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MODERNISM, SATIRE, AND THE NOVEL

In this groundbreaking study, Jonathan Greenberg locates a satiric sensibility at the heart of the modern. By promoting an antisentimental education, modernism denied the authority of emotion to guarantee moral and literary value. Instead, it fostered sophisticated, detached, and apparently cruel attitudes toward pain and suffering. This sensibility challenged the novel's humanistic tradition, set ethics and aesthetics into conflict, and fundamentally altered the ways that we know and feel.

Through lively and original readings of works by Evelyn Waugh, Stella Gibbons, Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, and others, this book analyzes a body of literature – late modernist satire – that can appear by turns aloof, sadistic, hilarious, ironic, and poignant, but which continually questions inherited modes of feeling. By recognizing the centrality of satire to modernist aesthetics, Greenberg offers not only a new chapter in the history of satire but a persuasive new idea of what made modernism modern.

JONATHAN GREENBERG is Associate Professor of English at Montclair State University. He has published essays on numerous twentieth-century writers including Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Evelyn Waugh, Nathanael West, and Ian McEwan. A comedic writer himself, he has also won an Emmy Award for his writing for children's television.

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One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.

Oscar Wilde

I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is "bitter," I must laugh at the laugh.

Nathanael West

"If I wasn't real," Alice said – half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous – "I shouldn't be able to cry."

"I hope you don't think those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

Lewis Carroll

Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me.

Samuel Beckett

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Illustration

Figure 1. “Sad Movie” by Charles Addams,
New Yorker (1946)

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Preface

THE UNCLE FESTER PRINCIPLE

A 1946 Charles Addams cartoon, “Sad Movie” (see Fig. 1), shows a movie theater full of people watching a film. We don’t see the screen, but the faces of the audience members – eyes wide, brows furrowed, tears running down cheeks – tell us that they are watching something distressing, maybe tragic. In the second row of the weeping crowd, slightly off-center, sits a familiar Addams ghoul, the character later named Uncle Fester, his face lit up in a grin. As in so many Addams cartoons, no caption is provided. His smile is the only punchline the joke needs.¹

By making a spectacle of the audience, showing not the action onscreen but the reaction in the seats, the cartoon diverts attention from the upsetting events of the film to the comic impropriety of Uncle Fester’s laughter. Addams’s joke hinges on the discord between Fester’s cruel pleasure and the heartfelt tears of the crowd. But although it is the deviant reaction that makes the scene a joke, it would be too simple to call Fester the object or the target of *our* laughter. For we are complicit with him; we feel that he shares our emotional distance from the movie, and hence our aesthetic superiority to those moved to tears by the spectacle on the screen. “The mind is complex and ill-connected, like an audience,”² William Empson wrote; this audience is complex and ill-connected like a mind. Indeed, I suggest, Addams’s audience gives us a picture of the *modernist* mind. Some minds are full of Uncle Festers in the seats of their intrapsychic cinemas, others have only one, but without any we are not fully modern. Call this the Uncle Fester Principle.

The reader’s complicity with Fester derives partially from her knowledge of the fictionality of the cartoon, and of the movie within the cartoon. A real man laughing at real suffering might violate protocols of decorum, if not morality or sanity, but he has more latitude if he is laughing at make-believe suffering. This process of accounting for



Figure 1. “Sad Movie” by Charles Addams, *New Yorker*, March 23, 1946. p. 31.
 © Charles Addams. Reproduced with permission of the Tee and Charles Addams Foundation

fictionality in one’s emotional response to perceived events, what Freud called “reality-testing,”³ is always at work in our understanding of representations, and the fact that both movie and drawing fail the reality test makes it easier for us to understand the moviegoer’s reaction as funny rather than cruel or lunatic.

But fictionality hardly tells the whole story. For Uncle Fester, judging by his looks, may very well *be* cruel or lunatic; that suspicion is in fact part of his charm. And under the right conditions anyone might laugh at real horrors. Instead of fictionality, the comedy of the cartoon hinges on the question of sensibility. The urbane *New Yorker* reader might well prefer to think of herself as sharing a dark sense of humor with Addams’s moviegoer – free to indulge her cruelty, or at least to laugh at the tear-jerker with its tired conventions. Henri Bergson famously claimed that laughter requires

a “momentary anaesthesia of the heart,” an absence of sympathy with the object of the laughter, and Fester certainly exhibits this anaesthesia.⁴ Yet such an insight still prompts the question why some viewers should experience this anaesthesia and not others. There is a social dimension at work: the cartoon, though hardly high culture, belongs to a higher stratum of culture than the movie, if only because it appeals to an audience that is more educated, sophisticated, worldly. Indeed, the best term for the quality of this sensibility might be *modern*. For our ideas both of modernity and of modernism itself are tied up with the ways in which we respond to various works of art and other representations. What saddens us, frightens us, outrages us, amuses us – these are indices of our modernity.

This book is guided by a group of questions concerning such an idea of modernity. How do different kinds of fictional representations of suffering make us feel? What aesthetic and cultural functions do such representations perform? Can ethical and aesthetic responses to a representation be separated, and what happens if they conflict with each other? And to what extent is our capacity to think of ourselves as modern, as fully at home in modernity, contingent on an aesthetic training, an antisentimental education?

My discussion of what I call late modern satire proceeds along both conceptual and historical axes. I attempt to understand the dynamics and the significance of ambivalent affective responses, on the part of both authors and characters, to suffering – responses which often include various combinations of laughter, fear, and pity. At the same time, I want to show how the works in question not only express but also *test* their own sensibility, their own modernity – at times their own relation to (various ideas of) modernism. Thus modernism as I understand it entails not only new understandings of key philosophical concepts (temporality, subjectivity, epistemology), nor merely a new repertoire of devices and techniques for representing such new understandings (free verse, stream of consciousness, spatial form), nor even a new cluster of technological developments (automobile, cinema, factory) which, with their attendant socioeconomic ramifications, might be seen as causes of those “superstructural” changes in the first place. Whether you take your version from Wilde or Shaw, Woolf or Lawrence, Fitzgerald or Hemingway, modernism – or, more loosely, being modern – involves codes of sophistication, codes which imply how we might respond emotionally both to the fact of human suffering and to the aesthetic forms that representations of such suffering must assume.

As a result of my effort to look at the intersection of a generic or modal term (satire) with a period term (modernism), my opening two chapters

will serve as a kind of double introduction to the themes of the later ones. [Chapter 1](#), “Satire and its discontents” describes the dynamics of satire, along with related genre terms, the grotesque and the sentimental; despite my conceptual emphasis, I try to address the relevance of these terms specifically for the modernist era of literary history. Satire, I argue, is a contradictory phenomenon in which its purported moralism or conservatism is conjoined with sadistic or anarchic desires, so that satire often in the end describes its own collapse or undoing. Complementary to this analysis of satire is an analysis of the affective excess, often called sentimentality, that modernist satire aims to avoid, denounce, or expose; and while the accusation of sentimentality is such that every expression of emotion risks incurring it, the threat of that accusation nonetheless exerts enormous pressure on modernist literature.

[Chapter 2](#), “Modernism’s story of feeling,” further historicizes the emergence of modernist satire. This chapter provides a narrative of the modernist engagement with affect with attention to key figures from the earlier, more canonical decades of the modernist era who represent different stances regarding feeling. It culminates in a discussion of the 1930s (an era for which I use the term “late modernism” in order to mark its belated relation to modernism as traditionally described), the decade in which the bulk of the novels I study were written and published. I have selected these novels not from any single national tradition, but from the literary culture that cut across Great Britain, the United States, and Ireland, as I aim to provide a sampling of late modernist work that is wide-ranging yet coherent. Some of the novels that I discuss are immediately recognizable as satires, while others are valuable to this study because of their place on the outskirts of that generic territory.

In-depth readings of those novels begin in [Chapter 3](#), which looks at the single figure most closely identified with English satire in the early-to-middle twentieth century, Evelyn Waugh. Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* (1930) proves particularly fruitful for understanding the confluence of modernism and satire because it explores tensions identified in the introductory chapters between humanist and antihumanist strains of modernism, and between reformative and anarchic impulses of satire. Challenging traditional readings of the novel as a targeted attack on the young, rich, and idle, I read it as an elaborate exposure of the processes by which satire both expresses and spawns moral outrage. In [Chapter 4](#) I turn to Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust* (1934), in which the author’s treatment of death attacks Victorian sentimentality but also questions the satiric attitudes toward suffering that the novel presents as modern. This impasse explains the puzzling shift of the novel’s ending: as this

drawing-room comedy flees the drawing room for the jungle, it modulates into the mode Freud called the uncanny – that side of the grotesque characterized by fantasy, anxiety, and repetition compulsion.

In [Chapter 5](#) I investigate the relationship among satire, sentimentality, and gender in the fiction of the 1930s through a reading of Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Gibbons's novel is useful here because it upends the traditional association of satire with masculinity and sentimentality with femininity. Critiquing the emotional excesses of both earlier high modernism and (putatively) female sentimentalism, it offers instead as an emotional protocol what Georg Simmel called a blasé attitude, a mode of social relation that turns out to be surprisingly consistent with a feminist, reformist politics.

[Chapters 6](#) and [7](#) treat American writers of the grotesque, Nathanael West and Djuna Barnes. West's fiction, especially *The Day of the Locust* (1939), explores a persistent conflict between using suffering as a source of comic pleasure and a discomfort with such "worldliness and wit." Caught between the sentimental claims of a suffering public and an antisentimental impulse to transform such claims into pleasurable rhetoric, West's novels end up stalemated. His own best critic, West ultimately reveals his uncanny representation of the self as a fear of the consequences of satire. [Chapter 7](#) then examines Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), in which what I call "anti-procreative" thematics – sterility, impotence, abortion, infanticide – imply a frustration of inheritance. For Barnes, the modern *is* the satiric in its rejection of generational continuity. But if the novel is satiric in its attitude toward tradition, it also inscribes the uncanny as a space of authenticity marking satire's limit, and so demonstrates the hidden proximity of the two modes.

In [Chapter 8](#), finally, Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) pushes the chronological framework of the study past the thirties and past the Second World War – and, moreover, expands it to include an Irish writer and an (initially) Francophone text. Beckett examines the nature of fascistic authority in a world that (at least vaguely) resembles wartime Europe, and his satire of modern authoritarianism and compulsion turns out also to be yet another satire of satire's own stringency, one in which the pressures of modern life are registered in the affective modulations both of the characters and of the act of reading.

Taken together, these readings provide a survey of late modernist satire in which recurrent themes emerge but peculiarities of individual authors and texts are, I hope, appreciated. By no means do they exhaust the catalogue of late modern satirists. Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett,

Dawn Powell, Flannery O'Connor, and Flann O'Brien could all merit chapters in a longer study – yet they mark the emergence of a sensibility that is still very much at work in our culture at large, in which ironic detachment and sentimental excess seem always to be in contest. For as late modernist authors struggled to find forms in which to portray the ways that people experience, manage, and represent suffering, they provided new structures and models for feeling and expression. They recognized implicitly that if we are to praise literature for an ennobling moral quality of extending sympathy, then we must also recognize its power to play to our cruelty and stimulate our sadism.

It is therefore not by lauding writers for emotional magnanimity or chiding them for political insensitivity that we recognize the force of their achievements. Lionel Trilling, writing soon after the historical moment I examine in this book, complained that although “We have the books that praise us for taking progressive attitudes” we lack those “that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses.”⁵ Trilling, whose own examination of our moral engagement with literature will provide an important critical touchstone for me, was expressing a skepticism about claims for the virtues of literature that, to my mind, is as necessary in today’s critical climate as in his own. Late modernist satire, for all the pleasure it might give, raises still too frequently unasked questions about what might lie behind our good impulses.

In its long, slow growth from dissertation proposal to book, this study has benefitted from the generous attention of friends, teachers, and colleagues. Maria DiBattista has provided guidance and insight in every stage of this book’s writing, and she has encouraged me throughout to hold fast to my convictions. Michael Wood has read my work with patience and acuity, and helped me to find the interesting ideas hiding behind my sometimes obvious ones. Doug Mao and Justus Nieland have read multiple chapters of this work and, sharing their intelligence and expertise, pointed me toward new directions for my argument. Discussion with graduate school classmates and teachers also informed this book; Sally Bachner, Michael Goldman, Martin Harries, Jonathan Lamb, Gage McWeeney, Lee Mitchell, Dan Novak, and Jeff Nunokawa deserve special thanks. My colleagues at Montclair State University have provided a congenial atmosphere for my professional life, and many have helped in different ways. Lee Behlman, Emily Isaacs, Lucy McDiarmid, and Art Simon generously read chapters and offered valued advice; Brian Cliff,

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Preface

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Naomi Liebler, Mary Papazian, and Tanya Pollard helped me to navigate the publishing world; my students, especially Norman DeFillipo, Anne DeMarzio, Terrence Ferguson, Katie Keeran, Peggy LeRoy, Sandy Reyes, Andrew Smethurst, and Curtis Zimmerman, prompted me to think anew about many of the texts I discuss. Chris Gaillard, Robert Caserio, and Michael Coyle also deserve thanks for their help at various stages. At Cambridge University Press, Ray Ryan, Gillian Dadd, Jo Breeze, and their staff have provided editorial guidance, and the comments of my two readers, Jesse Matz and Ed Comentale, helped to broaden and deepen the argument of the book.

Several institutions also supported the writing of this book. Princeton University granted me a Presidential Fellowship and a year of study at the University Center for Human Values; Montclair State provided a Global Education Grant, a Separately Budgeted Research Grant, and a year's sabbatical. The Interlibrary Loan staff at Montclair State's Sprague Library has obtained for me numerous books essential to my research. [Chapter 4](#) appeared in somewhat different form in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*; it is reprinted by permission of the publisher, Duke University Press. [Chapter 6](#) appeared in *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Johns Hopkins University Press. A small portion of the preface appeared in altered form as a book review in *Modernism/Modernity*; it is also reprinted with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press. A few short passages in [Chapters 3](#) and [5](#) are drawn from an article in *Modernist Cultures*, and are reprinted with the permission of that journal.

My sister and brother, Judith Greenberg and David Greenberg, have read portions of this book and informed it with their own scholarly expertise. My children, Hank and Maggie, are younger than this book and still too young to be interested in the details of my argument, but their excitement about its publication gives me hope that some day not too far off they will open this book with scholarly interest, or at least amused curiosity. My wife, Megan Blumenreich, has been a wonderful, patient, sensible, devoted, and intelligent companion throughout the labor of writing this book. She has read and offered advice on all aspects of it; her love, care, and support have sustained me during its composition. Her devoted encouragement and gentle criticism have made the work immeasurably stronger.

My parents, Robert and Maida Greenberg, were the first to show me what intellectual inquiry entailed, and in their own thinking and scholarship I have seen what dedication and rigor can accomplish. The extent of their belief in my work, while bordering on the ludicrous, has been invaluable, and the depth of their interest continues to gratify me. To them I dedicate this book.

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Abbreviations

- CCF* Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932; New York: Penguin, 2006).
- DL* Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, in *Nathanael West: Novels and other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (1939; New York: Library of America, 1997).
- HD* Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1934).
- M* Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, trans. Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles (1951; New York: Grove, 1955).
- N* Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1937).
- VB* Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1930).