Sensationalism

Where sentimentalism, as a literary critical term, has often been used to refer to works that indulge in positive feelings of sympathy and connection, of love and community, sensationalism has been used to refer to the opposite sort of feelings, those largely condemned by American society in the antebellum period and, to some extent, now: lust, disgust, horror, and shock. Just as critics of the mid-twentieth century used sentimentalism as a term to reject works they saw as indulging in sympathy or emotional sensibility for its own end, they similarly used sensationalism as a term to reject works they saw as providing sexual titillation, evoking terror, and representing disturbing and unusual behavior and images merely to create a reaction in readers. And like sentimentalism, sensationalism has undergone a critical transformation over the past three decades as literary historians have sought to understand popular sensational works in reference to political and economic structures, in terms of their appeal to a broad swath of the populace, and in relationship to the works of canonical authors. Sentimentalism and sensationalism, then, are the interrelated poles of the popular literature rejected by American literary history until the last few decades.

The development of sensationalism relates directly to the economic, technological, and demographic changes of the antebellum era, specifically the rise of the penny press due to cheaper printing processes and to the new consolidation of mass readerships in urban centers. While sensationalism drew on and grew out of the literary Gothic in numerous ways, sharing its emphasis on the psychologically abnormal and the grotesque, extreme situations giving rise to intense emotional states in characters and readers alike, sensationalism focused more on the social conditions surrounding urban crime and immorality, and the Gothic tended to locate the sources of its terror in fundamental psychological or philosophical conditions or in an archaic past. Early American Gothic writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, George Watterston, and John Neal began to blur this distinction in locating their Gothic stories in growing American cities, but it was really with the penny press of the 1830s and its exploitation of stories about urban crime and the publication of Eugène Sue’s Les Mystères de Paris in 1842-43, which was rapidly translated into English and republished in the United States, that antebellum sensationalism came into its own. The most important authors to develop and explore the mode’s potential were George Lippard, George Thompson, and Ned Buntline (E Z. C Judson). While Buntline would go on to establish himself in somewhat more genteel circles through his postbellum role in popularizing images of the West and helping Buffalo Bill and other western icons attain fame, Lippard and Thompson more truly epitomize antebellum sensationalism through their emphasis on class disparity and exploitation in plots veering on the pornographic.

In Quaker City, perhaps the most popular and famous sensational text of the era, a text whose sales would only be surpassed by Susan Warner’s Wide, Wide World (1851) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) in the antebellum era, Lippard offers a fictional expose of the debaucheries and corruption of the wealthiest, most influential residents of Philadelphia, while celebrating the attempts of lower-class
citizens to save themselves from the insatiable lust and vengeance of the ministers, politicians, and merchants who control the city. Like much sensationalism of the period, the novel draws clear moral distinctions between the exploitative upper classes and the working classes, but it offers much more ambiguous depictions of sexual licentiousness and of the criminal underclass. While ostensibly denouncing the seductions and rapes it depicts, the novel repeats descriptions of women’s bodies and their sexual responses and desires. Similarly, the novel represents some of its most violent characters as morally superior to the hypocrisy of the upper classes, suggesting that their violence and immorality derive from an unjust, exploitative system that gives them little chance at survival beyond turning to their most selfish and animalistic instincts. Thompson was even more prolific and nearly as popular as Lippard, producing somewhere between 50 and 100 novels over a short career. His novels, epitomized by Venus in Boston, share much in common with Lippard’s work, as they foreground class inequality and the hypocrisy and viciousness of the elite, while offering more equivocal representations of sexuality and criminality.

Sensationalism, like sentimentalism, was largely rejected by academic criticism and was seldom reprinted until the last decades of the twentieth century. One reason for the lack of attention was the ephemeral nature of the publications themselves, as they often appeared in cheap newspapers or in cheap bound editions that were less likely to be saved or collected. Many of these works were also destroyed later in the nineteenth century by censors seeking to cleanse reading materials deemed obscene or pornographic. Academic criticism throughout most of the twentieth century dismissed sensational literature as merely sensational, as simply attempting to provoke the most visceral emotions—disgust, terror, lust—and lacking the depth and artistry of the true literary classics of the era. In the 1950s and 1960s, some critics, such as Leslie Fiedler and Henry Nash Smith, attended to sensationalism and dime novels (cheap, somewhat formulaic novels usually set in the city or the frontier, often produced in near-industrial conditions for the working-class), focusing on them as a barometer of popular American ideas. However, it was really in the 1980s, with the publication of David S. Reynolds’s Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (1988) and Michael Denning’s Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (1987), that an upsurge of interest in sensationalism really took hold. For Reynolds, sensationalism, along with other popular modes, provided a fount of images, themes, and devices that the canonical authors of the era drew on and recreated in more artistic, philosophically deep works. While Reynolds is interested in sensational materials for their own sake, exploring the works of writers such as Lippard and Thompson, their nascent working-class politics, and their critique of dominant American morality as hypocritical, much of his focus is on how authors such as Hawthorne and Melville translated sensational materials into higher literary works such as House of the Seven Gables and Pierre. Denning, on the other hand, reads dime novels as an arena of class conflict, where authors and readers worked through competing ideas and images of middle-class morality and working-class reality in seemingly escapist melodramatic adventure and indulgent prurience. Denning’s overarching argument is that dime novels gave voice to working-class
utopian longings, that they expressed an uncoalesced consciousness of the exploitations of capitalism.

In the years since Denning’s and Reynolds’s books, a number of scholars have focused on more specific thematic and political strains within antebellum sensationalism. In particular, Shelley Streeby has analyzed sensational fiction surrounding the U.S.-Mexican War and Manifest Destiny, while David Anthony has explored how sensationalism responded to the changing economic conditions of the era by providing a realm for renegotiating masculinity, and David Stewart has described how sensational fiction less reflected an urban reality experienced by working-class men than helped shape working-class men for the new marketplace realities of early capitalism and urbanization. With this work, more and more sensational works have been recovered, opening new fields of exploration and providing more and more insight into the varied cultural landscape of the antebellum U.S.

Suggested Further Reading


Stewart, David M. *Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011.