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Sentimentalism and the Feeling Body

Claudia Stokes
Trinity University

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CLAUDIA STOKES

Sentimentalism and the Feeling Body

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Sentimental literature of the nineteenth century depicts the struggles of errant young women as they attempt to achieve self-control and comply with normative ideals of feminine conduct. Religious piety often figures centrally in these efforts, as sentimental heroines learn to imitate Christ in their pursuit of self-mastery and acquire moral instruction through the study of scripture. Sentimentalism's preoccupation with spiritual matters, however, did not preclude an interest in corporeal matters, and sentimental writers afford particular attention to the body. Focused principally on depicting female development – and sustained by women writers and readers alike – sentimentalism attended to the female body in particular and warned of the special dangers that it posed, whether through its susceptibility to seduction or through its capacity to instill vanity in worldly young women. Sentimentalism characterized the female body as an especial hazard in need of protection, and, through the repeated depiction of the perils that may befall the defenseless female body, sentimental texts often assumed a public pedagogic role in teaching female readers to exercise caution and avoid unnecessary danger. While prudence and restraint may enable young women to evade temptation and grievous bodily harm, sentimentalism also recognized that some forms of bodily affliction may prove unavoidable because of accident or illness. As a result, sentimentalism taught readers to regard debility with sympathy and pious resignation. Young women should not submit to sexual exploitation, but bodily malady may provide a vital opportunity to submit to the divine will. In this respect, sentimentalism regarded the body not only as a source of vulnerability but also as a potential site of religious enlightenment: The body in sentimentalism may cause either ruin or salvation, and the heroine's decisions alone may lead her to either of these two moral outcomes

In its portrayal of the vulnerable female body, sentimentalism often diverges from conventional scholarly understandings of nineteenth-century bodily attitudes. Elaine Scarry asserted decades ago that bodily suffering "is

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not *of* or *for* anything ... [and] it takes no object," but sentimental texts offered an alternate view of pain as a purposeful and even providential opportunity to acquire religious wisdom and salvation.[1] As a result, sentimental texts also depict disability in a manner that markedly deviates from the standard literary template discerned by scholars. Rosemary Garland-Thompson influentially argues that disabled bodies in American literature are typically "perceived as out of control. Not only do they violate physical norms, but by looking and acting unpredictable they threaten to disrupt the ritualized behavior upon which social relations turn."[2] Sentimentalism often registers a countervailing view of the disabled, upholding them as paragons of religious piety who have learned to renounce worldly desires and minister to the needs of others. In this respect, they often serve as role models whom both sentimental heroines and readers themselves are implicitly encouraged to emulate.

The Reading Body

Sentimental novels emerged in the late eighteenth century alongside the United States itself, and the first novel by a native North American published in the United States, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), is generally recognized as the earliest work of sentimental fiction. As with such novels as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), early sentimental novels typically recount the seduction and consequent ruin of a young woman who falls prey to a rake and dies in childbirth. In the nineteenth century, sentimental novels adopted a different narrative template and more typically depict the development of isolated orphan girls – who are often the product of the ill-advised unions portrayed in eighteenth-century sentimental novels – as they find community and loving guidance from an assemblage of voluntary caregivers.[3] Sentimental novels in this vein had been in circulation for decades, as with Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* (1822), but they became a sudden popular sensation with the publication of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), which achieved unexpected success. Warner's novel was quickly followed by Harriet Beecher Stowe's blockbuster, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–1852), and Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), the popularity of which prompted Nathaniel Hawthorne's famed complaint about "that damned mob of scribbling women" who had come to dominate the literary market.[4] Sentimental fiction remained popular through the century, as with Martha Finley's Elsie Dinsmore series (1867–1905) and L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green*

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Gables (1908), and Lauren Berlant contends that sentimentalism continues to influence American popular culture.[5]

Sentimentalism's preoccupation with the body became evident from the very outset, with novels that narrated the fatal dangers of sex for unmarried young women. Scholars have argued that these eighteenth-century seduction novels conveyed anxieties about the vulnerability of the new nation, with the body of the novel's heroine standing in for the United States itself.[6] The young woman's impregnation and death in childbirth thus dramatized concerns that the United States was vulnerable to malign forces and might prove unviable. But these early seduction novels also convey a developing preoccupation with the particular impact of reading on the female body. This concern found dramatic expression in Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, in which the titular heroine falls prey to seduction primarily through the act of reading. Charlotte unwisely accepts a love letter from the licentious Montraville, and, though she resolves to assert the "impropriety of [their] continuing to see or correspond with each other," she nonetheless allows herself to read his letter repeatedly. This reading proves disastrous, for "each time she read it, the contents sunk deeper in her heart," and in consequence Charlotte loses her resolve and allows herself to succumb to Montraville's designs.[7] Within this scenario, unrestrained reading allows Montraville's seductive words to reverberate in Charlotte's consciousness, where they meet no resistance or opposition and where, as a result, they take root and grow in persuasiveness and influence.[8]

Rowson's description, in which Montraville's letter sinks ever "deeper in [Charlotte's] heart," characterizes the act of reading as a form of bodily intercourse, for rereading causes his words to achieve access to a vulnerable and intimate part of her body. Rowson suggests that Montraville's letter effectively primes Charlotte for the sexual penetration that will effect her ruin, and indeed this textual exchange metonymically prefigures his later illicit access to her body. At the same time, this scene also comports with a late eighteenth-century phenomenon recently observed by Sari Altschuler, who notes that Americans in this period believed that exposure to an unwanted text – such as narratives about the yellow fever – could result in infection and illness, with the circulating text functioning as a contagion that causes disease.[9] A similar occurrence underlies this episode in *Charlotte Temple*, for reading allows Montraville's words to breach her body – as they burrow deeply into "her heart" – and cause a weakening of her judgement as well as her bodily defenses. Reading does not cause infection per se, but it enables the corporeal access that will allow a growing foreign entity – her unborn child – to occupy her body and cause her premature death. In keeping with eighteenth-century belief in the entanglement of

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textual circulation with viral contagion, mere exposure to an inappropriate, ill-advised text directly causes Charlotte's bodily compromise and eventual death in disgrace.

Apprehension about the gullible susceptibility of the female reader is as old as the novel itself, and these concerns animated such texts as Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). These worries, however, redounded to the early sentimental novel itself, which was widely characterized as a menace to the impressionable female reader and which, as a result, was often likened to the dangerous libertine whose seductions it depicted. Critics contended that young female readers were particularly passive and compliant, and, like Charlotte Temple, lacked the inner resources to rigorously scrutinize alluring texts. As a result, young women were presumed to follow the directives of their reading, often by imitating or dramatizing the characters and plots of novels. Critics warned that the reading of seduction novels might result in the asexual reproduction of countless Charlotte Temples and Eliza Whartons, who, in their unthinking imitation of these heroines, would become similarly vulnerable to seduction and ruin. This line of reasoning underlay Lydia Maria Child's warning that such novels could irrevocably corrupt young readers: She asserted that the young female reader of "shameless stories ... has in fact prostituted her mind by familiarity with vice."[10] Child suggests that novels of this kind cause the depravity of impressionable female readers: In allowing salacious stories access to her mind and imagination, the female reader has effectively allowed herself to be penetrated by corrupt influences and has become intellectually, if not bodily, ruined.

In the nineteenth century, sentimentalism shifted its focus from bodily seduction to narratives about the maturation and socialization of isolated young women. In narratives about female development, sentimental novels sought to leverage the presumed imitativeness and susceptibility of young women, using wholesome narratives to encourage imitative readers to embark on similar campaigns of self-improvement. Sentimental literature markedly changed its contents in this period, but it nonetheless retained a linkage with the reading female body. Observers noted that nineteenth-century sentimental texts frequently elicited bodily responses in receptive readers, though these responses tended to be sighs and tears rather than seduction and impregnation. One early critic commented on "the 'handkerchiefy' feeling" of sentimentalism, which seemed designed to elicit such a bodily response in readers.[11] In producing a visible corporeal response, sentimental texts ran the risk of exposing the female reader, making her private textual responses visible before an observing public. Sentimental texts occasionally acknowledge this effect on the reader: In Warner's *The*

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Wide, Wide World, for instance, a physician interprets the flushed face of Mrs. Montgomery, the heroine's ailing mother, as bodily confirmation that she has been furtively reading a novel.[12] The embodied reading of sentimental literature became most closely associated with Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was engineered to provoke sympathetic tears in the reader and which famously concluded by urging the reader to "feel right," thereby designating sensation, both bodily and affective, as the ideal outcome of reading and the seat of social change.

However, the association of embodied reading with the sentimental female reader would lead to the scholarly denunciation of this reading practice as mawkish and uncritical. As Jane Thrailkill notes, embodied reading fell out of favor at the urging of the New Critics, who contended that reading ought to be cerebral and unemotional and who reserved special contempt for such "physiological effect . . . as . . . the flowing of tears, visceral or laryngeal sensations," and the putatively lowbrow reading practices favored by "women's clubs."[13] In the decades following New Criticism, sentimental embodied reading received mockery even from some of the field's most influential critics.[14]

In producing bodily reactions, sentimentalism rendered the female reader legible to observers, and this phenomenon comports with the common sentimental perception of the human body as an intelligible, accurate record of character and disposition. In keeping with mainstream nineteenth-century view, sentimental texts contain countless examples attesting to a belief in the decipherability of the body. For instance, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Mr. March observes the visible changes that have occurred in his daughters' bodies during his absence in the Civil War, taking these changes as evidence of corresponding alterations in their character: He interprets the coarsening of his daughter Meg's hands as proof of her declining vanity and her hard work. Similarly, Fanny Fern's autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1854) includes a lengthy phrenological reading of the heroine's skull, in which her bodily features provide a thorough inventory of her abilities and temperament. Likewise, the face of Gabriella Lynn, the heroine of Caroline Lee Hentz's *Ernest Linwood* (1856), perfectly reflects her precocity, as with the "peculiar depth of expression" in her "wise" eyes.[15] In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe mocked the misinterpretation of bodily signifiers in the slave trader Haley's comments about Tom's forehead: "'Look at his head; them high forrads allays shows calculatin niggers, that'll do any kind o' thing.'"[16] With his willing submission to authority, Tom altogether lacks the disposition to treachery that Haley attributes to him, and Stowe suggests not only that Haley is a bad reader of the body but also that Tom's high forehead instead denotes his noble character. Stowe mocks

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Haley's ignorance, but her novel elsewhere registers a similar inclination to interpret the enslaved body and discern markers of ability and intelligence in bodily traces of racial heritage. She notes, for instance, that the biracial slave George Harris inherited from "one of the proudest families in Kentucky . . . a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit," suggesting that both his handsomeness and manly refusal to submit to slavery are bequests from his white father (182). By extension, she also suggests that compliance with enslavement was an inherited biological trait that rendered Africans naturally docile.

The Vulnerable Body

Eighteenth-century sentimental novels dramatized the sexual vulnerability of the young female body, and later nineteenth-century works retained this concern, though they seldom articulate this worry outright. Instead, these anxieties often go unspoken and implicitly underlie the advice given by concerned caregivers, who attempt to institute restraints on girls' conduct and self-presentation. For instance, in *The Hidden Hand* (1859), E. D. E. N. Southfield's somewhat parodic treatment of the sentimental novel, Major Warfield forbids Capitola, his unruly charge, from solitary horse riding, the reasoning for this directive becoming evident when she disobeys him and encounters the menacing Craven Le Noir, who tries to force her off her horse for evidently nefarious purposes. The motherless girl, unsupervised and untaught, is presumed to be particularly vulnerable to malevolent influence, and, in teaching young female readers to follow prudent advice and cultural convention, sentimental texts implicitly offered protection from predation. For instance, Child insisted that girls must never be allowed to present themselves in disarray: She wrote, "Buttons off, muslins wrinkled, the petticoat below the edge of the gown, shoe strings broken, and hair loose and straggling, should never pass unnoticed" (138). Child never explains why she finds untidiness intolerable, but, in urging mothers to enlist their husbands in offering "[s]erious advice," she reveals that her prohibition derives from concern about the male response to such an appearance. Child's description of untidiness evokes not only undress but also the aftermath of sexual violence, with clothing items torn and the hair disheveled. An untidy, careless appearance, she suggests, may convey a lack of concern for the care of the body, and it may thus invite the attentions of men with improper designs who discern vulnerability in the bedraggled young woman. Child thus characterizes untidiness as both a cause and an effect of sexual assault. In instructing young readers to comport with normative standards of conduct and appearance, sentimental texts thus work not only to socialize

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readers in mainstream convention but also to protect them from sexual predators on the lookout for possible targets. In so doing, they place the onus of sexual assault prevention on young women and even implicitly blame them for attracting the notice of predators.

Sentimental novels dramatized these dangers with the occasional character who preys on vulnerable young women, such as Mr. Saunders, the cruel salesman in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, and Arthur in *Elsie Dinsmore*, who delights in inflicting pain on the hapless Elsie. However, it is primarily in writings about slavery that sentimental literature most overtly addressed sexual predation and vulnerability. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offered the most expansive treatment of this topic, with innumerable enslaved women whose beauty attracts the attentions of men intent on making them their sex slaves. The novel begins with the slave trader Haley taking notice of Eliza's comely body and asking to purchase her, thereby seeking to dash her wholesome life as a doting mother and consign her to a wretched life of sexual exploitation. Later in the novel, the enslaved woman Susan watches in terror as a slaver appraises her daughter Emmeline's body, knowing full well the fate that awaits her daughter if she is "sold to a life of shame" (472). Stowe dramatizes the fate of such women in the embittered figure of Cassy, who has survived years of sex trafficking and admits to killing her infant daughter to prevent her from enduring a similar fate. With these characters, Stowe revealed how slavery commodified the intrinsic sexual vulnerability of isolated young women and reduced them to mere sexualized bodies in thrall to rapacious male desire.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was followed by innumerable publications that sought to capitalize on its popularity and offer rejoinders to Stowe's claims. Numerous sentimental texts – among them Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1852), Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852), and Augusta Jane Evans's *Macaria* (1864) – sought to justify slavery and present it as preferable to the labor conditions and racism of the north. Advocates for other women's causes tried to enlist sentimentality to publicize comparable dangers to the female body. Critics of Mormon polygamy, for instance, claimed that it operated as a form of white slavery that similarly preyed on vulnerable young women and led to sexual exploitation, and advocates sought to mobilize sentimentalism's reformist authority by recruiting Stowe to their cause, an effort that resulted in Stowe's preface to Fanny Stenhouse's memoir of polygamy, *Tell It All* (1872).[17] Harriet Jacobs similarly tried to enlist Stowe's help for her memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), which depicts her struggles to evade sexual predation and her decision to become the mistress of another prominent white man. Stowe objected to the commodification of the enslaved woman's body, but she was

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not above conscripting these women's sufferings for her own purposes: Stowe failed to respond to Jacobs's request and instead appropriated her story for *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), which provided factual corroboration for Stowe's novel.

Following Stowe's disappointing response, Child instead sponsored Jacobs's account, and in her preface Child used the language of bodily undress to explain her support for Jacobs's narrative. She wrote, "This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn."[18] With her metaphor of unveiling, Child intimates that customs of propriety have long shielded sexual slavery from public view and thereby enabled its continuation, and she suggests that some forms of scandalous narrative exposure are necessary to effect social change. Thirty years earlier, Child insisted that young female readers avoid sexually scandalous narratives, but she here suggests that concerns about the bodily dangers posed by reading are partially culpable for the continuing atrocities of slavery, which are "so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them" (748). White women have been insulated from these facts because of the enduring belief that their bodies are too fragile to receive such information without sustaining damage, and she suggests that the protection of the white reader's body has come at the expense of the enslaved woman's safety, providing a discursive shield for her continuing sexual abuse. Overturning both her own prior claims as well as a century of prohibition, Child suggests that the reading of Jacobs's sexually explicit narrative may help protect the bodies of enslaved women and correct major social ills.

Child's comments on the bodily delicacy of middle-class white women accord with the conventional sentimental portrayal of feminine virtue, for sentimental texts often depict devout, righteous women as particularly prone to illness and bodily affliction. Sentimental novels commonly include the untimely death of a beloved female figure – such as Alice Humphreys in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Eva St. Clare of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – whose tutelage and example help socialize the wayward orphan girl. Even the most stalwart female authority figure may be vanquished by the inherent vulnerability of the female body. However, this standard convention of the sentimental novel – the premature death of the virtuous young woman – also conveys some important information about the limits and even dangers of sympathy, the emotional disposition that scholars have long recognized as the affective cornerstone of sentimental literature. As with the suggestive title of Brown's foundational sentimental novel *The Power of Sympathy*, sentimental texts commonly depict the transformative powers of fellow feeling,

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both in their narration of the heroines' developing sympathies for the needs of others and in their efforts to provoke the reader's own sympathetic identification with the characters' sufferings. Shared sentiment is a fundamental good in sentimental literature, and scholars have shown how sympathy underlies such varied entities as nationalism, campaigns of social reform, abolition, and even consumerism.[19] However, the persistent susceptibility of sympathetic young women to illness and premature death suggests that sympathy may also pose a significant bodily hazard. Sympathy denotes the possession of a shared feeling, but this affect evidently entailed both emotions as well as bodily sensations, for medical discourse throughout the nineteenth century commonly used the term "sympathy" to denote shared bodily conditions. To be sure, sentimental texts often depict illness as an incitement to sympathy, as with Hentz's novel *Ernest Linwood*, in which illness draws an isolated family out of its seclusion and leads them to rely on their neighbors in their hour of need: The novel's narrator comments, "We felt the drawings of that golden chain of sympathy which binds together the great family of mankind."[20] At the same time, however, sentimental texts often characterize sympathy as a potential biohazard that enables exposure to contagion, for the possession of mutual sentiment often leads to shared bodily ailment. Priscilla Wald reminds us that the word "contagion" etymologically means "to touch together," and it thus suggestively invokes the shared bodily sensation that often underlies sympathy. Even while encouraging sympathy, especially for the sick, sentimental texts warn that openness to the feelings of others might also lead to infection and even death.[21]

The bodily perils of sympathy underlie Stowe's *Dred* (1856), which depicts a slave uprising modeled on the Nat Turner rebellion. When the novel begins, the orphaned heroine, Nina Gordon, has allowed herself to become engaged to three different men, and as a result she is repeatedly described as a "coquette": This description invokes Hannah Webster Foster's famed early sentimental novel *The Coquette*, and it suggests that Nina carelessly toys with others' feelings and, like Foster's Eliza Wharton, runs the risk of seduction and infamy.[22] However, Nina's life takes a different turn when she witnesses the dead body of a young mother who, like herself, also hailed from an elite family but who, in keeping with the narrative template of the seduction novel, made a disastrous marital choice and died in neglect and ruin. Nina recognizes her similarity to Mrs. Cripps and remarks, "To think that that poor woman was just such a girl as I am, and used to be just so full of life, and never thought any more than I do that she should lie there all cold and dead!"[23] Nina's act of sympathetic identification causes her to abandon her coquettish ways, acquire religious piety, and become sympathetic to the sufferings of others. Nina's sentimental

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transformation becomes complete when her household is overrun with cholera and she unselfishly cares for others, putting her own health at risk. As a result of these unselfish attentions, Nina dies unexpectedly halfway through the novel: Sympathetic identification with another woman's bodily mortality causes Nina's maturation and moral awakening, but it also leads to her own premature death. In this respect, *Dred* somewhat revises the longstanding belief that exposure to scandalous narrative could cause young women to imitate and reproduce these events in their own lives. Hearing Mrs. Cripps's sad story and seeing her body impel Nina to make changes in her own life, and, like this tragic figure, she too dies prematurely and tragically. However, Nina does so not because she has allowed herself to be seduced but because her new capacity for sympathy has exposed her to contagion. Justine Murison has shown that the body in the nineteenth century was understood to be "open" and "susceptible," and sentimental fiction, in both the seduction novel and in its later nineteenth-century iteration, suggests that this was particularly the case with the female body, which was endangered not just by contagious illness but by other people's feelings.[24] Whether through the submission to seduction or through sympathy, the sentimental heroine typically remains fundamentally permeable and capable of allowing other people's sensations – whether emotional or corporeal – to puncture her defenses and overtake her body. Feelings in sentimentalism may be contagious, and this exposure may, at best, render the young woman more pious and sympathetic, but, at worst, it may also render her seduced, impregnated, or fatally infected. The powers of sympathy, sentimentalism reminds us, carry with them the power of life and death.

The Disabled Body

Bodily malady did not always conclude in death; it instead often resulted in impairment. For instance, Beth March in Alcott's *Little Women* contracts scarlet fever after caring for an immigrant family's dying infant, and, though she survives, she spends the rest of her life in delicate health. As a result, the vulnerability of the body in sentimental literature also manifested in widespread disability, as innumerable characters manage such long-term conditions as impaired mobility, blindness, and degenerative disease. Scholars have noted that the disabled often reside only at the margins of the literary text, in "secondary or even minor parts," where they function primarily to induce pity in fellow characters and readers alike.[25] This is frequently the case in sentimentalism, in which the disabled provide a site for the practice of sympathetic caregiving, as with, for instance, Warner's *Wide, Wide World*,

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in which Ellen Montgomery attends to her impaired and housebound grandmother in concert with her growing piety.[26] In this respect, the impaired often occupy narratively instrumental roles in which they merely provide testcases for the heroine's developing sentimental maturation, as she learns to subordinate her own desires and provide attentive care for those in need. Perhaps because the disabled are so often objects of care, sentimental literature also included innumerable malingerers – such as Marie St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mrs. Dean in Alcott's "Psyche's Art" (1868) – who falsely claim bodily infirmity in order to attract the attentions and sympathy that accompany impairment. Where the genuinely impaired are pitiable and sympathetic, these malingerers instead become the subjects of mockery and disdain.

Sentimental literature coincided with the mid-century development of enduring medical systems of classification, which devised new diagnostic standards of bodily normality and which deemed the atypical body abnormal and thus in need of clinical treatment; bodily diversity, that is, became pathologized in the mid-century.[27] Amid this change, numerous mid-century writers portrayed the atypical body as corporeal confirmation of the intrinsic monstrosity of the disabled, as with, for instance, the hunchbacked Roger Chillingworth in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). In medical discourse and in such literary depictions, disability and bodily difference often appear unwholesome and unnatural, and these depictions contributed to a growing clinical opinion that disabled persons should be consigned to institutions where they might remain out of public view and avoid posing an undue burden on others.

Sentimental texts often treat the impaired as mere narrative props, but they did not sanction this emerging view. On the contrary, sentimentalism more commonly consecrates the disabled, elevating them as saintly models of patient suffering who have endured terrible travails and learned vital religious lessons that other characters strain to acquire. Furthermore, sentimentalism typically upholds caregiving as the apex of "true womanhood," to use Barbara Welter's famous phrase.[28] Within sentimental literature, the adult woman's portfolio of responsibilities includes caring not only for children and households but also for the elderly, the ill, and the dependent. As one skeptical critic notes, the sentimental woman's proper "place was in the sick chamber and in the squalid abodes of poverty and suffering," where she seeks to alleviate suffering and administer care.[29] Sentimental texts depict the home as the appropriate site of caregiving, though scholars have noted that sentimental nurturance would eventually contribute to a national supervisory ethos that sought to intervene in the lives of the poor and

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minorities, and in this respect sentimentality ultimately underlay the institutional management of bodily difference emerging in this era.[30]

In this way, sentimentalism sharply deviates from the emerging medical rhetoric of bodily abnormality, and it instead characterizes impairment as a normal and even inevitable consequence of bodily vulnerability. In sentimental literature, anyone may become sick or impaired at any time, though, to be sure, the particularly virtuous seem especially likely to contract fatal illness. In Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, for instance, illness and accident seem to lie in wait behind every corner, with virtually every character enduring a devastating sickness or disability: The main character, Gertrude Flint, survives several serious bouts of illness, and both of her surrogate parents, Trueman Flint and Emily Graham, are impaired due to catastrophic accident. The body in *The Lamplighter* is fundamentally fragile, and everyone – men and women, adults and children, the rich and the poor – is equally at risk of impairment and dependence.[31]

Where other mid-century novels portrayed the disabled body as a marker of wickedness, *The Lamplighter* suggests that bodily affliction may provide a conduit to religious salvation. In describing the accident that caused her blindness, Emily Graham admits that in her early life she had pursued only worldly pleasures, but her impairment led her to renounce her attachment to material matters and devote herself to the invisible, unseen world of the spiritual. In this respect, blindness only enhanced Emily's spiritual development, for it required her to detach from worldly pleasures and find meaning and value in the unseen. In addition, Emily intimates that, within the Christian worldview, affliction, impairment, and dependence are the fundamental state of all human beings. Happiness amid life's suffering may be available, she asserts, "only [to those] who have learned submission; those who, in the severest afflictions, see the hand of a loving Father, and, obedient to his will, kiss the chastening rod."[32] Citing the Protestant doctrine of affliction, she depicts suffering as a providential, purposeful gift from a loving god and an opportunity to learn submission to the divine will. For Emily, suffering is inevitable for everyone, and it entails the acceptance of limitations and dependence, both of which are common conditions of disability: As she describes it, the life of the devout Christian is uncannily similar to that of the impaired. In this respect, the disabled have a decided religious advantage over their body-typical peers, for their bodily afflictions compel them to submit to the divine will and accept their limitations while the body-typical characters in the novel instead struggle to achieve this acquiescence. In confirmation of the particular advantage of the impaired in this religious difficulty, Gertrude feels a flicker of envy while hearing Emily recount the impact of blindness on her religious piety, as she longs for a

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similar "endurance of trial": It is "through suffering only that we are made perfect," Gertrude comes to realize.[33] An imperfect body may lead to the perfection of character and piety, a view that markedly distinguishes sentimentalism from that of much contemporary fiction.

Ultimately, however, sentimental literature repeatedly suggests that this religious perfection entails the renunciation of the body altogether.[34] Countless sentimental texts describe the illness and final decline of the righteous as a process of sloughing off bodily matters and achieving a spirituality that concludes in union with the divine. This common trope in sentimentalism is often referred to as "the angel in the house," a moniker taken from the title of Coventry Patmore's 1856 poem, and it denotes the idealized sentimental figure whose body deteriorates in tandem with advancing spiritual growth. In *Little Women*, for instance, Beth March's "soul grew strong" as "the wreck of her frail body" weakens.[35] Stowe similarly enlists this trope in her depiction of saintly Eva St. Clare's death, but she also adapted it for the death of Tom, in which he asserts that Simon Legree's power is confined only to the body while his heart and piety remain untouched by his abuse: Tom tells Legree, "'after ye've killed the body, there an't no more ye can do. And O, there's all ETERNITY to come, after that!'" (539). Amid all of sentimentalism's advice and concern for the management of the female body, sentimentalism repeatedly suggests that the ideal condition is characterized by pious disembodiment and liberation from bodily demands.

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NOTES

1 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5, original emphasis.
2 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 37.
3 For a discussion of adoption in sentimental literature, see Cindy Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
4 Nathaniel Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor, January 19, 1855, in *Letters, 1853–1856*, ed. Thomas Woodson et. al., vol. 17, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 304.
5 See, for instance, Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in America Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
6 Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8; Bruce Burgett,

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Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3–4; Shirley Samuels, *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5ff.

7 Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, ed. Patti Cowell (Boston: Bedford, 2011), 61.

8 Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, 8.

9 Sari Altschuler, *The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 54–55.

10 Lydia Maria Child, *The Mother's Book* (1831, reprint; New York: Arno, 1972), 152.

11 Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940), vii.

12 Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 139.

13 Jane F. Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4; John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 1115, 1116.

14 See, for instance, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977; New York: Doubleday, 1988), 4.

15 Caroline Lee Hentz, *Ernest Linwood; A Novel* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856), 23.

16 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin, 1981), 182.

17 For further discussion, see Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 142–159.

18 Lydia Maria Child, Introduction to "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs, *Slave Narratives* (New York: Library of America, 2000), 748.

19 Marianne Noble has recently offered a thorough reappraisal of the dynamics of sympathy in nineteenth-century American literature. See Marianne Noble, *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

20 Hentz, *Ernest Linwood*, 46.

21 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 12.

22 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, vol. 1 of 2 (1856, reprint; Grosse Point: Scholarly Press, 1968), 36.

23 Ibid., 136.

24 Justine S. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

25 Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 82.

26 Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 4; Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 81.

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27 Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 35–36; Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 23–49; Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 2.

28 Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151–174.

29 Brown, *Sentimental Novel,* 113.

30 See, for instance, Laura Wexler, “Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform,” in *The Cultures of Sentiment: Gender, Race, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9–38.

31 I discuss *The Lamplighter’s* attitudes toward disability more fully in my essay “‘Sinful Creature, Full of Weakness: The Theology of Disability in Cummins’s The Lamplighter,” Studies in American Fiction 43 (Fall 2016): 139–159.

32 Maria Susanna Cummins, *The Lamplighter* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 104.

33 Ibid., 321, 322.

34 For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see Nina Baym, Introduction to *Woman Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820–1870*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993); Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850,” *Signs*, 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1978): 219–236; ~~Noble, *Masochistic Pleasures*, 22–37.~~

35 Louisa M. Alcott, *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, ed. Anne K. Phillips (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 325.

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