

Sentimentality: The Mask of Shallow Emotion

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'Sentimentality originally indicated the reliance on feelings as a guide to truth, but current usage defines it as an appeal to shallow, uncomplicated emotions at the expense of reason'.

In current literary terms, sentimentality is both a device used to induce a tender emotional response disproportionate to the situation at hand, (and thus to substitute heightened and generally uncritical feeling for normal ethical and intellectual judgments), and a heightened reader response willing to invest previously prepared emotions to respond disproportionately to a literary situation.

"A sentimentalist", Oscar Wilde wrote Alfred Douglas, "is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it." James Baldwin considered that 'Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel...the mask of cruelty'.

18th century origins

In the mid-eighteenth century, 'a Lady Bradshage had written querulously to Richardson: What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word sentimental, so much in vogue among the polite...Everything clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word...such a one is a sentimental man; we were a sentimental party'".

The second half of the century saw the word become 'an international obsession', - part of 'the Enlightenment project of cultivating the soul of the subject toward a visceral capacity to embody, recognize, and sanction virtue'. Everywhere in the sentimental novel or the sentimental comedy, 'lively and effusive emotion is celebrated as evidence of a good heart'.

By the close of the century, however, 'reaction against the uncontrolled excesses of sentimentalism' had set in; and 'the word "sentimental" came to mean "false and self-indulgent feeling" after Schiller's division (1795) of poets into two classes, the "naive" and the "sentimental", the latter being seen as 'forced and artificial'.

Modern times

In modern times "sentimental" is a pejorative term that has been casually applied to works of art and literature that exceed the viewer or reader's sense of decorum--the extent of permissible emotion--and standards of taste: "excessiveness" is the criterion; "Meretricious" and "contrived" sham pathos are the hallmark of sentimentality, where the morality that underlies the work is both intrusive and pat.

'Sentimentality often involves situations which evoke very intense feelings: love affairs, childbirth, death', but where the feelings are expressed with 'reduced intensity and duration of emotional

experience...diluted to a safe strength by idealisation and simplification'.

As a social force, sentimentality can be seen as a hardy perennial, appearing for example as 'Romantic sentimentality...in the 1960s slogans "flower power" and "make love not war"'.

Less commonly recognised perhaps is 'indecent sentimentality... pornographical pseudo-classics', so that one might say for example that 'Fanny Hill is a very sentimental novel, a faked Eden'.

Baudrillard has (perhaps over-cynically) attacked the sentimentality of Western humanitarianism, suggesting that 'in the New Sentimental Order, the affluent become consumers of the "ever more delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own attempts to alleviate it"'.

Dissensions

Complications enter into the ordinary view of sentimentality, however, when changes in fashion and setting-- the "climate of thought"--intrude between the work and the reader. The view that sentimentality is relative is inherent in John Ciardi's "sympathetic contract", in which the reader agrees to join with the writer when approaching a poem. The example of the death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), "a scene that for many readers today might represent a defining instance of sentimentality", brought tears to the eye of many highly critical readers of the day. The reader of Dickens, Richard Holt Hutton observed, "has the painful impression of pathos feasting upon itself."

'Recent feminist theory has clarified the use of the term as it applies to the genre' of the sentimental novel, stressing the way that 'different cultural assumptions arising from the oppression of women gave liberating significance to the works' piety and mythical power to the ideals of the heroines'.

Sentimental fallacy

The sentimental fallacy is an ancient rhetorical device that attributes human emotions, such as grief or anger, to the forces of nature. This is also known as the pathetic fallacy, 'a term coined by John Ruskin...for the practice of attributing human emotions to the inanimate or unintelligent world' - as in 'the sentimental poetic trope of the "pathetic fallacy", beloved of Theocritus, Virgil and their successors' in the pastoral tradition.

The term is also used more indiscriminately to discredit any argument as being based on a misweighting of emotion: 'sentimental fallacies...that men, that we, are better - nobler - than we know ourselves to be'; 'the "sentimental fallacy" of constructing novels or plays "out of purely emotional patterns"'.