

Introduction: the ethics of indecency

In 1885, the crusading journalist William T. Stead used the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* to chronicle an investigation into an underground trade in young women. His “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” which ran from July 6 through the 10th, uncovered “a veritable slave trade” in English girls. With shocking subtitles such as “The Violation of Virgins,” the series pieced together interviews with brothel-keepers, prostitutes, and procurers, all of whom collectively explained how young girls were “snared, trapped and outraged, either under the influence of drugs or after a prolonged struggle in a locked room [...] from which they are never allowed to emerge until they have lost what woman ought to value more than life.”¹ The pinnacle of the first day’s account was “A Child of Thirteen Bought for £5.” According to Stead, a procurer purchased young “Lily” from drunken parents who were indifferent to their daughter’s fate. This parental apathy resulted in a detailed seduction scene set in a brothel, where Lily was put to bed:

She was rather restless, but under the influence of chloroform, she soon went over [...] All was quiet and still. A few moments later the door opened and the purchaser entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door. There was a brief silence. And then there rose a wild and piteous cry – not a loud shriek, but a helpless, startled scream like the bleat of a frightened lamb. And the child’s voice was heard crying, in accents of terror, “There’s a man in the room! Take me home; oh take me home!”

The narrative closed with a row of asterisks that left Lily’s violation to the imagination, but the return of the narrator confirmed readers’ worst suspicions: “And then all once more was still.”²

In publishing the scandalous record of his nightly forays into dens of vice, Stead joined other nineteenth-century reformers in what had become a popular form of social activism: reclaiming the nation’s “fallen women.” But Stead did more than had anyone else to draw the country’s attention to

the plight of prostitutes, and while his series had elements of the comic, it gave impetus to a powerful social movement that became one of British modernism's constant – if unwanted – companions.

The “Maiden Tribute” made Stead a celebrity. His series led to mass rallies and calls for government intervention; eventually, the outcry pushed through the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen and increased penalties for streetwalking and brothel-keeping.³ But Stead did not stop with legislation. He later arranged a conference on the subjects covered by the “Maiden Tribute” with a “practical program” of organizing “the Vigilance Association of London.”⁴ This Association – later known as the National Vigilance Association (NVA) – was determined to see the provisions of the new Act enforced. Stead argued that the government could not be trusted to protect the nation's purity on its own; the new tools of the state would only be employed if a vigilant public demanded action.

The National Vigilance Association had a family resemblance to an older Society for the Suppression of Vice (SSV), which had been formed in 1802. The NVA began with the Society's £50 bank balance and continued the previous organization's crusade against pornography.⁵ But the NVA, as well as other purity groups that sprang up in its wake,⁶ had new approaches and a broader scope than the SSV: women made up a number of the members and workers, giving the movement a “feminist” stamp; organizations attempted to offer positive alternatives to vice, such as purity speakers and chastity leagues; and most disastrously for modernism, social purity demanded that the arts be as pure as possible. “The Maiden Tribute” itself indicated that the purity movement would become a vigorous policeman of literature. When a few Members of Parliament questioned the propriety of Stead's revelations, the editor warned, “some of those who are now using the cant cry of decency [. . .] may perhaps discover before we have done that we are more keen to secure the suppression of obscene literature and the punishment of those who produce it than they may altogether relish.”⁷ In three years, Stead's crusade would put publishers and printers in the dock, a position they would periodically occupy through the middle of the twentieth century.

The social purity movement increased its power by working closely with government agencies and circulating libraries to suppress purportedly obscene literature. Although officials did not invariably act on purity organizations' many requests – indeed, one staff member confessed that “it is sometimes difficult to recognize them or work with them”⁸ – there was “a continuing close, and often symbiotic relationship between morality

pressure groups, church, and [the British] state.”⁹ This relationship had a profound impact on writers, creating what Virginia Woolf described as an atmosphere of “fear and suspicion.”¹⁰ This climate was produced through a wide range of events and activities; the archives of government offices and of social purity groups indicate that obscenity prosecutions were only one of the many repressive strategies available to censors. Between 1888 and the late 1930s, purity organizations and government censors pressured writers through visits and surveillance, public proclamations and warnings, and threatening letters as well as trials for obscene libel. In response to such activities, modernism simultaneously went on the defensive and attacked: authors produced numerous representations of “deviant” sexuality, but their works are also marked, for better and for worse, by a process I call the censorship dialectic.

In the aftermath of Stead’s revelations, modernist writers renewed and intensified British literature’s longstanding engagement with the “oldest profession.” Although the figure of the prostitute has peopled English writing from the time of Chaucer, modernist writers gave new intensity and new inflections to this character-type as historically specific forms of sexual and textual regulation came into play. Such representations became a means to confront censorship, in part because the purity movement framed so-called obscene literature and prostitution as overlapping issues. In 1910, purity groups sent representatives to “International Conferences on Obscene Publications and the White Slave Traffic” in Paris. The same representatives worked out agreements on texts and bodies because the two forms of “deviance” were perceived as involved in a vicious circle: reading obscene work was thought to lead to prostitution, while prostitution supposedly inculcated a desire to peruse obscene materials. The agreement on obscene literature that emerged from the conference followed “closely the lines of the Agreement of 1904 in regard to the White Slave Traffic,” and as the British government agreed to abide by both conventions, the linkages between prostitution and obscene literature became coded into law.¹¹ In the minds of reformers and officials, then, prostitution and obscenity were inextricable concerns because both were capable of corrupting the most vulnerable members of the public.

If moralists thought that texts and individuals could be accurately assessed and policed, modernism responded with representations that framed obscenity and deviance as being in the eye of the beholder. Representations of prostitutes became a means of blurring the boundary between vice and virtue upon which social purity and obscenity law relied. Writers

turned to the prostitute in particular because the figure codes deviant sexuality and thus implicitly opposes traditional values and behavior: an individual prostitute embodies sex outside of normalizing institutions such as the family or monogamous couple. Because a prostitute's body "speaks" deviant sex regardless of her actual behavior, this figure provided modernists with a wide range of representational possibilities.

Writers such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Bernard Shaw, and Woolf, who are among the key authors addressed in this study, could put the prostitute "on stage" and trust that the figure would implicitly signal sex. In such cases, the prostitute is a transgressive subject because she points toward an unrepresented – but unforgettable – deviance. The other writers whom I take up, James Joyce and Jean Rhys, chose to represent the prostitute's sexual behavior and her social position. Their characters have sex as well as allude to it through their identities; this more brazen artistic choice restricted the audiences these writers were able to reach and contributed to their subsequent reputations. The latter strategy risked prosecution, while the former could skirt censorship. In all cases, however, modernist texts remained under the threat of suppression.

The historical fact of modernism's repeated brushes with censorship is well known. The received notion is that modernism steadfastly opposed government censorship while reveling in its ability to *épater le bourgeoisie*. In this story, modernist writers are inevitably the heroes of their period's culture wars, and their works rarely suffer from confrontation with censorship.¹² This study argues that we have only told half the story of the relationship between modernism and censorship: in the context of British modernism, censorship was repressive and also had productive effects. Individual texts were enhanced as a result of the threat of censorship, and this threat enabled writers to construct public personae – such as that of martyr (as in the case of Rossetti) or *enfant terrible* (as in the case of Joyce) – that exercise a strong hold on the imaginations of readers even today.

As an ongoing negotiation between writers and the general public culture of repression, the censorship dialectic had a profound impact on modernism and modernist precursors like Rossetti: it forced writers to articulate their aesthetic and social goals; it led to the development of widespread self-censorship, which often resulted in aesthetic gains; and it contributed to the pervasive presence – both enlivening and politicized – of irony and satire in modernist works. This irony encouraged readers and theatre audiences to question the repressive culture that surrounded modernist writers, and it thus expresses an ethical and political dimension that modernism is often thought to lack. My excavation of the censorship

dialectic suggests that we should reconsider British modernist personae, texts and politics, all of which were profoundly altered by the culture of censorship, even as they intervened in and shaped it in contestatory ways.

As this study demonstrates, anticipated or actual censorship led many writers to put their artistic goals and practices before the public through various kinds of polemics. In some cases, these polemics took the form of direct appeals: Rossetti, Shaw, Woolf and Joyce all published articles, open letters or essays that criticized the censorious actions of publishers, reviewers and government officials. In these pieces, they defended individual works, their general approach, or other authors and predicted dire consequences for modern literature if censorship continued to be exercised. Indeed, these polemics position the writers as “modern” – as forward-thinking, ahead of their time, and cutting-edge – as a defense against charges of indecency, using terms associated with modernity (such as “progress,” “advanced,” and “modern” itself) to represent individual writers as prescient rather than pornographic. In other words, charges of indecency and obscenity both enabled and compelled artists to assert their modernity, to cast themselves as a vanguard. Such polemics also allowed writers to shape their public personae. By positioning themselves as anti-censorship, they appealed to like-minded readers and inscribed themselves in the social text as bold defenders of artistic freedom, a posture that concealed or obscured their many and varied acts of compliance with censorship and the moral standards of the purity movement.

These polemics are complemented and fortified by representations of censorship in modernist works themselves, which consider the impact of purportedly obscene texts on vulnerable readers and the proper limits of artistic expression. In the cases of Woolf and Joyce, the subjects of chapters 3 and 4 respectively, self-reflexive meditations on censorship implicitly support the writers’ artistic practices while also highlighting the threat that banning posed to modern literature and intellectual life. In contrast, allusions to censorship in the works of Rossetti and Rhys, discussed in chapters 1 and 5, expose the authors’ suspicion that representations of sexual deviance are indeed harmful to impressionable readers. The censorship dialectic, then, shaped modernism by encouraging or forcing writers to take up censorship as a theme in both their nonfiction prose and creative writings; it pushed writers to meditate on their own productions and to explain themselves in documents that provide vital insights into specific works and into modernism in general.

Writers could not, however, entirely manage or counteract the threat of suppression through polemics or fictional interventions, and in response to

official and market censorship, many writers censored their own works. Throughout this study, I draw on manuscripts, letters, diary entries, and other documents to demonstrate that modernism, as exemplified by my authors, was more likely to comply with the demands of the censors than to oppose them. Joyce remained the exception that proves the rule: in response to censorship, he deliberately increased his texts' offensive power, a strategy enabled by his geographic positioning outside of Great Britain and by the amount of patronage he enjoyed. Yet Joyce's strategies, and the more customary practice of self-censorship, suggest that modernism, as a cultural mode, was profoundly transformed by its emergence during a period of repression. Writers altered individual works or the general directions of their writing in response to acts of censorship and implied threats of a pervasive climate of regulation; indeed, this book argues that the modernism we know owes many of its trademark aesthetic qualities – such as self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and indirection – to censorship.

This argument does not diminish the very real effects following from the repressive acts of governments and moral reformers. Although censorship took a more benign form in Great Britain than it did in other parts of the world, notably the Soviet Union, my study attends to the shame, frustration, and anger experienced by individual writers, and I detail where and when authors' lives were permanently scarred by those who policed the nation's reading. At the same time, this book demonstrates that censorship had a hand in shaping the aesthetics of high modernism and that the specter of obscenity prosecutions pushed writers to develop or heighten the defining stylistic features we have come to associate with the movement.

Finally, in terms of my overall argument, this book contends that the censorship dialectic is in part responsible for the irony that pervades high modernism and that understanding the activities of government censors and social purity workers enables readers to perceive hitherto unrecognized satire in works such as Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, treated in chapter 2, and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*. Although scholars have long recognized irony as a dominant mode in modernism, we have not yet carefully delineated censorship and social purity as crucial factors in its extensive employment.¹³ The more familiar we become with the history of the purity movement and censorship, however, the more we notice that a broad range of modernist texts direct their keen wit at the officials and reformers responsible for repression. While such irony is often funny, it is also pointed and serious because government censorship prevented a full and free assessment of the normative values challenged by modernity. The

irony and satire in modernist texts thus created a space where community values might be reconsidered; at times, these modes offered implicit “lessons” in the need to revise outdated ethical and moral codes.

Indeed, a broader implication of this study is that when we unpack the satire in modernist texts, it becomes apparent that high modernism is polemical and didactic in ways that seem at odds with traditional understandings of modernism as primarily an aesthetic movement.¹⁴ Although we tend to think that modernists employed irony to achieve formal, epistemological or psychological ends, high modernism’s irony was also moralizing, politically and ethically responsive to an evolving public debate over changing standards of sexual conduct and representational rectitude. This type of engagement has seemed mainly the purview of Shaw, who asserted that great art is “intensely and deliberately” didactic in the preface to *Pygmalion*.¹⁵ *Pygmalion*, one of Shaw’s *less* didactic plays, provides a clue to the form that modernism’s didacticism takes: texts instruct covertly, where and when readers least expect education. And this distinctive style of subtle instruction is present in an extensive group of texts beyond those penned by Shaw.

As Paul de Man observed, irony forces readers into untenable ethical positions through “the structural interference of two distinct value systems.”¹⁶ Although de Man argues that irony can never adjudicate between these two positions,¹⁷ this impasse is not inevitable. Irony can instead, as Gary Handwerk suggests, “generate a hermeneutic chain of displaced comprehension” because whoever detects irony “necessarily sees differently” as a result.¹⁸ This “seeing differently” pushes readers to reevaluate the ideas subjected to irony and satire, and when multiple readers respond to these modes, texts can facilitate the formation of provisional communities receptive to change in sociopolitical norms of belief and behavior.

In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth argued, “every irony builds a community.”¹⁹ These “amiable communities,” as Booth calls them, can be built upon agreement with the implied author of a text: “all readers are invited to agree with whatever message they have discerned. Even the least didactic authors [. . .] even the purest poets, ask us to join them in whatever opinions, views, attitudes, or emotions they present or imply, and we have difficulty resisting a decision for or against them. [. . .] irony dramatizes this choice.”²⁰ Irony renders this choice dramatic precisely because it invites readers to take an interpretive stand *against* values and opinions that it subjects to humor. Modernism’s irony and satire thus engaged in a reverse pedagogy that worked as an effective ethical tool. By representing

the folly of reformers and government officials, modernist writings encouraged readers to position themselves in opposition to a range of assumptions and campaigns. This audience became the amiable community of anti-censorship and anti-purity readers, laughing together at the beliefs and practices they had learned to regard as wrong-headed.

Although Shaw alone claimed the banner of the didactic outright, a range of modernists seek to educate through the ironic treatment of repressive cultural activities. In Virginia Woolf's 1922 novel *Jacob's Room*, for example, the protagonist writes an essay entitled the "Ethics of Indecency" in response to the bowdlerizing of a scholarly edition.²¹ Although, as I discuss in chapter 3, Woolf satirizes the publishing practices of her time by arranging for this essay to be suppressed, the narrator endorses its central claims as "the truth." This episode takes on purity workers and censors by advancing a proposition they would have found incomprehensible: indecent representations can have an ethical component. Although Woolf's novel does not detail these ethics, interlocking interpretations suggest themselves: writers have a moral duty to represent what may seem indecent or obscene if it is part of lived experience, and indecent content may not corrupt readers, as purity workers and censors assumed, but instead lead them to ethical decisions and behavior. Woolf's novel claims that it is "a breach of faith" to refuse such ethics, a stance that highlights the stakes for writers and readers.²²

Modernism's ethics of indecency results in texts that prod readers to rethink their attitudes toward sexual deviance and to reject – or at least complicate – the binary of "pure" and "impure" upon which social purity, obscenity laws, and treatment of purported deviants were based. By placing purity sentiments in the mouths of unlikable or patently misguided characters, modernist writers mocked the purity movement. By revealing that strenuous moral dichotomies and hierarchies become unworkable in practice, they gently encouraged readers to refine their notions of vice and virtue. Although it is difficult to quantify the effect of these ethical prompts, modernism's irony and satire undoubtedly participated in – as well as reflected – the gradual evolution of moral standards that took place in the first half of the twentieth-century.

As will be closely delineated, through its implicit advancement of the ethics of indecency, modernism eventually helped to free itself from the pressure of censorship. For instance, the historical record indicates that government staff were less likely to move against literary texts after 1929. In March of 1930, the Home Secretary explained the new state of affairs to the Bishop of London, the titular head of the London Public Morality

Council: “whether we like it or not it must be admitted that the standard has changed [...] in recent years. No one would dream of prosecuting now some of the books which were condemned and destroyed not many years ago.”²³ Many factors contributed to the changing criterion, but modernism did its part to agitate against the inflexible values of the Home Secretary and Bishop. Through its irony and satire, modernism pushed readers to alter the internalized standards that they used to measure obscenity.

There are clear reasons that scholars have not hitherto recognized the ironic traces of an intricate dialogue among modernism, censorship, and social purity. As I write in my Afterword, most social purity campaigns and arguments had a short shelf-life, and even leaders of the movement tended to forget the criticisms and concerns of earlier decades. The actions and personalities of purity leaders and individual politicians have all but disappeared from our collective memory while specific campaigns and tactics have suffered similar fates. Indeed, the history of the social purity movement is often displaced by the vague conviction that “Victorian” activities died with the Queen in 1901. My work offers a more complete and complex account of the resistance to modernity contemporary with literary modernism.

Modernism’s irony and satire have also been underappreciated due to the inherent instability of these modes. As I argue throughout this book, modernist irony and satire often backfired. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, irony is “many-voiced play,” and as a result, multiple readers are unlikely to “hear” the play of voices in the same way.²⁴ Even when irony is so pervasive as to deserve the label satire, readers can misconstrue an author’s tone and perceive texts to advocate what they oppose. Anyone who has taught Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” has experienced this phenomenon, and while educated readers are unlikely to read ironic texts literally, even the most alert will overlook instances of irony if they are unfamiliar with the background text or genres in question. The passage of time thus occludes the irony and satire of all but the most outrageous of texts; while we can still tell that Swift was not in favor of consuming the children of the Irish poor, the irony of other literary works – even those closer to our own period – has faded because it was contingent upon ephemeral phenomena.

If readers have overlooked or underestimated the irony modernist works direct at the purity movement and government censorship, writers sometimes created ironies that collapse due to the proximity of individual works to background texts. Writers who have had a nuanced understanding of social and political issues seem to be particularly vulnerable to unstable

irony, a mode that lends itself less to nuanced critique than to complete disagreement. Modernism's didacticism is compromised at times by an apparent concession that government censors and social purity workers may have been right in some fundamental assumptions: obscene representations might corrupt some readers, upper-class men might prey on working-class women, and women who fell into prostitution might be unable to extricate themselves. Such compliance with the assumptions of reformers and censors points to the deeply rooted beliefs that modernism confronted as it advanced the ethics of indecency. It also registers tensions between the values and material circumscription of modernity: although writers knew that the slackening of traditional morals provided new freedoms, such as opportunities for travel and sexual experimentation, to privileged individuals, they were also aware that economic and other inequalities limited the number of people who could enjoy these fruits of modernity.

My first chapter engages the work of an important modernist precursor, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Twentieth-century writers disagreed about the quality and import of Rossetti's work, yet biographies, essays, and poetry underline his position as a cautionary figure for modernism. Rossetti's experience of writing about sexually transgressive women launched him into an early – and disastrous – experience of the censorship dialectic as he worked and reworked his poetry and persona in an attempt to cultivate and placate resistant audiences. Rossetti prefigures the problems writers such as Shaw, Woolf, Joyce, and Rhys would experience when writing about similar topics, but his experience was also different from theirs in that Rossetti wrote before the rise of the modern purity movement and thus engaged censorious readers before there was a public debate over the boundaries of artistic expression. In this first chapter, I uncover the neglected historical context for Rossetti's revision and publication of "Jenny" and *The House of Life*, and I read his collapse in the wake of the "Fleshly School of Poetry" controversy as an example of the concrete costs exacted by moral conservatives and the threat of obscenity laws. As modernism's bogey, Rossetti emblemizes the "fear and suspicion" (in Woolf's phrase) that his successors felt when they confronted censorship.

If Rossetti emerges as a victim of a repressive culture, Bernard Shaw, the subject of chapter 2, demonstrates that a writer could manipulate the censorship dialectic to his advantage in the decades after Rossetti's death. Although Shaw was an early proponent of the social purity movement (and of Stead's "Maiden Tribute" in particular), he quickly discovered that his overtly didactic plays would be kept off the stage if he confronted audiences