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The Henry James Review, Volume 39, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 62-80 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/hjr.2018.0004

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Searching for Sentimentality in Henry James's *The Bostonians*

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When Henry James was twenty years old, he attended a talk by the medium and trance lecturer, Mrs. Cora L. V. Hatch, who was discoursing, at the behest of the audience, on "the Evidence of the continued existence of the Spirit after death" (*SL* 8). James concluded in a letter he wrote to Thomas Sergeant Perry "that the whole thing was a string of such arrant platitudes, that after about an hour of it, when there seemed to be no signs of a let-up we turned and fled." Basil Ransom, in *The Bostonians* (serialized in *Century Illustrated Magazine* from 1885–86), which James would write a little over two decades later, also spends an evening listening to an inspired female orator, Verena Tarrant, whose words produce in him a similar feeling of contempt. He concludes that "she had been stuffed with this trash by her father," a known charlatan (49). Yet even though Basil has contempt for Verena's words, he does not have contempt for Verena herself: he finds her "as innocent as she was lovely" (49).

It seems a remarkable fact that the novel's treatment of Verena differs so sharply from the young James's personal reaction to Mrs. Hatch and, as we shall see, the reactions of other American literary realists, to what Verena represents. Basil is not James's mouthpiece in the novel, but I shall endeavor to demonstrate how James's novel shares some of Basil's wonder at and all of his curiosity about this sentimental orator. This is an attitude at odds with the identity that critics have constructed for James as a literary master whose mastery at least partly inheres in his distaste for sentimentality. In what follows, I discuss what has usually happened when modern literary critics make sentimental texts the object of scrutiny and how James's own treatment of a sentimental object can open up new critical avenues.

To twentieth-century critics, mid-nineteenth-century sentimental novels appeared self-evident and transparent. Yet in "The Art of Fiction," which James published while finishing the last chapters of *The Bostonians* (Johnson 295), James recommends that a novelist not be imprisoned by the idea that there is a definitive way to produce a novel;

The Henry James Review 39 (2018): 62–80.
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the author ought to discover a way for himself. James discounts the attitude “that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding” (*AF* 29). James believes that “Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints.” Although James might have intended to address only authors with this observation, it can apply just as well to critics. In *The Bostonians,* he offers an alternative to readers, especially literary critics, who react to these sentimental novels with contempt or at least a sense of mastery. Through his own commitment to “the comparison of standpoints”—or what I shall describe as shifting focalization—James encourages the reader to adopt a humbler, more self-reflective consideration of these sentimental objects.

Sentimentality arises not from a certain kind of plot but from the intimate relationship of identification that a sentimental text tries to forge between its characters and readers, one invoked by and validated by the strong bursts of emotion that they both experience.[1] Sentimental novels cultivate certain reading practices that are very different from the ones James’s novels cultivate: a love of difficulty, a toleration of ambiguity, and judgment borne of critical distance. The reading practices cultivated by sentimental novels fly in the face of the “critical reading” practices that professors so assiduously cultivate in their students.

Instead of critical distance, a novel like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (serialized in the *National Era* from 1851–52) encourages sympathetic identification.[2] Instead of interpretive difficulty, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* assures its readers that what they see is what they get. The sentimental orators who populate *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* persuade the characters around them the way that the sentimental novel as a whole wants to persuade its readers: distrustful of mere words, they rely upon the strong feelings that they elicit in their audience, often through a recourse to the suffering that both they and their assumed audience have experienced. Elizabeth Barnes uses the example of the fugitive slave mother Eliza persuading Mrs. Bird, the white wife of a Kentucky senator, to help her because of their shared suffering. “[Eliza] looked up at Mrs. Bird, with a keen, scrutinizing glance, and it did not escape her that she was dressed in deep mourning. ‘Ma’am,’ she said, suddenly, ‘have you ever lost a child?’” (Stowe, *Uncle* 76). We can imagine Stowe sizing up her audience the same way Eliza does. Stowe was partially inspired to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* because of the loss of one of her sons, and, as Joanne Dobson has noted, the novel relies on the presumed knowledge of its contemporaneous audience of what it is like to lose a child in order to make an argument for the slave’s humanity: the slave feels what you, reader, feel at the loss of your own children.

While I read Verena as representative of the sentimental orators who populate these sentimental novels, I do not contend that *The Bostonians* should be counted alongside *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a sentimental novel. Instead, it is a sustained meditation on these sentimental novels and their persuasive techniques. James will not—cannot, I would claim—offer his readers the revelation that would explain why Verena exercises such power over her audience, but he does reveal how she lays bare the reading practices of both those who dwell within the novels and those who dwell without, James’s extradiegetic readers. In its intense scrutiny of Verena, *The Bostonians* admits the possibility that critical distance from the sentimental object does not have to result in a reader’s feeling of superiority.

The story that critics have told of our superiority to sentimental novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depends on a certain account of who originally read them (middle-class white women) and how artificially these novels convey reality (extremely). Yet this account ignores their actual reception history.[3] Writing about the best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison "confess[ed] to the frequent moistening of our eyes, and the making of our heart grow liquid as water, and trembling every nerve within us, in the perusal of the incidents and scenes so vividly depicted in her pages" (50). Garrison notes the novel's vividness, a common characterization. Southerners objected so strenuously to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* precisely because they worried about how vividly it struck its readers. In "Slavery in the Southern States" (1852), "A Carolinian," writes that

> [w]e have a variety of vivid scenes to illustrate the power of the master in separating the families of slaves, in destroying their moral character, and in scourging them even to death. In these sketches her zeal has got the better of the authoress, and she has drawn a most wild and unreal picture of slavery. (433–34)

That this novel has "vivid scenes" is precisely the problem for Southerners: its believability obscures its inaccuracy.

The history of contempt toward these popular sentimental novels has been long and well populated. Nathaniel Hawthorne was a founding father with his endlessly quoted 1855 comment to his publisher about the "damned mob of scribbling women." But in the post-bellum period, the contempt hardened when American realist writers like Mark Twain and William Dean Howells[4] succeeded in writing a new—and false—literary origin story for these novels. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, simultaneously serialized with *The Bostonians* in the *Century*, features a sentimental poetess, Emmeline Grangerford, whose oeuvre includes "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd" and "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas." Emmeline's prolixity is matched only by her obsession with mortality: "The neighbors said it was the doctor first, then Emmeline, then the undertaker" (113).[5] In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), also serialized alongside *The Bostonians,* Howells has his characters allude to a (fictitious) sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, whose title suggests the ineffectuality Howells associates with the sentimental novel. Twain and Howells helped replace the notion of sentimental realism with sentimental artificiality and the fact of a wide and varied audience with the notion of a set of genteel female readers unable to appreciate the irony and complexity of more sophisticated literary endeavors. So successful has this revisionist history been that since the 1980s, critics interested in the actual reception of these sentimental novels have published satisfyingly counterintuitive works that document their original reception and try to explain it to a mystified modern audience.[6]

If Twain and Howells explicitly referred to sentimental novels in ways that would distinguish their own works (and provide an alibi for their own forays into sentimentality), the realists, more broadly, helped to usher in a way of reading that is, as I mentioned above, still prized: a judgment borne of critical distance, a distance achieved through the analytic stance the reader takes toward a literary work. As Nancy Bentley writes, "[i]n their faith in and fondness for analysis, these nineteenth-century

literary authorities are our critical ancestors, whether or not we wish to claim the kinship" (13). Yet as Bentley's skepticism about our acknowledgment of their critical legacy attests, it is much easier for us, modern professional critics, to discern and evaluate the explicit attacks leveled by Howells and Twain than to acknowledge the historical specificity and contingency of the reading practices they have bequeathed us.

Unlike the other realists, James did not propagate this false origin story even as he showed himself to be an analytic writer *par excellence*. To establish James's anomalous response to sentimental rhetoric, I will scrutinize *The Bostonians*, a novel that has been classified as one of his two political novels (the other is *The Princess Casamassima*). I propose to read it less as a means to discern James's complex position on "the woman question" than his complex views on sentimental rhetoric. I will focus on Verena Tarrant, who, in this reading, becomes what I will call a sentimental object: *sentimental* because she is a most effective practitioner of the sentimental rhetoric deployed by Harriet Beecher Stowe and other sentimental authors; *object* because not only does she function as the object of the desire of the two other main characters in this novel, Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom, but she also comes to be treated as a "thing" by them and others—a commodity to be circulated or taken out of circulation, for profit. The "celebrated magazinist" Matthias Pardon (41) is only one example[7] of the desire to use Verena. Pardon suggests to Olive "[c]ouldn't they run Miss Verena together?," adding, "I want to make history!" (111). A horrified Olive rejects Matthias and his designs on Verena, which are not however, the novel suggests, completely unlike those of Olive, who also plans to put Verena on the lecture circuit as a means, in Pardon's words, to "help the ladies."

There is another, less obvious way that Verena is made an object in the novel: James, that connoisseur of consciousness, declines to make her into a distinct subject the way that Olive and Basil are made subjects in the novel[8]; instead, Verena reflects these subjects back at themselves, should they choose to notice (they do not). Verena remains a figure very hard to make out. James's ambiguity has, of course, been seen as one of his most salient formal qualities. *The Bostonians* suggests that James's characteristic practice might derive, at least in part, from his response to a genre that appears nothing if not transparent, both in its own self-report and to the critics who have analyzed it. Sentimental novels never allow their readers to remain in doubt about their characters' moral character. Even Jane Tompkins, a foundational figure in the feminist rescue of these sentimental novels, which began in the 1970s, concedes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lacks "stylistic intricacy [and] psychological subtlety" (126).

James's novel, on the other hand, has no dearth of these qualities. Yet James's tenacious ambiguity around Verena can give us insight into the sentimental object, specifically how that object has been more obscured than illuminated by literary critical scrutiny. *The Bostonians* stands as a warning to the modern critic of the nineteenth-century American sentimental novel, always in danger of inhabiting one of two extremes. She may find herself denigrating sentimentality so much as to make it seem impossible that anyone would have ever fallen for it, as the critic Ann Douglas does, or, conversely and much more rarely, she may find herself making it seem so accurate, so trustworthy, as to make readers' skepticism about its possible manipulation or artificiality seem unwarranted, as does Dobson.[9] Yet these opposing reactions have something in common: the assumption that sentimental rhetoric is transparent, that is, that one can easily interpret it.

More recent criticism of sentimentality has moved away from these earlier, more Manichean critical responses. Cindy Weinstein's influential and insightful work on sentimentality demonstrates "the ideological complexities of sympathy" (67) and discusses the very different rhetorical and political purposes sentimental rhetoric was put to by different antebellum writers, a nuanced approach that is shared by Marianne Noble, Lora Romero, and Susan M. Ryan. Ryan similarly characterizes her work as employing an approach that "allows us to move beyond the question of whether benevolence [a distinct but overlapping category to sentimentalism] was progressive or retrograde" (5). Yet these modern critical projects share with earlier ones the sense that, regardless of the ingenuity and critical sensitivity required, sentimentality can be analyzed with confidence. The analytical perspective that these critics bring is one they take up without doubting the ability it affords to identify its object of scrutiny. In these more recent critical accounts, antebellum sentimentality, though resistant to being summed up across the ideologically and generically disparate texts in which it appears, can still be nailed down in terms of its (complex) political ramifications and rhetorical effects.[10]

This straightforwardness differs from the way that James's texts have been discussed. We can see this difference and how it gets magnified in Jamesian criticism if we look at recent articles on James's debt to sentimental literature, which juxtapose James's ambiguity to sentimentality's transparency. In his excellent "Overhearing Testimony: James in the Shadow of Sentimentalism," Brian Artese illuminates James's complex handling of the confessional mode. This "demand for confessional transparency" (119) allows sentimental literature to be easily identified—and the word "transparency" shows up again and again in Artese's treatment of the sentimental (104, 105, 109, 114, 119). This description allows sentimental novels to appear rather simple (and it puts the reader in a position of superiority, amused by these novels' narrative contortions). According to Artese, Henry James's novels have no such imperatives, only the careful consideration of the implications stemming from their dual use of confession and testimony.

In 1960, the critic John Bayley called Henry James "the *least* sentimental of writers" (235, emphasis mine).[11] Presumably, Bayley meant this as a compliment. When Bayley was writing, about a decade before the feminist "rescue" of the sentimental women writers, to distance an author from sentimentality was simultaneously to praise him as an artist.[12] But how should we assess Bayley's judgment in light of more recent scholarship on James? Recent scholars have demonstrated James's debt to the sentimental tradition, from William Veeder's analysis of how James transformed the stylistic techniques of the "scribblers," to Alfred Habegger's exploration of James's implicit acknowledgment of the contradictions in the sentimental novel (toward which Habegger shows a generous measure of contempt), to Bonita Rhoads's claim that the modernist novel owes a great debt to the sentimental novel's focus on domestic interiors and Artese's analysis described above. I share these critics' interest in forging a connection between James and sentimental rhetoric. We can take *The Bostonians* as a case in point.

The Bostonians follows a conventional sentimental plotline, as defined by the extremely contemptuous critic Henry Nash Smith: after many hardships, the orphaned heroine "finally attains economic security and high social status through marriage" (49).[13] *The Bostonians* ends with Verena betrothed to the genteel Southerner Basil

Ransom. But this outline does not do justice to the changes that James rings on this ur-plot: Verena is not exactly orphaned; instead, Olive spends time wishing she were; Basil might be from a genteel family, but it has slipped into poverty, and the novel points out his own lack of financial acumen. There are other differences, too: sentimental novels need to delay the marriages of their heroines (with the marriage comes the close of the narrative), and these delays are caused by the need for the protagonist to grow into an adult and to learn lessons in self-abnegation or self-determination (depending on whether you follow Smith or Nina Baym). But in *The Bostonians*, although young, Verena is already an adult at the novel's opening, and her schooling in "true womanhood" takes the form of a Boston marriage to Olive Chancellor, who extracts a promise from Verena to "renounce heterosexual attraction" (Thomas 731). As I hope even this brief description of the revisions James makes to the sentimental plotline suggests, James is not so much borrowing elements from these novels as both critiquing and meditating on them.

The critique is easier to see. For example, in *Washington Square* (1880), James affords us a sentimental view of how the engagement of Catherine Sloper, daughter of a wealthy doctor, to the penurious Morris Townsend should proceed. This view comes from Mrs. Penniman, Catherine's aunt. Mrs. Penniman queries Morris about his motives in asking Catherine to marry him: "'Ah, you know what it is, then?' said Mrs. Penniman, shaking her finger at him. 'He [Catherine's father] pretends that you like—you like the money.' Morris hesitated a moment; and then, as if he spoke advisedly. 'I *do* like the money!'" (122). And why not, the reader wonders. Isn't it awfully naive to think that money doesn't matter? James can be adept at rendering the sentimental worldview à la Howells and Twain: as a site of unreality.

Yet it is James's *meditation* on the sentimental novel—his refusal to settle for an easy, dismissive interpretation of it—that I would like to explore. Unlike other novels of James where, I would argue, the meditation on the sentimental novel is fitful or is taken over by the critique, *The Bostonians* features a sustained meditation through its treatment of Verena. Verena is a tremendously successful female orator, consistently bringing many of her audience to tears. As with the earlier sentimental authors, she is a reformer. In Verena's case, she wants to educate her auditors about the plight and potential of women. Even when a sentimental novel does not have one of the great social reforms of its time as its topic (*The Lamplighter*, for example, does not), it still seeks to reform the character of those that populate—and read—its pages. Of course, the most popular sentimental novel of the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, did engage with the great political issue of its day. There is, as has been generally acknowledged,[14] a straight line connecting abolition and the issue that preoccupies Olive and Verena: many white nineteenth-century female reformers (the Grimké sisters being perhaps the most famous) first found their voices in support of abolition, "a seedbed of women's public speaking" (Sells 339), before raising them in behalf of women's rights. This was the course, in fact, that the nineteenth-century reformer and actress Anna Dickinson, who is supposed to have been the model on which James based Verena, followed.

Beyond simply being a reformer, Verena uses an array of sentimental techniques of persuasion. For one thing, her reform happens through her voice. James describes the reaction of Basil to one of Verena's orations: "After he had stood there a quarter of an hour he became conscious that he should not be able to repeat a word she had

said; he had not definitely heeded it, and yet he had not lost a vibration of her voice" (*BO* 206). As the narrator of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* notes of the New England spinster, Miss Ophelia, who manages to reform a slave child consigned to her care (and who shares not a little in common with Olive Chancellor): "Miss Ophelia's voice was more than her words, and more than that were the honest tears that fell down her face" (273). Words, then voice, and then tears—this is the hierarchy that shapes Verena's rhetorical performances.

Verena's effect on her audience is—and the narrator could be describing Stowe's original reception—an "extraordinary artless vividness" (*BO* 86). Sentimental novels strive to present pictures to their audience. As Stowe wrote to her publisher regarding *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "My vocation is simply that of a *painter*, and my object will be to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible slavery. . . . There is no arguing with *pictures*, and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not" ("Letter"). So, too, Verena acts on her audience through not only her voice but also the picture she presents, and without their full consent.

By "audience," I mean both her extradiegetic audience (because the novel mostly declines to transcribe Verena's words) as well as her intradiegetic one (because they can't stop fixating on the picture Verena presents). Here is a representative example of how the novel avoids transcribing what Verena says; it is, in fact, the very first time Verena orates in this novel. The stage is set when the appointed speaker, the famous Mrs. Farrinder, refuses to speak. Verena's father, the "mesmeric healer" (27), offers up his daughter to say a few words on the subject of the woman question. Basil seems about to report on what she has to say, but instead we get this:

> It was not what she said; he didn't care for that, he scarcely understood it; he could only see that it was all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man. . . . The effect was not in what she said, though she said some such pretty things, but in the picture and figure of the half-bedizened damsel (playing, now again, with her red fan), the visible freshness and purity of the little effort. (48)

What matters are much less the words Verena utters than the qualities Verena evinces; her essence is, in some sense, the content of her oration. In fact, "essence" plays a double role in this speech: Verena's own essence, her "freshness and purity," carries her rather slim argument, which itself relies on a notion of women's essence, "their gentleness and goodness," in order to show how unjustly they have been treated. It is quite possible that Verena's speech is not nearly as cliché-ridden as Basil makes it out to be. Assuming it is, these clichés merely allow the audience to turn their attention to the picture that she presents. And while Basil's mention of Verena's "figure" suggests Basil's sexual interest in Verena, it also suggests James's use of Verena as a "figure" for sentimental rhetoric.

At one point, Olive herself thinks that "she might have been satisfied that the girl was a mass of fluent catch-words and yet scarcely have liked her the less" (63). Olive's response illuminates another aspect of sentimental rhetoric, its love of "fluent catch-words" and reliance on clichés. Douglas, a supremely contemptuous critic of these sentimental novels, whose 1977 work, *The Feminization of American Culture*,

shaped a generation's response to them, quotes what she takes to be a hideous poem from Lydia Sigourney: "Beautiful boy, with the sunny hair / What wouldst thou do with that birdling rare? / It belongs to the sky—it hath wings, you know, / Loosen your clasping, and let him go" (256). Though Douglas does not specify exactly what makes this poem so dreadful, she does call it "rancid." "Rancid" implies language that has been left out too long, handled by too many different people.[15] Douglas seems to object to the triteness of the central metaphor, the way it, unlike a live metaphor, presents us with absolutely no frisson of the unexpected or strange. Douglas accuses Sigourney of being a bad artist.

But it is an unfair accusation: the last thing Sigourney wants to be is any kind of artist at all. She does not want to seem highly trained in the arts of rhetoric, of figure-making. She wants the language of her poem to be so familiar that it becomes a transparent medium that can convey the feelings that have impelled the author to write such a poem. Sentimental persuasion takes place when all textual barriers—including the originality of the author's figures, which catch the reader's attention in their defamiliarizing effect—have been removed. Verena, like other sentimental orators, is filled with catchwords, with banal expressions. Yet they serve only to push her front and center. Her banal words highlight her essence. Her character suffuses the scene in a way it could not if people were caught by her words, the content of what she is saying.

How Not to Judge Verena

If Verena *is* a sentimental object, then we should be able to read back from her to at least the narrator's, and possibly James's judgment, of sentimentality. After all, one could say that the business of this novel, as with many of James's novels, is the evaluation of its characters. Yet unlike in the sentimental novel, this evaluation is a drawn-out process, the "content" of the novel perhaps.[16] In James, almost every character is caught up in what I will refer to as a "web of judgment."[17]

The task of reading back from Verena to the narrator is complicated because, unlike in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, much of the narration is focalized through one or another character, whose self-interest and perceptual limitations (which we know in part from how they, in turn, have been evaluated by other characters and the narrator) infuse their impressions of Verena. Take for example the passage about Verena's first oration. It becomes clear that we are not getting an objective picture of what is going on but an interpretation focalized through the anti-feminist Basil, who denigrates Verena's message. He is struck by the clichés of her speech: "long ages of history" and "iron heel of man." His inability to hear her in favor of gazing at her "figure" might say as much about his tendency to objectify women than about a characteristic of the sentimental orator.

For more evidence of the way this focalization reveals more about Basil than Verena, let us turn to his mental summing up of her speech:

> [T]he necessity of her nature was not to make converts to a ridiculous cause, but to emit those charming notes of her voice . . . to please every one who came near her, and to be happy that she pleased. I know not whether Ransom was aware of the bearings of this interpretation, which

> attributed to Miss Tarrant a singular hollowness of character; he contented himself with believing that she was as innocent as she was lovely, and with regarding her as a vocalist of exquisite faculty, condemned to sing bad music. How prettily, indeed, she made some of it sound! (49)

On one hand, we seem to have further proof that Verena is a sentimental object, whose voice carries much more persuasive weight than her words (as Basil says at the end of the novel, "I don't listen to your ideas; I listen to your voice" [258]). Yet on the other hand, our overwhelming impression is of Basil's misogyny. Basil sees her as a pretty, brainless bird, emitting "charming notes," beguiling him with her vivid plumage. Even the narrator seems to cast aspersions on the objectivity of Basil's view of Verena through his own interjection, "I know not whether."

However, some readers have assumed that the narrator is complicit in this misogynist view. It is, after all, not just Basil who describes Verena as slight but the narrator himself: "Her ideas of enjoyment were very simple; she enjoyed putting on her new hat, with its redundancy of feather, and twenty cents appeared to her a very large sum" (61). Here the narrator reveals not just Verena's innocence but also her inanity. Not surprisingly many critics have argued that the narrator (and also James) dismisses not just women but their public voices,[18] especially if one considers how the narrator seems to sympathize with Basil, how Basil seems to be his mouthpiece in the novel. They are both men, after all, and they are both authors (toward the end of the book Basil publishes a story in a journal). This is exactly how Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar read the novel, pointing out James's complicity with Basil.

For them, Basil is a pure villain; Verena and those whom Basil/James can see only as "fanatical acolytes" (Gilbert and Gubar 27) are pure heroines.[19] On this view, the veil thrown around Verena's particular words seems the effect of a patriarchal conspiracy rather than a characteristic feature of sentimentality. I second the critic Wendy Lesser that this reading is actually a misreading of the novel. Let us grant for the sake of argument that James and his narrator are equivalent. As Lesser points out, James does not choose Basil as his stand-in. The narrator appears as distanced from Basil as he does from his other characters. He leads us to doubt Basil's perceptions of the world. Basil appears ridiculous at certain points, nowhere more so than in his attempts at authorship. As one editor comments on Basil's writing, "his doctrines were about three hundred years behind the age; doubtless some magazine of the sixteenth century would have been very happy to print them" (*BO* 148). And it does seem rather strange to propose the fastidious and complexly gender-identified Henry James as a kind of patriarchal he-man. When once asked who the greatest American female novelist was, Elizabeth Hardwick responded, "Henry James" (qtd. in Lesser 99).

Gilbert and Gubar simplify this novel in order to make it serve a particular political purpose. They conflate Basil's and the novel's treatment of Verena, and this conflation turns her into a lamentable figure, neither trifling nor disingenuous. Gilbert and Gubar solve the mystery of Verena, and they do this by making Verena into a victim. Yet this does not reflect the feel of the novel, where Verena exerts a fascination for everyone who stands in her presence and hears her voice. Gilbert and Gubar deny Verena and the novel's real strangeness, a strangeness that can be summed up in a question that Lesser poses: "Verena Tarrant is possibly the darkest of James's deep wells of desire, in that it is almost impossible to understand why two intelligent

people are so wildly attracted to her" (109). Gilbert and Gubar might respond that men often are wildly attracted to women they can dominate. Yet James suggests Verena's attractiveness—and, by extension, the attractiveness of the sentimental object—is not so easily divined, especially as we explore the difficulties in evaluating Verena that James throws in our way with his commitment to "the comparison of standpoints," in this case, the shifting focalization that structures this novel.

Verena does present a puzzle, yet it is not one to be solved by recourse to a story of patriarchal oppression, as can happen if we focus exclusively on Basil's judgment of Verena. After all, it is not only men whom Verena attracts. She attracts Olive, Basil's blue-blooded cousin. Olive is a social reformer with mixed motives. She wants to use Verena to advance the cause of women, but she also wants to keep Verena for herself. Olive certainly does not see Verena as a victim; she sees her as powerful in her eloquence; she finds Verena "very remarkable" (62). Unlike Basil, Olive does not judge Verena's discourse to be meaningless or false. And nowhere is Verena's power over Olive more confirmed than by Olive's own suspicion that Verena's eloquence might have something suspect about it.

It is easy to dismiss Olive's fascination with Verena as simply the result of Olive's personal desire for her—a position the novel gives us ample evidence to do (Olive believes that "[i]f they were all in all to each other, what more could they want?" [127]). If that is true, then what remains of Olive's assessment of Verena is the impression of Verena's intellectual insubstantiality and possible disingenuousness (and I could just as well be describing the realist assessment of sentimental authors more generally).[20] An alternative characterization of Verena emerges: instead of giving Verena the status of a victim, as Gilbert and Gubar do, readers can instead discount her as a charlatan. The narrator seems to provide us with more than enough clues that this is the proper reading. For one thing, the narrator makes much of Verena's crass huckster of a father, Mr. Tarrant, the mesmeric healer, who cares more than anything for "receipts" (81). How far can the apple fall from the tree? Here is how *he* speaks:

> He looked like the priest of a religion that was passing through the stage of miracles; he carried his responsibility in the general elongation of his person, of his gestures (his hands were now always in the air, as if he were being photographed in postures), of his words and sentences as well as in his smile, as noiseless as a patent hinge. (79)

In his association with "patent hinges" and his hunger for having his picture taken, Mr. Tarrant is a modern mountebank. He also seems to be the endpoint toward which Verena is tending. She is also described as having "a new style [of speaking], quite original" (41). This can hardly be taken as a compliment, uttered as it is by Matthias Pardon, whom James celebrates as a fool. Verena, too, enjoys her publicity, a penchant for vulgarity we can see even in her choice of dress, for example, "her little jacket (the buttons were immense and gilt)" (56), which she dons for her first meeting with her future patroness, the celebrity-shunning Olive. We should be able to dismiss her as we can her disingenuous father.

If Gilbert and Gubar's reading dignifies Verena as a victim, this reading cuts her down to size. And both readings demystify the mystery of Verena's attractiveness. In the former case, it is because she is deliciously submissive; in the latter, it is because

she has fooled them. Both readings make Verena fully intelligible, the *sine qua non* of sentimental characterization. Gilbert and Gubar do not use the term "sentimental" to discuss *The Bostonians*, but their technique of reading—of deciding whether the characters (or authors) are to be wholly embraced or wholly rejected and to be absolutely certain of one's decision—is one prescribed by sentimental novels.

These focalized characterizations of Verena tempt us either to pity Verena or to discount her. Pursuing either of these readings, readers find in Verena an antidote to the frustrating position *The Bostonians* puts us in. Where is the foundation upon which we can judge her? *The Bostonians* does not always focalize its narration through its characters; there exists in this novel a narrator who seems to be of the classic omniscient variety.[21] If we could finally know whether this zero-focalized heterodiegetic narrator either condemns or sympathizes with Verena, we could finally solve the mystery that she poses. The novel would *share* characteristics of Verena's sentimental style of persuasion. As it is, Verena's own style of persuasion stands in marked contrast to James's, which is not particularly persuasive, in Verena's sense, at all. Verena aims to make her audience feel strongly about a cause, but as Barbara Hochman notes, "James' fiction is especially difficult to reduce to a political message" ("Historically" 275).[22] If the sentimental novel wants to reform the world through its "political message," it still does so by first immersing readers in the vivid lives of its characters. Yet Verena's life, especially her inner life, remains opaque. Her "message"—the content of the speeches that the reader never quite hears—immerses the characters who *do* hear them in Verena. Yet it is hard for the *reader* to become immersed in her: we never directly see or hear her; instead, we observe the other characters' immersion. Rather than enlist the reader in the cause of women's rights, the novel addresses the question of whence Verena's—and sentimentality's—attractiveness. Who exactly is she?

As I mentioned above, there are moments when the narrator does comment directly on Verena, without the lens provided by another, distorting consciousness, for example when the narrator comments on how large a sum twenty cents appeared to her. And here is how the narrator describes Verena toward the end of the novel:

> [A]ll her artlessly artful facilities . . . were not a part of her essence, an expression of her innermost preferences. What *was* a part of her essence was the extraordinary generosity with which she would expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her. (296)

"Artlessly artful"—the import of this phrase is echoed early in the novel when Basil wonders if another character, Mrs. Farrinder, finds Verena a "parrot or a genius" (52). Even when the narrator describes Verena directly, he still seems to forestall a clear view of her. The passage above balances itself between criticism and praise: on one hand, it highlights Verena's essential emptiness (she becomes what other people want her to be). On the other hand, there is the narrator's tender tone produced by words like "generosity" and the sense he conveys of her disregard of her own ease. Verena is neither wholly believable as an ingenuous speaker nor wholly discountable as a charlatan. In fact, Verena remains a paradox. Upon first introducing Verena, the narrator describes Verena in a flurry of similarly paradoxical terms: she "gave almost the impression of a lesson rehearsed in advanced. And yet there was a strange

spontaneity in her manner" (42); she is "naturally theatrical." Lesser does not extend her analysis of Verena to include her identity as a sentimental orator, but the mystery that Lesser refers to, Verena's attractiveness despite her obvious limitations, remains.

We are never allowed to see Verena clearly. This blurriness differs from the way that James depicts the other characters in the novel. Olive is portrayed in almost direct contrast to Verena. For example, Basil is impelled to correct Olive's sister's characterization of Olive as a "dear old thing" (74). Basil thinks to himself that "[l]east of all was she a 'thing'; she was intensely, fearfully, a person." Here and elsewhere Basil identifies Olive by her distinctive sharpness—she is "sharply young." Basil's perception is picked up by the narrator when he comments on Olive's desire to have her era "feel and speak more sharply" (98). In fact, almost every character is rendered sharply in this novel, and in almost all cases, the reader can draw conclusions about the character in question, even if it is often a complex process to do so.[23]

Elsewhere in the novel, evaluation depends on a web of judgment. These judgments are often second-hand and reveal as much about the judger as the judged. Basil's wondering if another character, Mrs. Farrinder, finds Verena a "parrot or a genius" derives not from Basil himself but from Basil's perception of what Mrs. Farrinder might be wondering. Thus, we can use this question of parrot or genius not just as a further invitation to wonder about Verena but as an insight into Basil: that he might be projecting his own question onto Mrs. Farrinder or that, alternatively, he has the bead on Mrs. Farrinder (the narrator leads us also to suspect that Mrs. Farrinder might, in fact, be wondering this) and that Basil might be on occasion a good judge of character.

These webs of judgments appear everywhere. Verena's mother, Mrs. Tarrant, observes with satisfaction how Olive "seemed to think her young friend's [Verena's] gift *was* inspirational, or at any rate, as Selah had so often said, quite unique" (78). Here we can judge not only Mrs. Tarrant's overinvestment in her daughter's oratorical power but Selah's pompous verbosity. "Quite unique"—surely James intends his readers to catch the revealingly needless "quite." Yet Olive's judgment of Verena that Mrs. Tarrant considers—that she is inspirational—is not undermined, unlike her estimation of Selah, by either the narrator or the other characters. They, too, are inspired by Verena's orations. But because we readers have gotten in the habit of imagining there should be a distance between Mrs. Tarrant's thoughts about the world and our own, we are left with a frisson of unease about this judgment. We know that Olive has thought Verena to be inspirational, so does it mean that Olive has gotten it wrong? But the narrator, too, has narrated how she has inspired people. It is difficult to know what to think about Verena.

But Verena is an exception. Though all of the other major characters (and many of the minor ones) are enveloped in judgments, with regard to most of them, readers can formulate a final evaluation with some assurance that they have gotten it right. Many times the reader's evaluation will turn out to match ones that either Olive or Basil have made without the same kind of effort (a resonance that might explain why so many critics conclude that James identifies with Olive or Basil or both). I don't mean to suggest that the reader's judgment-forming process is easy or quick in this novel—just that it is possible. For the reader to make these final judgments, she must involve herself in a complex reading process: toggling between the narrator's descriptions (often embedded in passages focalized by one of the characters) and the

judgments one character will make of another, which are often conveyed indirectly or hypothetically as in the Basil-Mrs. Farrinder example. The reader's final judgments are rarely as easily arrived at as the judgment we make of those two wholly unreliable characters in the novel, Verena's parents. But when it comes to Verena, the narrator and reader's powers of judgment are stymied. Verena remains blurry.[24]

The reader's inability to form a final judgment of Verena departs from the characters' own often lightning-quick evaluations of her, which result in definite judgments on their part. Olive doesn't doubt her judgment of Verena, nor does Basil. But the narrator does not tell us which of these conflicting judgments is correct or if either of them is (the same goes for the judgments formed of Verena by the more minor characters). The novel leads us to the idea that Olive and Basil and all the other characters who judge Verena with such certainty are involved less in discrimination than projection, as when Basil's assessment of Verena's oration reveals his misogyny.

Here is a common syntax in *The Bostonians*:

> This narrative [of Verena's childhood, told by Verena], tremendously fascinating to Miss Chancellor, made her feel in all sorts of ways—prompted her to ask herself whether the girl was also destitute of the perception of right and wrong. No, she was only supremely innocent; she didn't understand, she didn't interpret nor see the *portée* of what she described. (86)

The reader infers that this is Olive's judgment of Verena (the "portée," for one, alerts us that this is from the cultured Olive's perspective) more than the truth of the matter. It is Olive's answer to the question she herself posed (can Verena distinguish between right and wrong?), but the question lingers for the reader since the answer has not the status of truth but of a judgment focalized through a character whose ulterior motives regarding Verena are known. The reader is led to suspect Olive is projecting Verena's innocence rather than discovering it. Let's call this syntax the focalized subjunctive, a syntax that can sound, if one is not attentive to the focalization, as if it's simply relating facts rather than psychological projection. It is a kind of wish fulfillment on the part of the focalizing character. This syntax appears throughout the novel, especially when characters think about Verena.

It is easy to miss the tenuousness of Olive's judgment of Verena or that of the many other instances of focalized subjunctive judgments. As I detailed above, most critics do not hesitate to form their own conclusions about Verena. But how, the novel invites us to ask, can we be sure that it is not projection on our part, for do we not have ulterior motives concerning Verena as well? Perhaps our critical project is not as polemical as Gilbert and Gubar's, but don't we all want to use Verena to advance our own reading of the novel?

As I described earlier in the essay, polemical does not describe the tone of the recent work on sentimentality that acknowledges its ideological complexity. Melissa Homestead explicitly calls attention to the critical aporia that prevents modern commentators on sentimental novels from recalling how contemporaneous readers like John DeForest thought of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an aesthetic triumph (Homestead 451). Homestead and what we might call the other critics of complexity allow us to develop a renewed appreciation for sentimentality but one that differs from the purely celebratory tone of early rescuers like Tompkins and Dobson. In this regard,

more recent work has something in common with James's simultaneously skeptical and generous view of sentimentality. Also like James, these critics retain their critical distance from it: they remain able to analyze it and not from on high.

Yet I think *The Bostonians* can add something even to these capacious readings. Although Homestead asks us to acknowledge that contemporaneous readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were able to feel its power, she does not discuss what enabled them to do so—and what makes it difficult for us later critics to register it, at least in our criticism. Discussing James's "The Figure in the Carpet" as a response to Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Miss Grief," Dorri Beam suggests that each text in its way "mock[s] certain textual approaches" (143).[25] I would suggest that one of the textual approaches "The Figure in the Carpet" mocks and *The Bostonians* holds up for scrutiny is the analytical one that James himself developed and displayed, the approach that Bentley enjoins us to recognize as our own critical inheritance from James and other realists. This approach, which forms the bedrock of how we modern professional critics operate, encourages us to find a final meaning to attach to Verena rather than see in her unresisting malleability an invitation to become aware of our own analytical reading protocols and their distinctive effects on sentimental objects. Other reading practices, like the uncritical ones that many antebellum readers possessed and that Dobson and Tompkins catch hold of at moments in their own criticism, have their own distinctive effects. *The Bostonians* asks us to notice what we do as critics and how we do it, to become aware of this process as both an engine and a boundary condition for our criticism on sentimentality.

Let us return to Bayley's remarks about James being the least sentimental of authors. For me, it is precisely the sustaining of Verena's mystery that makes James the *least* sentimental of authors. Sentimental novels want, above all, their orator-characters to be intelligible; they want you to be able to *decide* whether the orator is being disingenuous or not, and their off-putting effects (on many readers) spring from that compulsion. James recognizes the sentimental compulsion but, instead of simply disavowing it, he allows it to linger as a possibility, but one that his own work never realizes. Reading James it is impossible to *decide* about Verena. (This is not the same as saying that Verena is a charlatan: we *can* decide about charlatans once we recognize them as such.) To choose fully between sentimental power and sentimental disingenuousness is to participate in sentimentality's own perhaps disingenuous insistence on its own transparency.

Why does James treat sentimentality with this generosity? Why would James hesitate to deride a narrative technique that differs so much from his own? James's narrative technique does not induce in its readers the kind of transformative tears that works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Lamplighter*—or speakers like Verena—seek to induce. The narrator can describe only how Verena's audience as a whole was "exceedingly affected" (50) and record in detail the reactions she produces in some of the individual characters. The narrator takes an anthropological approach rather than an immersive one. Verena's persuasion moves beyond words, toward voice and then tears. In contrast, James never eschews words for voice—most of his characters do not persuade other characters or the reader through their sentimental speeches, nor do his own works strive to sound as if they were spoken (and when he tried in his dramatic productions to turn his words into voice, it was not a success). Further, one does not encounter clichés in *The Bostonians* unless they are attributed to others:

the words matter supremely. I am willing to bet that never has a "scribbling woman" cast aspersions on a character for the use of a redundant "quite."

James's novel differs from a sentimental novel in another way as well, in the nature of its vividness. Like sentimentality, literary realism has been associated with vividness, a fidelity to reality that eluded previous genres. "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (966), as Howells wrote in one of his editor's columns for *Harper's*, implicitly insulting sentimental literature with the statement. *The Bostonians*' vividness differs from sentimental vividness. This difference can be explained by returning to Stowe's association of her novel with a series of paintings that contain an emotional force that the reader cannot resist. Furthermore, Stowe believes that what they represent is self-evident: it is not available for interpretation. In *The Bostonians,* insights about the characters are slowly wrought by the author and hard won by the reader. Its vividness derives, in part, from creating three-dimensional characters, but this way of depicting characters, I would claim, gains traction through its distinction from sentimental methods of characterization. That is, the vividness of realism could not arise without, at the same time, a reappraisal of earlier characters as "flat."[26] James's marriage plots are not realistic until they are compared with earlier ones. Realistic "complexity" attains meaning in relation to sentimental "simplification." The reading practice required for a work like *The Bostonians* comes to be viewed not just as different from but as more sophisticated than that required by the sentimental novels. When sentimentality works, it does not seem sentimental at all—it just seems "realistic." But realism would later take the mantle of "realistic" for itself. When sentimental fiction does not work on a particular reader, it seems as if it is a disingenuous attempt to manipulate her, to shut down her brain and drain her will, just as Douglas portrays it and just as we might have expected James to as well.

Despite all these inducements to debunk Verena's sentimental persuasion, so different from his own writing technique, James refrains. Thus the mystery of sentimentality remains for the reader of this novel. This is an extraordinarily rare position. In not choosing, James has something to teach the modern critic of the sentimental novel. James manages to stand outside of sentimentality, to comment on its strange, fragile, overwhelming powers without either becoming swept up by them or experiencing contempt or a sense of mastery. He bequeaths the same experience to the reader, if she chooses to embrace it. James offers this unusual perspective on the sentimental object in his generous choice to keep Verena's true character veiled, or, even more radically, by suggesting the possibility that she has no "true" character.

Ironically, James reads against the sentimental grain in a more thoroughgoing way than that performed by the critics of contempt or even the critics of complexity. I'm intrigued by this position because it offers a person trying to understand sentimentality a way to respond to the sentimental object that is quite unique. James suggests that we cannot *tell* about these sentimental novels even if we think we can. But we *can* use these novels as a way to gain insight into our own reading practices, if we're willing to read ourselves according to the ways that James trains us to read Olive's and Basil's readings of Verena. Verena remains largely unchanged by the fact that she is an object constantly being read and read into by the characters around her, but their reading practices (and very characters) are illuminated by their judgments of her. We can use James's depiction of Verena not to figure out her own character

but the character of her readers. We might not be able to get at the real character of sentimental objects, James suggests, but we *can* use them to read ourselves. Modern critics have chosen not to use them this way; instead many of us have chosen to heed Howells's and Twain's characterization of sentimental rhetoric as something that proves our own superiority as readers. Against this reassuring message, I am asking us to pay attention to how James declines to let us dismiss either Verena or any doubts we have about the superiority of our own reading practices.

NOTES

[1]As I discuss in more detail below, critics like Smith and Baym associate sentimentality with a certain plot structure, but more recent critics like Hendler, Weinstein, and myself have highlighted sympathetic identification as a defining characteristic.

[2]This point is often stressed by critics who see sentimental identification as politically dangerous. See, for example, Berlant and Barnes. For critics who see this rhetorical strategy as having both costs and benefits, see Fisher, Sanchez-Eppler, and Noble, as well as Smith and Baym.

[3]Levine illuminates the racially diverse character of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s audience. But it was not just *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that reached a diverse set of readers. Habegger documents James's own self-described "absorbed perusal" of *The Lamplighter* in his youth (13).

[4]For an account of how Howells and James influenced each other throughout their long friendship, see Anesko.

[5]By picking an adolescent poetess to represent the sentimental author, Twain suggests that the main producers and consumers of sentimentality are genteel girls. Although Huck Finn himself is awed by Emmeline's productions, when left to his own devices he prefers adventure stories. As Hochman notes, "Advocates of 'realism,' launching a concerted attack on sentiment and romance, took the young girl not only as the prototypical novel-reader, but also as 'the iron Madonna' whose taste was destroying American literature" (*Uncle* 142). Until the 1990s, most critics assumed that only women produced sentimental works. For works that debunk this idea, see Chapman and Hendler's *Sentimental Men*, which builds on the claims made by a special issue of *American Literature* called *No More Separate Spheres!* (Davidson), one of the first works to question the association of women, domesticity, and sentimentality.

[6]An early work of this kind is Tompkins's *Sensational Designs*; a recent work is Hochman's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, which charts how dramatically the book changed in the postbellum period, becoming a defanged and nostalgic artifact rather than the immersive and revolutionary document it had been originally.

[7]The most obvious example of a person using Verena for profit is her father, who allows Verena to go live with Olive in return for a check. However, through this transaction, Olive is complicit in the "thingifying" of Verena as well: as Hochman puts it, Olive "literally leases Verena from her father for a year at a time" ("Historically" 275).

[8]Shaheen attributes this propensity to Basil rather than James: "[Basil] . . . refuses to credit her with the subjectivity she tries time and again to claim for herself" (186). I'm unsure whether Verena is trying to claim her own subjectivity throughout the novel, but it is not just Basil who refuses to credit her subjectivity but also James (via his narrator). Further, I do not believe that this is a reactionary move on James's part but a potentially liberatory one. This correspondence between Basil and the narrator is an example of how the narrator sometimes aligns himself with one or another character throughout the novel, both in terms of their evaluations of different characters and their narrative strategies.

[9]Dobson happily loses her critical distance from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when she discusses the scene in the novel where Eva gives away locks of her hair to her family and friends: "Eva's generosity is constructed within a cultural and historical context where all too often children *did* die, were snatched incomprehensibly from the arms of helpless families—as Harriet Beecher Stowe knew only too painfully" (273). Here Dobson recurs to the reality of what Stowe was writing about; she even takes on Stowe's anguished tone and reliance on dashes.

[10]Nailed down at least in the instances of its occurrence in a particular text. For example, Weinstein's paradigm-enlarging third chapter, "Thinking Through Sympathy: Kemble, Hentz, Stowe" (66–94), shows how the discourse of sympathy is deployed across the ideological spectrum in both anti- and pro-slavery texts. Through intricate close readings, Weinstein identifies how the three authors named in the title enjoin their readers to feel sympathetic to very different populations and by means of different formal techniques.

[11]Bayley himself attributes this lack of sentimentality to James's healthy respect for money. According to Bayley, discussing *The Golden Bowl*, James would not understand a reader's lack of sympathy for Maggie and her father on the basis of their vast wealth, "the economic scales . . . weighted so overwhelmingly in their favor" (235). For Bayley, "James, the least sentimental of writers, would not feel himself bound to defer to the tendency to side with penniless passion."

[12]The impulse to measure James's artistry according to how far he has departed from an earlier genre does not die out after Bayley. See Johnson.

[13]I am following Rhoads's technique in reading a Henry James novel according to the ur-sentimental plotline. However, Rhoads uses a different one from the one Smith uses. She uses the one developed by the feminist rescue critic, Baym. According to Baym, these novels tell "the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world" (11) but "[b]y the novel's end she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth" (19).

[14]For an insightful account of the way that women's rights activists in the latter part of the nineteenth century used the metaphor of "enslavement" to describe (white) women's plight, see Sanchez-Eppler.

[15]For an alternative account of the conventionality of sentimental poetry, see Stokes, who highlights how the conventionality of Lucretia Davidson's poetry allowed her to emulate adult authority and transform herself into a moral authority figure for her readers.

[16]Evaluation in sentimental novels works differently. For example, on the very first page of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we meet a slave trader named Haley: "He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world" (1). The reader knows exactly how to judge Haley, and all of his later actions confirm this judgment.

[17]In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, characters will sometimes render judgments of other characters, but these judgments are themselves easy to assess: if the character is sympathetic, the judgment is trustworthy; if he is unsympathetic, it is not. James's species of judgment—judgment as something that might be only partially trustworthy and as something that is as revealing of the judger as the judged—is absent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[18]For a different view, see Wardley, who argues for James's support for a qualified form of women's public voice.

[19]Gilbert and Gubar's way of reading the novel has persisted since its original publication in 1988. See Shaheen.

[20]Brown characterizes the scribbling women: "that a lyric faith in the perfectibility of man, they regarded the America of their own day as a mere vestibule to Utopia. They preferred to dwell in a cozy cloudland of sentiment, secure in a haven of dreams" (359). This characterization—the sentimentalists as incapable of deep and rebellious thinking—is one picked up by Douglas.

[21]I use this term advisedly in light of the critique Culler has made of the concept of "omniscient narrator." I justify its use in this context because so many readers still use the term and will identify the narrator of *The Bostonians* as such.

[22]Against this assessment is an interpretation of *The Bostonians* developed in Hendler's excellent "The Limits of Sympathy" that sees the "paradox of sympathetic politics . . . viciously satirized" (700) in this novel, which according to Hendler finds James "unambiguously assert[ing] the impossibility of reconciling sentimental femininity with liberal individualism" (701). Hendler sees similarities between Miss Birdseye and Verena, which propel him to see James as dismissing them both, whereas I see the novel as handling them differently in its narrative technique, a distinction that leads to my own conclusion about the undecidability of James's attitude toward the sentimental object and, by extension, a politics based on sentimental appeals.

[23]To give another example, we become acquainted with Mrs. Tarrant by being let into her own perceptions about herself and her world. "She supposed Verena would marry some one, some day, and she hoped the personage would be connected with public life—which meant, for Mrs. Tarrant, that his name would be visible, in the lamplight, on a coloured poster, in the doorway of Tremont Temple" (77). The narrator does not share in Mrs. Tarrant's estimation of either the desirability of publicity or in what she thinks represents its pinnacle (having it perhaps both ways). We both inhabit Mrs. Tarrant's thoughts and gain distance from them.

[24]There is another character, Miss Birdseye, said to be modeled on Nathaniel Hawthorne's sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, who also remains indistinct, but the way the narrative produces an impression of her indistinct character is instructive. As with Olive, Miss Birdseye's primary quality is directly alluded to in the novel: Basil sees Miss Birdseye's face "as if had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent" (22), a judgment picked up by the narrator who comments on what a "confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman" she was (23). But this impression of indistinctness is produced much more directly than in Verena's case. The narrator gives us a definite, zero-focalized idea of Miss Birdseye's character, which is also affirmed through the perceptions of the other characters.

[25]Although Beam sees Miss Grief as a figure for the woman writer more generally, I think one could argue that, like Verena, she is a sentimental figure, in her naiveté and her preference for speaking over reading as well as the (unheeded) demands she makes on the bachelor author, who narrates the story, for his benevolence.

[26]See Shi (chapter 6) for an extensive discussion of how the realists positioned themselves in contradistinction to the sentimentalists.

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