

Humoring the Context, Contextualizing Humor in the Short Fiction of Lorrie Moore

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Abstract

Talking about the revolutionary power of women's laughter, Jo Anna Isaak affirms that "the crisis of authority and value," that is symptomatic of postmodernism, has been "instigated largely by a feminist deployment of laughter." Since the 1980s, women's humor discourse has become part of a rapidly growing corpus of works by contemporary writers who engage a wide variety of comic techniques in order to explore alternative forms of resistance to mechanisms of control and containment.

*The argument behind this paper is to show how the American short story writer, Lorrie Moore (b-1957) uses humor as a subversive tool, a way of confronting tragedy and a vehicle to critique various psychological, social, and political issues about women's lives. Her collections of short stories, namely *Self-Help* (1985), *Like-Life* (1990), *Birds of America* (1998), and *The Collected Stories* (2008), provide alternative ways of thinking about the humorous texts by examining their contexts—not just their contents. Analysed contextually, Moore's "comic" stories emerge as forms of human communication whose con/textual implications are startling, engaging, and profound.*

Keywords: postmodern short story, women's humor, comic narrative, subversive humor, contextualized humor, female identity.

“We are losing our sense of humor...the last thing to be lost, after hope.”
Luisa Valenzuala

In her introduction to *The Signet Book of American Humor*, Regina Barreca, a leading theorist in the field of humor, argues that “women’s comic stories subvert the condition traditionally regarded as a prerequisite for humorous narrative: the assumption of a consensus-opinion or shared values.” According to Barreca, the word “humor” as distinguished from “comedy,” applies to “those specific textual strategies where the refusal to take serious matters seriously is rendered explicit” (2). The best American humor that women can produce, Barreca explains “isn’t about jokes, it’s about stories.” Women’s humor is about “our vision of life, loss, refusal, and recovery” (xxi).

Like all forms of communication, humor requires context: Almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humor. Indeed, out of all the textual territories explored, comedy, as Barreca claims in her book *Untamed and Unabashed*, is “the least universal” because it is “rigidly mapped and marked by subjectivity.” It is most liable to be “filtered” by history, social class, age, race, ethnicity, and of course gender (12). Women have a tradition of using humor to survive what is often a hostile environment. In most cultures, women were outside the locus of power and authority; they were not allowed the capacity of humor, with its implications of superiority and its fundamental critique of social, political, and cultural reality.

Recently, however, feminist critics have evolved more complex ways of analyzing the relationship between women and laughter. In its most radical function, women’s laughter attempts destruction, as Hélène Cixous describes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”: “A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic.” In fact, many women writers use humor to disrupt, unsettle, and rebel against patriarchal and cultural constrictions on women’s lives. By using the medium of the humorous discourse, many contemporary American women writers of fiction present their perceptions of and commentary on contemporary culture. Their humor functions both as a technique for questioning basic assumptions, and a tactic of cultural as well as textual resistance. “It’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (Cixoux 258). Thus, humor, for these writers, contains a diversity of elements and calls for a complex response.

Women writers of humor subvert the authoritative discourse by presenting a multiplicity of ways that humor can mean. Their wit has always been a carefully executed writing strategy used to shape and control their fiction. Refusal is at the heart of such works, which carry powerful messages of dissent. In their narratives, the main character often learns to distrust and refuse to participate in the system of shared values. This process, as feminist writers and critics maintain, disrupts and rebuilds, destroys and creates simultaneously. Hence, women’s humor is often elusive, evasive, and subversive. It focuses mainly on the female experience, and centers around such themes as feeling trapped, anger as projected outward and inward, and the quest for freedom, identity, power, and self-expression.

In her fiction, American short story writer, Lorrie Moore (b-1957) offers her readers a comic and decidedly dark catharsis. Her books unfold a startlingly brilliant series of portraits of the

unhinged, the lost, and the unsettled of American society. They tell varied stories about sadness, crisis and death. Lorrie Moore, considered by many critics as the best voice of her generation, is admired for her biting glances at American culture as she seems to be almost exclusively fascinated with broken, suffering and depressed people. Accordingly, her adroit portraits of places and people reflect her overarching artistic purpose, which she had described as “trying to register the way we, here in America, live” (2008). In fact, her characters’ personal dramas are enacted against a recognizably American backdrop made up of a multitude of details, allusions, and conversations (Vietnam War, Gulf War, 9/11 attack, etc). Throughout her work, it is apparent that her dark humor, and the pain it masks, is part of her intense contemplation of contemporary existence. Besides, her characters and narrators use comic expressions, jokes, and an entire collection of humorous effects to amplify, underline, and sharpen the points they make.

Writing humorously can be an act of survival and self-empowerment, a new power for women through their manipulation of literary language. Employing insights from psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and cultural criticism, Moore’s short fiction can be analyzed as a “comic” examination of futility and desperation, where humor operates largely to contextualize the issues and emotions that are explored in each story without the mawkishness that frequently pervades “problem” fiction.

In her first collection, *Self-Help*, published in 1985, Moore probes the pleasures and pains of modern relationships, offering poignant yet wickedly funny advice on how to survive several psychological crises of loss and love. In nine captivating stories, the author presents characters that will become typical in her work: individuals, usually women, who are sarcastic, witty, and secretly vulnerable. The title of the collection—“Self-Help” reflects the idea behind it: to adapt the prolific American self-help literature designed “to coach readers in self-fulfillment and good management of careers, love affairs, marriages, and family relationships” (Alison Kelly *Understanding Lorrie Moore* 21). All the stories in this collection offer sarcastic commentaries on the 1980s trend of books on self-improvement, sexual guidance, and popular psychology. Moore’s reworking of the genre is, of course, ironic and parodic, and much of the “putative advice dispensed by her narrators is highly subversive” (Kelly 21).

Thus, various female characters in this collection mimic certain cultural scripts that have confined them: horoscopes, advice columns, advertisements, and recipes. Their voice mocks the clichés of the cultural script even while it repeats it, thus generating a kind of “hysteria of resistance”. In these stories, oppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions. In this collection, Moore advises on “How to Be an Other Woman,” “How to Talk to Your Mother,” “How to Become a Writer,” and even simply “How,” a title that leaves the focus of its advice open. Irony pervades the narrator’s tone and storyline: the narrators are supposed to be addressing themselves, but after a while, it’s hard not to feel that it is the reader who is being hectored.

In “How to Be an Other Woman,” Moore’s first story in *Self-Help*, the style is modeled on an instruction manual, filled with lists and witty snatches of dialogue. The protagonist, a smart, single woman is “technically... still a secretary for Karma-Kola,” but she wonders repeatedly who she is as she becomes enmeshed in an affair with a married man who seems to be completely ignorant or unaware of the complexity of emotions that a woman might experience in such a frail

relationship. The story is written in the imperative: "Meet in expensive beige raincoats, on a pea-soupy night... Draw a peace sign. You are waiting for a bus." Later, in her description of a love encounter between the protagonist and her married lover, the narrator uses a language brimming with irony and sarcastic humor:

He tells you his wife's name. It is Patricia. She is an intellectual property lawyer. He tells you he likes you a lot. You lie on your stomach, naked and still too warm. When he says, "How do you feel about that?" don't say "Ridiculous" or "Get the hell out of my apartment." Prop your head up with one hand and say: "It depends. What is intellectual property law?" (4)

The same style is employed in several other scenes in the story, displaying a distanced, ironic narration in sharp contrast with the emotional upheaval of the events being narrated. Moore's characters are often at odds with the roles in which they find themselves and with the expectations of families and spouse; they are uncomfortable even with their names, the most obvious marker of their identities. In "Community Life," a story in *Birds of America* (1998), one protagonist, Olena, resists the efforts of her Romanian parents to Americanize her name to "Nell," but it is only after her parents have died that she realizes that her legal name "Olena" is an anagram of the word "alone," emblemizing the role of outcast that her ethnic heritage creates for her. This story is illustrative of most of Moore's work: it is the narrative of a woman ill-at-ease in her world, "searching for a place in a 'community' from which she feels physically, emotionally, or creatively exiled" (Karen Weekes 118). Olena's crisis of identity acquires ridiculous proportions when she becomes paranoid, a recluse "afraid of going out... the fear gripping her face when she was there, as if people knew she was a foreigner and a fool" (69). What's even more disturbing is the protagonist's awareness of the community's hypocrisy. The narrator makes use of a surprising and incongruous mixture of statements that create a sense of comic relief amid this bleak image of social inadequacy:

This lunge at moral fastidiousness was something she'd noticed a lot in people around here. They were not good people. They were not kind. They played around and lied to their spouses. But they recycled their newspapers! ("Community Life," 73)

In fact, Moore's women are haunted by an incessant dread of failure or, worse, a sense of guilt. This "fear of misspent life" (98) causes perpetual pain for Moore's main characters. They all undergo very hard moments of self-judgment or self-evaluation, which all lead to an obscure sense of guilt, despondency, and defeat. "It is like having a degree in failure," one character says. In a particularly gloomy scene of "Community Life," Olena is seized by a despicable sense of grief and fragmentation rendered in a playful, obscure, but accurate metaphor: "Olena! Alone! It was a body walled in the cellar of her, a whiff and forecast of doom like an early, rotten spring" (74). In such stories, the language of epiphany is less telling than the language of the labyrinth. "What has happened to me?" the protagonist of "How To Be an Other Woman" asks herself in shock. In store windows as she catches a glimpse of her face, she is caught with a disturbing sense of estrangement: "You don't recognize yourself, you are another woman, some crazy interior display lady in glasses... Wonder who you are?" (5-8).

In several of Moore's stories, emotion is expressed by inadequate words and inadequate gestures. What is important in Moore's fiction is psychological states, the individual's response to

events and other persons. Wordplay, redundancy, and aesthetic punning act as running commentaries on her text—to her readers and to the whole culture she addresses. Being a mistress is “like constantly having a book out from a library,” (5) the narrator ironically says on behalf of Charlene, the female protagonist of “How to Be an Other Woman,” (6), a story that illustrates this sense of discrepancy between women’s dreams and ambitions in life and their distressed reality. When she discovers that she is not her lover’s only mistress, Charlene realizes that a man will not be her salvation. “When you were six you thought mistress meant to put your shoes on the wrong feet,” the narrator sarcastically addresses the protagonist (and the reader); “Now you are older and know it can mean many things, but essentially it means to put your shoes on the wrong feet....” (5). The shoe image is very effective in transmitting a sense of unexpectedness and incongruity, especially, in conveying the protagonist’s sense of disillusionment and disenchantment with love. Moore’s immediate attention to “the wrong shoes put on the wrong feet,” a material emblem of a specific time and place, also serves to set the ironic tone of absurd tragedy and painful humor in the piece.

Moore’s characters suffer from “the wrenching incompatibility of [a woman’s] professional and artistic expression with the familial commitments” (Moore, 2004, 16). There is, indeed, a direct correlation between the theme of the frustrated quest for self-creation and the narrative form employed to convey that theme. In “How to Become a Writer,” another story in *Self-Help*, Moore advises: “First, try to do something, *anything else*” (emphasis added). Later, she addresses the frustrations of pursuing this vocation. Again, the style is instructive, and the protagonist seems reluctantly propelled into creative writing and arrives at realizations such as “Writers are merely open, helpless texts with no real understanding of what they have written and therefore must half-believe anything and everything that is said of them” (124). Moore’s lovely sentences, ludicrous puns and wisecracks stick to the memory like song lyrics. Her prose is “fancy without being schmancy,” to borrow one of her lines. Furthermore, “How to Become a Writer” examines the incompatibility of the public and the private, the artistic and the personal, and the contradictions that are part of the paradox. In *The Atlantic Monthly* Moore asserts that “the artistic self—devious, ironic, and isolated—resides at odds with the tender lover self in the same finely driven person”. Moore is hardly the first writer to worry about this conflict and the ensuing incongruity in women’s lives, but she is one of the most explicit in noting its obscenity, as well as its almost “comedic insolvability” (Moore 31).

In Moore’s stories, there is always that quickness of movement and slightly skewed narrative perspective that keeps the reader alert and a little uneasy. In other words, we can join Suzanne Juhasz’s contention that “in their form, women’s lives tend to be like the stories that they tell: they show less a pattern of linear development towards some clear goal than one of repetitive, cumulative, cyclical structure” (241). As a narrative device, humor has enabled the writer to challenge the limits of realism by using irony, satire, and the grotesque to mock traditional notions of linear plot, closure, narrative omniscience, and reliable interpretation. In fact, the chronology of the structure of a Moore story is nonlinear and sometimes, cyclic, and therefore flexible. The lack of conclusion in most of her short stories is allied to a lack of exciting intrigues, a refusal to write of the great themes of man’s destiny. Some of her stories are grotesque as she blends humor and horror and writes about the dissolution of familial order, the complications and contradictions of contemporary women’s lives, and people’s multiple physical and psychological afflictions.

In her second short-story collection, *Like Life* (1991), Moore presents a broader range and more complex emotions than *Self-Help*, and the narratives are more self-reflexive, probing deeper into the condition of life. Moore's objects of study range from a woman having affairs with two men ("Two Boys") to an examination of a pestilential urban hell ("Like Life"). Yet the work continues to reflect the author's focus on women's experiences and dark humor. John Casey described it as a mix of "comedy and sadness, wisecracks and poignancy" (3). The people in *Like Life* share a disbelief in what their lives have become and a terror of how they have lost control of their fate. A cheese store manager, whose only companion is her cat says, "You could look at your life and no longer recognize it" ("Joy" 50). A young woman torn between two boyfriends has a "subtle" nervous collapse and cannot comprehend how she ended up in this place in her life. "How did one's eye-patched rot-toothed life," she wonders, "lead one along so cruelly, like a trick, to the middle of the sea?" ("Two Boys" 18). Mary, the female protagonist of "Like Life," reaches a state of terrible desperation as "she felt a distrust of her own life," and explodes: "This is not life. This is something else" (157-58).

With Moore, the comic—one might recall John Lowe's words—"walks a narrow line between pleasurable surprise and uncomfortable shocks." Indeed, the surprise is one of the fundamental and most charmingly effective characteristics of Moore's humor. Indeed, "if a short story does not contain some element of surprise," Moore states in *The Booklist Interview*, "then it won't contain life" (403). Surprise is entwined in expectations and misdirection, and Moore's interweaving of biting humor with serious appraisals of relationships or even lives coming apart distinguishes her as an innovative and experimental short story writer. A pervasive irony runs through most of her stories, which manage to be both heartfelt and humorous at the same time. The techniques of colloquial dialogue, repetition, wordplay, and attention to tiny details are used in her stories to cover the same themes: the constant search for love and the impossibility of communication and hope.

"Paper Losses," the first story in *The Collected Stories* (2008) opens unexpectedly: "Although Kit and Rafe had met in the peace movement, marching, organizing, making no-nukes signs, now they wanted to kill each other" (3). Here, Moore addresses one of her most insistent and recurrent themes: divorce. She sarcastically leads the reader to the bitter realization that human relationships are, ultimately, nothing but painfully fragile and forever flickering. She offers a striking picture of how divorce can have destructive repercussions on a woman's life. Kit, the female protagonist of "Paper Losses" receives the divorce papers sent by her husband "suggesting their spring wedding anniversary as the final divorce date" (6). Surprisingly, Kit's inner turmoil and intense anger are imparted in a mordant and comic language that testifies to the incongruity and the absurdity of her situation: "The papers referred to Kit and Rafe by their legal names, Katherine and Raphael," the narrator sarcastically comments, "as if the more formal versions of them were divorcing—their birth certificates were divorcing!" (6).

Alternately hilarious and distressing, Moore's world, with its small, obscure, and sometimes violent corners, is a revelation of a specific element of human experience: the impossibility of life without pressure, tedium, surprise, paradox, and humor. Even more interesting is that the anguish Moore's characters feel and seek to overcome is comic because it is expressed in terms of the insignificant. Yet the emotional impact of their inner desolation is expressed in very profound humor. "You read Lorrie Moore and it's like, joke, joke, joke," humorist David Sedaris says, "but

by the time you get to the end, you are devastated.” Moore writes with extraordinary perception, wit, and exceptionally original language. No single emotion is spared, and yet all is funny as well:

They [Kit and Rafe] spawned and raised their hate together, cardiovascularly, spiritually, organically. In tandem, as a system, as a dance team of bad feeling, they had shoved their hate center stage and shone a spotlight down for it to seize. Do your stuff, baby! Who is the best? Who's the man? (“Paper Losses,” 3)

Moore excels at painting the “white space” between characters. Her talent for delineating and amplifying gaps—accenting the isolation not only between people, but also between a character and her own emotions—makes her characters orphaned observers of their own painful experiences. But there is something sadder and wearier about these characters, a realization, as they drift toward middle age, that “every arrangement in life” carries with it the shadow “of its not being something else” (93). Moore’s storytelling recalls American humorist Dorothy Parker: there’s a loneliness that sometimes collapses inward in complete breakdown, and occasionally culminates in a moment of epiphany. Moore stated in an interview that gaps between people, and not loneliness, are particular qualities of her stories: “The attempts to bridge those gaps or the attempts to acknowledge them, I think, are often the interesting aspects of a character’s life” (Nourok 9).

Moore’s formal experiments are daring and successful. She’s sometimes against the boundaries of the form and tradition. Her stories evoke a sense of challenge to the traditional forms of the short story. Her narrative refuses to offer the platitudes of beginning, middle and end; it spins reflexively, implying that fiction can cure us, that it is a miracle – a moment of pleasure in a conventional, dreary commonplace world. The jokes give her writing a brilliant surface over the stories’ dark content- the shaky, flickery nature of love, and the uncertainty and instability of existence. In an article written for *Ploughshares*, (Fall 1998), Lorrie Moore explains that these narrative strategies are intentionally designed as she “aimed for a kind of ragged emotional arc: from adventure/misadventure, through catastrophe and reminiscence, toward grief and finally to love. It is a trajectory that lands on the only note worth landing on.”

In *Birds of America*, (1998) Moore takes unprecedented stylistic and formal risks, most notably in “People Like That Are the Only People Here.” In this story, a baby is diagnosed with kidney cancer and his mother strives to cope with the perplexing life she has to endure in the hospital. Moore shows the obscure ghostly new life of parents and children caught in the trauma of pain and suffering, and confined within the closed walls of the hospital: “A whole place has been designed and decorated for your nightmare,” the desperate mother-narrator says. She feels so shocked and baffled, incapable of comprehending such “inconceivable fate”. In Moore’s fiction words combine in a surreal chaos where all juxtapositions are paradoxical and laughable. “When your child has cancer,” the mother sadly relates, “you are instantly whisked away to another planet: one of bald-headed little boys”. However, flashes of humor lighten the increasingly dark world that she portrays. Here, the narrator—a writer and a mother— manipulates various narrative and metanarrative elements to create a thrilling world of pain, suffering, horror, and dark humor. With her child in the hospital and his fate in doubt, a surgeon takes the mother aside, intensely serious. ““There is a particular thing I need from you,” he says. ‘Yes?’ she says, her tension is mounting and her heart is pounding, not prepared for any more bad news. ‘Will you sign my copy of your novel?’” (241). Later, the mother’s description of the surgeon, the anesthesiologists, and the nurses

who surround her baby evokes a sense of comic absurdity. In their “blue caps and scrubs,” the mother bitterly and playfully comments, “they look like a clutch of forget-me-nots, and forget them, who could?” (233). Thus, laughter seems to alleviate fear and bring both joy and relief to those who have deep-seated worries about death, disability, isolation, violence, and incapacity.

Moore's fondness for word games may serve as an index of insecurity. Pure wordplay may also indicate a divorce from the real world, a plight that touches many of Moore's characters, particularly middle-aged women. In “Terrific Mother,” Adrienne, the depressive female protagonist, begins to babble nervously when patronized by a pompous academic at a lavish symposium dinner. Then she smiles at him and replies: “Jetty-laggy. Baby talk. We love it” (275). Moore's style demonstrates that to compose effective language of humor, the writer often relies on getting a particular play with words or on the overturning of a particular rule. Much of the humorous use of language is reflected in such devices as puns, understatement, anti-climax, exaggeration and what Walter Blair calls “incongruous mixture”. These lead to a language full of surprise and lively turn of phrase. The use of misspelling and distorted syntax in Moore's fiction “spices” her short stories and makes them attractive. Imagery and originality of expression abound in her writings. She creates a humor “of phraseology rather than of character”, to quote again Blair (121).

In a remarkable scene in “Willing,” the first story in *Birds of America*, the female protagonist, Sidra, a depressive former Hollywood actress trapped with a love affair with a mechanic, is involved in a harsh argument with her unfaithful boyfriend. The narrator's use of eccentric and original language adds to the incongruous and absurd nature of their relationship: “A bone in her opened up, gleaming and pale, and she held it to the light and spoke from it.” (23). Moore's writing strikes the reader with acute statements that capture the essence of this woman's self-destructive tendencies as she tells the reader: “There were small dark pits of annihilation she discovered in her heart, in the loosening fist of it, and she threw herself into them, falling” (13).

The appearance of language itself can be funny and even shocking. In her story “Real Estate”, for instance, Moore fills an entire two-page spread with laughter as her protagonist, a cancerous middle-age woman, reflects upon her husband's infidelities. These words seem to be an expression of the character's nervous breakdown. “There had been a parade of flings—in the end they made her laugh:

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”
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Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Etc.

Laughter, in this case, is not an indication of moral superiority; it may well be an “index of moral failure” or rather psychic distortion on the part of the fictional female the writer creates. In this story, Moore examines the precariousness and instability of marriage when this unhappy married woman buys a new place, only to discover that “[e]very house is a grave.” and that “the key to marriage”, as she concludes “was just not to take the thing too personally”. It is in this reliance on the small detail, on how things look and feel, that Moore's writing often seems particularly

feminine, attuned to a vision of the world in which there are no heroes, no great actions to be undertaken, but some little incidents to be contemplated and one's own heart to be listened to.

Awareness of the impossibility of communication between people is crucial in understanding Moore's characters and their motivations. Their perceptions of one another are always far from the indefinable reality. These characters often seem as a roughly sketched form, a crude diagram, and a robot-portrait. The human personality, normally constructed according to social roles, is fragile and can crumble with terrifying results: depression, separation, rejection, suffering, isolation, desperation, and death. Wordplay is how Moore's characters protect themselves in uncomfortable situations but it isolates them even more, just as Moore's flippancy risks alienating readers while conveying her characters' desperation in a way no other style would. The anguish that her characters strive to convey is finally tragic, as it reveals the instability of all human projects. "When tenderness ended," the narrator in "Two Boys" says, "there was a lull before the hate, and things could spill out into it. There was always so much to keep back, so much scratching behind the face" (15). Indeed, Moore's characters, mostly women, seem stranded and self-mockingly insecure in an isolated, unheroic age. Acknowledging the horror of modern life, Moore makes it endurable by naming it and by demonstrating its inextricable connection with the comic.

Humor is fundamental in Moore's characters' lives. It upholds them morally and psychologically because, as Moore herself asserts in an interview, "humor is really part of the fabric of human discourse—it may be deflective or knee-jerk, intimate or distance-making, organizing or derailing, and may arise from hostility, generosity, boredom, anxiety, existential fatigue, or good drugs. (*The Paris Review*). There's a moment in "Agnes of Iowa," another story from *Birds of America*, when the title character recalls the good humor that prevailed during her years in Manhattan. This character seems to articulate Moore's firm and outstanding belief in the urgent need for humor. "Telling a joke," Agnes remembers,

[H]ad made any given day seem bearable, that impulse towards a joke. It had been a determined sort of humor, an intensity mirroring the intensity of the city, and it seemed to embrace and alleviate the hard sadness of people having used one another and marred the earth the way they had. It was like brains having sex. (94)

Finally, there is in the work of Moore the subtle suggestion that discord prevails in her world, not just in human nature, but in the very scheme of things. The disorder is preferred over an order that subordinates and objectifies women. Indeed, like most women writers of postmodern comic fiction, Moore believes that "disorder *is* hope" especially in the comic cosmos. Undoubtedly, Moore suggests that disharmony is the condition of existence and that such dysfunction can be tolerated *only* by a humorous observer. By sharing her own helplessness in the face of chaos, she invites her readers to laugh at their own inadequacy and to recognize that vulnerability can be a form of strength.

Thus, in Moore's view, one should approach life with a highly detached and comically ironic vision. This constant is a quality of strength and detachment, which John Hawkes describes as "ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential violence" within ourselves and in the world around us. The obvious strain and tension under the surface of comedy might suggest an affinity with the tragic as well as the comic. Moore's fiction is an artistic attempt

to meet the terrors, the inflictions and the absurdities of the world with “savage or saving comic spirit” (Hawkes). Ultimately, this “comic spirit” constitutes an effort to defend and celebrate those permanent human values or “ancient aspirations”: love, peace, goodness, compassion, intelligence, and the value of life itself.

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