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The 19th Century Novel Podcast
Episode 8

Epistolary and Sentimental

The Epistolary Novel

Referring to the "Victorian Novel," as I've often done in this series, is a distorting shorthand. What, after all, does a novel written in 1837 have in common with one written in 1901? Historians often refer to Early, Middle, and Late Victorianism, rather than imagining a continuum across sixty years. Even the notion that the Victorian era, with its increased industrialization, rising middle class, and confining domestic relations, marked a substantial break from previous eras has been questioned. University of Maryland History professor Richard Price, for instance, argues that "the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century . . . can be usefully demarcated and discussed as a unit. Throughout this period the basic structures of society operated with contexts whose boundaries, scripts, tensions, and instabilities are visible by the late seventeenth century and are only decisively disrupted . . . two hundred years later" (52).

Likewise, literary critics have questioned this periodization and the notion of a Victorian novel. For one thing, despite the prevalence of a realist aesthetic, the Victorian novel draws from earlier forms, such as the epistolary, sentimental, and Gothic novel. For another, what we label the "Victorian novel" covers a long and changing time period. How can one speak of a Victorian novel, Francis O'Gorman (Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh) asks, when it ranges "from the provincial to the metropolitan, from the most judiciously moral to the daringly risqué, from the 1830s to the fin de siècle, from realism to fantasy, from the runaway bestseller to the unfortunately stillborn"? (2). Terry Eagleton, the celebrated Marxist literary critic (and professor at Lancaster University), explains that the period between the late 18th and early 19th centuries in particular saw a great diversity of novels: "Gothic fiction, romance, regional and national tales, Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels, novels of travel, sentiment, abolitionism and the condition of women, stories of foreign and domestic manners, and works derived from ballad, myth and folklore" (*English* 94). While some generalizations can be made about the Victorian novel—Eagleton, for one, sees the diversity of the 18th Century novel homogenized and its creativity flattened by Victorian realism—the novel's emphases and aesthetic features did change from the beginning to the end of the century according to literary fashion, the vagaries of the marketplace, the requirements of publishers, improvements in printing technology, decreases in taxation, a growing reading public, and the sensibilities of individual authors.

To chart the fashions of novels as they appeared and disappeared over the first half of the century, we need to turn to the previous century. In the 18th and the early 19th century, the novel was considered a lesser form of literature, inferior, writes Clive Probyn, Emeritus Professor at Australia's Monash University, "to its literary cousins, history, poetry, travel literature, popular journalism, and the sermon" (160). This low esteem was caused, first, by the novel's novelty: it had no real tradition behind it and no direct connection to what was considered the pinnacle of imaginative writing: Greek and Latin literature; second, by the novel's authorship: many were written by and for women; thus, the form itself must be deficient (women were, of course, excluded from the more refined realms of poetry and history and sermons by their inability to attain a classical / university education); third, by the novel's popularity: it must be an inferior art form since it appealed to the unrefined classes, Probyn asserting that by the 1760s, "for the first time in the history of the genre of prose fiction it is possible to speak with confidence of a middle class readership as an instrumental force in determining literary production" (149). Having no classical antecedents, written by women, and read by women and the uneducated middle classes, the novel was said to be aesthetically and morally

flawed. Over and over again, we encounter this reaction: a new literary form appeals to the masses and is instantly criticized by elites as morally dangerous.

One particularly popular form of the 18th century novel which continued into the 19th was the epistolary novel—that is, a novel told in letters. "Between 1660 and 1800," notes Probyn, "over a thousand works of epistolary fiction were published" (3), with estimates of "between two thirds and three quarters of epistolary novels between 1760 and 1790" written by women (Spencer 4). The common practice of anonymous authorship, though, made precise figures impossible. This form reached immense popularity in the 1740s with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, in a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel to Her Parents*. So popular was *Pamela* that it "became a play, an opera, even a waxork" (Mark Kinkead-Weekes qtd. in Eagleton, *Rape* 5), and according to an oft-repeated story, in one English village it was read aloud over the course of one summer. When at last the hero and heroine were united, the village's church bells were rung in celebration (Stevenson 469). As evidence of the popularity of the epistolary form, it's worth noting that the first novels published in Canada and the United States—*The History of Emily Montague*, by Francis Brooke, published in 1769, and *The Power of Sympathy*, by William Hill Brown, 1789 were epistolary ("Epistolary"). Jane Austen used this form in her earliest works, *Lady Susan* (written in 1794 but first published in 1871) and *Love and Friendship* (written in 1790 but not published until 1922). Scholars believe that both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were originally written as epistolary novels (Klenck). While the epistolary form fell out of favor in the 19th century, it persisted in novels such as Maria Edgeworth's *Leonora* (1806), Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859). In the 1840s, both Balzac and Dostoevsky wrote epistolary novels (Balzac, *Letters of Two Brides* and Dostoevsky, his first novel, *Poor Folk*). And Bram Stoker adopted the epistolary form for his novel, *Dracula*, published in 1897. But these were exceptions. By the middle of the 19th Century, the epistolary novel had fallen permanently out of favor, although authors continue to resurrect it, at least partially, in such well-known works as C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, Stephen King's *Carrie*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and A.S. Byatt's neo-Victorian *Possession*.

The Sentimental Novel

The epistolary novel is defined by its mode of telling, the Gothic by genre conventions. Neither by mode nor genre, the sentimental novel is defined by a philosophy, a belief in the transformative power of sentiment and sensibility. Thus, novels of sentiment can take forms as diverse as Richardson's epistolary *Pamela*, Laurence Sterne's pre-postmodern *Tristram Shandy*, William Mackenzie's abbreviated found manuscript *The Man of Feeling* and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's proto-romantic *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The sentimental novel, whose popularity ran from the 1740s through the 1770s, was a response to many social and cultural factors, among them, according to University of Aberdeen Emerita Professor Janet Todd, "the shifting importance of various classes, the growth of London, . . . the changing perception of the family and its importance in society, the economic and cultural situation of women, and the interrelated developments in religion, philosophy, and science" (10). From the latter categories, I would single out the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, which emphasis these novels attempted to counter through sentiment, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "refined and tender emotion; . . . emotional reflection or meditation; appeal to the tender emotions in literature or art." The sentimental novel, in other words, posited emotion as superior to reason. To do so, these novels focused on characters whose sensitivity to their own feelings and to the world around them, particularly to the injustices they encountered, caused them to respond deeply and often tearfully. That is, sentimental heroes and heroines possessed a sensibility which made them highly responsive to suffering and injustice.

How were these novels shaped by a belief in the power of sentiment? While, as I noted, their forms are various, sentimental novels tend to follow one of two models. Either they have a female protagonist

defending her virtue against unscrupulous males, as in Richardson's *Pamela*. Or they have a male protagonist encountering and perhaps intervening in scenes of injustice. Of the latter, George A. Starr, English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, writes, "sentimental novels tend to become satires on 'the world,' but satires in which the hero himself cannot usually take part because of his naivete, good nature, and general childlikeness" (181). In either case, female or male, the sentimental novel has little concern for psychological realism or character development and employs episodic and often fragmented plots, giving them little contemporary appeal. In fact, sentiment has become a pejorative; as the O.E.D. has it, sentiment is "Now chiefly in derisive use, conveying an imputation of either insincerity or mawkishness." It's not that we aren't moved by pathos, by appeals to our emotions. It's that we turn away from these appeals when they're too obvious. Responding to endless and often sophisticated appeals, whether by politicians and advertisers, telemarketers and multinational corporations, influencers and, yes, I admit, even podcasters, we are ever wary of being manipulated and thus cynically dismiss persuasive appeals once we recognize their attempt to exploit our emotions.

The origins of the sentimental novel are usually traced to the 1740s and the publication of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In both, a woman is tormented by an amoral rake (or as we would label him today, a sexual predator). Pamela, 15 years-old and newly employed as a maid by one Mr. B, must fend off his incessant advances. To fulfill his desires, he abducts and imprisons her in his country estate, where he continues to try to seduce her, even proposing marriage, until, after reading a bundle of letters in which Pamela has expressed her suffering to her parents, Mr. B. has a change of heart, comes to sympathize with Pamela, regrets the pain he's caused her, frees her, and sends her a letter of apology, upon receipt of which Pamela faces a dilemma: to be Mrs. B. or not to be Mrs. B. That is her question. The answer: she realizes she has fallen in love with the previously predatory Mr. B. and agrees to his marriage proposal.

In *Clarissa*, Richardson narrates (across more than 1400 pages in the Penguin edition) the suffering of 18-year-old Clarissa Harlowe, who, from a well-to-do family, is pursued and imprisoned by the aristocratic libertine Richard Lovelace who, his attempts at seduction through fraud and persuasion having failed, drugs and rapes her. He subsequently proposes marriage, which Clarissa refuses. When he tries again to rape her, she threatens to kill herself, escapes and finds sanctuary with a shopkeeper and his wife, grows increasingly weak and dies. Lovelace, too, dies, killed in a duel with Clarissa's cousin. In both novels, we see a woman oppose, heroically and even fatally, a man's unwelcome sexual advances. This opposition not just to individual men like Mr. B. and Lovelace but to a patriarchal system that promoted male violence and other forms of exploitation and injustice was a primary target of the sentimental novel, many of which were written by women whose ultimate goal, writes G. J. Barker-Benfield (Professor Emeritus at SUNY-Albany), was "to transform male treatment of women. . . . [through] a female gender style manifest in tearfulness, fainting, and physical weakness. . . . This style was presented as women's refinement of manners" (251). The aim of these novels, in other words, was, through the sentimental play on emotions, to transform men's attitudes toward women (and toward other forms of male cruelty), raising men's consciousness by developing their sensibility, aiming for a kind of 18th century version of wokeness but one based on women's passivity and vulnerability rather than on their self-assertion, public declamation, and demands for justice.

Although it has a male protagonist, Harley, William Mackenzie's novel *The Man of Feeling*, like *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, features a scene in which the weapon of sentiment is deployed through the depiction of a woman seduced and abandoned by an aristocratic rake and forced into prostitution. This woman explains that her downfall was caused by believing her seducer's arguments. He played upon "the weakness of [her] soul and pretended to have "an unlimited confidence in [her] understanding" 43-44). This combination, a weak soul (i.e., weak sensibility) and a reliance upon intellect rather than feeling, is the cause of her sad fate, as she makes clear when she says to Harley, "Our reason . . . is so much of a machine that it will not always be able to resist" (44) trickery and praise and fraud.

Harley, though, is not governed by reason; he is a man of feeling, and so he responds as a sentimental hero should. First, he recognizes her suffering: "Her face was thin and hollow," Mackenzie writes, "and showed the remains of tarnished beauty" (37). Second, after she apologizes for troubling him, admitting she hasn't eaten in two days and saying, "Your generosity, Sir, is abused; to bestow it on me is to take it from the virtuous," he sees the true feelings expressed in her sorrow, sees her beauty however tarnished, and therefore tells her, "No more of that. . . . there is virtue in these tears; let the fruit of them be virtue" (38). Third, when remembering this encounter, Harley himself is overwhelmed with feeling and brought to tears: "he recalled the languid form of the fainting wretch to his mind [and] wept at the recollection of her tears" (41). Fourth, he provides direct assistance to lift her from her life of infamy and help her become reconciled with her father. Moved to tears by remembrance of her tears, which are themselves evidence of her virtue, Harley is a moral exemplar, his behavior a model for other men and an implicit condemnation of libertinism and prostitution and the patriarchal system which engenders these.

A novel Maureen Harkin, Professor of English at Reed College, calls "a more or less exhaustive catalogue and *summa* of the conventions of the sentimental novel" (318) and what Clive Probyn calls "a kind of handbook of sensibility" (60), William Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* was a tremendous success, both commercially and in its impact upon readers, one of whom, Lady Louisa Stuart (the daughter of the poet and travel writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu) remembered "my mother and sisters crying over it, dwelling upon it with rapture! And when I read it, as I was a girl of fourteen not yet versed in sentiment, I had a secret dread I should not cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility" (qtd. in Harkin 319). Brycchan Carey, English professor at Northumbria University, explains the logic behind these tears: the sentimental novel "is devoted to stories of woe and moments of distress, and the quintessential sentimental moment is when one or more of the characters begin to weep. At these moments, it is often made clear that the reader is supposed to weep too" (18). Over time, these tears would be drained of their power, as we can see in the 1886 edition of *The Man of Fee*ling, its editor having included (with satirical intent) an "Index to Tears," 47 places in the novel where someone cries. But in the 18th century, crying by readers—and often by the characters (the orphans and peasants, widows and widowers, beggars and cripples, the fallen and the dispossessed—and the man or woman who observes these characters' plights) is a testament to one's sensibility, a proper and heartfelt response to sentimental scenes, to the physical and emotional suffering of others.

One way to elicit tears from a reader is through melodrama—excessive and elaborately described heartache and pathos, as when Harley listens to the plight of an old acquaintance, Edwards, whose son Jack's dog is abruptly shot and killed by a gamekeeper for trespassing on the property of a justice of the peace, Jack subsequently hitting the gamekeeper, being taken to jail, denied bail, tried for assault and battery, and forced to pay a fine, then having a press gang arrive at his house on Christmas Eve, while he is playing with his children, to abduct him into the military until his father, Edwards, volunteers to go in his stead and is sent to India where he frees an unjustly imprisoned Indian and is punished with 200 lashes and banished from camp and thus forced to begin a lethal 400 mile trek to the nearest seaport but only a mile into his journey is assisted by the Indian he had helped escape and another Indian, the latter of whom guiding him to the coast and giving him 200 pieces of gold to help him return to England, after a week in which he discovers that his son and daughter-in-law had suffered bad crops and bad debts and had died of broken hearts, leaving behind two young children who he will now raise, assisted by Harley who provides him with a small farm.

Not just the incidents themselves but how they are conveyed is meant to produce tears and thus provoke a reader's sympathy and outrage. Here's Mackenzie's description, as told by Edwards, of the death of Jack's dog: "The creature fell; my son ran up to him; he died with a complaining sort of cry at his master's feet" (67). Earlier in the novel, Edwards had described another tear-jerking scene of a dog's demise: he and his family had been forced out of their home; their aged dog could go no farther than their front yard, where it laid down and died. My paraphrase, of course, doesn't do justice to Mackenzie's mawkish prose:

> You remember old Trusty, my shag house-dog; I shall never forget it while I live; the poor creature was blind with age, and could scarce crawl after us to the door; he went however as far as the gooseberry-bush that you may remember stood on the left side of the yard; he was wont to bask in the sun there; when he had reached that spot, he stopped; we went on: I called to him; he wagged his tail, but did not stir: I called again; he lay down: I whistled, and cried Trusty; he gave a short howl, and died! I could have lain down and died too; but God gave me strength to live for my children. (66-67)

To continue, here's Edwards's description of the Christmas eve when the press gang comes to take Jack away: "My daughter-in-law gazed upon her children with a look of the wildest despair: 'My poor infants!' said she, "your father is forced from you; who shall now labor for your bread; or must your mother beg for herself and for you" (69). Here's Edwards recounting his plight in India: "I . . . resolved to walk as far as I could, and then to lay myself down and die. But I had scarce gone a mile, when I was met by the Indian whom I had delivered. He pressed me in his arms, and kissed the marks of the lashes on my back a thousand times" (70). And here's Edwards after learning that his son and daughter-in-law have died and that the orphans he sees are his grandchildren: "'My poor Jack! art thou gone? I thought thou shouldst have carried thy father's grey hairs to the grave! And these little ones'—his tears choked his utterance, and he fell again on the necks of his children" (73).

Between 1770 and 1800, more than 1300 novels were published, many featuring similar tear-inducing scenes (Probyn 179n1). A bookseller in Thomas Bridges's 1771 novel *The Adventures of a Banknote* notes the popularity of sentimental novels, claiming that "a crying volume. . . brings me more money in six months than a heavy merry thing will do in six years" (qtd. in Todd 88). Yet by the 1820s, these crying volumes had had their tears nearly staunched: the sentimental novel had all but disappeared. Literary fashion, especially the rise of the Gothic novel—replacing tears with fears—had hastened its demise. But the sentimental novel was also the victim of assaults from various quarters for a variety of offenses. Conservatives saw sentimentalists as naively supporting the idealism of the French Revolution and then because of their self-indulgence as ignoring its terror. Radicals viewed sentimentalists' self-indulgence as reinforcing the status quo and reaffirming, in Janet Todd's words, "the mode of an apathetic middle class which enjoyed dabbling in philanthropy, especially when it involved groups far from home, such as African slaves" (131). For radicals, sentimentalism did not, Todd continues, "mount a general attack on the social problems of an unequal and unfree society and it did not encourage a political response [but instead] by giving aristocracy . . . a human face . . . it reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling class" (131). At the same time, conservatives worried about the levelling rhetoric of sentimentalism—that in rating feeling above rank and status, it posed a threat to the established and necessary hierarchical social order.

But it was feared, by conservatives and radicals alike, that sentimental novels, in championing the female virtues of feeling and compassion, effeminized men. In attempting to reduce male brutishness, these novels suggested that a man must, in popular parlance, embrace his feminine side. For some, this embrace of the feminine was a necessary corrective and a key to proper moral behavior. A as an anonymous writer offered in 1755, "Moral weeping is the sign of so noble passion . . . that it may be questioned whether those are properly men, who never weep upon any occasion . . .What can be more nobly human than to have a tender sentimental feeling of our own and other's misfortunes" (*Man* 4). On the other hand, the economist and philosopher Adam Smith worried that "the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of character" (qtd. Barker-Benfield 140). Ultimately, sentimental novels were seen as a threat to the traditional, proper, and natural roles of both sexes, as well as to patriarchy itself.

For some, these novels' emphasis on instinct and feeling encouraged women to follow their passions, leading them away from chastity and motherhood. Conversely, Mary Wollstonecraft, who would likely have supported this liberation of women's desires, objected to the focus on female feelings, arguing that women

should instead be treated "like rational creatures." She sought "to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them, that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness," which promote in men pity and contempt (12). Sentimentalists and sentimental novels, to Wollstonecraft, furthered the stereotype of woman as emotional rather than rational, delicate rather than assertive, and thus did not challenge women's subservience to men.

Attacks on the sentimental novel frequently took the form of mockery and satire. The novelist Henry Fielding satirizes Richardson's novels in both *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews*. Jane Austen in her epistolary juvenile novel *Love and Friendship* (written when she was 14) points up the absurdities of the cult of sensibility. The main character, Laura, with "a sensibility too tremblingly alive to every affliction" (554), is absurdly self-centered, at one point interrupting her narrative to explain that she hadn't mentioned her parents because of "the trifling circumstance concerning them . . . [Their} death . . . a few weeks after my departure" (561). Austen likewise mocks the idea of sentiment, as when Laura sees a noble youth who had knocked at her family's door because he is lost and wishes to warm himself by their fire. "My natural sensibility," Laura explains, "had already been greatly affected by the sufferings of the unfortunate stranger, and no sooner did I first behold him, than I felt that on him the happiness or misery of my future life must depend" (556). Austen here mocks both the power of feeling and the inability to distinguish between the serious and the trivial. Austin offers another critique in *Sense and Sensibility*, contrasting the sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood who, respectively, represent a moderate, rational approach to life and an immoderate, emotional one. They both suffer romantic losses but whereas Elinor experiences her heartbreak stoically, with calm self-command and thereby spares her mother and sisters from her grief, Marianne dwells on her sorrow, in what Austen calls an "indulgence of feeling" (62). This preference for feeling above all else has led Marianne to fall in love with a roguish, untrustworthy man while mocking her sister's attraction to a rational and temperate suitor. Marianne, though, realizes the selfish error of indulging in feelings. Just as Marianne learns from her mistakes, so Austen teaches her readers to reject sensibility and to embrace sense.

Another novelist, Ann Radcliffe in her Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, has her protagonist's father, on his death bed, warn his daughter about the dangerous allure of sentiment:

> do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling. . . . Those, who really possess sensibility, ought early to be taught, that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. And, since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them. . . . happiness arises in a state of peace, not of tumult. (49)

Commenting on the foolishness of sentiment, Austen and Radcliffe are repeating a belief common among writers at the end of the 18th century. As Todd asserts, "By the 1790s almost all serious novelists noted the selfishness, irrationality, and amorality of the cult of sensibility" (144). Besides the narcissism and illogic that Austen, Radcliffe, and other writers objected to, the sentimental novel was criticized for its piecemeal, individualistic response to injustice, its naive belief that sensitive individuals responding with great feeling and many tears could somehow effect substantial social change.

As frivolous as sentimental novels may seem, in reacting against the 18th century emphasis on reason, they were taking sides in a serious philosophical debate being led by Mackenzie's fellow Scots David Hume and Adam Smith about human nature, about the question of whether human beings are motivated by "benevolence or sympathy rather than . . . acquisitiveness or mere self-preservation" (Bending and Bygrave xi). One impetus for this debate was the development of a capitalist consumer culture, with its implicit belief that human nature is based on acquisitiveness and self-preservation. While consumerism expanded in the

19th century in conjunction with the industrial revolution and the growth of the British empire, its roots lay in the 18th century, Barker-Benfield arguing that “Britain became a mass consumer-society in the preindustrial period, 1650-1750, or even earlier. The industrial revolution would answer to and vastly stimulate needs and appetites . . . but they had long been expressed by the majority of English women and men” (xxii). The suffering that Mackenzie shows and which characters like Harley tearfully respond to—poverty, imprisonment, prostitution, dispossession, imperialism—as well as the desire to reform and temporize these conditions are products of this new and growing capitalist culture.

The idea that seeing characters in novels cry could somehow alter social relations in any meaningful way seems ludicrous. But we need remember that the idea of sentiment and sensibility was embraced by many in 18th century Britain. Sensibility became something like a religious belief (and was derided by critics as a “cult”) that was overwhelmingly female and which, Barker-Benfield argues, “could be consolidated and developed into self-consciousness and authoritative convention, before issuing outward in demands for heterosocial politeness and, eventually, reform” (263). In addition, in its attempts to solicit emotional responses, the sentimental novel often presented critiques of prevailing social practices. In Edwards’ story, for instance, we are made painfully aware of how inequitable access to power and wealth can lead to imprisonment, bankruptcy, dispossession, disease, and death. In one notable passage, Mackenzie has Edwards denounce British imperialism in India. “What title have the subjects of another kingdom,” he asks, “to establish an empire in India?” (76). He goes on to assert that the motives of the British gentlemen going to India are clear: they want to enrich themselves, and these spoils “are covered with the blood of the vanquished” (77).

The authors of sentimental novels identified many other forms of injustice which they hoped, by cultivating proper sensibilities, to correct, including, according to Barker-Benfield, “the cruel treatment of animals, the mistreatment of children, of the sick, and the insane; the corporal punishments of public flogging and executions; imprisonment for debt; dueling; war; and imperialism; the abuse of the poor; their economic exploitation unrelieved by charity; the press-gang and injustice generally; political corruption; and the slave trade and slavery” (224). Mackenzie touches on most of these. But he does not refer to slavery. Historians, though, have suggested that this shift in perception—this development of sentiment, with its concern for and emotional reaction to human suffering—played a role in the development of organized opposition to the slave trade. As Paul Langford, History professor at Oxford University, explains, “abolition [was] among the manifold expressions of the [cult of] sensibility” (516).

But Langford also notes the political limits of this movement: “the new sensibility,” he writes, “was not sufficient to bring about change. It needed the somewhat harder core of moral earnestness provided by the evangelicals to turn it into a weapon of real weight and effectiveness” (518). Here is the abolitionist Wendell Phillips in an 1852 speech before the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, using the kind of emotional appeal common to the novel of sentiment:

> Elizabeth Blakeley, a mulatto girl, of Wilmington, N. C., who, loving freedom more than slavery, concealed herself on board a Boston brig, in the little narrow passage between the side of the vessel and the partition that formed the cabin,--two feet eight inches of room. There she lay while her inhuman master, almost certain she was on board the vessel, had it smoked with sulphur and tobacco three times over. Still she bore it. She came North, half frozen, in the most inclement month of the year. . . . She reached Boston just able to crawl. . . . Just able to stand, fresh from that baptism of suffering for liberty, she came here [to Fanuel Hall]. We told her story. And with us that night . . . sat [the Swedish novelist] Fredrika Bremer, the representative of the literature of the Old World; and her humane sympathies were moved so much, that the rosebud she held in her hand she sent . . . to the first representative of American slavery she had seen. It was the tribute of Europe's heart and intellect to a heroine of the black race. (74-75)

Phillips and other abolitionists joined this sentimental appeal to the seriousness of Protestant religious instruction: “What I want to impress you with,” Phillips declaimed in another speech before the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, “is, the great weight that is attached to the opinion of everything that can call itself a man. Give me anything that walks erect, and can read, and he shall count one in the millions of the Lord's sacramental host, which is yet to come up and trample all oppression in the dust” (68).

This linking of sentimental instruction with Christian teaching to oppose slavery was used most famously and effectively by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe shows the suffering of Uncle Tom and other characters with the goal of moving readers emotionally in order to move them politically, while linking this position to the moral earnestness of evangelical Protestantism. As Stowe writes in the novel’s “Concluding Remarks,” “What can any individual do? . . . There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ?” (388).

Stowe’s emphasis on the importance of feeling right is a holdover from the sentimental novel. But there is a considerable difference between the novel of sentiment and the Victorian novel. The former seemed sometimes, in its emphasis on feeling, to challenge the primacy of marriage so often at the heart of the Victorian novel. Another difference is that the Victorian novel is plot-driven with sentiment folded into narrative; feeling doesn’t supplant plot, as it does in *The Man of Feeling*. Another difference is that the sentimental hero is one-dimensional, a transparent vessel through which we see a refined sensibility responding to injustice. Such characters are instruments meant to direct our feelings, not representations of real people we can identify with and learn from. The characters in Victorian novels have depth and complexity. They’re not just moral exemplars or pitiable victims or conscienceless villains.

Like the sentimental novel, the Victorian novel—and Victorians in general—displayed an at times uneasy belief in social progress. However, there existed an irresolvable tension in the philosophy of feeling—the struggle between what the Australian poet, editor, and scholar R.F. Brissenden defines as “the belief that men have a basic desire to act benevolently; that the sentiments of humanity and sympathy are among the most powerful feelings we possess” (30)—and the evidence we encounter every day of a society that seems to run on cruelty and exploitation. For Brissenden, “the paradox that man though naturally good somehow creates the conditions which prevent him from acting virtuously . . . haunted the imagination of the age” (29). Brissenden goes on to explain that the result of this conflict between an optimistic view of human nature and the brutality of human existence could only lead to despair. And this, Brissenden argues, explains protagonists’ and readers’ frequent crying: “the sentimental tribute of a tear exacted by the spectacle of virtue in distress was an acknowledgement at once of man’s inherent goodness and of the impossibility of his ever being able to demonstrate his goodness effectively” (29).

While the sentimental novel would lose its cultural force, seen as too didactic and emotional even by the Victorians, the man of feeling influenced Western culture’s perception of the artist and what the subject matter of art should be as it was transformed by the Romantics into the figure of an isolated poet suffering for his art. As Brissenden observes, the notion “of the unloved, misunderstood, agonised and alienated artist is a romantic myth; and it is intimately related to, is in part perhaps a variant of the myth of the virtuous but impotent man of sentiment. . . . since the end of the eighteenth century the writer in the European tradition has become increasingly preoccupied with the theme of the dislocated, deracinated, powerless artist: the theme, in other words of virtue—literary, artistic, cultural virtue—in distress” (77). And so a line can be drawn, though hardly a straight one, from Mackenzie’s man of feeling to James Joyce’s artist as a young man.

One wouldn't, though, describe Joyce's fiction as a sentimental. As a modernist reacting against Victorianism, Joyce has his characters painfully come to understand sentimentalism as one more entrapping and life-denying illusion. It's in the Victorian novel that we can most clearly see the continuity of the sentimental novel. Both construct moral arguments through emotional appeals. Ellen Wood in *East Lynne*, for example, describes at length the suffering of her heroine Isabel Vane as she watches the slow death of a child she has abandoned. Wood does so to teach a moral lesson—that wives should not abandon their husbands and children because of tmarital disenchantment and fleeting desire but should instead maintain the sanctity of the bourgeois domestic household with its conventional gender roles. The function of the sentimental hero, to open our feelings and thus reform our sensibilities, was supplanted in the Victorian novel by the oft-intruding voice of the author directing our responses and providing explicit moral instruction. Thus, although to a modern reader, the sentimental novel can seem, frankly, ridiculous, it had a lasting impact on the Victorian novel, through its use of sentiment and its belief that such scenes—Helen consoling her dying husband in Anne Bronte's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Isabel watching over her dying son in *East Lynne*, Nell learning of her sister's betrayal in Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*—might move a reader emotionally and thereby serve as effective moral instruction. Sentimental novels and Victorian novels were equally didactic but the moral instruction in the latter is more convincing because it is conveyed through compelling narratives that feature realistic characters in detailed true-to-life settings, unlike the stock characters and cliched narratives of sentimental novels. Yet despite their greater realism, the moral assurance that most Victorian novels convey frequently offers a thin and perfunctory resolution to the many uncertainties and contradictions and dilemmas at the heart of Victorian society. Just as, in Todd's words, "the evanescent moods and physical emanations of sensibility resulting in momentary tearful compassion have no staying power and no ability to improve society at large" (140), so too, it can be argued, the Victorian novel's individualistic status-quo-reaffirming moral instruction could offer only a modest critique of large and persistent social problems in Britain and its territories.

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