

Satire and irony in the
1930s: resistance to
ideological
commitment in 'novel
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Many critics would define Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* as being aligned with feminist politics. Her decision to satirize the patriarchal, domestic-centred expectations of 1930s women, and the media that propagated said expectations, arguably gives the text a significantly pro-feminist bent. Though Smith didn't identify with the specific feminism of her era, the complex characterization and the free narrative voice that she imbues her protagonist with are recognisably revolutionary for female characters of 1930s literature. One can also note Smith's own position as a woman in the 1930s and locate the anxieties this position would engender throughout the text. Yet, Smith also has Pompey espouse several misogynistic viewpoints throughout the text as well, supposedly undermining the initial categorization of *Novel on Yellow Paper* as a feminist text. Pompey continually mocks and satirises the voices of her female contemporaries and perpetuates a stereotype of womankind rooted in inherent stupidity and inadequacy. Some would argue, that the harsh and violent language and imagery directed towards women throughout the narrative fundamentally undermines any feminist interpretation of the text. An argument can be made that to try and align the text with any form of political ideology is fruitless. Pompey's eclectic voice and character taking precedence over any political commitment, so it can be posited that the novel inherently resists any ideological classification, whether it concerns sexual politics or any other conflict of ideas.

One can locate a feminist political bent throughout *Novel on Yellow Paper* through the cutting parody of the patriarchal expectations of woman in the 1930s, primarily focused on the media that extolled this idealised image of

being a wife and mother. Though she lived during an era where “ Marriage was seen as the normal state, the only ambition for all young girls,”[1] Smith’s expresses a highly cynical view of the institution. ...it certainly takes a strong heart and high fettle not to get cynical when the girl friend turns up at last and doesn’t want anything, no nothing but a home and a b-a-b-y. Smith’s further mocks the domestic ideals expected of 1930s through her emulation of the tone and language used by the lifestyle magazines of the period, “ These girls believe everything our contributors tell them. They put a spot off scent behind the ear, they encourage their young men to talk about football, they are Good Listeners, they are Good Pals, they are Feminine, they Let him Know they Sew their own Frocks, they sometimes even go so far as to Pay Attention To Personal Hygiene.” This criticism is obviously informed by Smith’s own experience of working as secretary for the owner of a major magazine publisher and her relationship with several influential woman editors such as Narcissa Crowe-Wood at Newnes, Kay Dick the first woman director in English publishing and Norah Smallwood at Chatto and Windus.[2] Severin argues that these connections endowed Smith with, a lively understanding of a largely masculinist industry that continued to dictate the tastes of its lowbrow and middlebrow women’s readership, while retaining the privilege and power associated with ‘ high’ art production.[3] This ‘ understanding’ is evident in the novel’s scathing characterisation of the male writers, specifically, “ the man who read Swinburne.” A writer whom Smith describes as conforming to the male-centric literary standard of the era, “ Very pat he was with these old masculine phrases,” and literate “ He’d even heard of A. Huxley, D. H Lawrence and Les Sitwells.” Yet, his primary form of employment is as “ A Lady Novelist...he was writing those

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chic little middles for girlies' papers." Through this parodic figure Smith identifies the idealised and oppressive feminine ideal as being engineered entirely by a patriarchal force. Moreover, through this pathetic, neutered character with " thinning grey hair" Smith highlights the stupidity and unfairness (" that makes me cold and furious") of having a female narrative curated by a man. This satiric, and highly critical dissection of idolized female gender roles through the lens of the types media aimed towards women, is a distinctively feminist criticism. Thus, it is not inaccurate to argue that the novel favours a feminist political ideology.

However, it can be argued that to assign this book " feminist" characteristics can be conceived as problematic, due to Smith's refusal to identify herself as one. In a statement relating to the politics of Rebecca West, Smith is keen to avoid the term, I would not call Miss West a feminist, because this suggests - and is meant - an aggrieved and strident person. I would say, she is on the side of women. Moreover, Smith's cynical view of feminism is obvious through the mercantile lens through which Pompey views the woman who buy the lifestyle magazines that espouse the domestic ideal: And are the public on whom we rely to buy and read our two-penny weeklies...And that, Sir, is why we are able to pay a 15 per cent dividend on our ordinary shares and 10 per cent on the 2nd prefs[4] In this passage " Pompey's scathing language soon blends into the language of the patriarchal capitalist,"[5] and her opinions become indistinguishable from the male literary figures she has satirized, arguably eroding the potency of said satire. Furthermore, an aversion to feminism is evident in her sustained, borderline misogynistic, parodying of women's voices throughout the text. When she discusses the "

cheerful buyer of the two-penny weeklies,” she uses violent imagery, “ They ought to be drowned, they are so silly and make lamentation, and are wet and are a burden.” Smith endows her heroine with a deep vein of snobbery towards woman who read frivolously, that tends to border on hatred and clashes with any superficial feminist reading of the text. Conversely, she also expresses a certain distaste towards the idea of the cultured, intellectual woman “ Oh how I dread those cultured gentlewomen, like you get so many in America...Oh it is a pity such people learnt to read.” Severin’s diagnoses the source of Smith’s aversion to feminism relates to her class status, Smith’s lower-middle-class background put her at odds with the middle-class and upper-middle-class women whose goal, advancement in the professions, she vaguely saw as self-serving and masculinist.[6] Yet no woman, regardless of intelligence or class is safe from Pompey’s mocking. Even her aunt, whom Pompey idolises constantly calling her “ the lion” is subject to jest. Pompey attacks her appearance when she describes her as looking like “ a fish” and “ so extremely funny I must not laugh.” By rooting her parody of woman in the caricature’s perpetuated by misogyny and portraying women as either intellectually inferior, selfish or simply unattractive any feminist interpretation of the text is undermined. Moreover, this case of warring political opinions within Pompey’s characterisation is not just isolated to the subject of gender roles. Though she is critical of the “ wicked cruelty” she witnesses towards the Jewish population of Germany subjecting, she herself is prone to anti-Semitism. A party attended majorly by Jewish people, makes her feel like “ the cleverest goy in the world.” Though she later expresses regret of her views after her visit to Germany, “ I felt real wicked the way I had felt about the Jews myself,” she soon lapses back into <https://assignbuster.com/satire-and-irony-in-the-1930s-resistance-to-ideological-commitment-in-novel-on-yellow-paper/>

using anti-Semitic stereotype of the money-grabbing Jew when she describes the Jewish husband of a friend as, ...the sort of Jew not like Hermann or Bennie that has an artistic temperament working overtime on -all cylinder, but just a plain ordinary safe business-man of a Jew with a whole hell of a great idea about money. Political duality and fluidity, fuelled by the Smith's need to satirize anything and everything, is endemic to the character of Pompey, and thus therefore endemic to the text. Thus, generating a confusing political landscape for the reader to navigate.

A further argument can be made that Smith's satire is not just undermined by her disparate choice of political targets, but also due the sympathetic characterisation of Pompey. Smith engineers this sympathy through the distinctive, stream of consciousness, narrative style of the novel. By utilising the colloquialisms and cadences of the era, one can argue that Smith is presenting an unflattering satire of the voices of her female contemporaries: Here am I on a fine day in October riding along the Row with Leonie. Well, please do not think that I have a lot of money. But here I am all the same. And who is paying. Well, partly it is like this... The narrative's unreliability and propensity for digressions could be interpreted as reflecting a misogynistic caricature of womanhood - " I certainly have a flippant and frivolous mind...I certainly am fundamentally not serious." There seems to be an expectation that the opinions she expresses are not to be taken seriously regardless of their politics due to an innate frivolity. Yet, it would be inaccurate to define the text as a work of pure satire, unconcerned with aligning itself with any political cause, feminist or otherwise. Pompey's inner monologue is far too sympathetic to be reduced to a silly satirical figure.

Rather than being a derisive vocal imitation, it is “inspired and distinctive chatter. It darts and swoops from incident to incident, from lyrical and poignant to the comic, colloquial and sometimes cruel.”[7] Her humorous tone and repeated fourth wall breaks to the reader, which are nearly always apologies “And you Reader, whom I have held by the wrist and forced to listen, I am full of regret for you, because I have forced you to listen to this,” manipulate the reader’s sympathies. Moreover, Smith peppers the text with moments of vulnerability, for example, Pompey’s re-telling of her mother’s sickness and eventual death positions the audience as the privileged confidante instead of a mocking bystander.

The similarity between the character of Pompey and Smith herself further blurs the distinction between satire and seriousness. Pompey works the same job as Smith and shares several similar personality quirks.[8] This complexity and intersection with Smith’s own identity makes it hard for the audience to identify a specific political or moral leaning. It would seem counter-intuitive to use such a sympathetic narrator, whose personality greatly reflects that of the author’s, as a vehicle for satire. The audience would feel emotionally pressured to agree with the narrator’s questionable views. For example, Pompey’s belief that “it is a wise thing that every intelligent sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide.” Though this opinion is undeniably controversial, because it is ensconced in a humorous and conversational tone the reader is inclined to agree with Smith. Or at least, not take her seriously. Spalding argues that Smith’s decision to generate a narrative with a constantly shifting style was a deliberate reaction to the cold, distant narration of her predecessors,

Pompey's interior monologue has an effervescent naturalness; she flirts with her readers, takes them into her confidence, rebuffs them, the book having an openness and immediacy that Virginia Woolf's prose does not allow.[9] Smith main thematic concern revolves not around feminist or anti-feminist politics. She "...was aware of the ideology of domestic and its potential dangerous effect on women"[10] and wanted to explore how the effect of this propaganda had on the female identity. The fluidity of Pompey's political biases is predicated on a familiar narrative conceit employed by Smith, in which she has, " Smith has her characters begin by agreeing with socially accepted opinions, only to gradually change their minds through the process of reflection." [11] Pompey's constant flip-flopping concerning politics reflects her continued identity crisis. A crisis evident in the descriptors she applies to herself - " chimara", " a ghost" - she even identifies herself with the " double facing, looking both ways" Hermes. Smith's distinctive narration ultimately reflects the fracturing of Pompey's identity. Ultimately, Smith's main textual concern is Pompey's narrative journey, it takes precedence over any of the text's political satire.

However, the complexities and contradictions of Pompey's characterization are not entirely incompatible with Smith's mocking of the societal expectation for woman of her era. One can identify this in the structure of the novel. Smith initially sets up a romantic love triangle between Pompey, her fiancé Freddy and her German ex-lover Karl - yet she defies the normative romantic structure by not only choosing to have Pompey reject both potential suitors, but also by denying the audience any true narrative closure. The audience never discovers whether she chooses to marry or not,

as the final passage devolves into Pompey recounting an extract from an obscure, half-remembered play, and a vivid suicide fantasy. Smith predicts the reader's expectation of a romantic narrative and subverts it. A literary conceit that functions to both present her narrator has complex, as well as satirizing the romantic expectations put forth by the media era. It can be posited that this anti-structuralist interpretation of satire positions Smith's gender politics as more similar to third generation feminism, "those who oppose the rigidity of social constructions of gender,"[12] cementing Smith's gender beliefs as "unquestionably radical, given the time period in which she began writing.[13] This classification of Smith being 'beyond her time' is bolstered by her conversational, narrative style which is most often associated with male anti-heroes of later literary works, such as Catcher in the Rye's Holden Caulfield, or the post-modern rambling style popularized by the works of Hunter S. Thompson. Smith pre-dates these writers by several decades, yet her narrative style seems refreshing and empowering in comparison due to her utilising such a narrative technique to portray a morally complex inner voice. Her refusal to cement a political or moral affiliation for Pompey, and furthermore, provide her with controversial and borderline offensive opinions prevents valorisation, which Smith "deplored... as she understood such a move to be continuation of the Victorian separation of spheres." This type of complexity is not always afforded to women characters and is rooted in a certain type of feminism that Smith predates, thus the reason why we have trouble locating her politics.

Though the satirical elements Smith employs presents supposedly disparate and contradictory viewpoints concerning the gender politics of 1930s Britain,

this is the result of a purely superficial reading of the text. When, Smith's satire is taken into context with the narrative and structural techniques that are integral to *Novel on Yellow Paper*, one becomes aware of a more nuanced criticism of gender being put forward. A criticism that is keen to highlight the absurdity surrounding the era's limited domestic ambitions expected of woman, and also to locate the structural powers that uphold such expectations. Which Smith does by having her flawed and complex narrator express misogynistic opinions and uphold the oppressive attitudes which maintain the position of woman as the inferior sex. Thus, the author is able to reveal to the audience a feminist critique that interrogates structural forces that pressured woman to remain in the domestic sphere more effectively than a superficial parody would. Such a satirical conceit belongs to an ideology that Smith precedes historically, and rather than obscures or undermines the pro-woman politics of Smith, it instead cements the novel's position on gender politics as decisively radical.

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