For Discussion and Writing

1. Why was the 1980s “the decade of the child consumer”?
2. Schlosser connects the turning of children into customers to a number of factors. What are the causes for the growth of the child market, and how does Schlosser connect these causes and effects? Thinking outside of this essay, what further effects do you imagine might be caused by this growth?
3. connections Compare Schlosser’s approach to youth marketing to Steven Johnson’s treatment of video games in “Games” (p. 196). How does each author feel about his subject? Can you imagine what each might say about the other’s subject? Would Johnson see something valuable in the exposure of children to advertising? Would Schlosser criticize video games?
4. Many readers will be disturbed by the notion that children often recognize brand logos before their own name and that dream research is used in child-focused marketing. Why do you think this is? Do you find these things disturbing? Why or why not?

DAVID SEDARIS

A Plague of Tics

Born in 1956 in Johnson City, New York, David Sedaris grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is a playwright (in collaboration with his sister Amy) and an essayist whose work has been featured regularly on National Public Radio and in collections such as Me Talk Pretty One Day (2000), Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim (2004), and When You Are Engulfed in Flames (2008). Sedaris’s work tends toward the satiric, but even the most wickedly pointed of his pieces are marked by an ironic stance that includes the author among those humans whose folly must be satirized. This insistence on turning his satiric eye on himself is evident in “A Plague of Tics,” taken from Naked (1997), in which he recounts—with humor and vivid detail—the obsessive-compulsive behaviors that afflicted him from elementary school through college.

When the teacher asked if she might visit with my mother, I touched my nose eight times to the surface of my desk.

“May I take that as a ‘yes’?” she asked.

According to her calculations, I had left my chair twenty-eight times that day. “You’re up and down like a flea. I turn my back for two minutes and there you are with your tongue pressed against that light switch. Maybe they do that where you come from, but here in my classroom we don’t leave our seats and lick things whenever we please. That is Miss Chestnut’s light switch, and she likes to keep it dry. Would you like me to come over to your house and put my tongue on your light switches? Well, would you?”

I tried to picture her in action, but my shoe was calling. Take me off, it whispered. Tap my heel against your forehead three times. Do it now, quick, no one will notice.

“Well?” Miss Chestnut raised her faint, penciled eyebrows. “I’m asking you a question. Would you or would you not want me licking the light switches in your house?”
lick that concrete mushroom one more time, hoping its guardian wouldn’t once again rush from her house shouting, “Get your face out of my toadstool!” It might be raining or maybe I had to go to the bathroom, but running home was not an option. This was a long and complicated process that demanded an oppressive attention to detail. It wasn’t that I enjoyed pressing my nose against the scalding hood of a parked car — pleasure had nothing to do with it. A person had to do these things because nothing was worse than the anguish of not doing them. Bypass that mailbox and my brain would never for one moment let me forget it. I might be sitting at the dinner table, caring myself not to think about it, and the thought would revisit my mind. Don’t think about it. But it would already be too late and I knew then exactly what I had to do. Excusing myself to go to the bathroom, I’d walk out the front door and return to that mailbox, not just touching but jabbing, practically pounding on the thing because I thought I hated it so much. What I really hated, of course, was my mind. There must have been an off switch somewhere, but I was damned if I could find it.

I didn’t remember things being this way back north. Our family had been transferred from Endicott, New York, to Raleigh, North Carolina. That was the word used by the people at IBM, transferred. A new home was under construction, but until it was finished we were confined to a rental property built to resemble a plantation house. The building sat in a treeless, balding yard, its white columns promising a majesty the interior failed to deliver. The front door opened onto a dark, narrow hallway lined with bedrooms not much larger than the mattresses that furnished them. Our kitchen was located on the second floor, alongside the living room, its picture window offering a view of the cinder-block wall built to hold back the tide of mud generated by the neighboring dirt mound.

“Our own little corner of hell,” my mother said, fanning herself with one of the shingles littering the front yard.

Depressing as it was, arriving at the front stoop of the house meant that I had completed the first leg of that bitter-tasting journey to my bedroom. Once home I would touch the front door seven times with each elbow, a task made more difficult if there was someone else around. “Why don’t you try the knob,” my sister Lisa would say. “That’s what the rest of us do, and it seems to
work for us." Inside the house there were switches and doorstops to be acknowledged. My bedroom was right there off the hallway, but first I had business to tend to. After kissing the fourth, eighth, and twelfth carpeted stair, I wiped the cat hair off my lips and proceeded to the kitchen, where I was commanded to stroke the burners of the stove, press my nose against the refrigerator door, and arrange the percolator, toaster, and blender into a straight row. After making my rounds of the living room, it was time to kneel beside the banister and blindly jab a butter knife in the direction of my favorite electrical socket. There were bulbs to lick and bathroom faucets to test before finally I was free to enter my bedroom, where I would carefully align the objects on my dresser, lick the corners of my metal desk, and lie upon my bed, rocking back and forth and thinking of what an odd woman she was, my third-grade teacher, Miss Chestnut. Why come here and lick my switches when she never used the one she had? Maybe she was drunk.

Her note had asked if she might visit our home in order to discuss what she referred to as my "special problems."

"Have you been leaving your seat to lick the light switch?" my mother asked. She placed the letter upon the table and lit a cigarette.

"Once or twice," I said.

"Once or twice what? Every half hour? Every ten minutes?"

"I don't know," I lied. "Who's counting?"

"Well, your goddammed math teacher, for one. That's her job, to count. What, do you think she's not going to notice?"

"Notice what?" It never failed to amaze me that people might notice these things. Because my actions were so intensely private, I had always assumed they were somehow invisible. When cornered, I demanded that the witness had been mistaken.

"What do you mean, 'notice what'? I got a phone call just this afternoon from that lady up the street, that Mrs. Keening, the one with the twins. She says she caught you in her front yard, down on your hands and knees kissing the evening edition of her newspaper."

"I wasn't kissing it. I was just trying to read the headline."

"And you had to get that close? Maybe we need to get you some stronger glasses."

"Well, maybe we do," I said.

"And I suppose this Miss..." My mother unfolded the letter and studied the signature. "This Miss Chestnut is mistaken, too? Is that what you're trying to tell me? Maybe she has you confused with the other boy who leaves his seat to lick the pencil sharper or touch the flag or whatever the hell it is you do the moment her back is turned?"

"That's very likely," I said. "She's old. There are spots on her hands."

"How many?" my mother asked.

On the afternoon that Miss Chestnut arrived for her visit, I was in my bedroom, rocking. Unlike the obsessive counting and touching, rocking was not a mandatory duty but a voluntary and highly pleasurable exercise. It was my hobby, and there was nothing else I would rather do. The point was not to rock oneself to sleep; This was not a step toward some greater goal. It was the goal itself. The perpetual movement freed my mind, allowing me to null things over and construct elaborately detailed fantasies. Toss in a radio, and I was content to rock until three or four o'clock in the morning, listening to the hit parade and discovering that each and every song was about me. I might have to listen two or three hundred times to the same song, but sooner or later its private message would reveal itself. Because it was pleasant and relaxing, my rocking was bound to be tripped up, most often by my brain, which refused to allow me more than ten consecutive minutes of happiness. At the opening chords of my current favorite song, a voice would whisper, Shouldn't you be upstairs making sure there are really one hundred and fourteen peppercorns left in that small ceramic jar? And, hey, while you're up there, you might want to check the iron and make sure it's not setting fire to the baby's bedroom. The list of demands would grow by the moment. What about that television antenna? Is it still set into that perfect V, or has one of your sisters destroyed its integrity. You know, I was just wondering how tightly the lid is screwed onto that mayonnaise jar. Let's have a look, shall we?

I would be just on the edge of truly enjoying myself, this close to breaking the song's complex code, when my thoughts would get in the way. The trick was to bide my time until the record was no longer my favorite, to wait until it had slipped from its number-one position on the charts and fool my mind into believing I no longer cared.
I was coming to terms with “The Shadow of Your Smile” when Miss Chestnut arrived. She rang the bell, and I cracked open my bedroom door, watching as my mother invited her in.

“You’ll have to forgive me for these boxes.” My mother flicked her cigarette out the door and into the littered yard. “They’re filled with crap, every last one of them, but God forbid we throw anything away. Oh no, we can’t do that! My husband’s saved it all: every last Green Stamp and coupon, every outgrown bathing suit and scrap of linoleum, it’s all right here along with the rocks and knotted sticks he swears look just like his old department head or associate district manager or some goddamned thing.” She mopped at her forehead with a wadded paper towel. “Anyway, to hell with it. You look like I need a drink, shouldn’t all right?”

Miss Chestnut’s eyes brightened. “I really shouldn’t but, oh, why not?” She followed my mother up the stairs. “Just a drop with ice, no water.”

I tried rocking in bed, but the sound of laughter drew me to the top of the landing, where from my vantage point behind an oversized wardrobe box, I watched the two women discuss my behavior.

“Oh, you mean the touching,” my mother said. She studied the ashtray that sat before her on the table, narrowing her eyes much like a cat catching sight of a squirrel. Her look of fixed concentration suggested that nothing else mattered. Time had stopped, and she was deaf to the sounds of the rattling fan and my sisters’ squabbling out in the driveway. She opened her mouth just slightly, running her tongue over her upper lip, and then she inched forward, her index finger prodding the ashtray as though it were a sleeping thing she was trying to wake. I had never seen myself in action, but a sharp, stinging sense of recognition told me that my mother’s impersonation had been accurate.

“Priceless!” Miss Chestnut laughed, clasping her hands in delight. “Oh, that’s very good, you’ve captured him perfectly. Bravo, I give you an A-plus.”

“God only knows where he gets it from,” my mother said. “He’s probably down in his room right this minute, counting his eyelashes or gnawing at the pulls on his dresser. One, two o’clock in the morning and he’ll still be at it, rattling around the house to poke the laundry hamper or press his face against the refrigerator door. The kid’s wound too tight, but he’ll come out of it. So, what do you say, another scotch, Katherine?”

Now she was Katherine. Another few drinks and she’d probably be joining us for our summer vacation. How easy it was for adults to bond over a second round of cocktails. I returned to my bed, cranking up the radio so as not to be distracted by the sound of their cackling. Because Miss Chestnut was here in my home, I knew it was only a matter of time before the voices would order me to enter the kitchen and make a spectacle of myself. Maybe I’d have to suck on the broom handle or stand on the table to touch the overhead light fixture, but whatever was demanded of me, I had no choice but to do it. The song that played on the radio posed no challenge whatsoever; the lyric as clear as if I’d written it myself. “Well, I think I’m going out of my head,” the man sang, “yes, I think I’m going out of my head.”

Following Miss Chestnut’s visit, my father attempted to cure me with a series of threats. “You touch your nose to that windshield one more time and I’ll guarantee you’ll wish you hadn’t,” he said driving home from the grocery store with a lapful of rejected, out-of-state coupons. It was virtually impossible for me to ride in the passenger seat of a car and not press my nose against the windshield, and now that the activity had been forbidden, I wanted it more than anything. I tried closing my eyes, hoping that might eliminate my desire, but found myself thinking that perhaps he was the one who should close his eyes. So what if I wanted to touch my nose to the windshield? Who was it hurting? Why was it that he could repeatedly worry his change and bite his lower lip without the threat of punishment? My mother smoked and Miss Chestnut massaged her waist twenty, thirty times a day — and here I couldn’t press my nose against the windshield of a car? I opened my eyes, defiant, but: when he caught me moving toward my target, my father slammed on the brakes.

“You like that, did you?” He handed me a golf towel to wipe the blood from my nose. “Did you like the feel of that?”

Like was too feeble for what I felt. I loved it. If matched with the right amount of force, a blow to the nose can be positively narcotic. Touching objects satisfied a mental itch, but the task involved a great deal of movement: run upstairs, cross the room, remove a shoe. I soon found those same urges could be fulfilled within the

was never shamed or seriously bothered by any of them. Her observations would be collected and delivered as part of a routine that bore little resemblance to our lives.

“It’s a real stretch, but I’m betting you’re here about the tiny voices,” she said, offering a glass of sherry to my visiting seventh-grade teacher. “I’m thinking of either taking him to an exorcist or buying him a doll so he can bring home some money as a ventriloquist.”

It had come out of nowhere, my desperate urge to summon high-pitched noises from the back of my throat. These were not words, but sounds that satisfied an urge I’d never before realized. The sounds were delivered not in my voice but in that of a thimble-sized, temperamental diva clinging to the base of my uvula. “Eeeeeeee — uuuuuuuuuuuuu — ahhhh — ahhhh — meeeeee.” I was a host to these wailings but lacked the ability to control them. When I cried out in class, the teachers would turn from their blackboards with increasingly troubled expressions. “Is someone rubbing a balloon? Who’s making that noise?”

I tried making up excuses, but everything sounded implausible. “There’s a bee living in my throat.” Or “If I don’t exercise my vocal cords every three minutes, there’s a good chance I’ll never swallow again.” The noise-making didn’t replace any of my earlier habits, it was just another addition to what had become a freakish collection of tics. Worse than the constant yelps and twitchings was the fear that tomorrow might bring something even worse, that I would wake up with the urge to jerk other people’s heads. I might go for days without rolling my eyes, but it would all come back the moment my father said, “See, I knew you could quit if you just put your mind to it. Now if you can just keep your head still and stop making those noises, you’ll be set.”

*Set for what?* I wondered. Often while rocking, I would imagine my career as a movie star. There I was attending the premiere beneath a floodlit sky, a satin scarf tied just so around my throat. I understood that most actors probably didn’t interrupt a love scene to press their noses against the camera or wail a quick “Eeeeee — ahhhhhh” during a dramatic monologue, but in my case the world would be willing to make an exception. “This is a moving and touching film,” the papers would report. “An electrifying, eye-popping performance that has audiences squealing and the critics nodding, ‘Oscar, Oscar, Oscar!’”

**DAVID SEDARIS**

confines of my own body. Punching myself in the nose was a good place to start, but the practice was dropped when I began rolling my eyes deep in their sockets, an exercise that produced quick jolts of dull, intoxicating pain.

“I know exactly what you’re talking about,” my mother said to Mrs. Shatz, my visiting fourth-grade teacher. “The eyes rolling every which way, it’s like talking to a slot machine. Hopefully, one day he’ll pay off, but until then, what do you say we have ourselves another glass of wine?”

“Hey, sport,” my father said, “if you’re trying to get a good look at the contents of your skull, I can tell you right now that you’re wasting your time. There’s nothing there to look at, and these report cards prove it.”

He was right. I had my nose pressed to the door, the carpet, and the windshield but not, apparently, to the grindstone. School held no interest whatsoever. I spent my days waiting to return to the dark bedroom of our new house, where I could roll my eyes, listen to the radio, and rock in peace.

I took to violently shaking my head, startled by the feel of my brain slamming against the confines of my skull. It felt so good and took so little time; just a few quick jerks and I was satisfied for up to forty-five seconds at a time.

“Have a seat and let me get you something cool to drink.” My mother would leave my fifth- and then my sixth-grade teachers standing in the breakfast nook while she stepped into the kitchen to crack open a tray of ice. “I’m guessing you’re here about the head-shaking, am I right?” she’d shout. “That’s my boy, all right, no flies on him.” She suggested my teachers interpret my jerking head as a nod of agreement. “That’s what I do, and now I’ve got him washing the dishes for the next five years. I ask, he yanks his head, and it’s settled. Do me a favor, though, and just don’t hold him after five o’clock. I need him at home to straighten up and make the beds before his father gets home.”

This was part of my mother’s act. She played the ringleader, blowing the whistle and charming the crowd with her jokes and exaggerated stories. When company came, she often pretended to forget the names of her six children. “Hey, George, or Agnes, whatever your name is, how about running into the bedroom and finding my cigarette lighter.” She noticed my tics and habits but
I'd like to think that some of my nervous habits faded during high school, but my class pictures tell a different story. "Draw in the missing eyeballs and this one might not be so bad," my mother would say. In group shots I was easily identified as the blur in the back row. For a time I thought that if I accompanied my habits with an outlandish wardrobe, I might be viewed as eccentric rather than just plain retarded. I was wrong. Only a confirmed idiot would wander the halls of my high school dressed in a floor-length caftan; as for the countless medallions that hung from around my neck, I might as well have worn a cowbell. They clanged and jangled with every jerk of my head, calling attention when without them I might have passed unnoticed. My oversized glasses did nothing but provide a clearer view of my rolling, twitching eyes, and the clunky platform shoes left lumps when used to discreetly tap my forehead. I was a mess.

I could be wrong, but according to my calculations, I got exactly fourteen minutes of sleep during my entire first year of college. I'd always had my own bedroom, a meticulously clean and well-ordered place where I could practice my habits in private. Now I would have a roommate, some complete stranger spoiling my routine with his God-given right to exist. The idea was mortifying, and I arrived at the university in full tilt.

"The doctors tell me that if I knock it around hard enough, there's a good chance the brain tumor will shrink to the point where they won't have to operate," I said the first time my roommate caught me jerking my head. "Meanwhile, these other specialists have me doing these eye exercises to strengthen what they call the 'corneal fibers,' whatever that means. They've got me coming and going, but what can you do, right? Anyway, you go ahead and settle in. I think I'll just test this electrical socket with a butter knife and re-arrange a few of the items on my dresser. Eeee-ey does it. That's what I always s-ahhhhhhhhh."

It was hard enough coming up with excuses, but the real agony came when I was forced to give up rocking.

"Give it a rest, Romeo," my roommate moaned the first night he heard my bedsprings creak. He thought I was masturbating, and while I wanted to set the record straight, something told me I wouldn't score any points by telling him that I was simply rocking in bed, just like any other eighteen-year-old college student. It was torture to lie there doing nothing. Even with a portable radio and headphones, there was no point listening to music unless I could sway back and forth with my head on a pillow. Rocking is basically dancing in a horizontal position, and it allowed me to practice in private what I detested in public. With my jerking head, rolling eyes, and rapid stabbing gestures, I might have been a sensation if I'd left my bed and put my tics to work on the dance floor. I should have told my roommate that I was an epileptic and left it at that. He might have charged across the room every so often to ram a Popsicle stick down my throat, but so what? I was used to picking splinters out of my tongue. What, I wondered, was an average person expected to do while stretched out in a darkened room? It felt pointless to lie there motionless and imagine a brighter life. Squinting across the cramped, cinder-block cell, I realized that an entire lifetime of wishful thinking had gotten me no further than this. There would be no cheering crowds or esteemed movie directors shouting into their bullhorns. I might have to take this harsh reality lying down, but while attempting to do so, couldn't I rock back and forth just a little bit?

Having memorized my roommate's course schedule, I took to rushing back to the room between classes, rocking in fitsful spurts but never really enjoying it for fear he might return at any moment. Perhaps he might feel ill or decide to cut class at the last minute. I'd hear his key in the door and jump up from my bed, mashing down my wadded hair and grabbing one of the textbooks I kept on my prop table. "I'm just studying for that pottery test," I'd say. "That's all I've been up to, just sitting in this chair reading about the history of jugs." Hard as I tried, it always wound up sounding as if I were guilty of something secretive or perverse. He never acted in the least bit embarrassed when caught listening to one of his many heavy-metal albums, a practice far more shameful than anything I have yet to imagine. There was no other solution: I had to think of a way to get rid of this guy.

His biggest weakness appeared to be his girlfriend, whose photographs he had tacked in a place of honor above the stereo. They'd been dating since tenth grade, and while he had gone off to college, she'd stayed behind to attend a two-year nursing school in their hometown. A history of listening to Top 40 radio had left me with a ridiculous and clichéd notion of love. I had never entertained the feeling myself but knew that it meant never having to say you're sorry. It was a many-splendored thing. Love was a rose
and a hammer. Both blind and all-seeing, it made the world go round.

My roommate thought that he and his girlfriend were strong enough to make it through the month without seeing each other, but I wasn’t so sure. “I don’t know that I’d trust her around all those doctors,” I said. “Love fades when left untended, especially in a hospital environment. Absence might make the heart grow fonder, but love is a two-way street. Think about it.”

When my roommate went out of town, I would spend the entire weekend rocking in bed and fantasizing about his tragic car accident. I envisioned him wrapped tight as a mummy, his arms and legs suspended by pulleys. “Time is a great healer,” his mother would say, packing the last of his albums into a milk crate. “Two years of bed rest and he’ll be as good as new. Once he gets out of the hospital, I figure I’ll set him up in the living room. He likes it there.”

Sometimes I would allow him to leave in one piece, imagining his joining the army or marrying his girlfriend and moving someplace warm and sunny, like Peru or Ethiopia. The important thing was that he leave this room and never come back. I’d get rid of him and then move on to the next person, and the one after that, until it was just me, rocking and jerking in private.

Two months into the semester, my roommate broke up with his girlfriend. “And I’m going to spend every day and night sitting right here in this room until I figure out where I went wrong.” He dabbed his moist eyes with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. “You and me, little buddy. It’s just you and me and Jethro Tull from here on out. Say, what’s with your head? The old tumor acting up again?”

“College is the best thing that can ever happen to you,” my father used to say, and he was right, for it was there that I discovered drugs, drinking, and smoking. I’m unsure of the scientific aspects, but for some reason, my nervous habits faded about the same time I took up with cigarettes. Maybe it was coincidental or perhaps the tics retreated in the face of an adversary that, despite its health risks, is much more socially acceptable than crying out in tiny voices. Were I not smoking, I’d probably be on some sort of medication that would cost the same amount of money but deny me the accoutrements: the lighters I can thoughtlessly open and close, the ashtrays that provide me with a legitimate reason to leave my chair, and the cigarettes that calm me down while giving me something to do with my hands and mouth. It’s as if I had been born to smoke, and until I realized it, my limbs were left to search for some alternative. Everything’s fine as long as I know there’s a cigarette in my immediate future. The people who ask me not to smoke in their cars have no idea what they’re in for.

“Remember when you used to roll your eyes?” my sisters ask. “Remember the time you shook your head so hard, your glasses fell into the barbecue pit?”

At their mention I sometimes attempt to revisit my former tics and habits. Returning to my apartment late at night, I’ll dare myself to press my nose against the doorknob and roll my eyes to achieve that once-satisfying ache. Maybe I’ll start counting the napkins sandwiched in their plastic holder, but the exercise lacks its old urgency and I soon lose interest. I would no sooner rock in bed than play “Up, Up, and Away” sixty times straight on my record player. I could easily listen to something else an equal number of times while seated in a rocking chair, but the earlier, bedridden method fails to comfort me, as I’ve forgotten the code, the twitching trick needed to decipher the lyrics to that particular song. I remember only that at one time the story involved the citizens of Raleigh, North Carolina, being herded into a test balloon of my own design and making. It was rigged to explode once it reached the city limits, but the passengers were unaware of that fact. The sun shone on their faces as they lifted their heads toward the bright blue sky, giddy with excitement.

“Beautiful balloon!” they all said, gripping the handrails and climbing the staircase to their fiery destiny. “Wouldn’t you like to ride?”

“Sorry, folks,” I’d say, pressing my nose against the surface of my ticket booth. “But I’ve got other duties.”

For Discussion and Writing

1. Compose a list of Sedaris’s tics and try to establish some general rules that make them tics and not more acceptable repeated motions, like his mother’s smoking or his teacher’s waist massaging.

2. As is apparent when he reads his work on the radio, Sedaris is a master storyteller. One of the things that makes his stories so effective is the way he uses humor. His essays are rarely simply funny; as is the
case with “A Plague of Tics,” he uses humor in combination with other elements, to various effects — for example, as contrast or relief. List five funny moments in this essay. In what context do they appear? How do they interact with their contexts? What do you think Sedaris was trying to do with humor in each of these instances?

3. connections Sedaris is concerned as much, if not more, with what others think of his behaviors as with what he thinks of them. Compare Sedaris’ account of the way his identity depends on how others see him to Judith Ortiz Cofer’s in “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria” (p. 91). How do the issues with which they are concerned, and the way they react to how they are perceived, compare?

4. “Don’t think about it,” Sedaris tells himself when he is young. But he is unable not to obsess over his compulsions — as he says, “There must have been an off switch somewhere, but I was damned if I could find it” (par. 14). Reflect on moments in your life when you have been unable to not think about something — something that happened to you, something you did, something you are looking forward to or fearful of. When have you wished you had an off switch? What do you think it means that people are not able to simply turn their minds off?

SUSAN SONTAG

Regarding the Pain of Others

Susan Sontag (1933–2004) was an intellectual who ranged widely, writing about subjects including photography, the AIDS epidemic, and literary theory. She was also a novelist, playwright, and filmmaker. Her nonfiction books include Against Interpretation (1966), On Photography (1977), Illness as Metaphor (1978), and Regarding the Pain of Others (2003); her novels include The Volcano Lover (1992) and In America (2000). "Regarding the Pain of Others," drawn from the book of the same title, demonstrates two of Sontag’s greatest interests, aesthetics and politics, as much of her work has done — whether she is studying the impact of photographs of atrocity or the impact of language on the way we think about disease, Sontag’s work is concerned with the way representation informs the way people think about the world. Keep an eye out as you read for the ways in which Sontag brings these two interests together here.

Often something looks, or is felt to look, “better” in a photograph. Indeed, it is one of the functions of photography to improve the normal appearance of things. (Hence, one is always disappointed by a photograph that is not flattering.) Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown. Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.

An example: A few years ago, the public health authorities in Canada, where it had been estimated that smoking kills 45,000 people a year, decided to supplement the warning printed on every pack of cigarettes with a shock photograph — of cancerous lungs, or a stroke-clotted brain, or a damaged heart, or a bloody mouth in acute periodontal distress. A pack with such a picture accompanying the warning about the deleterious effects of smoking would be 60 times more likely to inspire smokers to quit,