an expression of joy. However, the father's sole manifestation of the emotion of joy is described as "dragging the Santa suit and draping it over a kind of crucifix." Joy is framed as a heavy weight that requires efforts to carry and transport. The destination towards which the costume is taken, the crucifix, emphasises the peculiarity of the father's behaviour. Christmas, which is a time of joy, is expressed by dragging a suit to a crucifix, a symbol of suffering.

PAST EXPERIENCES ARE ANCHORS.

Odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theatre tickets, old sweatshirts (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Past experiences become anchors that stabilise the pole. Referring to objects from the father's past as talismans conceptualises them as having supernatural protective powers. Positioning them around the base becomes symbolically more meaningful. They are anchors that protect the father's psyche from drifting into meaninglessness.

GUILT IS SUSPENDED WEIGHT.

He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Guilt is framed as a burden that must be displayed rather than concealed. It is suspended, and under this conceptualisation, suspension represents an ongoing presence. Guilt is thereby materialised as a tangible object, neither deposited nor buried, but held in suspension. The image communicates that the father's guilt lingers unresolved.

GRIEF IS A MONUMENT.

He dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

The father's grief over the loss of his wife is expressed by monumentalising it. He dresses the pole as death, embodying grief as a statue and supplementing this embodiment by photos of the deceased, thus transforming memory into visible objects.

GUILT IS A BURDEN + CONFESSION IS EXPOSURE AND CONNECTION.

He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all

written in a frantic hand on index cards. (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

Confession is conceptualised as a performative act in which guilt is externalised through material tokens, letters suspended on strings that link a central structure to its extensions. The act of hanging these notes enacts the offloading of a moral burden. Additionally, his frantic handwriting reveals how guilt destabilises the father's body and mind, making the confession compulsive rather than measured.

LOVE AND THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS ARE PAINTINGS.

He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? (Saunders, 2018, p. 30)

The father materialises his emotions by inscribing notes on paper. Yet, only at the end of the story does he "paint a sign" rather than write a note. Painting requires greater effort and departs from the automatisms of muscle memory, rendering it more deliberate. By painting "LOVE" and "FORGIVE?" in uppercase, unlike the lowercase writing of earlier emotions, these expressions are framed as more significant than those previously conveyed. Moreover, painting rather than merely writing functions as a narrative signal. The bold uppercase letters evoke an epitaph and thus foreshadow both the conclusion of the story and the father's imminent death. The painted words mark the culmination of his externalisation of emotions as burdens

Through these metaphors, emotions are consistently treated as objects too heavy to carry internally and thus must be externalised. The pole becomes a scaffold of emotions, a structure for unloading burdens.

There are further expansions that can be drawn from the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weight. For example, the story's brevity, extending over only two paragraphs, reflects the father's reduction of complex emotions to physical objects. The analysis of the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights prefigures the examination of the father's idiosyncratic behaviour through Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome (Lacan, (1916/2010).

IV. SYMPTOM AND SINTHOMES

To interpret the father's reliance on the pole, Lacan's distinction between symptom and sinthome proves illuminating. Freud (1916/2010) defined the symptom as compromise, an unconscious urge expressed indirectly because its direct articulation would violate social or moral norms. Lacan extends this by linking the symptom to jouissance, a paradoxical mix of pleasure and pain (Lacan,

1975/2016). Symptoms in this sense are coded messages requiring interpretation.

However, the father's decorated pole resists reading as a symptom. It is not a veiled message awaiting decipherment but an idiosyncratic practice enabling psychic survival. Lacan's concept of the sinthome is more appropriate. For Lacan, the sinthome is not a puzzle to analyse away, but a stabilising knot that binds together the three registers of subjectivity, "the imaginary, the symbolic and the real" (Lacan, 1975/2016, p.8). The imaginary designates the self-image to which one aspires. The symbolic refers to the set of rules that an individual has no choice but to abide by, and the real is the inexpressible that can only be known through its effect. In the story, The imaginary is reflected in the father's decoration of the pole, where each arrangement corresponds to his emotional state and constitutes his attempt at constructing a self-image. The symbolic, the order of language, law and relational norms, is not fully accessible to the father. In lieu of integrating into these shared structures of meaning, he invents a singular practice of inscription and decoration, weaving the symbolic, the imaginary and the real into an idiosyncratic yet stabilising equilibrium. The real constitutes the locus of the father's unfathomable emotions which overwhelm the symbolic. Hence, the father's singular behaviour is a sinthome. It is the knotting that stabilises his psyche and allows him to remain functional and keep his grip on reality. The metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights corresponds with the interpretation of the father's peculiar behaviour as a sinthome whereby externalising weights is a survival mechanism.

There is a logical continuity between the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions as weights and the interpretation of the father's ritualistic attachment to the pole as a sinthome. At work is an underlying conceptual metaphor that frames the psyche in corporeal terms. Emotions accumulate like physical burdens, entailing that the subject can bear only so much before reaching collapse. Within this framework, the father's peculiar behaviour emerges as a sinthome, and the pole functions as the site on which excess weight is discharged, thereby preventing psychic disintegration.

V. JOYCE'S EXPERIMENTAL WRITING AND THE FATHER'S OBSESSIVE HANDLING OF THE POLE IN "STICKS"

Lacan's analysis of James Joyce offers a useful parallel. In the absence of a paternal stabiliser, Joyce developed a unique writing style as a sinthome, a creative necessity rather than a pathology (Lacan, 1975/2016). Similarly, the father in "Sticks" relates to the pole

compulsively yet productively. His connection to it constitutes a private knotting of the three registers, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. Lacan identifies Joyce's idiosyncratic writing as a sinthome and describes it as "utterly essential to Joyce's ego" (Lacan 1975/2016, p. 127). Just as Joyce's writing sustained his subjectivity (Lacan, 1975/2016), the father's compulsive decoration of the pole sustains his psychic survival. While for an external observer the pole remains meaningless, for the father it is indispensable. Its disposal by the new owners after the father's death underscores the radical singularity of the sinthome. Within this perspective, Saunders's short story resists reduction to a moral parable that merely imparts a lesson. Rather, it emerges as a meticulously woven narrative that illuminates the function of ritualistic idiosyncrasies as sinthomatic knots binding together the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (Žižek, 1991).

VI. CONCLUSION

A critical metaphor analysis of "Sticks" (1995/2018) shows that the story conceptualises emotions as weights. The father expresses his feelings by offloading them onto a pole, and later onto subsidiary poles. From a Lacanian perspective, the father's behaviour is not merely symptomatic but exemplifies what Lacan calls a sinthome, a creative knotting of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real that enables the father to sustain existence. Interpreting Saunders' short story through Lacan's reading of Joyce underscores the importance of idiosyncratic practices in preserving sanity, functionality and subjectivity. The father's pole, like Joyce's writing, demonstrates that what may appear as eccentric or pathological could, in fact, be the very condition of psychic survival.

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