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The happy lie of antebellum sentimental literature: performance of ideal womanhood, middle-classness, and social mobility

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The Happy Lie of Antebellum Sentimental Literature:
Performance of Ideal Womanhood, Middle-Classness, and Social Mobility

by

Erica Barone

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes antebellum United States sentimental and sensational texts to highlight the social anxieties surrounding the emerging middle class. Reading Maria Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854) as an example of a text working within the conventions of the sentimental literary tradition, I claim that sentimental novels work to construct a model of ideal femininity in which women become essential to both defining and demarcating middle-classness. By learning to exhibit ideal femininity, a woman actively participates in the achievement of social mobility. Therefore, becoming a member of the middle class largely depends on a female’s ability to enact virtue. In sentimental novels, one can easily cross the barriers of class so long as she exhibits the qualities of true womanhood, and a middle class couple is formed based on a female’s efforts. The contemporary body of sensational novels, I argue, reacts against sentimentality’s easily accomplished version of social mobility. Using George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* (1848) and George Thompson’s *Venus in Boston* (1849), I claim that sensational texts render women incapable of performing or sustaining ideal femininity precisely in order to point to the instability and falsity of a social order in which class position is based on the enactment of female virtue. Noting the ways in which sensational texts craft female characters who become the opposite of ideal women, I claim that women become the vehicle by which social reformers advocate a social order based on a firmer foundation than female abilities to enact the qualities of the “cult of true womanhood.”
Fraught with strain over racial relations, class conflicts, and changing ideas of
gender roles, the antebellum United States produced a wide variety of literature
expressing its cultural moment. Traditionally, scholarship has focused on the “high brow”
male authors that the literary canon has included, and only within the past twenty-five
years has the more popular fiction, the antebellum US’s version of popular culture,
become the site of serious critical inquiry. My project bases itself in literature read by the
masses, the middle or “low brow” texts that contemporary intellectuals made the
conscious choice to ignore. Following the lead of recent scholars such as Jane Tompkins,
Nina Baym, and Michael Denning, I proceed with the notion that we can learn a great
deal about a culture by reading the works that its public embraced. Particularly, by
examining the immensely popular sentimental and sensational texts of the mid 1800s, I
seek a window into tensions about middle class formation and its relationship to
womanhood.

This paper’s analysis of sentimental literature rests on the assumption that
women’s domestic fiction performed the cultural work of teaching its primarily middle
class female readership the tenets of ideal femininity. According to Jane Tompkins, the
primary purpose of sentimental literature was to inculcate virtue. Indeed, as Tompkins
explains, sentimental literature was a “political enterprise, halfway between sermon and
social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (Tompkins
126). For example, Susan Williams asserts that The Lamplighter, a widely popular
sentimental text published in 1854, “articulated so fully the values of feminine self-
sacrifice and maternal power inherent in middle class domesticity” that women would
read the text for both entertainment and edification (Williams 180). Williams further explains that the novel’s plot “elevates its readers by giving them a model of virtuous behavior” (Williams 191-193).¹ The performance of antebellum womanhood thus has clear connections to sentimental novels.

This paper will look at the specific type of woman that sentimental novels work to construct, the social power that the texts attribute to such a woman, and how this ideal woman is essential to demarcating the emerging antebellum middle class. Although previous sociological and literary criticism has noted the ways in which the society of the antebellum US worked to construct a model of ideal femininity, I suggest that past accounts have analyzed womanhood largely without considering the ways in which social class and the performance of ideal femininity are intertwined. I argue instead that the antebellum US’s model of ideal femininity is closely tied to the definition and performance of middle-classness. Sentimental novels, I suggest, create the impression that the performance of ideal femininity sparks social mobility and allows members of the working class to become middle class.

Barbara Welter’s “The Cult of True Womanhood” explains that women of the 1850s were taught to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. Through the embodiment of these virtues, a woman would gain social respectability, admiration, and authority within her domestic space. Instead of encouraging outright passivity, the characteristics of the “true woman” groom her for an active social role. Welter explains:

¹Susan Warner’s *The Wide Wide World* has similar effects on female readers, as the critical consensus has been that readers identified with Ellen Montgomery, the heroine, and hoped to emulate the virtues that she learns to exhibit throughout the text. See Joanne Dobson’s “Read the Bible and Sew More: ‘Domesticity and the Women’s Novel in Mid-Nineteenth Century America.”
The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For if a woman was so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things. (174)

As Welter notes, the perfection of the “true woman” suited her for a socially active role that would allow her, by means of her virtue, to influence others in an attempt to better the world. Antebellum sentimental literature, I’d argue, encourages women to take this more active role. Although sentimental novels depict the experience of women in the private sphere separate from the public world of men, domestic heroines achieve an element of power over the society in which they live.2 Using The Lamplighter as an exemplary sentimental text, this paper focuses on one kind of power of “true” women: specifically, the role that “true” women play in both defining and marking middle-classness. Following my reading of The Lamplighter, I turn to examine the contemporaneous body of sensational literature, written for a primarily working class, masculine audience. I claim that sensational literature reacts against the easily attainable image of class mobility posited by sentimental texts.

The Lamplighter relates the story of a young woman’s coming of age, of her maturation into the ideal embodiment of antebellum American womanhood. According to Nina Baym’s introduction to the recent reprint of the text, the heroine’s “growth and development must be carried out in a situation starkly delimited by her sex, and her success is judged according to whether she becomes a woman as well as an adult (Baym xii). At the beginning of the text, readers meet Gerty, an apparent orphan who has no

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2 This is Jane Tompkins’ argument in Sensational Designs, in which she claims that through an exhibition of the qualities of ideal womanhood, women could demonstrate their moral superiority and their closeness to God, a closeness allowing them to achieve a form of power that transcends the social, political, and economic powers of men.
positive adult influences and who is therefore ignorant about how a proper young woman should behave. The text explains that “No one loved her, and she loved no one; no one treated her kindly; no one tried to make her happy... she was all alone in the world” (2). In this abandoned state, Gerty has no knowledge of God or of propriety; she is a “poor little, untaught, benighted soul” who has a “fierce, untamed, impetuous nature [that]... only expressed itself in angry passion, sullen obstinacy, and even hatred” (7). As the novel progresses, Gerty is “adopted” by a poor lamplighter, Trueman Flint, who introduces her to a host of positive characters who ultimately shape her disposition and teach her how to perform the qualities of womanhood.

*The Lamplighter* places Gerty in a slippery class position; at the start of the book, Gerty has no claim to any class, as she is destitute and wholly dependent on others. When she enters the “family” of True Flint, her social status elevates somewhat, as she now has sufficient food and a reliable shelter, yet True and Gerty still inhabit the working class, as they have few financial resources and live with little more than necessary materials. Mrs. Sullivan and Willie, the lamplighter’s friends and neighbors, share a similar social position. The narrator notes that both Willie and Gerty “belong to a poorer class,” and Mrs. Sullivan and Willie, left little property from Willie’s dead father, “lived together in humble comfort, for though poor, industry and frugality secured them from want” (36). At its beginning, the text clearly positions True and the Sullivans, and by extension Gerty and Willie, in the socio-economic position of the working poor, but they are not to remain in this social position. By the novel’s end, Gerty and Willie move up the social ladder, as they are able to achieve middle-classness. Indeed, one of the principal projects of *The Lamplighter* is the forging of Willie and Gerty’s entrance into
the middle class, as the narrative depicts an exploration of what it means to become middle class, what values govern middle-classness, and how social mobility might be achieved.

Cummins' text tackles a real antebellum American social issue, as historical accounts of antebellum US society note the development of a new socio-economic group separate from both the working class and the elite. Stewart Blumin's "The Hypothesis of Middle Class Formation in Nineteenth Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals" attempts to define the antebellum American middle class as a separate entity than the working class and the upper class, which most historical accounts have been quick to recognize. While acknowledging the difficulties in proving the existence of a middle class that did not manifest itself in political movements and the subsequent difficulties in arriving at any accepted definition of the term, Blumin nonetheless asserts that a group of Americans shared a common lifestyle and ideology, as well as a common economic position between the two easily recognizable classes. Similarly, in "Class Formation in 19th Century America: The Case of the Middle Class," Melanie Archer and Judith Blau assert that the growing number of non-manual workers, geographical and occupational stability, and high rates of mobility into the middle class formed the middle class's structural basis (18). Middle-classness, they further note, is tied to both economy and to values and institutions (26). Performing non-manual labor presented the opportunity for membership in the middle class, and "climbing" into the middle class was possible, as Archer and Blau note that one in four male workers had the "likelihood of career mobility from manual to non-manual work" (30). Blumin also explains that the middle class was characterized in terms of what type of work its members performed, as
increasing opportunities to participate in non-manual labor became available with the growing need for clerks, managers, and retailers (312-313). Blumin next notes that the middle class also shared a similar ability to consume products other than necessities yet distinct from those purchased by the opulent elite (330).

The qualities that Blumin characterizes as central to middle-classness are also central to *The Lamplighter*, as Willie and Gerty become representative of the ideal middle class couple. *The Lamplighter* takes pains to describe that Willie will perform non-manual labor, as his specific jobs are noted, as well as the potential they offer for upward advancement. Also, after Gerty and Willie undergo their various trials and tribulations, at the end of the text, they are able to live in a middle class home with a “well-lit, warm, and pleasantly furnished parlor of his own and Gerty’s...” (419). The idea of seeking a comfortable home is essential to middle-classness, and *The Lamplighter* illustrates this concept. Indeed, Lori Merish claims that one of the attributes of the middle class is the desire for a home in which members achieve emotional fulfillment, a home in opposition to the outside world. Merish points to the recurring trope of window scenes in sentimental novels to illustrate this idea, as individuals looking into the window of a home want to “cross the threshold from outside to inside, from street to household; everybody wants a ‘good home’” (Merish 7). Merish then notes that the working class experienced no such separation between the public and the private sphere and that working class women had identities tied to urban neighborhoods instead of the home (Merish 7).³ The home, according to Merish, is the most physically and emotionally significant space, because it is within the home that characters achieve satisfaction and

³ Merish cites Christine Stansell to support the idea that idea is a decidedly middle class formulation.
emotional intimacy. "Home is both instrument and telos of redemption: both persons and objects belong inside, and those with value ultimately make their own there" (Merish 8). In *The Lamplighter*, Gerty lacks such a home until she is "adopted" by True (and later Emily Graham, her mentor and financial benefactress), and the text, as Merish suggests, posits the home as central, as the place in which Gerty finds love and direction. The novel moves toward the ability of Gerty and Willie to establish such a home for themselves, to become the type of couple that "belongs inside."

To explain another characteristic of middle-classness, Blumin cites Mary Ryan’s assessment of the changing ideology of the family as constitutive of the antebellum middle class (Blumin 335). Ryan’s *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* explains that the ideology of the family began to change in the nineteenth century, as the number of children per family dropped and more resources were consequently available to each child. The primary job of mothers became nurturing their children, and families became increasingly interested in allowing sons to attain an education that would open the possibility for social mobility.

*The Lamplighter* clearly illustrates this dynamic, as Mrs. Sullivan devotes all of her energy to Willie, and Willie, in turn, feels the responsibility to elevate his family’s social status. Mrs. Sullivan’s insistence on Willie’s education places him in a position to accept employment that will give him the opportunity to make a middle class living. Significantly, Mrs. Sullivan acts as the catalyst for Willie’s education and subsequent professional opportunities. Despite the family’s economic situation, Mrs. Sullivan makes sure that her son receives an education, as she “encouraged and exhorted” him to remain in school until the age of 12 (36). The text implies that Willie’s education will be the
instrument of his family's upward social mobility and attainment of financial comfort, as he “must be the staff of their old age; he must labor for their support and comfort; he must do more – they hoped great things of him; they must not be disappointed” (39). From the beginning, then, while instilling the text’s heroine and her eventual husband firmly within a working class home, the novel simultaneously offers the expectation that the “family” will socially rise as a result of Mrs. Sullivan’s insistence on Willie’s education.

Willie’s opportunity is framed in terms of Mrs. Sullivan’s sacrifice, as the text describes his departure for India by saying “And the pious, loving, hopeful woman, who for eighteen years had cherished her boy with tenderness and pride, maintained now her wonted spirit of self-sacrifice” (107). Further, during Willie’s time in India, the text makes clear that Mrs. Sullivan bears responsibility not only for Willie’s economic opportunity, but also for his moral development. Mrs. Sullivan dreams that each time Willie is tempted to stray from his path of virtue, “he listened to [his mother’s] warning voice, . . . [and] went on in safety” (171). Even after her death, Mrs. Sullivan claims, she will remain a significant influence upon her son, as she claims that her spirit will act as “a truer shield from danger” than even her presence on earth (172).

*The Lamplighter* also establishes that the relationship between Mrs. Sullivan and Willie is not unique and that other mothers have also been instrumental in securing their sons’ educational and professional opportunities. When the text describes the interaction between Willie and Mr. Clinton, the wealthy and successful man who offers Willie employment, readers learn that Mr. Clinton’s mother has also influenced his social status. Acknowledging that he understands Willie’s gratitude, Mr. Clinton remembers when he
came to the city searching for a position that would allow him to earn enough money to support himself and his widowed mother. The text broadens and speaks in terms of the general rather than the specific, commenting:

And the spirits of those mothers who have wept, prayed, and thanked God over similar communications [letters recounting job opportunities] from much loved sons, may know how to rejoice and sympathize with good little Mrs. Sullivan. . . .(85)

The idea that mothers play significant roles in their sons’ (and, by extension, their own) social mobility is highlighted by the text and presented as commonplace rather than as an isolated instance. Similarly, just as the text is clear in its characterization of Willie’s motivation as he accepts the position in India, it broadens to again include other men like him, claiming that “. . . there is many a [wanderer to another country] who is actuated not by love of gold, the love of change, the love of adventure, but by the love he bears his mother - the earnest longing of his heart to save her from a life of toil and poverty” (107-8). This deliberate broadening suggests that the text is purposefully drawing attention to the role of mothers in the accomplishment of social mobility.

Ryan’s historical analysis also notes that middle class women and girls often worked for pay so the male children of the family could receive an extended education, as women’s work was used to “maintain or advance the status of men in their families” (Ryan 185). Linda Kerber comments on Ryan’s account, claiming that “women defin[ed] their own interests as inextricably linked to the upward mobility of their families, repressing claims for their own autonomy” (Kerber 24). The Lamplighter, to a degree, follows this prescription, although in a slightly altered way. While the sentimental text does not require Mrs. Sullivan to perform wage labor to afford Willie’s schooling, she
does sacrifice financially by insisting that Willie attend school rather than earn money that would support the family.

Readers see female energy providing male opportunities in a more pointed way through the relationship of Willie and Gerty. When Willie decides to leave his family to earn a living in India, he is careful to ask Gerty to bear the responsibility for his relatives in his absence. While Willie never explicitly says that he will not accept the commission if Gerty is unable to look after his family, their conversation implies such a reading. Willie recalls the way that Gerty nursed True in his illness and asserts that she would be a great help to his mother and grandfather in their old ages, and he explains that he feels entirely comfortable leaving them in her care. Later in the conversation, Willie says that he does not think that he could bear leaving if he “didn’t hope to find [them] all well and happy when [he] came home” (106). Thus, though Gerty does not directly labor to provide Willie’s education, her promise makes it possible for him to leave and pursue the job that will later allow him to financially gain entrance into the middle class. Gerty’s labor, then, is a direct catalyst for Willie’s advancement, and though Gerty herself never comments on reaching a higher class status, the way that the novel has characterized Willie and Gerty’s relationship suggests that Willie’s social mobility will also become Gerty’s. Throughout the text, Willie and Gerty’s fates are inextricably intertwined; from the beginning of their relationship, it is assumed that they will ultimately marry.

Before Gerty can instill herself within a middle class couple, however, she must learn to perform the type of femininity that middle-classness requires. As Archer and Blau note, antebellum middle-classness depended not only on one’s finances, but also on one’s behavior. A set of cultural codes, behaviors, and conventions helped to define the
middle class in antebellum America, and social origins mattered little, since one’s ancestors were often of a much different social class. As a result, middle-classness rested heavily on one’s outward behaviors, and this allowed for members of the working class to achieve social mobility with greater ease than one might imagine, as the “general thesis of cultural historians is that high rates of upward mobility combined with accessible codes of middle class culture helped to shape a common class identity . . .” (Archer and Blau 30). People hoped, then, to learn to become middle class, and the public’s drive for such refinement is evinced in the volume of conduct books and household manuals published and purchased during the period (Archer and Blau 31). Sentimental texts such as The Lamplighter acted precisely as a sort of conduct book for middle class women, and the qualities of ideal womanhood became essential to the performance of middle-classness. As Gerty learns piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, she also becomes a suitable middle-class wife. Yet, the middle-class version of ideal femininity does not endorse a wholly passive feminine ideal and instead harkens back to Welter’s assessment of the ways in which the “true” woman assumed a more active social role.

Significantly, Gerty’s maturation into an ideal woman is influenced by members of both the lower class and the upper class; figuratively speaking, Gerty’s “parents” are True Flint and Emily Graham, representations of two quite different social classes. Mrs. Sullivan, a member of the same class as True, despite her performance of sacrificial motherhood and devout Christianity, cannot provide the type of influence that Gerty will need to become an ideal woman; her class, I suggest, limits her role in Gerty’s life. In the first part of the text, the novel foregrounds the domestic skills that Mrs. Sullivan teaches
Gerty, the religious ideas that Willie explains, and the ways in which True’s love opens Gerty’s heart to calm her fierce disposition. Simultaneously, however, the text points to the limitations of her maturation; “. . . the effect of eight years of mismanagement, ill-treatment, could not be done away. . . Her unruly nature could not be so suddenly quelled, her better capabilities called into action” (35). For Gerty’s development to continue, she must cultivate a relationship with Emily Graham, a woman whom the text paints in wholly angelic terms, calling her “a lady too good for this world” (19). Emily herself embodies all of the qualities of true womanhood, as she is pious, pure, domestic, and submissive, and throughout the majority of the text, Emily works to instill these qualities in Gerty. The text explains that

. . . there was a world of love and sympathy within [Emily], which manifested itself in abundant benevolence and charity, both of heart and deed. She lived a life of love. She loved God with her whole heart and her neighbor as herself. (57)

The angelic manner in which the text portrays Emily suggests that she is the epitome of the ideal woman, pious and benevolent, loving and compassionate. The text credits Emily as Gerty’s primary teacher, as “. . . [Gerty] reposed implicit confidence in what [Emily] told her, allowed herself to be guided and influenced . . . as she. . . listened to her gentle voice while she gave her her first lesson between right and wrong, Emily. . . knew that a great point was won” (65). In spite of her positive relationships with True and the Sullivans, Gerty’s spiritual maturation, her “first lesson between right and wrong” only occurs as a result of Emily’s influence.

The combination of Emily’s class and gender, I suggest, makes her the ideal role model for Gerty, as Emily is a woman who both embodies the positive nurturing qualities
of Mrs. Sullivan and the manners of a higher class. In Emily and Gerty’s first meeting, the text highlights the class difference between the two, calling attention to Gerty’s lack of exposure to a woman such as Emily.

... though [Gerty’s] life had been passed among the poorer, and almost the whole of it among the lowest class of people, she seems to feel none of that awe and constraint which might be supposed natural, on her encountering, for the first time, one who, born and bred among affluence and luxury, showed herself, in every word and motion, a lady of polished mind and manners. (55)

From the beginning of their relationship, then, Emily and Gerty are demarcated as members of different classes. Though the text only raises the difference to negate its importance to their ability to forge a lasting emotional bond, the fact remains that the novel chooses to define the relationship in terms of the social class each female inhabits. Further, the first time the text mentions Emily, before she has met Gerty or ever becomes physically present in the text, she is presented as a financial benefactress, as she has given True the money to provide for Gerty’s initial needs. This characterization continues as Emily repeatedly offers her financial support throughout the first portion of the text. Thus, the text conveys the idea that a member of a higher social class, particularly one who performs ideal womanhood, will be an essential part of Gerty’s maturation. As the novel progresses, Emily becomes more and more important to Gerty and to her moral development. Under Emily’s tutelage, Gerty will learn both to embrace the qualities essential to true womanhood and to achieve social mobility into a higher class. Practically speaking, Emily and Mr. Graham make purposeful decisions about how to educate Gerty; they decide to send her to a school that will train her to be a teacher, an occupation that will allow her to earn her own living and achieve financial independence.
The suggestion is that when Gerty reaches adulthood, she will not be a dependent of the Grahams nor forced to live in discomfort, as she will learn the skills to perform a middle class occupation.

The middle class woman that the text encourages, however, is not a facsimile of Emily’s version of ideal womanhood. Although Emily is the text’s angel, she is not the functional woman who emerges as the middle class wife. While Emily’s “power” as the sentimental heroine is found in her closeness to God and her perfect embodiment of Christian piety, other than in her instructing of Gerty, Emily actually accomplishes little throughout the text. I do not mean to underestimate the role that Emily plays in Gerty’s moral and emotional development, as she is the motivating force behind Gerty’s maturation into an ideal woman, and, as Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs*, the submissive sentimental heroine assumes a transcendent form of power through her piety. She becomes the vehicle through which others find God. Though Emily certainly manifests this type of influence, Gerty assumes a more practical type of power than her mentor and acts in a more socially functional way. Emily, we must not forget, requires Gerty’s physical assistance throughout the text, and her blindness renders her incapable of physically manifesting her authority. Further, Emily, though content throughout the novel, ultimately achieves happiness because of Gerty’s activities, as Gerty reunites her with her long-lost lover, Phillip Amory. Emily’s father and Phillip Armory had dictated the course of Emily’s life, and she played little role in effectively defining the type of adult relationships that she wished to pursue. Further, Emily is unable to defend herself against other women’s intrusion upon her home; her ethic of submission requires her to willingly suffer in silence.
Gerty, on the other hand, does not exhibit such passivity, as she actively fights injustice and acts according to her own sense of duty. Cindy Weinstein claims that Gerty’s independence is evident through her decisions about when she should submit to the will of another: “Independence, for Gerty, means that ability to decide for oneself when and for whom sacrifice...is appropriate and necessary” (Weinstein 1032). Instead of unequivocally following Mr. Graham’s orders, Gerty makes the conscious choice to leave, then return to, the Graham household, so Emily’s ethic of submission has not been entirely passed along to her protégé. Additionally, although Gerty learns to control her emotions and perform sacrifices for the sake of others, she remains active in her fierce protection of Emily, who cannot defend herself. The text explains that Gerty could bear injury, injustice, even hard and cruel language, when exercised toward herself only; but her blood boiled in her veins when she began to perceive that her cherished Emily was becoming the victim of mean and petty neglect and ill usage. . . long before the blind girl was herself aware of any unkind intentions. . . many a stroke was warded off by Gertrude. (242)

Gerty actively ensures Emily’s comfort in any way that she can, effectively waging a type of war with Mrs. Graham and Isabella. Also, Gerty’s ability to make an active difference in the world is evinced in her rescue of both Isabella and Emily, as neither can save themselves from a fire without Gerty’s aid. Placing both of their lives above her own, Gerty acts with a form of courage that Emily’s blindness makes it impossible for her to exhibit. Finally, Weinstein points to Gerty’s biological and financial independence; unlike Emily, whose “work” is her piety and example, Gerty actually learns to teach, to perform a skill that will allow her to depend on her own income (Weinstein 1032). If left alone in the world, Gerty will be able to manage, a feat that
Emily, raised in wealth and dependent on her family's money, lacks the skills to perform. Also, until the very end of the text, no one has a biological claim on Gerty. Unlike Emily, who must remain with Mr. Graham because of their kinship, Gerty may move from one family to another at will, choosing her own allegiances and crafting her own familial bonds. Gerty, then, is a far more active character than her instructor; she embodies a type of womanhood that both encompasses Emily's qualities and that allows her to effectively function in her world. A middle class woman, then, must both possess the qualities of true womanhood and be able to perform an active role in determining her own fate. Such independence, I claim, is essential to middle-class demarcation, as a middle class woman must have the ability to actively create and maintain a domestic space and support her husband's social and financial advancement.

By the end of the novel, Gerty and Willie have defined what it means to be a middle class family, financially stable, emotionally fulfilled, and domestically comfortable. Willie explains that he has been tied to Gerty since their childhoods but also that her adult qualities make her "so well entitled" to "the aristocracy of true refinement, knowledge, grace, and beauty," and this aristocracy is that to which Willie aspires (358). By contrast, Mr. Armory points out, Willie could achieve a far greater financial fortune had he chosen to align himself with Isabella Clinton, as a "union with [her] would entitle [him] immediately to such a position as years of assiduous effort would hardly win" (346). Willie responds by explaining that he is well aware of the benefits that a marriage with Isabella would provide, but that, more than wealth, he desires "a home" for both himself and for Gerty (347). The word "home" here assumes all of the significance that Lori Merish claims in "Sentimental Consumption." To Willie,
a home signifies not just the physical place where he will reside, but also the emotional fulfillment that he will gain from his marriage to a “true woman,” a place separate from the public world of work, a place, above all, domesticated by a woman such as Gerty.

Just as Emily does not emerge as the ideal middle-class woman of the text, neither do any of the other female characters in the novel. The type of woman that Gerty has become is sharply contrasted with the other females, especially Isabella Clinton and the new Mrs. Graham. While Gerty’s natural attractions are “greatly enhanced by an utter unconsciousness, on her part, of possessing any attractions at all,” Isabella and the new Mrs. Graham constantly show concern for their appearances and spend much of their time assuming affectations (129). Indeed, unlike Gerty, who cares little for material possessions or ornamentation, these other female characters are dissatisfied unless they remain at the center of attention, and they value material things above cultivating meaningful friendships. The text indicts these women on many levels, but the most significant contrast comes in their treatment of Emily. While Gerty continues to show utter devotion to Emily and a genuine concern for Emily’s happiness, Isabella and the new Mrs. Graham show a complete disregard for Emily’s feelings and take control of her home, asserting their will even as it opposes Emily’s. The difference between a woman such as Gerty, who place others’ happiness ahead of her own, and Isabella, whose self-centered behavior litters the text, is clear; the ideal woman exhibits the qualities of Gerty.

Just as the ideal middle class wife posited by the text is more socially active than Emily, the ideal middle class marriage cannot include a woman such as Isabella Clinton, who only disrupts the domestic sphere. A middle class marriage must instead be constituted by a female who can turn the home into a place of domestic perfection, a woman who
embodies the Christian values of love and self-sacrifice.

According to the formulation in *The Lamplighter*, women bear the primary responsibility for instilling Gerty and Willie into the middle class, as I argue that the middle-classness of Willie and Gerty is fundamentally tied to women and their work of embodying feminine ideals – and that social mobility is largely attained as a result of feminine efforts. A woman can become a member of the middle class through her embodiment of true womanhood, as such behavior will motivate a man to achieve the financial successes that would earn a middle class income, and such a woman will then attract that man to her domestic space. In addition, a mother has great influence on her son’s ability to achieve middle-classness, as her teaching will make such social advancement possible. Further, since, as historical sources explain, belonging to the middle class in antebellum America rested on both finances and behaviors, a woman such as Gerty, who can perform ideal femininity, becomes essential to the social order. In a society with fluid social positions, in which one’s genealogy matters little to his or her social rank, having a wife able to manage a home and exhibit propriety becomes a hallmark of middle-classness. If lacking a wife like Gerty, how would Willie, or a man in a similar position, “prove” his middle-classness? Willie’s comfortable home, made possible because of Gerty’s efforts, clearly demarcates him as a middle-class man, and the absence of an ideal, domestic, functional woman would leave Willie without any physical manifestation of his financial success. The social order giving rise to the antebellum middle class is thus very much tied to the performance of ideal femininity, and without women who follow the requirements of the “cult of true womanhood,” such a social order would fall apart, as no mother would propel a son to social advancement,
and no woman would act as the visible representation of middle-classness.

It is also important to note that the version of social mobility set forth in The Lamplighter is an easily attainable one wholly dependent on one’s own character development - independent of any external variables. As long as Mrs. Sullivan encourages Willie to attend school and avoid vice, Willie will prove a worthy young student and will eventually receive a job that allows him to earn a middle class wage. Indeed, little agency is actually left to Willie, as he goes through life following his mother’s behavioral prescriptions. As long as Gerty learns to follow Emily’s teaching and embody the characteristics of ideal womanhood, she will be indispensable to Willie, or a man like him, and will eventually secure both of their places within the middle class. Social injustice in the text is quickly righted, and, overwhelmingly, the characters get what they deserve. Such a utopian view of the world, in which eager young adults can climb the social ladder with little difficulty, would have inspired readers to act like Gerty, in the hopes that they, too, would receive rewards, especially given the critical consensus that sentimental texts also serve as behavioral models. While this may seem like an innocuous presumption for the middle class readers of sentimental texts, I argue that this vision of social mobility is a cause of anxiety for the working class and for advocates of social reform. The ease with which Gerty and Willie are able to rise from poverty to assume places within the middle class may have rung false to the thousands of members of the working class struggling to earn a living, and I contend that antebellum sensational


4 Though one might argue that this reading is muddied when readers learn that Gerty does, in fact, have middle class roots and has restored herself to middle class status, I claim that this detail does little to change the overall reading, as Gerty’s character has completely matured by the time she discovered her parentage. Her progress from the destitute orphan, to lower class, to middle class is unaffected by this piece of information; the text emphasizes Gerty’s internal development far more than this plot device.
literature directly responds to the vision of social mobility offered by sentimental texts such as *The Lamplighter*.

As much as the vision of social mobility that sentimental texts posit must have appealed to middle class female readers eager to embrace an ideology giving them power over the traditionally male arena of social status, it also encourages the status quo – and “the cult of true womanhood” became one method of justifying a social order based on inequality. Kerber recalls the argument made by Gerda Leamer in her 1969 essay “The Lady and the Mill Girl” which examines the political and economic history of women. Leamer argues that American industrialization, which depended on the labor of women and children, promoted increased class differences among women. Lerner interpreted the “cult of true womanhood” as “a vehicle by which middle class women elevated their own status” (Kerber 12). Lerner writes, “It is no accident that the slogan ‘women’s place is in the home’ took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women left their homes to become factory workers” (Kerber 12). Similarly, Kerber explains the appeal of a Marxist interpretation of the separation of male and female spheres, as it reveals the idea of separate spheres to be a “social construction camouflaging the social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared” (14). Thus, as middle class women used the idea of the cult of true womanhood to separate themselves from women who could not embody the same qualities, the gap between women of different social classes widened.

The assumption of a sentimental text such as *The Lamplighter* is that a woman who acts in accordance with the ideals of womanhood has the power to place herself and her family within the middle class, but where does this leave women who either fail to
live up to the ideal or do not achieve economic rewards despite their moral virtue? I argue that sensational fiction attempts to expose as false the social order portrayed in sentimental texts such as *The Lamplighter*. Indeed, sensational texts render women incapable of performing or sustaining ideal femininity precisely in order to point to the instability and falsity of a social order in which class position is based on the enactment of female virtue.

Classified as “low brow” entertainment in relation to the popular “middle brow” sentimentalism, sensational literature proliferated in the 1840s as a result of improvements in printing technology. According to Shelley Streeby’s *American Sensations*, sensational fiction was aligned with the masculine and the working class, and it focused on materiality and corporeality instead of the refinement and transcendence emphasized in sentimentality (28). Streeby also notes that sensationalism enacted a resistance to the discourse of sentimentality, as it did not stress bourgeois ideals but bourgeois corruption (32). Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* explains that sensational novels enjoyed a wide readership predominately but not entirely composed of young members of the working class and was “at least as popular and culturally influential as domestic novels, probably more so, given its cheap price and massive distribution” (Denning xxix). Like Denning and Streeby, I argue that people read sensational novels for culturally informative reasons. Specifically, this paper focuses on two sensational novels, George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* (1848) and George Thompson’s *Venus in Boston* (1849), both of which enjoyed popular success. Most modern literary critics agree that both authors had social aims while they wrote these sensational texts and that both hoped to enact a social critique. All evidence of Lippard’s
life shows that he hoped for social reform, as he was a labor activist and well known for critiquing the tenets of capitalism (Streeby 42). Literature, according to Lippard, was to “accelerate social progress and . . . radical individual change” (Ehrlich 51). Similarly, “Lippard’s project was to reveal the underside of capitalism and urbanization” and to seek social equality for marginalized groups - slaves, the working poor, and women, as he sought to “expose the grim side of life in America undergoing rapid urbanization” (Reynolds viii). Critic Gary Ashwill agrees, beginning his analysis of The Quaker City with the presumption that the novel does perform radical, oppositional cultural work (295). Ultimately, Ashwill claims, the novel empowers readers, encouraging them to “look outward, away from the novels, and [to] address the inequalities and horrors of their everyday lives” (296). Lippard attempts to convey the notion that “Civilization is built on the bodies of the poor, the weak, the enslaved, and the oppressed. . . . Lippard’s fiction dramatizes this hidden dependence” (Ashwill 305). Similarly, in the introduction to a volume containing both George Thompson’s Venus in Boston and City Crimes, David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman note that Thompson’s “. . . horrific narratives contain political subtexts with the potential to subvert middle class mores, unmask hypocrisy. . . . (xi). Both Lippard and Thompson and Maria Cummins hoped to give their readers a method of exerting influence upon their societies, yet Cummins’ formula (if one follows the prescriptions set by the cult of true womanhood one will attain financial and emotional fulfillment) is unacceptable to the social reformers.

Although some might argue that Lippard or Thompson’s social critique applies only to the antebellum urban city, since a particular city serves as the distinct setting for each of the novels, Ashwill makes the case that “Lippard’s novels address the essential
social relations of capitalism rather than their particular, historical manifestations” (297). I suggest that we can also extend this idea to other sensational texts, such as George Thomas’s *Venus in Boston*. Although these novels are set in a particular urban area and are based on the particulars of city life, this paper suggests that readers can extend the critique to capitalist society at large. As Ashwill explains, the city serves as a metaphor for “the social system that created and sustained [it]” (298). We cannot, then, read sensational texts only for their indictment of city life, as the social critiques the novels enact reveal the underside of the entire capitalist system, the entire unequal social order that comes to light most clearly in the overpopulated space of the antebellum city.

As one of its conventions, antebellum sensational literature lifts the sentimental heroine out of the domestic novel and places her in a situation where she can easily become the victim of depravity, in which it becomes increasingly difficult for her to maintain the codes of ideal femininity, and in which she does not receive rewards for moral conduct. It is tempting to read sensationalism as a wholly separate mode of literature existing outside of the realm of sentimentality, as it is aimed at a different audience and is set in an entirely different type of world. However, such a reading of sensationalism would ignore the fact that in many ways some of the specific conventions of sentimentality rear their heads in sensational texts. Recent literary scholars have also recognized a link between sentimentality and sensationalism. For example, according to David Reynolds and Kimberly Gladman’s introduction to a volume containing two sensational novels by George Thomason, sensational texts such as Thompson’s repudiate the ideology of domestic novels that “trace a virtuous heroine in overcoming personal misfortune and moving toward middle class marriage, guided by a strong Christian faith.
In the domestic novel, home is the ideal to be gained, and marriage is a kind of heavenly reward for virtuous behavior” (Reynolds and Gladman xxxiv). Sensational texts take an opposite stance, as Thompson’s novels “repeatedly deconstruct marriage and family” (Reynolds and Gladman xxxiv), and Thompson’s female characters “enact the rejection, even the inversion, of the maternal and nurturing female roles promoted by the cult of true womanhood” (Reynolds and Gladman xxxix).

It may be tempting to conclude that sensational texts have the primary aim of denigrating women, as women are no longer able to successfully fulfill the qualities of true womanhood. Sensational texts instead repeatedly render women capable of sexual desire, purposefully ignorant of Christian ethics, and disinterested in forming any emotional attachments. Indeed, sensational novels depict women who act in ways exactly opposite to Welter’s “cult of true womanhood.” Further, the female characters who do act in accordance with the values of true womanhood are powerless and relentlessly victimized at the hands of other women and men. Unlike a sentimental text such as The Lamplighter, which classifies unworthy women as those possessing the haughtiness of Isabella and Mrs. Graham, sensational novels picture women capable of tremendous atrocities, women whose “crimes” are far greater than their pride and disregard for others’ comfort. Women’s “sins” in sensational novels make them unfit to function in society and dangerous to those around them, especially to the pure, pious heroine, and I suggest that this stripping of female virtue is intended to prompt readers to question the basis upon which the social order, according to sentimentality, rests – female ability to form and perform middle-classness.
Sensational texts, then, differ from the sentimental portrayal of womanhood in key ways: the pure woman is punished rather than rewarded, and "fallen" women recur throughout. In addition, the "fallen" woman becomes a threat to the pure and often is granted more power to act in her world. In *Venus in Boston*, the young, innocent heroine, Fanny, shares many characteristics with the heroine of a sentimental novel, as the text portrays her as pure and pious – notably, the hallmarks of a true woman. Just as Welter's analysis of true womanhood provides that "Purity was essential... to a young woman... Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order," Fanny realizes the importance of keeping her virtue intact (Welter 154). When induced by another woman to allow a libertine to seduce her, Fanny replies, "I will not... become the slave of your master's will... you are a wicked wretch for trying to tempt me to do wrong. I am not afraid... for God will protect me... You may kill me if you like, but I will not be guilty of wickedness" (Thompson 14). With this, Fanny proves her purity and her piety, preferring death over debasement. However, Fanny's moral goodness does not win her favor with the older woman in the libertine's employ; instead, after the woman hears Fanny proclaim this moral fortitude, "... livid with rage, [the servant woman] flew at the young girl, tore every shred of clothing from her person, and beat her cruelly with the rope... In vain poor Fanny implored for mercy" (Thompson 15). Instead, then, of encouraging the young girl to continue on her path of virtue, the older womanpunishes her. Interestingly, the servant woman's rage is provoked as a direct result of Fanny's moral declaration, implying that, for this, Fanny must suffer. This exchange suggests that such morality has no place in the sensational world; it will grant Fanny no rewards, and her attempts to remain virtuous are mocked and punished rather than celebrated.
*The Quaker City* portrays a similar danger for the domestic heroine, as the pious Mary Arlington is also "seduced," which in *The Quaker City* becomes another word for "raped." A “fallen woman” also contributes to Mary’s danger, as Bess entraps her for a libertine’s abuse. Mary, like Fanny, is both pious and pure, as she regards losing her virtue as the worst possible fate and clearly has strong religious beliefs, as she invokes religious language to describe her love for the man she thinks she will wed. “Pure, stainless, innocent, her heart a heaven of love, her mind childlike in its knowledge of the world. . . [she says] ‘for the sake of God, save me’” (Lippard 134-5). Again, the pure woman’s virtue brings her little reward, as Mary is ultimately seduced/raped. Further, David Reynolds notes that Mary Arlington’s seduction is accomplished as a libertine uses the promise of home as his enticement and that Mary’s desire for a domestic space, an ideal marriage, makes her more susceptible to the libertine’s threats (xxii).

In addition to their portrayal of the inefficacy of the pure domestic heroine, as she falls victim to other, less worthy (but more powerful) creatures, sensational texts also craft another type of woman: the woman who inverts the qualities of true womanhood, who both experiences and acts upon her sexual desires, and who has none of the moral virtues of her pure sentimental sisters. As Ridgely claims, few can remain pure in the world of *The Quaker City*, as each character falls victim to corruption in some form (84). Females are no exception; in fact, some of the most condemned villains in the text are women. For example, Dora Livingstone rejects each of the qualities of ideal womanhood in her quest for wealth and social status (Reynolds xxiii). Dora, Ehrlich claims, is the “epitome of beauty and evil” (58), and the moral climax of *The Quaker City* comes when Luke Harvey, the character closest to a hero, rejects Dora’s sexual advances and scorns
her as an adulteress. The text characterizes Dora as having a heart as “corrupt as the blackness of hell,” as “the Canker of Ambition, has warmed itself into her soul” (Lippard 252). Similarly, Venus in Boston also pictures women who appear evil, as Sow Nance, a prostitute, tries to lure the unsuspecting Fanny into a libertine’s trap.

[Fanny] little thought that the abandoned creature at her side was leading her into a snare, imminently dangerous to her peace of mind and future happiness! . . . she gaily trudged onward, while ever and anon Sow Nance would glance savagely at her from the corners of her snake-like eyes.

(Thompson 10)

Sow Nance clearly has no misgivings about leading her innocent victim into a trap, as she hopes to gain financially from delivering Fanny to her employer and fails to consider the moral sin that she commits by leading Fanny into danger (Thompson 11). The text leaves little room to interpret Sow Nance as a positive character, as the words “savage” and “snake-like” unequivocally cast her as the villain.

Women in sensational texts also deviate from the members of the “cult of true womanhood” in another key way – in their expression of sexual desire. Unlike sentimental texts in which sexuality seems nonexistent, sensational novels include sexual desire as integral to their female characters, even the characters appearing as victims of a lusty libertine. In The Quaker City, both Mary and Mabel are said to possess a degree of sexual desire, even as they are seduced/raped. The narrator explains that Mary’s seducer had the “intention to wake her animal nature into full action. . . . her veins were all alive with fiery pulsations, . . . her heart grew animate with sensual life, . . . her eyes swam in the humid moist of passion. . . . “ (127). Similarly, Mabel, while drugged by a man attempting to seduce her, becomes sensual; “the flush brightened in her cheek, still the glance flashing from her dark eye, grew more soft and mellowed with the moisture of
passion. . . All the animal portion of her nature is aroused into active life” (322). This sexually desirous woman also appears in *Venus in Boston*, as the prostitutes in the text appear to enjoy their activities. The women remark that Fanny will “dream of Cupid’s pleasures, and when she awakes. . . she may find herself in the arms of an impetuous lover- Happy girl! I envy her the bliss she is soon to experience” (Thompson 100). Thus, unlike the asexual heroines of sentimentality, the women in sensational texts have sexual urges that sharply contrast them with the wholly pure women of domestic novels.

Though sensational texts clearly describe women who invert the qualities of true womanhood, the texts do not encourage readers to value such women; the woman who either falls victim to a libertine, thereby losing her purity, or behaves in another immoral way, is surely punished. Most pointedly, *The Quaker City*’s Dora, the most unconventional feminine character, receives the ultimate punishment, as she suffers and dies in a fire. Additionally, fallen women in *The Quaker City* are seen as contaminators of society; as Ridgely notes, the text describes the fallen woman as “polluted, ruined, deflowered: the connotations of such words expose the perverse severity of society’s judgment. She has broken the imposed standard, and her very presence contaminates the community” (91). Further, *The Quaker City* offers no hope of redemption for its fallen female characters. Even Mary, who has struggled to remain pure, has no hope for happiness, despite the fact that she has been returned to her parents. The last scene of the novel reveals Mary completely losing her mental facilities, staring at a photo of her deceased seducer. She mistakenly thinks that her seducer had, in fact, become her husband, and she expresses extreme grief and madness during this final scene.

The girl in robes of flowing white, knelt on the floor with her eyes so full
of unutterable feeling, centered on the portrait her cheek flushed with strange emotions, and her clasped hands raised on high. A single word burst from her lips, a single word, uttered in a whisper, like the sigh of a broken heart - ‘Lorraine!’ (Lippard 575)

Instead of offering Mary the hope of rediscovering happiness now that she has returned to her family and to safety, the text paints the damage done as irreversible, and the novel’s ending rings with lamentation and despair. If, as Ridgely persuasively claims, the very presence of the fallen woman contaminates the community, then the question remains: why are women in sensational texts portrayed as such contaminants, regardless of whether they have fallen victim to male seduction, like Mary, or have purposefully chosen to reject the qualities of true womanhood, like Dora?

As I earlier suggested, it would be both tempting and easy to read sensational texts as having the aim of denigrating women, of questioning female virtue as a means of further lowering the estimation of women. In short, the most obvious way to read these texts is to conclude that they support patriarchy. If so many women are “bad” and if the pure woman cannot take care of herself, then women’s social roles should surely be limited. My analysis, recalling the ways that sentimental texts tie female virtue to middle-class formation, leads me to a different conclusion. I posit instead that sensational texts do not primarily aim to condemn or contain women, but to enact a critique of the vision of social mobility that rests on female virtue. Literary scholars agree that Lippard, in particular, was far from a misogynist looking to scorn women, as he was classified as an advocate of women’s rights and a fighter for women’s economic independence. As Reynolds explains, “Lippard is showing how women, in a twisted society driven by lust and money, become victims of a massive male power struggle,
falling prey to male constructed images of romance and social advancement” (xxiii).

Similarly, Gary Ashwill claims that Lippard exposes the “suffering, corruption, and oppression of women engendered by this corrupt and dishonest social system” (293).

Applying these ideas to Thompson, as well, it becomes apparent that these sensational authors were critiquing something other than women, and I argue that women, in fact, become the vehicle by which sensational fiction advocated a social order based on a firmer foundation than female abilities to enact the qualities of the “cult of true womanhood.”

If social mobility was as easily accomplished as the historical accounts of middle class formation relate, then there appears to be little reason for the literature of the working class to express anxiety over the role of women as the definers and performers of middle-classness, since the middle class appears to have been accessible to everyone. Social reformers such as Lippard and Thompson, however, were deeply pessimistic about the possibility of social mobility, despite the pictures that 20th century historians retrospectively paint. I argue that for working class readers, the specific vision of middle class formation and its attainability rings both false and unlikely precisely because of its reliance on female conduct, especially because, practically speaking, working class women were realistically faced with social problems that the utopian model of sentimentality refuses to acknowledge. Female virtue, sensational novels point out, is always contingent upon male restraint; at any moment, a woman could be subject to male force, thereby “falling” into degradation and shame. A woman is in a more vulnerable position than sentimental texts such as The Lamplighter would have readers believe. Although no evil inhabits the sentimental world, it lurks throughout society, both in the
shape of male seducers and economic oppression. The working class reality, in short, looks far different than the sentimental ideal. An analysis of antebellum periodicals and newspapers reveals that for an urban, working class audience, the depiction of the options available to Gerty would be an unrealistic pipedream. An 1860 article in *The Dial: A Monthly Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion* records that few employment opportunities are open to woman and those few

furnish so little and so precarious a pay. As she [an honest laborer] goes home with her meager wages, her sick heart, her weary nerves, her wet eyes, the gaily dressed prostitute flaunts past her; and a whisper is in her heart that her shame is well paid for. . .(674)

Similarly, an 1847 article in *Harbinger, Devoted to Social and Political Progress* indicts economic conditions, noting that “poverty, hideous poverty, is the great cause of female misery. . .” (3). *Liberty* magazine is even more explicit in its portrayal of the economic structure, “Do they [the working class] realize that the capitalist system, after extorting the last cent from the working women, forces them into the street. . .” (Kelly 5).

Although the accounts of these print sources are based on urban areas, the economic structure, though admittedly more unequal in an overpopulated city, would, I suggest, also extend to more suburban areas; the lack of economic opportunities for women, despite the enactment of their virtue, was paralyzing. What recourse existed for a young woman like Gerty, with no skills, no family, and no resources? Sensational fiction asserts that the performance of true womanhood advocated by sentimentality is decidedly not enough to raise one’s economic status. The sensational novel *Venus in Boston*, though containing many fantastic elements, is more realistic regarding the financial plight of women. Fanny sells fruit because her family lives in extreme poverty and was “very
poor and wholly dependent on a small pittance. . . her grandfather was unable to work
and the poor family had not tasted food that day” (Thompson 4). This depiction of
poverty, coupled with the lack of economic opportunities for women, opposes the view of
female opportunity that sentimentality portrays. When examined alongside the extreme
poverty depicted sensational texts and periodicals’ accounts of the antebellum US,
sentimentality’s vision is not only false but also destructive, as it lulls its readers into a
false sense of security based on a happy lie. The middle class readers of sentimentality
would have their interests served by believing this lie, but the working class and the
social reformers would not have felt similar satisfaction.

Further, if readers accept the notions of social mobility and the ease of entry into
the middle class offered by sentimentality, then the necessary corollary is that anyone
who has the desire and the moral fortitude can transcend class barriers. Willie and Gerty
need only the positive influences of Mrs. Sullivan and Emily, in addition to their own
moral goodness, and they immediately have the resources to elevate themselves in class
status. The implication of this is that those who deserve to become middle class will;
those who remain in the working class must then deserve to live with limited finances,
and this vision of social mobility becomes a justification for the social inequality inherent
in capitalism. As Lori Merish’s “Sentimental Consumption” argues, in sentimental texts,
those who “belong” in a home will find their way there. Anyone who remains outside,
then, must not deserve entrance, for if they truly deserved a higher social status, then their
performance of proper social conventions, of middle-class virtue, would propel them out
of poverty. Sentimentality, in short, ignores the idea that some women are forced, out of
economic necessity, to reject the qualities of true womanhood. Can a working class
woman really choose to embody the characteristics of true womanhood? Sensational novels, I suggest, imply that such choices are a luxury to which not all women have access.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that sensational novels triumphantly portray working class defiance; in particular, Lippard’s vision offers little hope for real social reform, for the formation of a “new, more humane noncapitalist society” (Ashwill 313). Instead, Ashwill claims, Lippard’s novels had the “function of promoting what might be called ‘conflict consciousness,’ achieved by modeling conflict in the novels’ structures, motifs, and sensationalism” (313). The “goal,” then, of sensational novels might be seen as the exposure of the myth that sentimentality propagates; they might be read as urging their readers to spend less energy promoting the “cult of true womanhood” and more advocating social change. Further, women, according to sensational texts, need not embody perfect virtue to become efficacious. Instead, an ideal woman, according to a sensational text, would have the means to defend herself against the oppression, notably economic and sexual, with which she is faced. The utopia of sentimentality makes social mobility appear attainable, but the mechanisms through which it is attained are fundamentally false. If middle classness is dependent on the ability of women to embody the characteristics of true womanhood, then middle-classness is not so easy to attain, after all, for the execution of ideal femininity, for the working class, is more problematic than Gerty’s or Mrs. Sullivan’s experiences would have readers believe.

An analysis of antebellum US sentimentality and sensationalism yields an understanding of the significant anxieties surrounding social mobility and middle-classness. As those safely established within the middle class found themselves wanting
to believe in the justice of the social order, in the ease of crossing class boundaries, another less fortunate portion of society dealt with the harsh reality of poverty, economic oppression, and sexual victimization. Sentimental texts such as *The Lamplighter* may have done much to advance the ways in which middle class women viewed themselves as vital contributors to the social order, but domestic novels simultaneously mask the very real problems facing the working poor, thus perpetuating the status quo and economic inequality. Sentimental urging toward virtue does little to change political and economic realities, and sensational literature aims to expose such stasis-causing sentimental rhetoric as little more than a happy lie.
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Biography

Erica Barone was born in Throop, Pennsylvania on 18 April 1981 to Richard Barone and Debbie Barone. She attended Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania where she received a B.A. in English and graduated Summa Cum Laude with a citation in honors. Currently, Erica is finishing her M.A. in English at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where she teaches composition.
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