

## Sentimental Fiction: Women in Literature

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Women have always existed in literature, although not in the foreground each time, writing for themselves or others, on napkins or in journals. The oppression and limitation on their existence, as well as the feeling of incompetence in a male-dominated society, resulted in women being outnumbered in certain areas, including literature. What helped their outburst in nineteenth-century America was mainly the Sentimentalist movement in literature, also known as “Domestic Fiction.”

Sentimentalism has its roots in philosophy in eighteenth-century Europe. When it comes to its effects on literature, however, the most basic and general definition for it could be that it focuses on emotions rather than reason. It could even go as far as to express an excess of emotions to a hysterical point, consequently creating different kinds of reactions in both its writers and its audience.

However, sentimental fiction’s most significant impact was probably the fact that it gave so many women a voice in a male-dominated field like literature. The texts usually had domestic themes, so-called “feminine” topics, so it gave women a chance to express themselves publicly and uniquely since men had nothing to say about the domestic space. They belonged to the outside world, involved in multiple aspects of life, and basically leading life socially, economically, and politically. Meanwhile, women belonged to the house, and the maintenance of their household was all they had for a very long time. The main reason behind this difference of lifestyles was because men were thought to be led by their reason, whereas women by their emotions, therefore unable to govern and go out into the world. This sort of belief was what pushed them to be writers of the Sentimental fiction.

Women started to publish short bulletins among their own societies, writing about topics that fit the gender stereotypes of their time. They talked about the idea of a proper woman as well as the ideal view of the domestic space, quickly becoming popular and gaining readers amongst themselves. They regarded the household to be an affectionate, warm, nurturing, caring environment, keeping their emotions on the surface all while doing so.

As they became more and more successful, to the point of becoming bestsellers, it is not surprising that they started to receive criticism, especially from men. Literature, a previously male-dominated field like many others, was being conquered by women and their unfamiliar subjects. What is worse, they dared to be successful too! This shift of power and dominance enraged many male writers, among whom was the American journalist Nathaniel Hawthorne. Upon Sentimental fiction gaining success in America, he said, “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the

public taste is occupied with their trash.” These are quite discouraging words as they are; however, they did not have much influence on the women themselves. This new way of expressing themselves was a rare chance for them to finally raise their voices and be heard by others. The women who wrote on personal journals or scrap papers before, always having to hide what they had written, were now getting accepted by this public field and were recognized, perhaps for the first time.

On the other hand, men were not the only ones to criticize this movement. Around the time Sentimental fiction was at its peak in America, there were some female writers who sought more, Phoebe Cary being only one of them. Cary was glad that women were now out in the world and had their own space, but her main concern was that they were restricted by these emotional and domestic stereotypes forced upon them. In her poems, Cary advised women to move beyond the limitations of this genre and get out of the “emotional woman” label. At that point, women already had a voice in the literature market and began to be more confident in themselves as well as in their writings. Still, their femininity and domesticity being their only defining quality created a worry.

Even so, it cannot be denied that Sentimental fiction was a huge step towards many more opportunities to come for women. Through seeing their success, their tones changed from self-deprecating and insecure to self-confident and self-reliant. It enabled them to embrace their femininity without being ashamed or trying to hide it, maybe for the first time in their lives. What is more, they were actually accepted and respected by their society. Even though they utilized feminine, domestic topics in their works, they were able to use their voices among so many men who were already dominating the literary field. It is true that they maintained the gender roles imposed upon them, but they were using it to carve their way slowly but surely into this new field, where they could be move outside of the domestic sphere.

In the end, Sentimental fiction, with its “feminine” topics, created a space for women outside of their household and among the public. They were recognized, respected, and undeniably successful; the criticism of men only proved their victory further. Having their own genre to express themselves, their thoughts and emotions, strengthened their confidence in their authorship, which inevitably made way for more opportunities and achievements in the future. With time, women gained more individuality and control over their own lives, making it easier to move outside of their comfort zone and into the real world. After all, Sentimental literature was, in many ways, the start of progress that continued step by step, progress that aimed to get rid of the traits imprinted on women and their characterization. (1) (2)