Modern Times, Modern Satires, and Modern “Babbitt”

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O sacred weapon! left for Truth’s defence,
Sole dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!
To all but Heav’n-directed hands deny’d,
The Muse may give thee, but the Gods must guide.
Rev’rent I touch thee!

Alexander Pope, Epilogue to the Satires (1738)

But on the other side of this blasted world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity and without hope, satire begins again.

Northrop Frye, An Anatomy of Criticism (1957)

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

T. S. Eliot, “The Wasteland” (1922)

ABSTRACT

This paper, using textual analysis of some satires, argues that modern light-hearted satire was a protection against a disorientating modernity and a release from a bleak life. By contrast, more normative social and political satire – i.e. more serious, indignant satire – still existed in modernist works and with some corrective potential. Modern satire, and despite its different functions and types, continued to be rooted in human lives and social interaction, for satire is basically a social genre. As such, it was engaged in a critique of modernity, be it militant (as in normative satires) or tolerant (as in light satires). The satirical impulse in modernism is contingent on modernism’s zeitgeist and was triggered by the modernist sensibility.

Keywords: Modernist fiction, satire, modern heroism, social realism
1. **INTRODUCTION: MODERNISM AND SATIRE**

Most discussions of modernism focus on canonical writers and experimental themes yet ignore satire as a significant feature of the Anglo-American and European literature of the early 20th century. However, the modern age allowed many sources for satire and led to its revival with its celebration, or rather critique of, mechanization, technological progress, mass culture, violence/war, total break with tradition, speed, and dehumanization. The disillusionment and cynicism effected by the Great War contributed significantly to the revival of satire as a dominant mode within many modern novels. Hence, Jonathan Greenberg rightly argues that “the satiric mode became in many respects central to the modernist project” (2006: 589) and that “if the era of modernism was one in which the proximity of man and machine seemed to pose a greater threat than ever before, then satire, which presents the human as mechanical, emerged as a mode all-too-suited for modernity” (p. 590). Randall Stevenson, in a similar line of thought, asserts that “[t]he era of social change and shifting values which followed the First World War encouraged satire …” (1993: 50). People lost assuring values like love, manhood, and justice, and this made them more critical of their life conditions. The modernists’ sense of twentieth-century cultural crisis and concomitant feelings of loss and despair gave writers the satirical mood they expressed in their works. Modern satire, hence, tends to be less personal and more social, i.e. it deals more with attitudes, outlook, temper and institutions than with individuals. The satirical impulse in modernist works is contingent on modernism’s zeitgeist and was triggered by the modernist cultural sensibility.

However, this modern satire was not always serious or corrective of folly or vice, and it often laughed at the absurdity of the postwar Western world. As Peter Petro argues, “satire is no longer in the ‘reform business’” (1982: 19). This means that modern satire does not always have to have a clear norm against which evil or aberration can be judged. It does not have to teach. Mere exposure of folly and vice, mere censure, or even mere nostalgia for better times can be enough. In the absence of a consensus about shared assumptions and traditional values, satire can become a cynical, pessimistic, and nihilistic genre devoid of a clear corrective function. What Charles Knight calls “a shared understanding between the satirist and audience regarding the purposes and proprieties of the satiric attack” (1992: 33) is often absent in modern satires because writers could not hope for better or
more stable times. Northrop Frye’s classical clarification of satire as a genre whose “moral norms are relatively clear” and that “assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (1957: 223) is still useful in general terms, yet it requires some modification if applied to modern satire as satire became less direct and more general. In a sense, modern light-hearted satire, as in the work of Evelyn Waugh and Nathanael West, was a protection against/reaction to a disorientating modernity and a release from a bleak life. More normative social and political satire, i.e. more serious/indignant satire, still existed in the works of Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and George Orwell, among others. All in all, modern satire, and despite new functions, continued to be rooted in human lives and social interaction, for satire is basically “a social mode” that “has nothing in it of the transcendental” (Pollard 1970: 7). As such, it was engaged in a sociologically oriented critique of modernity, be it militant or tolerant.

The modernist sensibility of the 1920s was largely shaped by the Great War and the sentiments of its lost generation. It was characterized, among other things, by a search for meaning in a world without God, loss of traditional values, fragmentation, a sense of cultural dislocation, a sense of alienation/insecurity, pessimism/nihilism, distrust of progress and technology, a sense of disillusionment and lost innocence. T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land captures the decline and fragmentation of modern life as well as the somberness of the postwar London scene in particular. Art for him was an attempt to impose order on the chaos of modern experience in a mythical, allusive approach. Modern satirists captured the same sensibility and tried to come to terms with the disorientating modernity by critiquing it or simply hailing its absurdity in satirical works of different degrees of seriousness. The response to the problems of modernity was more literature and, in particular, more satire. As David Trotter puts it more generally, “Modernism was one of the fiercest campaigns ever mounted in favor of literature” (1999: 74). Satire became the defense-mechanism writers used against an absurd modernity. In the midst of frustration and anger, some humor was needed and satire was the needed relief. Hence, satire became less personal and lighter in tone in many cases, and incidental satire in literature was more frequent. Next, I examine some representative modern satires, both light and more serious, trying to contextualize them within a critique of modernity. The classification is not meant to be a rigid one – as one satire can partake in both categories with varying degrees – but rather an organizational, pedagogical tool.
2. A SAMPLING OF SATIRE IN SOME MODERNIST WORKS

2.1. Light/tolerant satires
Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* (1930) is a light satire with a detached critique of the empty hedonism, futility, ennui, and endless parties of the fashionable London society of the roaring twenties. The satire is light because it is not direct. We sense the satiric thrust through what characters say and do, and not through direct authorial commentary to us or a satiric voice speaking to another character. As the object of attack is too general or as its opposite norm is vague, Waugh’s satire is light and tolerant. Waugh takes an amoral, cynical view of life in the post-WWI era and its lost generation; he uses an unsentimental style, mainly trivial dialogue, to describe what is basically anti-heroic: successive parties and dull conversations. The absurdities of this society are then exposed in politics, social life, and religion. The end itself is apocalyptic and prophetic about an impending large-scale war. The overall social vision, hence, is pessimistic and in line with the modernist sensibility I described in my introduction. The endless party life is repetitive, and the absurdly inevitable tragic fate of the characters is in violent death, in a war battlefield, and in burning ovens. The writer uses grotesque humor to comment on the waste of this interwar generation and its irrational violence. The lack of plot itself suggests the emptiness of the characters’ lives. The Bright Young People described are the brittle, amoral group whose drinking and social gatherings color the narrative. This generation is caught between two wars and has no faith to support it and no moral guidance; in addition to its cultural exhaustion and loss of past and future, it is even characterized by religious hypocrisy, illicit love, and secularism. The mood captured is a witty, cynical and irresponsible one. The particular slang the young set uses is repetitive, artificial and indicative of its ennui. Waugh offers no redemptive vision, and hence the satire remains light or beyond the reform agenda.

Irrational violence, speed, and cruelty characterize these lives and indicate the absence of reasoning in the satirical world and a critique of machines and technology, i.e. the condition of modernity. Bright Agatha Runcible spins out of control, drunk in charge of a speedy racing car. She dies partying madly at the hospital where she still thinks she is racing. She is taken there in a dazed state thinking that “she has no name” and that she came “in a motor car”, a machine satirists often attacked, which “would not stop” (Waugh 1930: 258). She dies thinking she was still driving in a race and singing the futurist speed
cult “faster, faster” until stabbed with a hypodermic needle (p. 285). Her neighbor in the nursing home is another victim of machines; has also had an airplane accident. In another instance of black humor, Miss Ducane is described as dying “following an accident in which [she] fell from a chandelier which she was attempting to mend” (p. 100). We know she died swinging from the chandelier and drunk during a party at a hotel despite the champagne used on her forehead. The novel ends with Adam in a vast battlefield of a big war where he sees a desolate scene of damage and burning. The final chapter begins: “On a splintered tree stump in the biggest battlefield in the history of the world, Adam sat down and read a letter from Nina” (p. 314), an ironic note on futurist glorification of war and violence. The scene all around him was one of unrelieved desolation, “a great expanse of mud in which every visible object was burnt or broken” (p. 316). The prophetic message about a cataclysmic war is in tune with the novel’s critique of modern life. A gossip columnist exposed during a party to which he was not invited reports false accounts to his paper and goes home, puts his head in the oven, turns on the gas, and dies. Hence, we see a critique of the speed, warfare, and violence of the 20th century machine age. The narrative rapidly shifts scenes to imitate the dynamism and repetitive circularity of modern life. Curt, accelerated conversations also capture the speed cult of the modernized London Waugh satirizes.

Religion is also a façade and, like futile love relations, is unable to redeem the entire postwar generation. The old religious order of stability and decency is over. Religion is represented by the cunning priest Father Rothschild, who has a suitcase of imitation crocodile hide, and the angels of Mrs. Melrose Ape, “the woman evangelist” (Waugh 1930: 2) who sing ceaselessly and prostitute their bodies; Father Rothschild is a wily Jesuit and financier who finds his talent in remembering everything that “could possibly be learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance” (p. 2). He thinks that these young people “are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence” (p. 183). Mrs. Ape is a grotesque and acquisitive rum-drinking revivalist. During a difficult Channel crossing, her playful angels “crowded together disconsolately … My, how they would pinch Chastity and Creative Endeavour when they got them alone in their nightshirts. It was bad enough their going to be so sick without that they had Mrs. Ape pitching into them too” (p. 3). She inducts her angels to sing saying that there is “nothing like it” (p. 4). Chastity, an evangelical angel, becomes a whore for a drunk Major who insists he is
SHADI NEIMNEH

a General now. They make love and drink inside a car parked in the blasted battlefield. The corruption of the war Generals and religious women and the relationship between war/violence and machines are then clear: “The windows of the stranded motor car shone over the wasted expanse of the battlefield. Then the General pulled down the blinds, shutting out that sad scene” (p. 320). Chastity “in the prettiest way possible fingered the decorations on his uniform and asked him all about them” while the thuds of battle begin again (p. 321). The surreal ending exposes the ridiculous immoral effects of war on the previous generation and on another generation to come.

Politics and other domains of social life are no better than religion: Another party held by the daughter of the Prime Minister and its midnight orgies lead to a change in government. Mr. Walter Outrage, a disgraced former Prime Minister, takes “twice the maximum dose of a patent preparation of chloral, and losing heart later had finished the bottle in the rain” (Waugh 1930: 4). He does not know if he is still a minister, for the government changes every week. Vulgar women and customs officials and publishers are self-seeking, immoral and deceptive. Nina’s father is senile, materialistic, and eccentric. He is obsessed with movies and once gives Adam a false check signed “Charlie Chaplin.” The movies he films in his estate are breathless successions of fast, bad quality scenes. A Major who owes Adam money is either drunk or elusive. Adam then despairs and sells Nina to a wealthy man, her childhood sweetheart, for “seventy-eight pounds and two-pence” (p. 280); the marriage is a failure and they resume their illicit affair. The innocent Adam finds the price of non-conformity too high. He decides to join the rest and be as deceptive and materialistic as they are. When modern life reduces him to an unheroic tramp, he learns to devise ways of surviving the muddle and insanity of the modern world.

The very first scene is representative of the satirical approach of the whole novel. It dramatizes the shallowness, disorientation, and irresponsible mood of the Bright Young People. The young, restless set during a rough canal crossing in a steamship and “to avert the terrors of sea sickness they had indulged in every kind of civilized witchcraft, but they were lacking in faith” (Waugh 1930: 4). They spend “a jolly morning strapping each other’s tummies with sticking plaster” (p. 4). Lady Throbbing and Mrs. Blackwater are twin sisters who eat apples and drink champagne, which the latter pronounced “exotically” and “as though it were French” (p. 5). As for the rest of the set, “some had filled their ears with cotton wool, others wore smoked glasses, while
several ate dry captain’s biscuits from paper bags, as Red Indians are said to eat snake’s flesh to make them cunning” (pp. 6-7). The Bright Young People repeat “oh” as the ship moves and drops (p. 9). The Angels sing “wildly, desperately, as though their hearts would break in the effort and their minds lose their reason, Mrs. Ape’s famous hymn, *There ain’t no flies on the Lamb of God*” (p. 11). Mrs. Ape sings; her arms “rose, fell and fluttered with the rhythm” (p. 17). When the ship reaches harbor at Dover, Mrs. Ape’s religious hypocrisy and greed are exposed for “as was her invariable rule, took round the hat and collected nearly two pounds, not counting her own five shillings which she got from the bar steward. “Salvation doesn’t do them the same good if they think it’s free,’ was her favourite axiom” (p. 20). Nothing is spared and the satire becomes less serious and more commercial. The novel criticizes aspects of modern life like war, speed, violence, secularization, mechanization, and progress – all futurist subjects. However, we see no glimmer of hope. There is nothing else to do. The characters are after all products of their times and not direct objects of attack. Waugh was presenting a panorama of social life more than showing how to correct its ills.

Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonely Hearts* (1933) is another light, sardonically comic satire, but on American values this time. It satirizes capitalism, consumerism, the newspaper media, reversal of gender roles, and the crisis of faith in the depression era of the 1930s. As with Waugh’s novel, the multiplicity of satirical objects reduces the overall effect of the novel and puts it in the category of light satires. A nameless middle-aged man, unable to find any other job, writes an advice column addressed to the lovelorn in New York newspaper. He himself is troubled by this circulation trick and suffers along with the morally and physically deformed letter senders. The anti-hero of the novel is thus a product of the wasteland of modernity: irrational violence, capitalist indifference, empty relationships, spiritual crisis, and unredeeming popular culture. West strongly critiques modern life and existence. Such a sick world necessarily robs men of their masculinity and renders them anti-heroes. However, the satire is detached. As in *Vile Bodies*, it has no specific targets. It indirectly critiques a whole era and institutions rather than specific individuals. It is meant to portray a social vision rather than offer an effectual redemption.

Miss Lonelyhearts is the victim of a commercial culture devoid of religion. He writes under a feminine name and tells Betty that his job is “a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke” (West
1962: 32). Then he forgets the joke and is touched by the suffering in the letters. He says to Betty that this makes him for the first time consider “the values by which he lives” and conclude that he is “the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator” (p. 32). He himself is disillusioned with his work, alienated, anxiety-ridden, and suffering mentally. He sees secularism as the root of the problem and wants to preach Christian love, yet he is incapable of doing so in an age when people are indifferent to religion. He heads steadily for the spiritual crisis characteristic of modernism and emblematic of an entire age. While he has a Christ complex as he thinks, others are lost in a world of violence, capitalism, and sex. On another occasion, Shrike, his cynical, bullying editor, taunts him as a modern messiah and says that “the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America” (p. 44). Shrike is the exact opposite of religious sentiments: materialism and secularism in a pure form. He is ready to sell his wife for sex in order to get some money. For him, religion is an escape from reality. He views materialism in a metropolitan city as stronger than religion.

While the pathetic letters haunt him, Betty wants him to change his job and lead a normal bourgeoisie life. He is suffering and agonized, a modern Christ in a wasteland trying to redeem humanity. He wants to show them that Christ and love are the solution, but his attempts backfire and he himself is killed by a correspondent’s husband, Mr. Doyle, ironically at the moment he embraces him and thinks he has attained a religious vision. In modern life, religion is decaying, individuals are lonely. He becomes so burdened by the agonies of the people who write to him to the extent he believes he must save them. Christian love, he believes is the answer, but he is mocked by Shrike. In his sensitivity, his feeling that he has a message even to rejecting crowds, in his final sacrifice, he conforms to the artist archetype. The artist wants to help those who reject him, the Philistines. Modern life has emasculated him and asserted a nihilistic, absurdist message.

The letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives are from desperate, sick people and collaged into the text; they show the wasteland motif: people with deformed faces, women exhausted from repeated pregnancies, retarded children raped, sexually impotent men, etc. His correspondents are people whose problems are rooted in love and sexual frustration. The letters weigh heavily upon him, and he believes that “Christ was the answer” (West 1962: 3). However, religious sentiments make him sick and “Christ was Shrike’s particular joke” (p. 3). He himself is “a perfect butt for Shrike’s jokes” (p. 18). Shrike
wants this column to increase the circulation at the expense of people, not to cure them or have them commit suicide for this would reduce the circulation (p. 18). Shrike would mockingly compare him to Christ in body, soul, and blood (p. 3). With no miracles or salvation tools, he ironically administers erotic love to the suffering as a Christ administering redemption. He hangs an ivory Christ on his bedroom wall. In a scene of grotesque humor and mock-sacrifice, he has a dream about sacrificing a lamb; he fumbles and misses it, injures the animal, and goes back to crush the skull with a stone and leaves the carcass “to the flies that swarmed around the bloody altar flowers” (p. 10). The modern world cannot accommodate religion. We brutalized and battered it. Miss Lonelyhearts goes to bars but is still restless.

In an irrational world devoid of reason, people often resort to meaningless violence. He collides with a man carrying a glass of beer in the bar, turns to apologize, and only to receive “a punch in the mouth” and sustain a “loose tooth” (West 1962: 15). He tries then to fit his hat and discovers “a lump on the back of his head” (p. 16). Drunk, he and a friend go to a park, enter a rest room, and annoy and take an old man with them to an Italian cellar. He thinks, in twisting the arm of the old man, he is having a sadistic revenge on a sick humanity by “twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent” (p. 18). The old man screams and somebody hits Miss Lonelyhearts “from behind with a chair” (p. 18). He once steps on a frog and then pulverizes it. The irrational violence is a satirical comment on the absence of reasoning in this world. He fondles Betty’s breasts and wants her and she responds “Are you sick?” (p. 12). He declares to her that he has a “Christ complex” and that he is “a humanity lover” (p. 130). The modern sick age is, however, incapable of accepting religion. Miss Lonelyhearts begs Shrike’s wife, Mary, for sex but she refuses to sleep with him. Like drinking, exercise, and hot water baths, this also fails to bring him release. He once asks her to sleep with him and says that if she does he will be “one gay dog” (p. 23). He thinks that adultery is a sin for one believing in Christ, yet calls a correspondent and yields to her in his bed. “If he could only believe in Christ, then adultery would be a sin, then everything would be simple and the letters easy to answer” (p. 26), he reasons. “The completeness of his failure” drives him “to the telephone” (p. 26). She reverses gender roles and he enjoys being the pursued with her (p. 28). After she leaves, he is “physically sick and was unable to leave his room” (p. 30). In this satire of modern life, sex and hedonism are not working, and Miss Lonelyhearts resorts to something else.
He tries to preach love and compassion to the cripple and his wife. He himself is happy with “the triumphant thing that his humility had become” (West 1962: 47). He screams to the couple that “Christ is love” and that “Christ is the black fruit that hangs on the crosstree” (p. 49). The husband is ordered to bring gin for the wife, she tries to seduce Lonelyhearts, and he now hits her and runs out of the house (p. 50). His crucial religious experience happens at the end when he has a fever and stares at the Christ that hung on the wall of his bedroom (p. 56). He feels “clean and fresh” and thinks his heart is “a rose and in his skull another rose bloomed” (p. 57). He finds Christ to be “life and light” and chants the name of Christ (p. 57). He thinks he has reached a moment of religious conversion and identification with God. He has a vision and will lead a religious life and preach Christian love to the readers of his column. Now Doyle the cripple comes and he takes him to be the sign that proves his conversion and allows him to perform a miracle. He thinks: “He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole” (p. 57). He opens his arms and rushes to meet/embrace him. The cripple has a gun wrapped in a newspaper and warns him, and yet he ironically continues interpreting the shout as a cry for help from all the spiritual and physical cripples he wrote to (pp. 57-58). He runs “to succor them with love” (p. 58). He embraces him, the man tries to flee, is obstructed by Betty, and tries to pull his hand out, the gun fires and Lonely falls down with the cripple. They both roll part of the way down the stairs and the novel ends. A modern life bereft of morality and religion leads to people like the wicked, soulless Shrikes or despairing, idealistic anti-heroic Lonelyhearts. The monstrous grotesque life of commercialism and secularism that is satirized is what produces anti-heroes, emotional cripples, and anti-Christians. Again, and as with other light-hearted satires, West’s satire exposes human folly and vice without offering a specific system of reform or some hope out of this bleak worldview. The novel poses no healthy norm against which we can condemn the abortive lives of characters.

Although the two novels I have discussed so far fall more easily within the confines of the light/tolerant satire, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932) is more difficult to categorize. However, it weights more toward less serious satires because it satirizes our utopian dreams of a scientifically determined future life and the modern values of Western civilization in general. The satire is sweepingly general that the inclusive butts of satire render it a light one. It shows skepticism
about human civilization/progress and argues that industrialization and technology are not always good. The novel’s pessimism is in tune with its critique of a modernity in which the human is reduced to the mechanical. Men here become slaves to assembly lines, biological engineering, and universal happiness. In the process, they lose their identities and freedom and are swallowed in utilitarian world states that own everything. In this sweeping satire, family values, history, religion, love, and reproductive sex are frowned on and instead sterile sex, hedonism, and careless happiness are offered. Scientific determinism negates personal freedom and non-conformity is punished with violent death and exile or insanity. The novel’s prophetic value is a warning against the dangers of scientific engineering and utilitarianism. Although the satire is often bleak and grotesque, it is not direct. The satiric voice does not talk to us in the first person or directly to another character through authorial message. Rather, the narrative action and the interaction of characters reveal the satiric thrust of this dystopia. Only in one scene does Orwell speak to us through the Savage when he confronts the world controller Mustafa Mond and they debate humanity and freedom as opposed to scientific and social determinism, thus making satire direct in this scene through authorial intervention or at least by associating the Savage’s stance with that of Orwell. Although the Savage’s confrontation with such a ridiculous world marks the most noticeable incident of a normative satire in which the absurd confronts the sensible, the whole satire revolves around its social message about human life and potential future changes.

Frye argues that satire has two important features: “one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack” (1957: 224). Henry Ford is a deity and new machines and devises are equally worshipped. People have no sense of morality. They have no sense of privacy or freedom or stable relations. They are deindividualized and replicated. They live for the present and instant gratification and consumption. Identical newborns are mass produced and decanted from bottles and graded Alphas to Epsilons. They perform identical tasks fit for their castes. Huxley’s satire, and especially the absurd scene of confrontation between John the Savage (the potential norm being lost) and Mustapha Mond (one of ten World Controllers and the object of attack) dramatizes Huxley’s skepticism about rampant scientific progress. Mond advocates science over humanism and art/religion. They debate freedom and passion and happiness and morality. The satire is meant to vent some ethical
questioning about scientific totalitarianism through the voice of the Savage. The satire of the values inherent in scientific progress and sheer technology is evident. The Savage claims the right to be unhappy or lonely or to love and be faithful or passionate.

The year is 632 After Ford (some point in the 26th Century). Classes are regimented and stratified biologically and socially, emotions are controlled through drugs, reproduction is scientific incubation in hatcheries, education is conditioning and “sleep teaching” or “hypnoaedia” (Huxley 1932: 27). The result is a state that is clean, ordered, efficient and homogeneous, yet sterile and dehumanized. Conformity is expected from everyone in this world. This world is anything but brave or perfect, and hence anti-utopian. The World Controllers aim at absolute happiness but at the expense of individual freedom. The state slogans and life aim at a collective stable identity. Change is not expected or tolerated. The satirical future fantasy is still rooted in the present. It is hilarious that discontentment is immediately treated with doses of soma, the drug of forgetfulness and illusion, policemen use anesthetic instead of truncheons, over-intellectuals like Bernard Max and Helmholtz Watson are “heretics” and exiled. People are kept busy with consumption and sex or work. Solitude or much free time is frowned on as it might bring restlessness. Natural birth is abolished. Those who write poetry, desire solitude, or value stable relations are frowned upon or exiled. The insane logic that governs this brave new world in different walks of life intensifies the humor of the novel and robs it of reformative potential.

The state produces millions of identical twins, standard men and women in uniform, and employs the motto of “Community, Identity, and Stability” (Huxley 1932: 6). It applies the “principle of mass production” to “biology” (p. 7). But these men have no substance. They are mere waifs that obey orders and live according to strict standards. They have no private lives or personal freedom, i.e. they are conforming “Babbitts” – as we will see in Sinclair Lewis’s novel of that title – and types rather than individuals. Efficiency for them replaces humanity. It is no wonder that John remembers “identical midgets” and “human maggots” he has seen in this new world (p. 265). As the director of a London hatchery explains to students at the beginning of the novel, conditioning “is the secret of happiness and virtue – liking what you’ve got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (p. 17). They are encouraged to “consume manufactured articles” and “elaborate apparatus” for sports and entertainment as the Director explains to the students (25).
Conformity is also expected in dress; Gammas “all wear green, and Delta children wear khaki” (31). Characters repeat a conditioning, communist proverb “every one belongs to every one else” throughout the novel. Fanny advises and reminds her friend Lenina “to be a little more promiscuous” rather than have one relationship (p. 49). A chorus singing a Solidarity Hymn prays for union and oneness, and thus for abolishing personal identities, and sings “I am you and you are I” (p. 97). Lenina repeats the state slongs constantly because of conditioning. She says “I take a gramma and only am” (p. 122) and “cleanliness in next to fordliness” (p. 128). People are machine-like as true to many modern satires. They are devoid of personalities and unique traits. As modern “Babbitts,” they are lost in a system that subjects them to absolute conformity in dress, entertainment, consumption, and tasks. They spend a specific time span only to be sent for cremation. They never feel ill or old or get fat. They are disposed of when their life span is over. People do not cry or mention parents or mothers. They never feel remorse or guilt.

The Savage disrupts the distribution of soma rations for some children during their death conditioning and after the death of his mother. He sees the children as slaves and wants to free them. He throws the soma tablets and continuously punches the attacking “Babbitts,” “the indistinguishable faces of his assailants” (Huxley 1932: 255). The policemen realize his social threat and come and use “thick clouds of <i>soma</i> vapour into the air”, a “Synthetic Music Box”, and “water pistols” of anesthetic (p. 256). The Savage, Bernard, Helmholtz are arrested for the disorder and taken to the Controller Mustapha Mond. They debate old things that are not tolerated here, like Shakespeare (p. 262). The Controller asserts the satirical objects, the ideals of conformity:

The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get. They’re well off; they’re safe; they’re blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they’re plagued with no mothers or fathers; they’ve got no wives, or children, or lovers to feel strongly about; they’re so conditioned that they practically can’t help behaving as they ought to behave. (Huxley 1932: 263-264).

Stability and happiness, the controller reiterates, are the foundation of the new World State. Anything that can provoke passion or thought is discarded. Mustapha also says: “Our Ford himself did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness.
Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can’t” (p. 273). Even God is an old concept for this new world. God, for Mond, "manifests himself as an absence” (p. 282) these days, as he is not compatible with “machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness” (p. 281). Mond says “You can carry at least half your morality about in a bottle. Christianity without tears – that’s what soma is” (p. 285). The Savage, as a non-conformist, asserts his humanity: “But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin” (p. 288); and he claims “the right to be unhappy” and to be old, ugly, sick, diseased, fearful, hungry, in pain (p. 288). The non-conformist has no place in this world. He exiles himself, disgusted with a dehumanized machine-like life, and is not left alone. People see him as an exotic hermit, and he commits suicide. The vision is a dark one about what awaits humanity blindly following progress. The modernity criticized is that of assembly lines, mass production, genetic engineering, consumerism, hedonism, secularism, loss of individualism/privacy, and dehumanization. Since satire is pervasively inherent in the structure of the novel, it is difficult to see an effective redemptive vision that puts the novel in the normative/serious tradition. The failure of the normal human being within the novel testifies to the ineffectuality of reform.

2.2. Normative/corrective satires
Although the light satires discussed in the previous section are not necessarily devoid of relevance because of their social nature, they are somewhat different from other satires that posit a prior sense of order and realm of salvation that can be restored or simply remembered. Therefore, Edith Wharton’s Age of Innocence (1920) is a more serious satire. It is set in New York during the 1870s; it is also nostalgic for the stable, peaceful prewar time yet critical of its upper-class society. As it was written immediately after the war, Stuart Hutchinson argues, it “only pretends” to attack the New York society of 1870s for she found in it “a momentary escape” (p. 951). Wharton’s satire is rooted in a critique of modernity. The title is ironic after millions of soldiers and civilians died in the Great War and the whole concept of an innocent civilization under a benevolent deity was questioned. Yet, it is nostalgic for the pre-war New York society after the weariness of the war. The rules of respectability made by the elite were never questioned. Still, that time was more orderly and more moral than the post-war time. Genuine love was still there or was just possible and society was still
redeemable. Wharton still finds substance and meaning in a trivial past. Hence, the novel is never indignantly serious or harsh in its attack on fake social mores. Its harmless critique makes it somewhat a light satire, but the norm it posits and hope it communicates make it more of a normative/corrective satire.

Wharton portrays an affluent yet provincial society that adheres to conventions and unstated rules, and things are okay as long as people are superficially conservative. The social façade, thus, is problematic as it allows hypocrisy. People in the society depicted strictly follow taste, stratified classes, and clear roles. Lefferts and Jackson are the arbiters of social taste, self-appointed for that matter, pointing misdemeanor and purveying gossip. “Lawrence Lefferts was, on the whole, the foremost authority on ‘form’ in New York” (Wharton 2006: 6). They affect behavior and understand glances. Archer thinks that they live in a world, “a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (p. 32). They stifle personal freedom and lose their distinct identities in the process. Mr and Mrs van der Luyden “were so exactly alike that Archer often wondered how, after forty years of the closest conjugality, two such merged identities ever separated themselves enough for anything as controversial as a talking-over” (p. 37). This society has “unalterable rules” regulating mourning (p. 42) and stylishness was “what New York most valued” (p. 43). A marriage cannot be completed without ornate preparations, a European honeymoon has to follow, and women have to assume the role of proper wives. This society accepts people like Larry Lefferts in so far as they apparently conform to what is accepted, even if they disguise illicit affairs and shady business dealings. Ironically, it is these depraved people who monitor the social code and judge outsiders as he does with Ellen Olenska early in the novel. The society scandalizes her because she left an abusive husband. Divorce is considered a taboo for an aristocratic lady even if the husband is debauched. Julius Beaufort is just accepted because he married the well-born Regina Dallas, although he is immoral as a banker and has a mistress, Fanny Ring. The ballroom his wife has makes them acceptable. When he accompanies Ellen a few times, she innocently cannot judge him because society is implicit in keeping her ignorant and in covering vulgarities. This society is narrow-minded and claustrophobic for Ellen. It is prejudiced towards her as a foreigner who lived in Europe. They see her as different and hence as a threat to their complacency and stability. Lefferts condemns Beaufort’s affairs yet commits the same illicit acts.
Divorce is not allowed yet infidelity is covered and allowed. Such a society is enslaved by conventional behavior, provincialism, pretentiousness, acquisitiveness, artificial innocence, and appearances. A woman who wants to divorce a bad husband is ostracized. A man lives in a marriage he is not satisfied with just because he cannot withdraw from his engagement to another woman in a dogmatic society. The newly wealthy interlopers like the Beaufort and Struthers jockey for social position and prim families like the Wellands and Archers fret over dangerous trends that the intruders introduce. A society like this can only ironically be labeled an innocent one as in the title, yet it also remains innocent compared with the post-war generations.

Mr Sillerton Jackson “carried between his narrow hollow temples, and under his soft thatch of silver hair, a register of most of the scandals and mysteries that had smouldered under the unruffled surface of New York society within the last fifty years” (Wharton 2006: 8). Sillerton says when he sees Ellen in the Mingott box, “I didn’t think the Mingotts would have tried it on” (p. 8). She was revealing, when leaning forward in the box, “a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reason for wishing to pass unnoticed” (p. 11). Beaufort is tolerated for he married society’s woman Regina Dallas, a woman of influence, despite his notorious affairs. Once he loses in business and is exposed, he is no longer in favor with the Mingotts. The society is exposed for holding double standards: “Archer’s New York tolerated hypocrisy in private relations; but in business matters it exacted a limpid and impeccable honesty” (p. 181). Mrs Beaufort wants to show her superiority to household cares and her control over her servants by holding her ball on Opera night each year:

Mrs Beaufort, then, had as usual appeared in her box just before the Jewel Song; and when, again as usual, she rose at the end of the third act, drew her opera cloak about her lovely shoulders, and disappeared, New York knew that meant that half an hour later the ball would begin. (p. 15)

Women do and say what is exactly expected from them according to conventions: “It was evident that Miss Welland was in the act of announcing her engagement, while her mother affected the air of parental reluctance considered suitable for the occasion” (p. 16). Social conformity is meticulously observed: “In the course of the next day the first of the usual betrothal visits were exchanged. The New York ritual
was precise and inflexible in such matters; and in conformity with it Newland Archer first went with his mother and sister to call on Mrs Welland, after which he and Mrs Welland and May drove out to old Mrs Manson Mingott’s to receive that venerable ancestress’s blessing.” (p. 19). Mr Sillerton Jackson “applied to the investigation of friends’ affairs the patience of a collector and the science of a naturalist” while his sister brings home “bits of minor gossip that filled out usefully the gaps in his picture” (p. 23). Lawrence Lefferts is “the high-priest of form” who had formed a wife so completely to his own convenience that, in the most conspicuous moments of his frequent love-affairs with other men’s wives, she went about in smiling unconsciousness, saying that ‘Lawrence was so frightfully strict’; and had been known to blush indignantly, and avert her gaze, when someone alluded in her presence to the fact that Julius Beaufort (as became a ‘foreigner’ of doubtful origin) had what was known in New York as ‘another establishment’. (p. 31)

By the end, the old Newland is not too dissatisfied with having followed tradition. He has kept a family, fathered children, and kept in mind the nice memory of Ellen. Conformity, though satirized, seems better than non-conformity. It is the problem and yet the best available solution, which puts the satire in the normative track. His son, Dallas, is to rebel and marry the illegitimate child of Beaufort and his mistress, Fanny Ring. However, the society is changing and Dallas may have to conform in new and different ways. Newland encourages his son in his rebellion and wants him to marry the illegitimate daughter of Beaufort the outsider who once violated the social conventions rather than have a convention-bound, loveless marriage. Newland tried conformity. He falls in love with Ellen Olenska but cannot marry her because of the constraints of society. Later on, he decides to keep his idealized vision and memories of the exiled Countess rather than visit her in Paris. The wise Newland reflects on his previous life with a mixture of regret and acceptance. He knows he was a good father, husband, and “citizen.” The unconventional cousin has no room in this society. She just leaves to Paris leaving others imprisoned by the strict social code they observe. Newland and Ellen are the ones who turn out to be naïve. “But the Countess was apparently unaware of having broken any rule; she sat at perfect ease in a corner of the sofa beside Archer, and looked at him with the kindest eyes” (p. 45). They shunned her for wanting a divorce, for liberally talking to married or engaged men, and for living in a bohemian part of New York. They collaborate to exile her and she
consents. “There was nothing on earth that the Wellands and Mingotts
would not have done to proclaim their unalterable affection for the
Countess Olenska now that her passage for Europe was engaged” (p.
234). “It was the Old New York way of taking life ‘without effusion of
blood’: the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who
placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was
more ill-bred than ‘scenes,’ except the behaviour of those who give rise
to them” (p. 235). The non-conformists are the pitiful victims of
society. The conformists who fake innocence are more subtle. May is
once described as floating among a social group like “a swan with the
sunset on her” and he takes “the rosiness and rustlings were the tokens
of an extreme and infantile shyness” (p. 139). In her white dress and
ivory wreath on her hat, “she had the same Diana-like aloofness
(p. 147). She has a “goddess-like built” and looks innocent as a child
(p. 225). May knew about her fiancé’s affair with Ellen and faked
pregnancy so that she excludes her cousin. Even Ellen herself became
conservative when she felt Newland was to marry her and disgrace his
honor and desert her cousin. Newland had inertia to act and change or
be free, yet he realizes that these social conventions are stifling and
futile. Sacrificing personal happiness for social stability is not too bad
after all. Also, one cannot tell what awaits him in the future of any
relation. So, he is somewhat satisfied with his life and career and child,
and becomes mature with time, thus making satire shift to a
Bildungsroman. A younger more liberal generation is the hope for
change, although this generation has its own pressures and limitations.
By the end, the old standards are obsolete. Social and sexual mores are
changing, but the new generation has its own pressures, and the
individual is often forced to sacrifice desire for the sake of the greater
society. Personal freedom may be gained at the expense of social exile.
“What was left of the little world he had grown up in, and whose
standards had bent and bound him? He remembered a sneering
prophecy of poor Lawrence Leffert’s, uttered years ago in that very
room: “If things go on at this rate, our children will be marrying
Beaufort’s bastards”” (p. 247). His son Dallas belongs “body and soul
to a new generation” (p. 250). He finally decides to keep his love affair
as an idealistic memory: “It’s more real to me here than if I went up,
he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of
reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes
succeeded each other” (p. 254). Newland lived for a while as different
in his tastes from the rest of the convention-bound society but he never
showed true rebellion. He once supported Ellen in her divorce plans
but was then prevailed on by his family when they convinced him to advice her to the contrary and then accepted his provincial domestic life by marrying May. The nostalgic view of the past, together with the glimmer of hope for the present and the future, make the social vision of the novel more down to earth and its message more applicable.

Although Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* is a normative/corrective satire in a subtle way and with some qualification, George Orwell’s *Coming up for Air* (1939) is a clearer case. It is a prophetic novel of ideas and social criticism about an impending Second World War and contemporary Britain. It is an attack on materialism and capitalism as well as a nostalgic account of a passing peaceful Edwardian era and rural landscapes. Since the novel sees a pattern of order somewhere, it is not a nihilistic satire but a normative/corrective one. George Bowling, another conforming type – a “Babbitt” – is a fat insurance clerk subjected to a life of middle-class standards and suburban uniformity and constantly facing worries of his wife about financial issues. The novel is a strong social critique of urbanization, industrial progress, loss of rural landscape, political irresponsibility, and middle-class life and concerns. Because it is written in the first person, the satiric voice speaks directly to us, which makes the satire more direct and more normative. The political message is a prophecy of world war and totalitarianism. Orwell satirizes modern life in the figure of George Bowling as a stifling world of jealousy, avarice, industrial ugliness, mechanical progress, streamlining, and dehumanization. Pollution, chemicals, factories, asylums and smells all destroy the rural landscape of George’s Edwardian past. Individuals have similar expressions, and are therefore types, bomber planes accidentally drop bombs, food is soft oozing stuff, people are sickly and diseased, the pool where he used to fish is now a trash dump, etc. Capitalism and an enterprising culture are also attacked. His father’s store is now engulfed by large commercial chain. People’s attitudes are commercial. Religion is diminished to the old and insane and filthy progress and industrialism are rampant. Within this critique of modernity, the past is the source of value and morality, honest men rather than streamlined ones; the past was stable as opposed to the terrible present and gloomy future. Authority figures are tyrannical and indifferent, wives are nagging, men are indistinguishable in their middle-class standards, and politicians are venal. The whole condition is pessimistic and George is stifled. An escape for a solution, to the immediate past or to a rural setting, makes the satire a normative/corrective one.
The title refers to George’s attempt to revisit the village of his childhood as a way of “coming up for air” from stifling middle-class life to find that industrialism, materialism, and modernity have arrived there too, and this contributes to his suburban frustration. George is a “Babbitt,” a satirical portrait of the typical middle-class family man with middle age, false teeth, a big belly, and a red face: “I’m fat and forty-five and got two kids and a house in the suburbs” (Orwell 1939: 86). He reminisces his childhood in Lower Binfield village during the Edwardian years and his fishing carp there in a pool he loved with his friends. A peaceful childhood in the late 1890s before machine-guns, aeroplanes, Hitler, and war, as we are repeatedly reminded, is gone. He stops going fishing with the onset of the Great War. His father, a shopkeeper, has his business going down gradually because of new salesmanship and modern methods and stores and big retail business. The narrator captures the excitement and restlessness that accompanied news of the onset of the Great War and England’s participation in it and his own enlisting and going to France few months later. He gets wounded in 1916 and returns to an England hospital. War becomes part of the condition of modernity he critiques and questions: “If the war didn’t happen to kill you it was bound to start you thinking. After that unspeakable idiotic mess you couldn’t go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable, like a pyramid. You knew it was just a balls-up” (p. 144). He says this by way of describing his disillusionment with the Great War. The war disrupted historical continuity and its aftermath was even worse: “The war had jerked me out of the old life I’d known, but in the queer period that came afterwards I forgot it almost completely” (p. 145). His wife has middle-class concerns and is always negative in attitude. She is always worried about petty things: “As for wars, earthquakes, plagues, famines and revolutions, she pays no attention to them. Butter is going up, and the gas-bill is enormous, and the kids’ boots are wearing out and there’s another instalment due on the radio – that’s Hilda’s litany” (p. 8). His wife keeps nagging about financial security and lack of money (p. 8). She has the same mood and repeats the same clichés over and over, what he calls the “I don’t know what we are going to do!” mood (p. 9). She stands for the materialism associated with the middle-class he detests and tries to escape from. Thus, the novel’s critique of modernity is at the heart of its social import.

Early in the novel, George gets a new set of false teeth and orders a frankfurter, and this becomes another source for his dissatisfaction with modernity. They “taste of nothing” and have “a rubber skin” (Orwell
1939: 27). Everything is “streamlined nowadays” he complains about the consumerist, mechanistic culture (p. 26). “Everything comes out of a refrigerator or squirted out of a tap or squeezed out of a tube” (p. 26). He finds it fish and is repulsed by the taste. He remembers something he read before about German food-factories “where everything’s made out of something else” (p. 27). He thinks this is the stuff “the modern world” is made of (p. 27). Orwell continues to use him to express his own discontent with postwar modern culture and frustration with modern life in general:

Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else. Celluloid, rubber, chromium-steel everywhere, arc-lamps blazing all night, glass roofs over your head, radios all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over, mock-turtles grazing under the neutral fruit-trees. But when you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a sausage for instance, that’s what you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting inside your mouth.

(Orwell 1939: 27-28)

He expresses nostalgia for the prewar Edwardian 1900s: “Is it gone for ever? I’m not certain. But I tell you it was a good world to live in. I belong to it. So do you” (Orwell 1939: 36). Hope becomes a belief in the healing power of time or in the potential recurrence of history.

George wins seventeen pounds at a race and decides to take a week’s vacation away from his family and the stifling materialism around him to go to Lower Binfield of his youth. “The very thought of going back to Lower Binfield had done me good already. You know the feeling I had. Coming up for air! ...We’re all stifling at the bottom of a dustbin, but I’d found the way to the top” (Orwell 1939: 198). He wants to go to the same pool he frequented more than twenty years ago as he misses the rural landscapes of England. Everything is changed, however. Lower Binfield is now an industrial, enterprising city, “buried somewhere in the middle of that sea of bricks. Of the five or six factory chimneys that I could see, I couldn’t even make a guess at which belonged to the brewery. Towards the eastern end of the town there were enormous factories of glass and concrete” (p. 211). The pool of his youth is gone and the town is changed often beyond his recognition. His stay there also witnesses an accidental bombing by the R. A. F. (263), which is prophetic about the threat of WWII. Many trees have been cut, and there are houses everywhere. In a small pool, the water is dirty and “looked kind of dead. No fish in it now” (p. 253). The pool he wanted was drained and made a rubbish-dump for
tin cans (p. 256). Everything was changed after the Great War. The narrator is left to his admonitions about the start of a new war soon and the domination of totalitarian regimes: “The bad times are coming, and the stream-lined men are coming too” and everything he is familiar with is going down “with the machine-guns rattling all the time” (p. 269). As for his wife Hilda, “even when the bombs are dropping she’ll still be thinking about the price of butter” (p. 270). The prophetic message of the book is incorporated within a critique of modernity. The “stream-lined men” George fears are the standardized, mechanical men we find in Babbitt and Brave New World. They are the products of technology and material progress. The novel’s social value is its assessment of its era between two World Wars.

In Babbitt (1922), Sinclair Lewis satirizes American enterprise culture and its lack of spirituality/morality. The novel satirizes American values like commercialism, boosterism, consumerism, salesmanship, success worship, and spiritual void. However, this satire is still normative/corrective because the novel’s titular hero and people like him are the specific butts of satire. By satirizing him, the novel also satirizes his conforming type of individuals without denying us a better lot in life. George F. Babbitt is the stereotypical middle-aged, middle-class, prosperous real-estate broker in a typical Midwestern metropolitan city called Zenith. Like other citizens in the rapidly industrializing Zenith, he is raised to believe in the middle-class standards of home life, conservative politics, lax morality, and material possessions. The money ethic governs his life. He is very conventional in his views, dress, gadgets, and aspirations, most of which taken from local newspapers. Babbitt becomes an American type, an idea of “Babbittry” associated with conformity to standards, slavery to machines, and loss of distinctive personalities in a consumerist business-driven culture. In so far as Babbitt is an idea and an attitude of middle-class boosterism rather than an individual, the satire is indirect and the satirical object is vague. The idea of Babbitry is exposed through what Babbitt and others like him say and do. So, Babbitt still engages our sympathy as a human type and a product of his commercial society. According to James Hutchisson, one problem Lewis tried to solve as he wrote Babbitt was “how to humanize a satirical character” (1992: 112). Nevertheless, Babbitt as a specific social type subjected to ridicule and capable of redemption has the non-conforming norm against which he can be judged and with which he can be compared. In this sense, the satire is normative/corrective because, unlike Brave New World, it compresses its satire in one
The most effective social criticism is found at the beginning. Babbitt, we know, is a grumpy balding man. The narrative introduces and follows him during a routine day. He is adept at making “nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay” (Lewis 1922: 2). He owns and worships a Ford, a motor-car as a favorite satirical target in modern satire. Like the standardized men in *Brave New World* who worship Ford as a deity, Babbitt is a “pious motorist” (p. 3) “whose god was Modern Appliances” (p. 5). He admires “all technical excellences” (p. 387). Mechanical devices are the symbols of truth and beauty. To him “as to the most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism. The office was his pirate ship but the car his perilous excursion ashore” (24). His alarm-clock is “the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial” (p. 3). His blanket for him is a symbol of “freedom and heroism” (p. 4). The gray suit he often wears “was well cut, well made, and completely undistinguished. It was a standard suit” (p. 9). His boots “were black laced boots, good boots, honest boots, standard boots, extraordinarily uninteresting boots” (p. 9). Everything around him is modern and standardized but everything is devoid of meaning. His large house, “like all houses on Floral Heights, an altogether royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile and metal sleek as silver” (p. 5). “Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this” (p. 15). It has all the latest appliances and electric devices. “In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home” (p. 15). But Babbitt is discontented with this life of appearances. The guest-towel in the bathroom: “It was a pansy-embroidered trifle which always hung there to indicate that the Babbitts were in the best Floral Heights society. No one had ever used it. No guest had ever dared to. Guests secretively took a corner of the nearest regular towel” (p. 6). When people are materialistic and self-seeking, they are dehumanized and dehumanize those around them; his wife: “was a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman, but no one, save perhaps Tinka her ten-year old son, was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive” (p. 7). As in *Brave New World*, literature has no place, art has no place, and religion becomes the gospel of salesmanship. Heroism is cutting off rival cars in the race to
the next light and finding a parking space or fooling a customer into a profitable deal or drinking bootleg whisky or stuffing oneself with food. These businessmen bully wives, show interest in other women, claim they are not race-prejudiced. Idealism is boosting the material progress of Zenith.

The drive for success and money is maddening. As in Brave New World, this world is made efficient yet spiritually empty by science. Babbitt swears faith not to God but to “business efficiency”, among other things, upon his reform and return to middle-class conventions (Lewis 1922: 388). Even God becomes a commodity, a brand name, to be vended by advertising methods. Materialism is the new surrogate for religion. From his house, he looks at the Second National Tower and beholds it “as a temple-spire of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men; and as he clumped down to breakfast he whistled the ballad ‘Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo’ as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble” (p. 13). Dr. Drew invites people to his “Salvation and Five Percent” church using the dollar ethic and preaches the gospel of salesmanship. Like religion, art is trivialized. Literary works are indistinguishable from commercial ads.

The Babbitts lead hypocritical lives. They scorn working classes yet try hard to associate with the aristocrats. When Babbitt takes a young woman out for dinner and she finds him a bore, he hypocritically decides to be moral. He is complacent in his prosperous life. He is grumpy, however, about his kids, their education, his business rivals, etc. In his discontent, he is similar to the discontented Alpha plus caste in Huxley. He suddenly becomes tired of this hypocritical life of conformity and decides to take a vacation with a discontented friend and booster called Paul Riesling, an artist/violinist who is also conforming and working instead in the tar-roofing business. He returns and is discontented with middle-class life but is again brought to conformity in the form of campaigning for a business friend for a mayor against a liberal lawyer, profitable and shady real-estate deals, the vice-presidency of the Booster’s Club, and speeches before prominent local gatherings. His friend rebels and shoots a nagging wife and ends up in prison. He tries then to revolt against social conformity by having a love affair with Mrs. Tanis Judique, an attractive widow who proves to be the fairy child of his dreams for a while, and her group the Bunch. Her group is a non-descript would-be bohemians. He then returns to liberalism after being impressed by a socialist lawyer. He once takes the side of underpaid workers on a strike, He also refuses to join the Good Citizens’ League, the Zenith
prosperous patriots who believe in unequal wealth yet a wholesome sameness in dress, thinking, morals, and language. “All of them agreed that the working-classes must be kept in their place; and all of them perceived that American democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals, and vocabulary” (p. 391). However, he finds extramarital sex disgusting. He is ostracized as heretic by all the right-minded citizens of Zenith, again like the exiled rebels in *Brave New World*. He finds the price of non-conformity too high for him and his business suffers by pressure from the Good Citizens’ League and business associates. His lunchmates in the Booster Club shun him as well.

His wife becomes sick, and he meekly returns to Zenith’s outlook once more, taking care of his wife and feeling a union with his city’s viewpoint. He becomes again part of the Good Citizens’ League and is accepted back in the Boosters’ Club and in the church. Upon his return to the Good Citizens’ League, he is again the old conforming type: “Within two weeks no one in the League was more violent regarding the wickedness of Seneca Doane, the crimes of labor unions, the perils of immigration, and the delights of golf, morality, and bank-accounts than was George F. Babbitt” (Lewis 1922: 390). By the end he is again secure and popular. He does not want to “endanger his security and popularity by straying from the Clan of Good Fellows” (p. 397). The prodigal son returns sheepishly to his kind. Hence, it is no wonder that Lewis dedicates the novel to Edith Wharton who wrote about stifling conventions and class standards. Babbitt then finds meaning in the humanist values of love, for his wife and family, and friendships. His inward hope for change out of this complacency is his son, Ted, who rebels against social expectations, leaving college and marrying hastily and deciding to be a mechanic. His father seems to support his son in this rebellion and wants him to do what he wants. He tells his son at the end: “I’ve never done a single thing I’ve wanted to in my whole life! I don’t know’s I’ve accomplished anything except just get along” (p. 401). He declares he is getting pleasure from his son’s decision to do what he wants. He tells him: “Don’t be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I’ve been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!” (p. 401). Humanist values of love and friendship seem to endure and solve problems; and hope, as in *The Age of Innocence*, is in the younger, more liberal generation. In setting a pattern of action one should follow or avoid, the novel is more grounded in the normative/corrective tradition of satire.
3. CONCLUSION

Modern satire remains a way of heightening our awareness about social ills, an antidote to absurdity and despair, and an essentially human way of confronting the evils of modernity. Its open-ended nature makes it more of an inquiry and provoking thought. When a shared sense of values and conduct was disrupted with changing times, modern satirists could not appeal clear norms against which folly or vice can be judged. These novels I have examined remain social documents with a social vision. They are novels of ideas. Hence, they deal less with internal reality as in the works of high modernism and more with what characters voice in terms of ideas about life. The satirical body of modernist literature is a sign of the social commitment of the modern novel, not its experimental form. If it does not drive us to action to address social ills, then satire remains true to its nature as a genre rooted in words and word play and conscious about its construction. If it is not directly moralistic and normative, it can be just subversive and attention grabber, i.e. merely reactionary within the textual realm of literature. As Richard Posner argues: “Satire tends, finally, to be topical. This makes it perilous to try to understand a satire without some knowledge of social conditions in the time and place in which it was written” (9). Satire is concerned with the external, the dehumanized mechanical surface of people, not their inward space. Whether normative or light, satire remains a powerful social genre offering a commentary about human life and societal interaction and capturing the spirit of its times.

REFERENCES


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