

Mina Loy's Sentimental Satire

ABSTRACT

Modernist writers infamously loathed sentiment. For Wilde and Joyce, sentiment amounts to unearned privilege; for Eliot and Pound, aestheticised sensations and emotions are ready indicators of bad, untimely art. So all-encompassing is this derision that in her essay *Narration*, Gertrude Stein argues that all written words since Shakespeare have been either sentimental or soothing. Stein's subtext is clear: high modernist writers are heroically alone in freeing themselves from tentacular sentiment.

Modernists are certainly not the first to shake off sentimental cling: in *Satire and Sentiment*, Claude Rawson discusses Jonathan Swift's belief that satire, aggressive by nature, is enfeebled by "fair-sexing", or writing directed at a culture of feeling. Rawson's work underscores Swift's now entrenched view that satire cannot withstand effeminacy, and thus died as a genre in the nineteenth century with the rise of the female writer, Romanticism, and, in turn, a wilfully emasculating Decadence.

By these terms, modernist satirists such as Wyndham Lewis restore satire to its sturdy origins: Lewis believes satire should concern itself with "exteriority," or the hard, external shell of human beings. By extension, Lewis is incensed by "interiority," a category that includes stream-of-consciousness writing and any preoccupation with emotion. Yet Lewis's *Tarr* concludes with his über-modernist protagonist marrying a woman to save her from the social disgrace of being pregnant and unwed, a traditional move Tarr stoutly, unabashedly defends as sentimental. In *Sentimental Modernism*, Suzanne Clark claims that sentiment replaces eroticism as the locus of obscenity in modernist literature. But if Clark is correct, why does sentiment surface so unremittingly and insistently in the work of even the most satirical of modernist writers?

This paper will explore Mina Loy's satire with a view to understanding how sentiment and satire can and do co-exist. Unlike most modernists, Loy does not resist, but openly borrows from her immediate society, sentimental Victorian forebears included; she also celebrates her peers, holding up Joyce, for instance, as an admirable satirist of all things British. Crucially, while Lewis insists upon maintaining the distance between satirist and satirised subject, Loy's poems, stories, and essays are rooted in a pursuit of proximity and emotionality, even as they excoriate the failure of intimacy in contemporary society. In other words, Loy inverts the satirical norm: while remaining hard-edged, her satire aims at life's viscerality with a view to forging a bond, not an enmity. In the process, Loy's satire demonstrates the pervasiveness and the persistence of satire into the twentieth century.