

Sentimentalism

The sentimental novel was a popular form of fiction that gained popularity in America from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century (although there are still manifestations of it today). In its common conception, sentimentalism is didactic in form, “artless” in style, sincere in its tone, melodramatic in its plotting, and addressed overwhelmingly to a female readership. Often, the term “sentimentalism” is used in two senses:

1. An overindulgence in emotion, especially the conscious effort to induce emotion in order to enjoy it; expressing a “sensibility,” or susceptibility to emotions and sentiments (as opposed to logic or reason).
2. An optimistic overemphasis of the goodness of humanity, representing in part a reaction against Calvinism, which regarded human nature as depraved.

In *The Rise of the American Novel*, Alexander Cowie (in a humorous but condescending manner) offers a “recipe” for a typical sentimental plot of the mid-19th century:

First, take a young and not-too-pretty child about ten years old . . . Make sure that the child is, or shortly will be, an orphan. If the mother is still living, put her to death very gradually in a scene of much sorrow and little physical suffering, uttering pious hopes and admonitions to the last. . . . Now put the child under the care of a shrewish aunt. . . . In an emergency a cruel housekeeper will do. The child is now unhappy, under-nourished, and underprivileged. . . . Introduce a young woman living not far away, who embodies all Christian virtues, especially humility. Let this lady kiss, pray over, and cry with the heroine at intervals of three to four pages. The lady may or may not be blind; at any rate she has had her sorrows and she is destined to die. . . . [The girl learns] to subdue her pride and then submit graciously to the suffering which is the lot of all mortals.

For many critics, “sentimental” is a pejorative literary term when referencing the novel, and is usually applied to the writing of women. Some literary historians, however, have pointed out the limitations of traditional readings of sentimental fiction:

- The term “sentimental” is inexact in that it tends to clump together a variety of novels different in form and tone. Such a flat reading of 19th-century women’s writing can be dismissive and ignores the differences among diverse texts.
- Emotional appeal, usually seen as a liability in fiction, actually functioned as an effective vehicle for social change. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a case in point.
- Sentimental writing often focused on the precarious place of women in society. Since at the time women’s lives were greatly restricted—legally, economically, morally, socially, and sexually—the novel of sentiment served as a cautionary tale or guide. They would tell women how to protect themselves against not only seduction and unscrupulous behavior (which was the focus of most late-18th-century sentimental fiction), but also unjust legal and economic systems (the focus of that found in the 19th century). In this way, the sentimental served as a critique of the status quo and even an outright attack on its central institutions.

In America, the sentimental form was largely influenced by 18th-century British novels of sentiment, such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*. However, American sentimental narratives tended to be more didactic, even propagandistic, than the British versions, largely in an effort to counter the tradition of Puritanical disapproval of fiction. Writers of sentimental novels emphasized the usefulness of their fictions by trying to provide upright moral examples and positive social values to the new society of the republic. Such messages, usually targeted at women (but also intended for men), included the dangers of seduction, the importance of choosing a dependable marriage partner, the consequences of sexual transgression, and the need for female education.

Between the 1820s and the Civil War, the growth of new industry helped produce a new middle class that, although having roots in preindustrial family structures, differed from it in these ways:

1. it didn't have to make what it needed in order to survive
2. when men went off to work outside the home, it created the idea that men alone could support the family and that a woman's place was in the private sphere of the home
3. it looked at itself (the nuclear family of the middle class) as the backbone of the new republic

In light of these changes, the sentimental novel took on a new form and became what is called the "domestic novel." Here women, by and large barred from public business and relegated to issues surrounding the home, became spiritual "guides" to the kingdom of heaven. The domestic sphere, as opposed to the outer world of commerce and politics, would be a haven established by the homemaker. This helped to engender the "cult of domesticity," a popular idea found not only in the novel, but in other forms of popular culture (magazines, advice books, religious journals, and newspapers). In these versions you have an idealized version of what a Christian family should be. In the domestic novel, a new idea of "true womanhood" evolved, and was characterized by:

- Piety – the idea that women had a proclivity for religion, that the modern woman of the early 19th century was a "new Eve" bringing the world (her home) out of sin through her suffering
- Purity – the notion that women must bring sexual purity into a marriage, and that without that she is "fallen" and unfit for a proper relationship; that this purity could be used by women to keep men in control of their needs and desires (for their own good)
- Submissiveness – a central concept that a true woman knew her place, submitting to fate, duty, and men; female submission to the patriarchy was transformed into identification with the will of God
- Domesticity – the idea that a woman's place is in the home, caring for the well-being of her family and using the domestic space (housekeeping, home crafts, and the education of her children) as a means of morally uplifting everyone under her roof; just as there was an emphasis on the private space of the home, there was an analogous emphasis on nurturing the sanctity of the *inner life* in the face of an increasingly commercial society

Examples of sentimental fiction include William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Clara Howard* (in the late 18th century); Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, Sara Payson Willis Parton (Fanny Fern)'s *Ruth Hall*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Sunny Side*, Augusta Jane Evans's *St. Elmo*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (in the 19th century).