Sentimentalism

Perhaps no literary-critical term has undergone such significant revision as sentimentalism has over the past three decades. For most of the past two centuries, "sentimentalism" has been used pejoratively to refer to a tendency towards overt emotionalism in literature and other cultural forms, an evocation of sympathy based on the most common-placed and clichéd situations and images. As such, critics often distinguished between the artistry of truly literary works and the sentimentalism of popular fare. While sentimental or sentimentalism have been used as terms to dismiss works from across time, much of the emphasis on sentimentalism—both before and after the critical turn to be discussed—focuses on works from the antebellum period. According to the older tradition, as the country modernized, becoming more market-oriented and urbanized, popular taste withdrew into the pleasure of an easy emotionalism, feelings of nostalgia and sympathy which allowed people to feel an untroubled connection to characters and to avoid the deep intellectual puzzles and problems that the true literature of the period addressed. Such a view provided a foundation for many critics to dismiss much of the most popular literature of the period, especially literature written by women, as women authors and readers were seen as particularly emotional. Since the 1970s, however, critics have overturned this older critical view, arguing that sentimentalism has a much deeper philosophical and religious foundation, that it enabled women writers (and others) to shift the ground for basing and enacting political decisions, and that, at times, it offered more of an alternative to dominant thought during the period than did the canonical authors.

The mid-twentieth-century critical wariness about emotional affect is exemplified by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley's famous essay "The Affective Fallacy" (1949). Following a New Critical emphasis on defining and evaluating a literary work in objective terms relating to the work itself only, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that readers often confuse the literary work with what it does, the emotive response it may elicit in different readers. Wimsatt and Beardsley offer a complex account of how objective literary details evoke emotions, contending that "the critic's report will speak of emotions which are not only complex and dependent on a precise object but also, and for these reasons, stable." As such, they do not dismiss emotional affect as unimportant but rather emphasize the concrete details giving rise to specific, complex affective responses. For Wimsatt and Beardsley, to focus on emotions is to face the peril of subjective relativism, for each reader's emotional response is potentially quite different. For other mid-twentieth-century critics, however, emotionalism in literature simply revealed its lack of artistry and depth. Herbert Ross Brown's treatment in The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860, published in 1940 epitomizes this tendency. While he acknowledged the incredible influence of sentimental works by women, he largely dismissed them as escapist and trite, as they refused, in his and the dominant critical view of the time, to confront such phenomena as slavery, Manifest Destiny, and Jacksonian democracy.
Two critical works did more than any others to establish the grounds for reevaluating sentimentalism: Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) and Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985). Although developing her critique from a feminist perspective, Douglas largely reiterated the traditional point of view, arguing that the “feminization” of American culture, especially a Protestant religious tradition, had undermined a profound philosophical engagement with the issues of the era. An “anti-intellectual sentimentalism,” rather than replacing a patriarchal Calvinism with a true feminist alternative, instead helped to “generate [a] mass culture” that “limited the possibilities for change in American society,” by “obfuscat[ing] the visible dynamics of development.” For Douglas, then, sentimentalism was distinctly feminine, as it connoted as emotionalism associated with women, but that feminine element, rather than speaking to the true development of women in complex ways, embraced the narrow non-intellectual, irrational arena of feelings as their proper sphere, in the process fostering society’s avoidance of the foundations of the social and political issues of modern life.

Tompkins all but reversed Douglas’s judgment in offering a broader critique of mid-twentieth-century literary criticism. Against New Criticism’s “modernist point of view, which tends to classify work that affects people’s lives, or tries to, as merely sensationalistic or propagandistic,” Tompkins practices a literary criticism that emphasizes the “cultural work” that texts perform, the way they circulate within a culture, shaping and reflecting its beliefs and views. The texts that Tompkins explores do not veer widely from the dominant assumptions of the era, for “a novel’s impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form.” In reorienting our understanding of antebellum sentimentalism, Tompkins focuses on the two most popular novels of the period, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had received some critical attention since its publication due to its seemingly direct impact on American politics, Warner’s novel, when mentioned at all, had largely been dismissed as exemplifying the worst sins of sentimentalism: a fantasy of escape from the realm of public issues involving class, economics, and politics into a domestic sphere defined in terms of maudlin feelings. Where Douglas saw such texts as accepting women’s place in the home and its limitations on her as a social and political subject, Tompkins argues that authors such as Warner and Stowe used domestic ideology—the idea that women’s true place is in the home as the moral and emotional center of the family—as a fulcrum for creating a space for women’s power. For Tompkins, twentieth-century critics have largely misread these texts, if they have read them at all, because they do not share the religious worldview—a liberal Christianity emphasizing Christ’s love—that shaped these authors and their readers. It was, according to Tompkins, through an emotional and spiritual appeal that women could take advantage of their position within the social expectations of the era to begin changing that society. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* best demonstrates this potential, as Stowe directly appeals to readers as mothers and
fathers and as Christians in order to make them feel for the slaves, concluding her novel by contending that what readers can do best to address slavery is to “feel right.”

The Douglas-Tompkins debate, as it came to be called, largely shaped criticism about antebellum American sentimentalism for the next decade. Was sentimentalism a conservative force that acceded to oppressive gender ideologies and their imbrication in a growing market economy, or did sentimentalism subtly subvert dominant ideas, questioning, in particular, slavery and gender expectations by exploiting the culture’s accepted notion of women as more innately having an emotional, moral core? Most critics largely sided with Tompkins’s characterization, but moving forward, they complicated the relationship between sentimentalism and structures of power, gender, the literary canon, and the market economy, while also offering a more philosophical and historical understanding of sentimentalism’s growth and development. As scholars such as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Gregg Camfield, among others, have emphasized, nineteenth-century American sentimentalism was largely grounded in eighteenth-century philosophical movements that simultaneously contributed to romanticism and modern philosophical aesthetics, movements often contrasted with sentimentalism’s supposedly clichéd appeals to feeling. For moral sense philosophers such as Adam Smith, feelings were innately implanted by God in order to guide our moral response to the world around us. They provided us with a moral compass, and the greater our sensibility to the suffering of others, the less we have been hardened by the world around us and conventional blindness to suffering, the more attuned we are to an internal monitor placed by God. Philosophers and critics built on this notion of an innate moral sense to offer descriptions of how a parallel sense of artistic taste either intersected with this moral sense or, at least, was similarly constituted. Eighteenth-century sentimentalism, then, as embodied in works such as Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa (1747-1748) and Henry Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling (1771), was not defined primarily in terms of gender, although heroines and their feelings often play a central role in such texts, but in terms of evoking and modeling the kinds of sympathetic feelings that underlie both the ability of art to communicate experience and the potential of individuals to be knit together into a coherent society as a whole.

Such sentimentalism can be seen at work, in fact, in foundational political texts of the new nation such as Tom Paine’s Common Sense (1776). There, Paine calls upon each colonist to use “his reason and his feelings to determine” the justness of the cause for independence. Paine further elaborates the centrality of feelings and their origin, speaking of “those feelings and affections which nature justifies, and without which, we should be incapable of discharging the social duties of life, or enjoying the felicities of it:” “The Almighty hath implanted in us these inextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the guardians of his image in our hearts. They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve, and justice be extirpated the earth, of have only a casual existence were we callous to the touches of affection.” Sentimental appeals to feelings in the eighteenth century, then provided a ground for addressing the most serious political issues of the era.
With the social and economic changes of the market revolution that gave rise to domestic ideology in the first half of the nineteenth century, sentiment more and more came to be regarded as the special province of women. Yet given its eighteenth-century heritage, many literary historians have focused on how sentimentalism continued to underwrite conceptions of both male and female identity and how it served as a basis for conceptions of modern subjectivity. While U.S. society as a whole seemed to view women as having a greater access to or relying more fully on a certain emotional sensibility, the culture as a whole in various ways suggested that such sensibility or sympathy was essential for all humans in order to be moral citizens. Thus, scholars such as Glenn Hendler, for example, have emphasized the prominence of sentimental motifs, tropes, and practices in the works of numerous male writers. Others have focused on how the sentimentalism in women characters often serves, both within and outside the text proper as a model for reinvigorating the sensibility men have allowed their public duties to deaden. Most revealingly, for example, in the chapter “A Senator is but a Man” in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Mrs. Bird, a character described as meek and submissive, slowly leads her husband to sympathize with the escaped slave Eliza, diagnosing that his “heart is better than [his] head.”

Another line of critical interest has explored the relationship between sentimentalism and the market economy defined in terms of wage labor and commodity consumerism. For Gillian Brown, sentimentalism became both a defense against the intrusions of the marketplace, a refuge of feelings for resisting and criticizing the objectification of people by market processes, and a product of those forces and their demarcation of a private and a public sphere. Lori Merish, on the other hand, has shown the central role commodities play in sentimental texts as objects for materializing and conveying feelings, as sentimentalism both invests commercial objects with a meaning denied by the marketplace and obscures the economic relations that lead to their material production. These accounts of sentimentalism as a complex, politically ambiguous set of cultural forms accord with other, more recent descriptions of the power dynamics of sentimentalism. For scholars such as Amy Schrager Lang, Marianne Noble, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Shirley Samuels, and others, the sympathy sentimentalism evokes depends on questioning while reinforcing the power inequality between the reader and the object of his or her sympathy, most often individuals bereft of political power in the antebellum U. S.—slaves, Indians, orphaned girls, impoverished widows, and working-class men. As much as sentimental texts humanize these figures, calling on readers to do something to change their conditions, their pleasure derives from the distance of vicarious suffering or easily slips into a form of condescending pity. Since the mid-1980s, then, sentimentalism has become a key term for the study of antebellum U. S. literature, a term that has been used to explore, in increasingly nuanced and complex ways, the dynamic among literary works, power, identity, and emotional affect.

Fanny Fern’s Ruth Hall exhibits the complexity of sentimentalism as a term and the difficulty of easily equating sentimentalism with women’s writing during the period. A largely autobiographical novel, Ruth Hall follows its eponymous heroine as she
struggles to support herself and her children after being widowed and largely abandoned by her and her dead husband’s family. The plot to a great extent mirrors Sara Willis Parton’s life-story. By the time she wrote *Ruth Hall*, Parton had achieved great fame and financial success writing under the name Fanny Fern. Her pseudonym suggests a public persona of femininity, but Fern, much more than many of her contemporaneous women writers, actively sought to challenge gender inequalities, especially, in *Ruth Hall*, those she faced as a widow attempting to make a living in one of the few economic realms open to “respectable” women during the period. Where, as Mary Kelley pointed out early in the recovery of women’s sentimentalism, domestic ideology provided a framework through which women could enter into the public sphere and become breadwinners for their families, Fern as frequently attacks domesticity as she embraces it. Thus, *Ruth Hall* can supplement a picture of sentimentalism more fully embodied by other novels in this course, most notably Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which more unambiguously embrace the domestic sphere as woman’s special realm of influence for their Christian faith and innate sensibility can indirectly shape society as a whole.

**Suggested Further Reading**


