Sentimentality as an aesthetic flaw

Sentimentality as an Aesthetic Flaw

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What is — and what is wrong with — sentimentality in literature? Over the last decades there have been a number of attempts to explain sentimentality in literature as, primarily, a *moral* defect. On this account, if in literary criticism we disparage something as sentimental, a negative aesthetic evaluation (in a broad sense of the term 'aesthetic') is based on a moral judgement. This would be an instance of the relevance of moral considerations for aesthetic criticism.

Current arguments for censuring literary sentimentality on moral grounds proceed in two steps (although the second one is often taken for granted):

First, sentimentality in a person is analysed as a moral failing.

Secondly, such moral censure of a person is then transferred to an artefact: a work of fiction.

I shall mainly be concerned with two such moralising accounts of literary sentimentality. The first (I) goes back to a remark by Oscar Wilde that was picked up by Michael Tanner, Roger Scruton, and others. The second (II) was propounded by Anthony Savile, and to some extent by Mary Midgley.

I.

The Oscar Wilde view. In his long letter of accusation to his former lover Lord Alfred Douglas, written from Reading Prison and posthumously published under the title *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde explains that:

> a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. … We think we can have our emotions for nothing. We cannot. Even the finest and the most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely

> enough, that is what makes them fine. The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. … they always try to get their emotions on credit, or refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. … Remember that the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism. [Wilde 1897, 636 & 640]

The occasion that led Oscar Wilde to this remark was one where an emotion was literally going to cost money: Lord Douglas wanted to be considerate to his mother by not asking her for financial support, but at the same time he was unwilling to do without any of his wonted luxury and extravagance. So he sponged on Wilde instead, which made his gesture towards his mother hollow —: 'To propose to spare your mother's pocket was beautiful. To do so at my expense was ugly' (Wilde 1897, 636). He indulged in feeling beautifully unselfish at the time, but he wasn't really

Or wasn't he? The fact remains that Lord Douglas spared his mother's money, which might well have been an act of sincere affection, even if in the end it didn't cost him much. It wasn't a heroic self-sacrifice, but, for all we know, it could still have been a sincere act of kindness. But let us assume that Lord Douglas did revel in the feeling of a grand self-effacing deed, which his act did not in fact amount to. Is that, then, a paradigmatic case of sentimentality? In other words, is sentimentality a matter of having, perhaps indulging in, the feelings of an emotion, while shrinking from the behavioural consequences that emotion, if genuine, would require (— refusing to pay the bill)?

I am not entirely sure that such ineffectuality of feeling should be called sentimentality. Suppose I feel passionately in love with a girl, but then refuse to do anything for her when she needs help. Obviously, it wasn't love, only a passing fancy, but it seems less clear whether it should be described as sentimentality. Or think of somebody who listening to another's tales of misfortune, witnessing their dire straits, feels touched and eager to help, promises to do so, as soon as possible — but, somehow, never does. That person's intention to help, though quite sincere and heartfelt at the time, does not prove strong enough to last and to lead to action. Is this a case of sentimentality, or is it not more aptly called shallowness? (which Oscar Wilde calls 'the supreme vice', and of which, incidentally, he also accuses Lord Douglas (Wilde 1897, 580)).

Moreover, there are clear cases of sentimentalists that are not lacking in real action. An elderly lady that gets soppy about cats may spend all her money on trying to improve their lives. And, as Michael Tanner observes, sentimentality may lead to various forms of violent behaviour, even suicide (Tanner 1977, 131).

Nonetheless, Michael Tanner regards those remarks, from *De Profundis*, as Oscar Wilde's most profound observation. As he puts it, 'a dominant element in sentimentality is that the feelings which constitute it are in some important way unearned, being had on the cheap, come by too easily' (Tanner 1977, 128). Yet this is not exactly the case of Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde's metaphor was that of not paying the bill *after* the luxury of an emotion; which suggests that the feeling was (or could have been) real enough at the time and only devalued subsequently by one's refusal to face the consequences. Whereas Tanner's words suggest a slightly different picture: there is something wrong with one's even having those feelings in the first place. They are come by too easily, unearned, i.e.: it should have been more difficult to experience them.

The same metaphor is used by Roger Scruton who at one point calls 'sentimentality': 'the desire for the glory of some heroic or transfiguring passion, without the cost of feeling it' (Scruton 2000, 86). This may be the sentimentality of somebody longing for the ardour of religious belief, but unwilling seriously to engage with it. In another context Scruton writes that: 'Kitsch is an attempt to have the life of the spirit on the cheap' (Scruton 1999).

I agree that there is some truth in this metaphor (of having feelings on the cheap), which I shall return to later. For the moment, however, I want to point out that this idea of sentimentality as emotions on the cheap seems extremely inappropriate as a basis for literary criticism. For is it not rather a neat characterisation of all fiction, including good literature, perhaps especially of well-crafted effective literature, that it gives us 'emotions on the cheap'? Novels and plays allow us imaginatively to live through and respond to all types of human passion or suffering, in a well-controlled and risk-free manner: without the inconvenience of being overwhelmed, traumatised, actually ruined or killed by the real thing. That it affords us emotions on the cheap is the very beauty and attraction of fiction, fiction at its best; — not a defect called 'sentimentality'.

Here we encounter the second stage of arguing that sentimentality in literature is a moral flaw: transferring the moral objections to sentimentality in a person to a work of fiction. One natural way of making this move is this: A person is sentimental if he has

certain kinds of emotions; a work of fiction is sentimental if it is likely to evoke in you that kind of emotion. But if sentimentality is emotions on the cheap, then on this account *all* emotional fiction comes out as sentimental, which is absurd.

Of course, this is not the only way of making the move from person to artefact. It may be more plausible to say that sentimental fiction expresses sentimentality, rather than arousing it. But even so, the characterisation of sentimentality as emotions on the cheap faces a problem. For it means that, even if we don't regard the literature itself as sentimental, it would still appear that all appreciative readers are. Reading fiction with the appropriate emotional sensitivity is undoubtedly a cheap and convenient way of enriching your emotional life. So on this account, reading fiction or watching it on the stage would be indulging in sentimentality, or shallowness. Leaving the theatre or putting the book aside we leave those borrowed feelings behind; just as Bingo Little (in P.G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves* novels) is passionately in love one moment and forgets all about it the next.

II.

Let us now consider *Anthony Savile's analysis* of sentimentality as a moral failing. According to Savile, sentimentality is always reprehensible because it involves an element of self-deception: A sentimentalist falsifies certain aspects of his experience, idealizing them, 'under the guidance of a desire for gratification and reassurance' (Savile 1982, 241). That is, either in order to experience an agreeable emotional response, or in order to experience an emotion that, although perhaps not pleasant in itself, allows one to feel good about oneself, or a combination of both.

A common example is the sentimentalization of children and domestic pets: 'Projecting onto them an exaggerated vulnerability and innocence, I encourage myself to feel a tender compassion for them', which is pleasant, but also supports 'a view of myself as a man of gentleness and fine feeling' (Savile 1982, 239).

An example exclusively of the second type is this: 'a man who idealizes a distant political cause may be sentimentally angry or indignant when one of its exponents is extradited from the country, even though he does not experience these feelings with pleasure'. The point is rather that they 'enable him to take a gratifying view of his own character' (Savile 1982, 239-40).

A first objection to Savile's analysis is that it takes extreme, quasi pathological cases as the paradigm of sentimentality. This is comparable to making violent behaviour a defining feature of alcoholism. It is of course true that many, and perhaps very typical, cases of alcohol addiction involve violent behaviour; but obviously not all. Similarly, Savile's examples of self-deception are undoubtedly telling specimens of sentimentality, but it's easy to come up with more benign instances of sentimentality that do not involve any self-deception or falsification. Imagine somebody who takes great delight at the sight of cuddly little animals; who is in raptures when seeing a mother cat licking her kitten; and who is inordinately fond of their own cat and extremely concerned about its comforts. Such a person is sentimental about their cat, but need not for that matter be deceived or self-deceiving about cats' nature and limited intelligence. Or again, I may be a lover of romantic comedies and particularly relish the touching moments at the end when all is bliss and happiness. That, no doubt, would betoken a sentimental streak in me, but it doesn't make me guilty of any kind of idealizing self-deception. I may be well aware that things are rarely as neat and tidy as that in real life. Indeed, that may be the very reason why I'm so keen on romantic fiction: that it's more beautiful than real life.

Savile distorts the concept of sentimentality by defining it in terms of its — admittedly typical, but not inevitable — excesses. And what is more, even those excesses may not always deserve Savile's harsh censure. There are many cat or dog lovers whose fondness of their pets makes them entertain a somewhat idealized picture of those animals' feelings and intelligence. You like to believe, for example, that your cat has some personal attachment to you, in the way people do; — which is clearly an illusion. But is such a sentimental idealization morally reprehensible? Think of a lonely old woman who has nobody to talk to but her cat: Is she morally wrong to cultivate this kind of sentimental self-deception of thinking of her cat as listening to her? — It seems to me that such common instances of sentimentality are usually quite harmless, since they remain well localised: you please yourself with entertaining the idea of your cat's perceptiveness, but you never actually make a fool of yourself by expecting your cat to do anything intelligent (fetch the post, or make a telephone call). And in some cases such mildly self-deceiving sentimentality may be of considerable psychological benefit.

Finally, there is the question of how Savile's analysis is to be transferred from a sentimental person to a sentimental piece of fiction. There are, of course, idealizing

representations in fiction. But what about the idea of self-deception? Would authors have to deceive themselves in order to produce a sentimental piece of fiction? Surely not. We would criticize a novel as sentimental even if it was obvious that the author knew perfectly well what he was doing; say, as somebody who makes a living out of producing cheap fiction according to familiar patterns. So it would be more plausible to say that sentimental fiction contains falsifying idealizations, while the effect of emotional gratification or reassurance would have to be located in the intended reader, not necessarily the author.

This is a point developed by Mary Midgley, who agrees with Savile that sentimentality consists in 'misrepresenting the world in order to indulge our feelings'. And in fiction such misrepresentation is calculated to indulge the readers' feelings; which is reprehensible because 'it distorts expectation; it can make people unable to deal with the real world' (Midgley 1979, 385).

But is that a plausible complaint? — Don Quichote springs to mind: whose long exposure to romantic literature and seclusion from the world made him mistake windmills for dangerous giants. But then, the conceit of Cervantes' novel is more satirical than realistic. In fact, people are not as naïve as that; they have a fairly good understanding of the institutional concept of fiction as something that is not intended to be taken at face value (cf. Jefferson 1983; Newman 1995). Indeed, misrepresentation of the world is understood to be a key device of many literary genres, such as fairy tale, fantasy, or science fiction. Of course there are also genres that aim for thoroughgoing realism. But then, that is understood to be an artistic challenge, which readers are invited to judge as more or less successfully met, by drawing on their knowledge of the real world. Readers admire a realistic novel if they find that it is true to life in all its psychological details; they do not take it for granted that that is always the case. (And if they did, they would not be sentimental in Savile's sense: they would not be self-deceiving, but merely mistaken.)

If we consider an unrealistically sentimental description in literature, for example, some angelically virtuous and well-behaved children in Charles Dickens's novels, it is rather difficult to imagine how an adult reader might be deceived by such a description so as to expect all children to be like that. You would have to imagine someone who has never seen any real children in his life.

III.

In sum, I am not convinced by the view that sentimentality is a moral failing, a reprehensible falsification, as Savile claims, so that sentimentality in literature too would be morally reprehensible. What then is sentimentality, and is there anything wrong with it?

Robert Solomon, in his 'Defense of Sentimentality', asserts that sentimentality is 'nothing more nor less than the "appeal to tender feelings"', and denies boldly that there is anything wrong with it, either in people or in literature (Solomon 1990, 305). I think that is going too far. It may not be the grave moral defect that Savile, Midgley and others make it out to be, but it isn't all fine either. In many uses of the word 'sentimental' (where it isn't merely used to mean: 'having to do with tender emotions'), it serves as a pejorative term. Sentimentality is a tendency to have and express tender feelings; but the word also carries an implication that those feelings or expressions are a bit over the top: *excessive* relative to the circumstances. A woman's grief over the death of her child, for example, would *not* be called sentimental, as it is clearly not excessive, but fully appropriate, to feel and express such grief, even very loudly and openly.

In short: sentimentality is an *excessive* tendency to have and express tender feelings. That means, the sentimentalist tends to *seek out* occasions for tender feelings; tends to have a *lower threshold* for having tender feelings; and tends to *prolong* the experience, to savour it fully and revel in it. Sentimentality cherry-picks suitable objects at which to direct beautiful feelings, and makes a meal out of it.

If this is correct, it is easy to see how sentimentality, although it is not intrinsically a falsifying attitude (cherry-picking, but not falsifying), can lead to the kind of misperception or misrepresentation described by Savile. If you are on the look out for suitable objects at which to direct your tender feelings, and if you have an excessive desire to find some, it is very likely that you cut some corners: that you eke out things in your imagination, or carefully overlook certain unsuitable details, in order to find what you're looking for.

Sometimes there is a grey area between convenient ignorance and self-deception. When after her fatal accident people got sentimental over Princess Diana, the ready object of their tender feelings was only her public persona: pretty and nice. Better knowledge of the real person might have made it more difficult to mourn her like a saint. Some, in this case, may have manipulated their image of her to suit their feelings, but others would simply not have been aware of more of her than those lovable innocent features. Their intense

sympathetic response might still be censured as excessive (after all they had never met her) and naive, but it wouldn't involve any active falsification.

Compare the sentimentalist (who enjoys strong sympathetic feelings) with other types of people with a penchant for certain kinds for experience (as usefully listed by Mark Jefferson (1983)), such as:

the thrill seeker;

the melodramatic man (who enjoys and likes to emphasise the poignant and dramatic aspects of situations);

or the wondrous man (who delights in the mysterious).

What they all have in common is a predilection for a certain kind of experience, which they seek out to an extent that others find excessive. And in all these cases there is a danger of self-deception: of pretending to be in a suitable situation for the desired emotion, when in fact that is not so. The thrill seeker may exaggerate to himself the danger of the situation he is in; the melodramatic man overstates and inflates the dramatic aspects of a situation; the wondrous man may project something mysterious into ordinary coincidences; and the sentimentalist may be tempted to deceive himself in order to indulge his tender feelings. But then again, they all may resist the temptation to cheat and find some honest gratification for their temperaments. The world is full of real dangers for thrill seekers; there is occasionally real drama in human relations; real mystery in scientific research; and certainly plenty of appropriate occasions for sympathetic feelings. None of these types is, as such, a self-deceiver; just as a drug addict is not a thief, even though drug addicts may often be likely to become thieves.

Let us now reconsider Oscar Wilde's idea that sentimentality means having emotions on the cheap. If sentimentality is an inclination to cherry-pick and dwell upon suitable objects of tender emotions, it will typically go for *easy options*. That is to say, trying to gratify a sentimentalist temperament you will naturally prefer clear-cut, straightforward simple cases, of thoroughly good, innocent creatures, where you can wholeheartedly sympathise, pity or rejoice. That is the sentimentalist's emotional taste: strong pure feelings, without any distracting admixtures or confusing complications (such as victims that are far from innocent and lovable; or good deeds done from selfish motives). And that, it seems to me, is what may strike us as 'cheap' about a sentimentalist's feelings. It is cheap and easy to sympathise extensively with innocent and lovable victims of evil villains. It is a lot more demanding to

sort out one's feelings in less clear-cut cases. There is nothing morally wrong with the sentimentalist's preference for easy options; it may however appear a little immature, lacking in emotional sophistication. Thus, to call it cheap is probably more an aesthetic criticism.

Finally, the charge of sentimentality in literary criticism should certainly be seen as an aesthetic censure and not as a moral, or ethically motivated, one. It is implausible to hold that the aficionado of fairy tales or simple-minded romances fails to notice the unrealistic idealizations. It is rather a taste for simple-minded narratives involving pure good and evil, which neither real life experience nor realistic fiction can satisfy. Such a taste is not morally reprehensible, though we may find it rather crude and primitive. To more sophisticated, adult, literary interests, sentimental fiction is just boring (at least from a psychological point of view). It is more interesting, hence aesthetically more effective, to have psychologically less clear-cut and more complicated cases: where, for example, the suffering is not of an all-noble hero or a blue-eyed innocent girl, but of somebody with a more realistically mixed and warped character.

However, if I am right in thinking that the word 'sentimental' is used in this context as a pejorative term, it should be noted that not every stylized or idealized representation in literature should be called sentimental. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, is not meant to be realistic. It is a fairy tale, and in this genre simplified and idealized characterizations (such as those of the Cratchit family) are aesthetically quite appropriate. The death of little Nell (in *The Old Curiosity Shop*), by contrast, is certainly sentimental by our standards of a realist novel, though was perhaps less so in Victorian times.

It is worth noting that if 'sentimental' means excessive in expressing tender feelings, sentimentality must be relative, first, to the cultural standards of expressing one's feelings in a given society, and secondly, to the standards of literary taste, which may allow for genres that are self-consciously stylised and artificial, both linguistically and psychologically.

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