

British Modernism and Dark Humor

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The increasing seriousness of things, then—that's the great opportunity of jokes.

—Henry James

Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle...

—Sigmund Freud

In the final chapter of Evelyn Waugh's grimly funny novel *Vile Bodies*, the feckless protagonist, Adam Fenwick-Symes, has finally caught up with the man he has been chasing throughout the entire work, the drunk major who owes him 1,000 pounds. They meet in a scene of utter devastation, on the "biggest battlefield in the history of the world," and though Adam at last receives the money that earlier in the novel would have allowed him to marry his lady love, the pound is now worthless, and the sum is only enough to buy him "a couple of drinks and a newspaper" (314, 317). The two retire to the car of the major (now a general), a Daimler limousine sunk to its axles in mud, and drink a salvaged case of champagne with a prostitute named Chastity as the violence inevitably engulfs them. Ironically titled "Happy Ending," the chapter represents Waugh's apocalyptic vision of the future of Western culture, aptly symbolized by the absurd image of the limousine foundering in the mire of a senseless war. It is at once horrific and hilarious, the only fitting end to a novel which comically bears witness to the turmoil and tragedy of British life in the wake of World War One.

Like Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, the comedic works of many British novelists between the wars are haunted by a sense of anxiety and powerlessness, marked by feelings of loss and uncertainty and shot through with the trauma of violence and the threat of further brutality. However, despite the violent events and unhappy endings, many works from the period insist on being funny, exploring the central themes of Modernism—alienation, uncertainty, instability, mechanization, and fragmentation—

through a grim form of comedy that, according to Virginia Woolf, leaves readers “laughing so hard they feel as grave as corpses” (299). In these pages I suggest a framework for reading what I call Modernist dark humor in relation to the more familiar histories and categories of Modernism, satire, and the twentieth-century comedic social novel. The dark humor of so many social comedies written between the wars offers a valuable way of reexamining the Modernist novel, which is certainly more diverse than traditional definitions of Modernism have allowed. Critical interpretations of Modernism generally exclude most of the social comedies written during the twenties and thirties—works by writers like Waugh, the early Huxley, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Anthony Powell, Michael Arlen, and Ronald Firbank—assessing them as satiric and therefore conservative, reinforcing the very cultural values they set out to critique, and thus too engaged in social correction to qualify as Modernist, with an ideal Joycean god-artist objectively paring his fingernails. However, dealing as they do with the trauma and confusion of post World War One life, these satirists employ a deeply ambivalent humor, and just what is being satirized is never entirely clear, making their humor distinctly darker than is generally presumed. Like conventional satire, the setting of these novels remains the social world of the privileged classes. However, the humor offers none of the optimism of conventional social satire that suggests correction of vice will lead the reintegration of the individual into society. Thus, in the dark humor of Modernist satire, the social content remains, but its social purpose all but disappears.

Dark humor is characterized by the very concerns of Modernism. It is generally defined by ambivalence, confused chronology, plots that seem to go nowhere, and a conflicting, or even unreliable, narrative stance. It presents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous. Like Modernism itself, dark humor defies any system that does not match with personal experience or intuition, whether that system is political, ethical, religious, or even narrative. At the same time it imposes a comedic order on the chaos and oppression represented in the text and refuses to endorse an all-encompassing ideological or philosophical view of the world. The object of the humor makes little difference; it can be the strict hierarchies of English country-house culture, the horrific slaughter of the First World War, the loss of unified identity, or the numbing effects of modern technology. I argue that dark humor is an important characteristic of Modernism, and the satire of these writers is characterized by its dark humor, therefore creating a new form of Modernist social satire. Though Modernist social satire may lack some of the formal experiment of Modernism—or it may not foreground formal

experiment—its humor revels in the nonrational, the unstable, and the fragmented, and it resists easy definition and political usefulness. Works as different as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Vile Bodies* are connected not by narrative experimentation but in the way comedy is used to make sense out of an increasingly senseless world. This way of reading allows for a more inclusive discussion of Modernist literature that can include writers as different as Woolf and Waugh.

The term Modernism itself is imprecise and contested. It generally refers to writings that are self-consciously avant-garde and that attempt to break with literary and aesthetic forms inherited from the nineteenth century. But as Nancy Paxton points out, “English Modernism had, in fact, more than one ‘face’ and the traditions eclipsed by it were also various and multiple” (3). Even the canonical works of Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stein, Woolf, Lawrence, Forster, and Conrad present the scholars of Modernism with a problem of definition. Whether it is in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane’s influential *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature* (a staple in many college courses in Modernism) or in any number of dictionaries of literary terms, the definition of Modernism quickly becomes vague and hard to pin down. Critics often resort to statements such as: “Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense,” or “Modernism becomes the movement which has expressed our modern consciousness, [and] created in its works the nature of modern experience at its fullest” (Bradbury and McFarlane 28). Recent critical reappraisals of the period are often recovery efforts, unearthing the contributions of authors who may have been overlooked based on their race, class, or gender. However, attempts to revise the canon do not fundamentally change the way we look at Modernism and have resulted, more often than not, in merely defining the “minor” writers of the period against the major ones, requiring a view of all writers’ works through the lens of identity politics.¹

Comedic writers historically have been of little use in questions of politics and ideology, though of course many humorous writers throughout the centuries are read this way: Shakespeare, Fielding, Swift, Austen, Dickens, to name only a few. By and large these writers were working within a stable system of values, where ideas about ethical behavior were assumed to be shared, and analyses of their humor were generally used to shed light on their more serious observations about human foibles and failings. Throughout history, ethical norms were probably much less stable than is generally assumed. However, in the twentieth century even the assumption of stability was overturned, and the satire of the century becomes increasingly difficult to use as a corrective. As Patrick O’Neill notes, dark humor has “an emphatic lack of belief in its own efficacy as an agent of moral

education” (75), and the darkly funny social satires between the wars are all suspicious of “causes,” political, religious, and even artistic. And in their focus on the upper-class they suggest that if individuals backed with the power of money and prestige are unable to successfully negotiate the chaotic and threatening forces of change in the twentieth-century, there is little to expect from a reshuffling of the deck, which would create merely a different system, equally incapable of addressing the needs of the individuals functioning within it.

Much of the Socialist-inspired literature of the period, also deeply affected by the brutality of the First World War and interested in exposing injustice, saw itself as moral and didactic, but there is a difference in motive between the work of writers like the early George Orwell, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Patrick Hamilton, or Henry Green and that of Evelyn Waugh, the young Aldous Huxley, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Anthony Powell. Whether considered in terms of a literary history that emphasizes either the “redness” of the decade or its reactionary tendencies, it is especially important to register the dissenting, skeptical, social vision of the writers of dark comedies.² For example, underpinning Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (which is dark, satiric, and at times, funny) are an indictment of injustice and a hope in moral action and social transformation. Flory’s undoing is that he is too engaged and too ambivalent, too thoughtful to accept the arrogant brutality of empire and too weak to reject it. As a result, acutely aware of his moral failings, his only recourse is suicide. In dark-humor satires injustice is mocked but so too are personal despair and the ideas of moral action and social transformation. Characters’ moral qualms and feelings of desperation are generally undercut by the use of non sequitur and incongruity, and suicide as a meaningful moral act is often reduced to an absurd farce, whether or not characters actually succeed in killing themselves. In Aldous Huxley’s *Antic Hay*, the failed painter Lypiatt sits down to write his suicide note, imaging how the others would find his body, and instead spends the rest of the evening composing a blustering treatise on the tortured artist-as-hero, and in Anthony Powell’s *Afternoon Men* the dejected Pringle decides to drown himself in the ocean but changes his mind only to find that his neatly folded clothes have been removed from the beach. In *Vile Bodies*, the aristocratic Simon Balcairn ludicrously dies by putting his head in an oven after learning that he has lost his job as Mr. Chatterbox, the gossip columnist. As implicated as they are in their own societal group, the characters are still thwarted and circumscribed by social hierarchies and the loss of meaning, and the fiction of this world suggests that there is little hope for all individuals to find meaningful roles to perform. Granted, it is somehow easier to laugh at the senseless death of a besotted and idle aristocrat than at the senseless death of an exploited and brutalized coal

miner. But in the dark-comedic universe there is no more meaning attached to one than the other, as both are reduced to parts functioning within a vast mechanism.

Unlike the social satire produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Modernist social satires like *Vile Bodies*, *A House and Its Head*, and *Afternoon Men* disallow easy identification with protagonists and do not ridicule cultural values or societal vice with the hope that they may be corrected. Alternative ideas are never offered, as in, for instance, Swift's "A Modest Proposal" or in Fielding's benevolent humor, and they do not assume the successful integration of the individual into society. Instead, they propose nothing in the form of social change and view all ideological systems—from religion and domestic hierarchies to political power structures—as essentially the same, oppressive to the individuals within them because of the inability of any system to address adequately the complex nature of human existence.

Attention to the complexity of experience makes Modernist satire deeply ambivalent; indeed, it is no longer satirical in the traditional definition of the term. Satire is conventionally defined as having "moral norms that are relatively clear" and "assum[ing] standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (Frye 223). Traditionally, satire has demanded at least an implicit moral standard, without which it was seen as not particularly effective. In much of the literature of the twentieth century, the post-Enlightenment assumptions about the rational, scientific ordering of the self and the world are viewed as ridiculous. As scholars of traditional high Modernism have observed, the grotesque and the absurd become the "moral" standards. One of the implications of this shift of standards is a need to distinguish traditional ideas about satire from ideas about dark humor, a need to expand our repertoire of terms and gain critical tools for more subtle analysis of Modernism, whether serious or comic. Without faith in meaningful moral development, comedy no longer serves a corrective satirical function but instead offers the pleasurable—if only momentary—protection of laughter in the face of injustice and brutality. As Robert Polhemus asserts, comedy evolves and "what people laugh at and why shows the direction of their lives and the course of their world" (5).

In Modernist dark humor, social arrangements have become too fractured to offer the necessary conformity from which social generalizations can be extracted, and Modernist social satires abandon any hope of understanding the world. In novels like *Vile Bodies*, *Afternoon Men*, and *Antic Hay* there is no progress and no relationship between cause and effect, and the actions of the most benevolent characters often result in tragedy and suffering. In the post-Nietzschean, modern world, the *Weltschmerz* of dark humor clearly has a different motivation than does satire. For

example, what are we to make of Ivy Compton-Burnett's satire when at the end of *A House and Its Head* Nance Edgeworth comments on the death her mother and her father's brutality: "We were fond enough of her to want her to have her life, even though it had to be lived with father. It shows what we think of life" (276)? To the dark humorist, social aberration—or even antisocial behavior—is only a small fraction of the chaos intuited in a vast indifferent universe; indeed, in the literature of Modernism, social aberration is more often celebrated as useful, protecting the individual from the hostile forces of a monolithic social machine—or a seemingly anti-pathetic universe—that distrusts difference and crushes individuality.

Dark humor and satire share certain formal characteristics, however, and the deflationary wit and lacerating use of irony and derision of dark humor has much in common with satire. Though it is perhaps awkward to suggest, as Bruce Janoff does, that what dark humor "satirizes is the man's position in the universe" (11), it can be argued that satire has evolved, as Polhemus suggests comedy does, in the object and purpose of its attack, still retaining some of the formal characteristics of conventional satire but now better reflecting the existential and philosophical crises that characterize the modern world. Writers of the era practice a distinctly Modernist type of satire with a purpose that has more to do with the coping devices of gallows humor than with the corrective function of exposing wickedness or foolishness.

Dark humor tends towards the dystopian and presents a grim and even hopeless picture of the historical moment between the wars in Britain, but with comedic aggression, the texts refuse to be overwhelmed by the absurdity and hopelessness they represent. The crystalline quality of Waugh's satiric style resists the chaos presented in his early novels, and the verve and energy of Huxley's *Antic Hay* belies the dark message embodied in Myra Viveash's final assessment of life at the end of that novel: "Tomorrow will be as awful as today" (212). The comedic defiance of these authors, their insistence on being funny in the face of the distressing subject matter they represent, is humor "on a grand scale" (*Jokes* 285), according to Freud, for it acknowledges pain, suffering, and futility but displays a "magnificent superiority over the real situation" ("Humour" 162). Though this form of comedy does not afford the confidence of change, it does offer the reader momentary protection from feelings of powerlessness and existential unease. In Modernist dark humor, all seems absurd, all seems inscrutable, and therefore, there is little else to do but laugh. This response may appear resigned, but it is, in fact, a powerfully assertive and aggressive reaction, for the dark comedic imagination casts off pain and suffering and refuses them their power to overwhelm and destroy. If humor can no longer be used to a

moral purpose, it can be employed as a defense and a weapon, a formula of personal survival that suspends the consciousness of death and dissolution and strengthens, if only momentarily, a hold on life.

Freud claims that the grandeur of humor lies in “the triumph of narcissism—the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability.” The individual ego, embattled by forces that would annihilate it, refuses to “let itself be compelled to suffer” and uses instances of pain and trauma as occasions to gain pleasure in humor (“Humour” 162). Dark humor is “grand” because it celebrates the protective capacity of the individual by its insistence on making comic sense out of overwhelming non-sense. It takes on our greatest fears and makes a joke out of powerlessness, loneliness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death, allowing them to be mastered for a moment. All the forces that would reduce the individual to nothingness are transformed into a source of pleasure. Narcissism is often discussed as a characteristic of Modernism, but it has generally meant a preoccupation with interior subjectivity or individual consciousness. The narcissism of humor protects the individual from threat and pain. Narcissism is aggressive; it reduces everything to the service of ego. Looked at through the lens of comedy, Woolf’s representation of the subjective, internal musings of Clarissa Dalloway and Ivy Compton-Burnett’s rigidly objective observations of social injustice are both narcissistic because they both mock and belittle the traumatic situations the characters find themselves in and allow the reader to feel superior to those circumstances.

Psychological protection and pleasurable experience are equally important in dark humor. The modern psyche is bedeviled by a disturbing awareness of impotence and the oppressions of authority and restraint. The arts, Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, are among the palliative remedies the individual uses to cope with excessive disillusionment and suffering (14). Since the “substitute gratifications” offered by the arts in general allow an escape from the pressures of reality, the comedic arts, which provide both the aesthetic pleasure of the joke and the psychological pleasure of fending off suffering, are especially powerful in protecting the ego from hostile forces that threaten it (14). The assertive stance of dark humor is particularly apposite in Modern social satire because humor is an inherently social activity, and the negotiation of increasingly confusing and conflicting group identities is the source of much of the comedy and the trauma. Modernist dark-humor satire examines the individual in society and reveals the seemingly hopeless struggle to fit in, simultaneously drawing on recognizable group experiences and undermining the possibility of having a truly shared experience. The often savage indignation and scathing irony of Modernist dark humor are important developments in the his-

tory of comic prose fiction because they are not only aimed at the injustices of social orderings but at the idea that any kind of order is possible. Order is an illusion, even if the effects of its illusion are damaging—if not murderous.

Freud, of course, is not alone in his valuation of comedy as one of humankind's most important coping devices. Speculators of the comic from Kant, Schiller, and Nietzsche to Baudelaire, Breton, and Bakhtin have all argued that the comic experience is important because it suggests the truth about the basic antinomies of existence, offering a way out, the possibility of understanding and then living with the anxiety of the human predicament.³ Beyond this, recent scholars, such as Regina Barreca, Nancy Walker, and James Kincaid, have persuasively argued that the disenfranchised and marginalized, i.e. women and minorities, have always included humor as one of the most important weapons in their arsenal to protect themselves from psychological damage and to subvert the power of the those in authority.⁴ But Freud's work remains one of the most provocative and useful analyses of humor because of its multiple layers of meaning and its complicated examination of the site of the comic. Though much of twentieth-century comic theory depends on Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, as does much of his later psychoanalytic theory, the work is very often dealt with superficially in studies of comic literature. Passing references are made to the idea that all humor is aggressive or to his paradigm of joke-work, but often the nuances and complexities of his theories are overlooked altogether.

Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious is a peculiar book. It is an uneven and difficult text and many scholars of Freud find that it raises more questions than it answers. Samuel Weber, who likens the work to a shaggy dog story, concludes that *Jokes* arrives "not so much at [an] organic whole...but at its shaggy fleece" and argues that "instead of baring the essential characteristic of a joke," Freud leaves us with "a patchwork quilt" (116). Though the book does appear to lack a certain coherence, even after numerous readings, what felicitously remains is not a unified whole that uniformly defines humor (for over and over scholars of the comic have proven that is impossible) but complicated examinations of the process of humor that can be extended, augmented, and applied to both comic behavior and comic literature.⁵ Freud forever changed the questions we ask about humor and remains important because he examines both the external conditions for humor and its internal functions, its intimate connection to reality and its distance from it, and its immense power to subvert authority and protect the individual.

Not all of the characters in dark comedy use humor in a self-protective fashion, but the narrative stance of the texts is aggressively humorous and allows

the reader protection from the traumatic circumstances presented by examining these circumstances from a safe comedic distance. We may feel sympathy for the plight of Adam Fenwick-Symes in Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, but we do not share his pain. The reader, more often than not, identifies with the narrator—implied or otherwise—who is in control rather than with the character who is not. The historical realities these authors examine are tragic, but from a comedic distance they are appraised humorously, an appraisal which is both defensive and aggressive, for as Freud has argued, "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances" ("Humour" 163).

The real circumstances between the wars were shockingly unkind. Violence on a grand scale, the loss of identity, and the increasing mechanization of society left the modern individual in a dilemma. Traumatized by recent historical events, the individual feared that some incalculable and horrible catastrophe awaited. Yet, deprived of sense of forward movement, the individual faced the equally terrible prospect that nothing at all would happen. Why did certain authors in the interwar period in Britain represent this troubling impasse and the disturbing sense of powerlessness comedically? Many writers of the period—Joyce, Barnes, Beckett—turned inward, choosing to explore individual consciousness and to extend the possibilities of the literary forms inherited from the nineteenth century to better represent alienation and fragmented identity. But many others, like Ivy Compton-Burnett and Evelyn Waugh, engaged Modernist concerns from a rigidly objective comic perspective, creating characters who consistently find themselves in traumatic circumstances yet who, for the most part, are revealed to the reader through their actions and words rather than their internal stream of consciousness. In dark-humor novels, the reader cannot be tricked into thinking he "understands" a character in the traditional way. Even when characters are relatively complex, it is difficult to understand motive, and we may know what they do but not why they do it. Just when we think we understand a character, he or she will do something ridiculous or outrageous and our expectations are undermined. The inability to understand comfortably the relationship between motive and action among the characters reflects a larger uncertainty about meaning and existence, an uncertainty that is at the root of dark humor. If traditional forms of literature assume that human character is knowable and imply that cause and effect can be discerned—in effect, that problems are resolvable—then dark humor supposes, as Matthew Winston argues, "that the patterns one may perceive are arbitrary, that our selection of what is important and what is not has no inherent validity...that the crucial

questions have no answers, and that mystery is not a particular obscurity in an otherwise known and ordered world but is the very nature of existence” (285). This dark view speaks to the Modern era’s concern with instability, nihilism, and alienation and implies a broader more subversive attitude toward the structures of authority than has been previously understood.

Dark humor suggests that there is really only established disorder. Sometimes it examines alienation and absurdity through the intensely subjective individual perceptions of characters, but more often it makes an aggressively objective evaluation of chaos and fragmentation. The canonical Virginia Woolf employs both of these strategies in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but reading her in the context of dark humor not only sheds new light on her work but reveals its connections to other writers of her time. Rethinking Modernist humor is important not only because it allows for canonical and noncanonical writers, but it also claims a tradition of dark humor for all of them. Dark humor is generally seen as an American phenomenon, and nearly all of the texts dedicated to it discuss American and European writers. Individual writers in English have been looked at in this tradition, notably Samuel Beckett and more contemporary authors such as Muriel Spark and Martin Amis. However most studies of humor in British literature, such as Alice Rayner’s *Comic Persuasion: Moral Structure in British Comedy from Shakespeare to Stoppard* or Polhemus’s *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce*, read it as redemptive or transformative, as Barreca does women’s fiction in *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature*. More recently, Margaret Stetz in *British Women’s Comic Fiction, 1890-1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing*, questions the transforming power of comedy in women’s writing and interrogates not only its ability to effect change but to guarantee survival. She argues, “When British women writers have weighed the power of comedy and found it wanting, it is because they have discovered its limitations in guaranteeing survival” (xiii). In dark comedy, rooted as it is in gallows humor, change—even survival—is beside the point. The point is to wrest from pain a momentary victory in laughter; it makes no other claims. The only triumph available is momentary and individual; it allows for pleasure even in the most unpleasant situations because it insists on a humorous appraisal of circumstances that often runs counter to material reality.

Clearly, the political and ethical uselessness of dark humor has profound implications for Postmodern literature. Claiming a tradition for dark humor in the British novel bridges the gap between Modernism and Postmodernism, a gap that is arguable in the first place. The work of Postmodern British writers—Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, etc.—is characterized by ambivalent hu-

mor, a delight in incongruity, and a preoccupation with the fractured nature of consciousness. They suggest very little in the way of change, and their work is not a break with the past as much as it is continuation of it. Kirby Olson argues that “the curious phenomenon of humor is central to the postmodern enterprise” (4). I would argue that the phenomenon of humor was central to the Modernist enterprise as well, and that perhaps the categories “modern” and “postmodern” are too limited. Though it took Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard to make the “positive enjoyment of asymmetry, incongruity, hilarity, and irrationalism” a trait associated with philosophy, it has always been a trait associated with comedy. In *Toward the Postmodern*, Lyotard observed, “Humor says: there is no correct point of view...Humor does not invoke a truth more universal than that of the masters; it does not even struggle in the name of the majority by incriminating the masters for being a minority. Humor wants rather to have this recognized: there are only minorities” (83). Olson argues persuasively that Deleuze and Lyotard champion work that that cannot be pressed into service of a given metanarrative, but the comedic literature of Modernism already had shown that.

Of course, not all comedies of the era were dark. Social comedies were popular in the early decades of the century, and writers such as E.F. Benson, Stella Gibbons, Elspeth Huxley, and P.G. Wodehouse (just to name a few) all wrote novels that mock English manners and expose hypocrisy. Their work also partakes of a certain comedic ambivalence and, I would argue, is much less conservative than is generally assumed.⁶ However, their comedy rarely deals with the death, destruction, isolation, and loneliness that marks the humor of Woolf, Compton-Burnett, Waugh, Powell, and others who wrote from a position of privilege but were aware of the irrational nature of that privilege. These writers savage their own social set without any expectation that their satire will materially change anything. For the most part, the writers of dark-humor satire all write about similar circumstances—sometimes with radically different styles—and behind all the humor lies acute feelings of alienation and isolation. Writers as different as Woolf and Powell share a ruthless observation of the social system and a concern with how individuals are damaged by it yet seemingly survive within it. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf gives us both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, two characters who have performed their duties and have done what is expected of them. Both are thwarted and victimized by the “virtues” of “proportion” and “conversion”; yet Septimus sinks beneath them while Clarissa, “a thorough-going sceptic” aware “that the whole thing is a bad joke,” does her part, knowing that “the Gods, who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting, and spoiling human lives were seriously

put out if, all the same, you behaved like a lady” (117). The common thread is not aesthetic form but a darkly comedic stance that confronts the complexities of the modern world and the psychological difficulties of negotiating them.

The role of the individual in society was still of profound importance in Britain during the decades of the twenties and thirties, despite the increasing interest in subjectivity of experience. As a result, many writers had an abiding concern with how the individual negotiates increasingly complicated social arrangements and performs social roles that no longer correspond to stable meanings or values. Wife, daughter, “Lady of Fashion,” aristocrat, soldier, writer, or lover are simply roles to be inhabited for a moment, no longer tied to identity and subject to change upon a shift in social circumstance. Even traditional expectations of gender performance elide, and “masculine” and “feminine” behavior are no longer viewed as necessarily distinct and fixed. The breakdown of stable social categories and the proliferation of social roles to be performed results in an anxiety about the ability of the individual to exist “sanely” (to use Woolf’s term) within a social system that is increasingly hostile to the people within it, requiring them to perform roles that do not adequately correspond to ideas of personal identity.

Wylie Sypher has argued that twentieth-century social satires are “a sign of desperation,” ghastly comedies of manners which reveal how the “awkward and hopelessly maladroit hero...struggles vainly somehow to ‘belong’ to an order that is impregnably closed by some inscrutable authority” (194). Throughout the literature of the period, characters reflect the anxiety that results from the individual’s inability to “fit in.” Most of the comedy arises when they attempt to adapt to the perpetually changing roles required of them, applying values and beliefs which worked in one situation to circumstances which continually change and require a different set of values and beliefs each time. Of course, one can never catch up, and the “through-the looking-glass” absurdity of the Modern world leaves the characters who do not succumb to death or madness with the unsettling feeling of stasis that prompted Waugh to cite Lewis Carroll in the epigraph to *Vile Bodies*: “it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.”

Engaging in activity that can no longer be seen as informed by meaning beyond that of the moment leads to a painful awareness of life’s inanity, and Sypher claims that “wherever man has been able to think about his present plight he has felt the suction of the absurd” (195). Indeed, in the twentieth century it would appear, as Sypher has claimed, that the absurd, “that is the irrational, the inexplicable, the nonsensical—in other words, the comic,” is more than ever inherent in human existence (195). Comedy is the language of the absurd because it deals in

contradictions, and the modern individual lives amid the incongruities and irreconcilables that are comedy's domain. Dark humor admits disorder, incoherence, and instability and yet resists being overwhelmed by them. Imposing a certain absurd logic, it takes potentially devastating meaninglessness and turns it into a joke. When external reality threatens the stability of the individual from all sides, dark humor allows for the triumph of narcissism, the protection of the individual and the pleasure of laughter.

Notes

¹ See Kirby Olson, *Comedy After Postmodernism*.

² See Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days*, Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, and Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation*.

³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*; Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter" and "On the Comic in the Plastic Arts" in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*; Andre Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; and Friedrich Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* and *On the Sublime*.

⁴ See Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed* and *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted*, and Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing, What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, and *Feminist Alternatives*.

⁵ For a further discussion of Freud's originality, see Jerry Keller Simon's *The Labyrinth of the Comic*.

⁶ See Robert Kiernan, *Frivolity Unbound* and Olsen, *Comedy After Postmodernism*, for interesting discussions of Wodehouse's humor. Also Alison Light, *Forever England*, and Alice Rayner, *Comic Persuasion*.

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