

Woman of Feeling I

If you're worried about the distinction between the literature of sentiment and sensibility, to be simplistic, there's one easy test: is it fundamentally moral and rational? If so, it's the literature of sentiment. Richardson and Fielding present characters who experience heightened states of emotion, expressed in blushing, shaking and specific use of language eg Pamela's 'My heart is full'(p.116). If these expressions of emotion were the primary element of interest, they would be novels of sensibility but in both novels the moral message is paramount - they're encouraging moral and rational behaviour in the reader. Have I repeated the words 'moral' and 'rational' enough?

Sentimental literature is designed to convey moral teaching relevant to our daily lives - relationships between children and parents, husbands and wives, courtship and marriage, the right use of money and power, the right way to treat others eg servants, the poor, or in the case of magistrates, the right way to treat people in court, ways to serve justice. The two most significant virtues in sentimental literature are chastity, the quintessential private virtue, and charity, the quintessential public virtue. The assumption was that these virtues indicated other virtues so if you were a chaste woman, you were likely to have other necessary domestic virtues; if you were charitable, it indicated that your public life, your relationships with others, were virtuous.

I would refer you back to Dr Whiteley's handout on drama, particularly pp 3 and 5; I'll read the paragraph on sentimental drama on p.3.

The sentimentalists concentrated not only on the emotional experience of the individual but that of the bystander, or, in the case of novels, the reader; writers explored the reader's vicarious emotional experience ie our ability to empathise with the characters and thus to experience distress or joy through them - a kind of catharsis. The fundamental aim of such writing was to arouse sympathy and charity; writers such as Richardson and Fielding interpreted this in a moral and practical sense but later writers often focused on producing emotional response but not in encouraging an active, practical response - so, for example, one would cry if one saw a poor peasant but not actually do anything about it; it was this sort of essentially selfish and, despite appearances, unfeeling response, that Johnson criticised as 'the fashionable whine of sensibility' and that Austen attacked in her work, notably *Sense and Sensibility*.

The literature of sentiment presents us with examples to follow, in the figures of heroes and heroines, the men and women of feeling and of ideal figures of mothers, fathers, priests etc. Look at the Preface to *Pamela*, Richardson's moral and literary manifesto. The moral claims of the Preface are very strong; Richardson's supporters were suggesting *Pamela* as moral education for young women in particular. It's not presented as a narrative which will entertain and possibly titillate the reader but as the answer to young women's moral dilemmas. This is what Fielding objected to - it's too ambiguous to live up to the moral standards it sets itself in the Preface.

The literature of sentiment isn't a self-indulgent activity concerned with creating emotional highs for the sake of it (which was the criticism levelled at the later literature of sensibility) - it actively engages with the social world by commenting on people's lives and how they should live them. People tend to look to two institutions for moral guidance: the Church and the State in the form of politicians and legislators. In the 18th century there were serious flaws in both institutions; dissatisfaction with public role models led to writers taking on the role of moral teaching and social comment - as Carole Stewart discussed in her lecture - see the detailed handout she gave you - in particular section 2, 'novelists see themselves as taking over the role of moral reform from the church'!

To put things into a vague historical perspective, the novel of sentiment was popular in the 1740s and 50s, the novel of sensibility becomes popular in the 1760s but already by the 1770s the term 'sentimentality' had come to be associated with affected and self-indulgent, possibly improper feeling. Once sentimentalism became divorced from serious moral and literary purpose, there was a tendency for writers to pander to the masses, in search of emotional highs.

Look at the difference in response to someone in need in *Joseph Andrews* and *Sentimental Journey*. When Joseph is beaten, stripped and thrown in a ditch, the postillion helps him in spite of opposition from the coach passengers and his own poverty; Fielding gives us many examples of the good characters coming across someone in need, feeling for them and ACTING ON that feeling: Joseph is a man of feeling in that he has strong feelings but they are natural and fundamentally moral, not artificial and self-indulgent. Compare this moral feeling with that presented in *Sentimental Journey* eg p.66: 'with what a moral delight will it crown my journey, in sharing in the sickening incidents of a tale of misery told to me by such a sufferer? to see her weep! and though I cannot dry up the fountain of her tears, what an exquisite sensation is there still left, in wiping them away from off the cheeks of the first and fairest of women'.

To be horrifically simplistic (as my students have asked me to be!), think of a seesaw or a pair of scales; the literature of sentiment will have the weight on the moral and rational side; the literature of sensibility will place the weight on the emotional side. Both kinds of literature may have elements of emotion or morality; the difference lies in their emphasis. To use Austen's terminology, in the literature of sentiment, moral 'sense' predominates over sensibility or emotion; in the literature of sensibility, as the term suggests, refined expressions of heightened emotion take centre stage.

Bear in mind also the fact that although writers share knowledge of the conventions of sentiment or sensibility, they use such conventions differently: they may use them straight or seriously, or rework them, challenge and subvert them, lampoon (ie take the mickey out of them) or simply present them ironically so that we're not quite sure how to take them. Richardson focused on the heightened emotions of his characters (key convention of sensibility) but although his work, particularly *Clarissa*, elicited strong emotional reactions from his readers, this was not his primary aim. Fielding's work celebrates benevolence, the concept of an open and generous heart, key sensibility concepts, but, as with Richardson, moral concerns are uppermost.

It's not always easy to see to what extent writers are taking seriously the conventions they use. *Sentimental Journey* can be read as an attempt to educate the reader in moral feeling through Yorick's own journey which, as the title indicates, is mental as well as physical. However, Putney comments usefully that *Sentimental Journey* is a satire in which Sterne 'records with amused irony the false, ludicrous or humiliating postures into which Yorick is thrust by his intrepid sensibility' (*The Age of Johnson*, pp.159-70). Yorick himself is subject to a great deal of irony - his sentiment is at best ineffectual in that he never really helps anyone; at worst, it is hypocritical because the feelings he professes never find outward expression - without the proof of active expression of moral feeling, one inevitably questions it.

Just as the conventions of tragedy are used in different ways by different writers but their plays are still labelled tragedies, so writers use the conventions of sentiment and sensibility in different ways - these conventions, from plot and character motifs to ideas, are outlined in your handouts! Remember also that ideals of sentiment are not simply literary but related to contemporary philosophical debates which literature is reflecting. Look back to the introductory lecture on the novel and the handout!

The French philosopher and writer, Rousseau (late 18th, early 19th century), is important in this context; he was influential with his belief that natural emotions were inherently good and innocent - something akin to Marianne Dashwood's attitude in *Sense and Sensibility*. Rousseau argued that society and its institutions, in particular its laws, had corrupted man from a state of natural innocence. His writing was popular but also controversial in that it contradicted biblical teaching that all men are sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness. It was a fundamentally optimistic view of human nature, one with which Fielding would have had some sympathy - the notion of human perfectibility argued optimistically that man was fundamentally good and that as our knowledge increased through science, so we would become more moral.

Of course experience shows that this simply isn't true - such optimism is clearly misplaced - the real world has Wickhams and Willoughbys and Lucy Steeles, selfish people who in their own way, can be very destructive. This is one of the sad lessons Marianne has to learn; it is not by accident that Willoughby acts like a romantic hero in Rousseau; his language is romantic, as are the literary tastes he lays claim to in order to impress Marianne; he is the living embodiment of Rousseau's thesis that society and its restrictions are bad and natural feeling is its own justification. Marianne believes this attractive proposition to begin with but experience teaches her that it is both fallacious and destructive.

Sensibility also had implications for the class system, which Richardson exploits in *Pamela*. Refined feeling was traditionally the preserve of the aristocracy. Addison and Steele in the early 18th century presented what is often referred to as a 'gendered' version of the sentimental vision: women were characterised as refined, delicate and feeling creatures. It was elevated in superficial terms by focusing on the delights of domestic virtue but it also kept women firmly subordinate to men, their very sentimental qualities which rendered them so delightful as companions in the home, rendering them weak and incapable of surviving in the public realm, which remained resolutely masculine.

Pamela is somewhat revolutionary in that Richardson shows that the lower classes are also capable of refined feeling and moral consciousness; it is in this sense a great equalizer, what Janet Todd refers to as a meritocracy of feeling (Todd, *Sensibility. An Introduction*, p.13). Pamela appropriates the genteel behaviour of women from a higher social sphere. She often uses the refined emotionally charged language of sentiment, for eg 'My heart is full'(p.116). This could be interpreted as a form of social pretension, something she 'puts on' just as she puts on different kinds of clothing in order to promote the image she chooses (pp.76-7). Fainting is also associated with romantic heroines and respectable 'ladies', not servants.

The literature of sentiment reflects contemporary debates about moral and social behaviour. The issue of chastity, for example, was debated in religious, intellectual and legal circles as well as in literature.

Writers throughout the eighteenth century were concerned with the nature of virtue, the legal double standard and the disabilities forced on women by the laws regulating sexual conduct; in an eighteenth-century context, virtue is a legal as well as a moral issue: concern for a woman's chastity is strongly related to a desire to protect patrilineal inheritance structures.

Issues such as sexual assault tend to be viewed purely as narrative strategies within a sentimental framework - plot motifs if you like. Janet Todd notes usefully in *Sensibility: An Introduction* that poverty is the test of the sentimental man but that sexual assault is the test of the sentimental woman (p.97). Yet sexual assault is also presented in a clear legal context which writers assume we recognise; it thus has a dual significance, as moral test and social critique; eighteenth-century women were 'ruined' after sexual experience not because of moral principles but because they were no longer marriageable. Both these aspects must be borne in mind when dealing with novels like *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews* and *Sense and Sensibility*.

In *Pamela*, Richardson transposes the popular convention of heroines protecting their chastity into a seemingly incongruous area: the lower class. Pamela herself recognises society's economic evaluation of virtue: 'poor peoples virtue is to go for nothing'(p.172). As Mr B's servant, Pamela is effectively his property; she later becomes his wife and the novel exploits the legal parallel between servants and wives as property. When she attempts to escape, he tells her, 'you *have* robbed me'(p.91).

For this reason, Pamela's insistence on seeing Mr B's sexual attempts in moral terms is comic to the other characters but it enables Richardson to question society's view of virtue, revealing a servant's virtue to be more profound than society's hypocritical notions. Richardson establishes a Christian family background for Pamela, perhaps to add credence to her status as pious heroine.

McKeon regards Mr B's attempt to deceive Pamela by the sham marriage as a 'touchingly inadequate' attempt to reconcile her 'elevated position' in 'the servant hierarchy' with the impossibility of marriage as he sees it. Hence 'the proposals soberly imitate the concerns of a formal contract'(p.372). Mr B may give Pamela the jewels intended for the gentlewoman he was to marry but he states quite clearly that the document would be 'as if you were my wife' - this is not in any sense a marriage contract and future presents are to be earned: he writes, '[I] will confer upon you still *other* favours, as I shall find myself obliged, by your affection and good behaviour'.

The 'articles' of his financial proposals (pp.227-31) do indeed resemble those of marriage settlements but the language is threatening: '[your] answer, will absolutely decide your fate'(p.227). His document effectively makes provision for Pamela as a mistress, or 'low-born prostitute'(p.231) as she phrases it. It seems probable that Richardson also conceived of the proposals in a moral context, rather than purely as an attempt to resolve class conflict.

Ian Watt reads *Pamela* simply in terms of class struggle, arguing that Pamela and Mr B's conflicts 'mirror larger contemporary conflicts between two classes and their way of life'(The Rise of the Novel, p.173). The novel does in one sense dramatise class conflict, with Mr B threatening Pamela constantly with the power derived from his social status. When Mr B recognises Pamela's worth, he has to face the reaction of his family. His sister writes to complain: 'ours is no upstart family...for several hundreds of years, it has never been known, that the heirs of it have disgraced themselves by unequal matches' ie marriage to a social inferior (p.293). Pamela comments on this letter, 'One may see by it how poor people are despised by the rich and the great! And yet we were all on a foot originally'(p.294). Pamela is articulating radical Christian views that all men are equal, something which many of Richardson's readers would have been uncomfortable with. As such, Pamela can be read as a strong moral heroine, a woman of feeling who is genuinely concerned with moral feeling rather than worldly values such as wealth and status.

Richardson presents Pamela sympathetically, courageously standing up to someone who, as a magistrate, should uphold justice rather than subverting it by exploiting his privileged status as aristocratic male. Mr B's status is compromised somewhat by the humour of his presentation: he's constantly trying to impress Pamela with his status and power but what self-respecting 18th century aristocrat would spend so much of his energy trying to impress the servants? Richardson further undercuts his pretensions by showing that attending St James's is a big deal for him. He is in some respects rather weak, blustering and threatening almost to reassure himself that he has power over this impertinent little servant; he's not very good at being a rake.

Richardson is not advocating equality in terms of class any more than he would advocate it in terms of gender. As someone who was outside the upper classes, he may well have had some personal interest in presenting an example of virtue in the lower classes and in presenting the upper classes as morally weak.

However, I would argue that Pamela is working class in name only - she hardly ever does any work and she expresses herself in very middle class terms. She can read and has been educated by Mr B's mother in the accomplishments associated with middle and upper class women.

Witness the vomit-inducing scene where Mr B calls Pamela, 'a pretty *rhimester*; I will not flatter you by calling you a poetess; yet I admire that beautiful simplicity which in all you do, all you write, all you speak, makes so distinguishing a part of your character. Did I not see on your toilette yesterday a few lines begun in praise of humility?'(p.514). May I draw your attention to the spelling of toilette - it is NOT spelt TOILET! I read far too many depressing exam scripts on the Augustans course extolling the beauties of Belinda's toilet in *Rape of the Lock*. I have no interest in toilets even if they are sentimental ones!

Pamela is displaying the hallmarks of the woman of feeling - simplicity and delicacy of feeling, expressed in poetry (as you do!) but not poetry of such skill that she could be confused with a poetess, exposing her thoughts to public scrutiny in an unseemly way.

Pamela behaves with feeling delicacy when she meets Mr B's illegitimate daughter, reacting as all good sentimental heroines do and weeping. She recounts: 'She [the child] sat down, and leaned her head against my bosom, and made my neck wet with her tears, holding me by the hands; and I wept for company'(p.452). Pamela cries because she is moved by the child's story and because she responds to the child's emotion and her beauty but her emotion is not presented as a fashionable affectation; it is a sign of her compassion; indeed she wants the child to come and live with them, which is a pretty radical approach to illegitimate children in 18th century terms!

Pamela may refer to herself as a servant but everyone in the novel is constantly reminding us how unusual she is - she is hardly designed as a credible representative of the lower classes to articulate their concerns; rather, she speaks as one whose nobility of character transcends the accident of her birth.

I realise it's terribly unPC in the 1990s but in the 1740s there was a clear social structure and people would have recognised readily enough that there was a lower, middle and upper class in the middle classes too. The upper middle class, as it increased in wealth and influence, came to aspire to marry into the lower gentry on occasion but in the 1740s you must remember that social mobility was neither common nor desirable in the minds of the moral majority. *Pamela* may usefully be read in this context.

J.H.Plumb sums up 18th century culture usefully: 'The age of Walpole was rough, coarse, brutal; a world for the muscular and the aggressive and the cunning. The thin veneer of elegance and classic form obscured but never hid either the crime and dissipation or the drab middle-class virtue and thrift.' It's worth bearing in mind this contemporary association of the middle classes with dull moralism and the upper classes, with frivolity and, particularly in the case of the men, with sexual immorality. In this sense, Richardson is using popular stereotypes, with Pamela embodying middle class virtue and Mr B upper class vice. Richardson may be advocating more respect for the virtues of the middle classes, of which he was a member.

If you view the novel in this way, as a clash of moral and social cultures, you may want to look at Michael McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel*. He argues that the attempted rape is intended to force Pamela to accept Mr B's quasi-marriage proposals and that, 'by assuming the levelling disguise of a servant girl' Mr B attempts to 'lower himself to her status'(p.372). This interpretation does not account for the ugliness of the language in this scene, which underlines the reality and brutality of the threat. McKeon may interpret the situation in terms of class but Mr B seems conscious of baser motives, 'trembling like an aspen-leaf'(p.241).

For Richardson, the notions of sentiment and sensibility could be used to reaffirm Christian values. He felt that the epistolary style (or novels written in the form of letters) was particularly appropriate to his concerns, both moral and literary.

In the Preface to *Clarissa* Richardson comments on the epistolary style, or 'writing to the moment': '*Much more* lively and affecting...must be the style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the events then hidden in the womb of fate); than the dry, narrative, unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be...the relater perfectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own story, not likely greatly to affect the reader.'

Richardson's novels are all written in the epistolary form - its advantages include a sense of immediacy which contributes to the reader empathising with the characters' emotions. Richardson and those influenced by him associated the epistolary style particularly with women and a subjective, emotional voice. Writing demands time and time is a commodity of the leisured (like students!) Thus the style became associated with privileged ladies. Figes notes usefully that as such, the style was not a useful model for women writers. She comments, 'Richardson, as a man who had no doubt of the ultimate superiority of his own sex, could afford subjective outpourings on the part of his female heroines. A woman writer could not'(p.17).

I imagine that women like Austen writing years after Richardson tended to avoid the epistolary form partly because it was no longer really in vogue but also because it was associated with leisured and overly emotional heroines. Austen and her contemporaries wanted to distance themselves from. Austen's heroines are ultimately defined by their rationality, not their capacity to feel; they are active, walking and travelling, not sitting for hours in cushioned boudoirs writing to a coterie of friends about their latest sentimental adventure - they inhabit a world that is much more real in some respects.

Richardson was influential in terms of style and plot structures. Some would argue that he is the father of the sentimental novel, someone writers imitated or reacted against but could not avoid being influenced by, be it positively or negatively. *Pamela* was immensely popular but it caused some concern to women readers in particular, who felt that her behaviour was not entirely in keeping with propriety. Of course the novel is ultimately comic and so such objections are largely invalidated - the sexual 'freedoms' taken by Mr B are, to some extent at least in the 18th century scheme of things, sanctioned retrospectively by marriage.

Marriage had traditionally been offered to women and particularly their families as recompense for injured honour; Richardson may find this acceptable but many of his contemporaries, both male and female, objected strongly to the idea of a nobleman marrying so far beneath his rank. In addition, women were also questioning the acceptability of marriage as a reward for varying degrees of sexual assault.

Pamela is ultimately comic; we have the vague feeling that all will be well. Yet all was not well for servant girls who were seduced or raped by their employers. They would lose their jobs and often not be able to find alternative employment, particularly if they were pregnant (it was believed that pregnancy implied consent and so compounded guilt). Many of them were forced to turn to prostitution and ended up literally in the gutter. Richardson and his readers could not have failed to be aware of the fate of such women (indeed Richardson was involved in setting up an institution which looked after such women. It was a well meaning enterprise but the women were effectively incarcerated and had to work hard for their keep). Richardson glosses over such things because they are not relevant to the narrative enterprise, which focuses on virtue rewarded.

Later women novelists took precisely this plot construct and presented it in a much uglier and more disturbing form. Mary Wollstonecraft appropriated sentimental plot constructs of women facing sexual trials but used them to reveal the inequities of her society, particularly in relation to women and the poor.

This radical reworking of the sentimental tradition needs to be borne in mind when we approach the work of women writers such as Frances Burney and Jane Austen, both of whom were writing at the time Wollstonecraft's work was being published. I must stress that both Burney and Austen would have disapproved of much of what Wollstonecraft argued for because their views were fundamentally moral. I don't know if Austen read Wollstonecraft and I'm certainly NOT arguing that there was any direct influence. However, Wollstonecraft's life, unconventional as it was in openly having an affair with Gilbert Imlay, was much talked about at the time, as was her work. It is difficult to imagine that someone as well read and aware of current issues as Austen was would not have been aware of what Wollstonecraft stood for as a figure in the gossip columns but also as a writer and feminist polemicist.

What is important is that Wollstonecraft and others helped to pave the way for women such as Burney and Austen, apparently much less radical in their views and certainly in their conduct, to rework the sentimental tradition in a way that would reflect women's interests and experience, be it in harmony with or in contradistinction to the dominant patriarchal ideology. Whatever their apparent sympathies towards women, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne, were part of this patriarchal tradition; Richardson and particularly Fielding did much to challenge the inequities of their society but they largely supported the patriarchal hierarchy in terms of class and gender. Women writers inherited sentimental plot and character traditions from such writers but often reworked them in order to subvert the patriarchal values they embodied.

20th century readers sometimes become frustrated with women writers such as Burney and Austen, wishing that they had been more unconventional in their lives and in their writing - something akin to Mary Wollstonecraft perhaps. Burney and Austen were accepted largely because of their impeccable personal lives - not a whiff of scandal could be found to debase their writing. Wollstonecraft's writing, though nowhere near as unconventional or immoral as was often claimed, was vilified because her personal behaviour was unwise - she refused to follow conventional morality and the reputation of her work suffered for it. Austen and Burney would have been well aware when writing that both they and their work had to be beyond moral reproach. 18th century double standards extended into the literary world, with little concern for the moral behaviour of male writers but considerable scrutiny of women writers, ostensibly to determine whether or not their work was safe for young women to read. Parents were deeply concerned at the influence of novels on young minds. The moral tenor of Austen's work genuinely reflects her beliefs but it is also designed to prove to parents that novels can be a beneficial form of literature.

When one comes to look at Austen's work in depth it is clear that she engages with social reality as effectively as Wollstonecraft, but she approaches it in a different way, a manner which will be acceptable to her readers and their parents. We need to be aware that acknowledged radical writers such as Wollstonecraft are part of the literary tradition within which Austen is working, providing a network of ideas and associations on which she and her readers may draw, for eg: Austen and Wollstonecraft both deal with seduction and potential ruin, their society's obsession with money and its nefarious consequences, the inability of respectable women to earn a living, the problems inherent in the laws concerning marriage and inheritance. Both writers deal with issues which were of fundamental concern to their readers and as such, both consciously enter into contemporary debate on such issues, using the sentimental tradition to examine contemporary society and its problems and to suggest ways forward.

The essential difference lies not in concern for such issues but in the presentation of them - both Wollstonecraft and Austen present women of feeling and explore the nature of those feelings as they affect the woman's relations with the outside world. Wollstonecraft's Maria, the central character in the well known novel *Wrongs of Woman*, follows her heart and commits adultery; Austen's heroines control their emotions, although she does present minor characters who value their emotions above social convention - think of Eliza, Colonel Brandon's first love and her daughter, also Eliza, who falls in love with Willoughby, becomes pregnant and is abandoned by him. This is the ugly reality behind the notion that love could be more important than social convention, as argued by Rousseau and others.

If it weren't for the kindness of Brandon, who ensures that Eliza is looked after, she would be forced to consider back street abortion or having a child and paying someone else to look after it, being kept by another man, possibly ending up in prostitution and thus probable disease and death. Brandon could refuse to have anything to do with her - she is illegitimate and has had an illegitimate child herself - she's not the sort of woman a respectable man would have anything to do with. Yet he values his affection for her mother and the duty he feels to protect the daughter above social convention; his concern is with genuine moral action, as opposed to superficial moral concern of the kind that leads people to reject someone who might damage their reputation. Brandon is sometimes regarded by 20th century students of literature as being prissy and as vital as a bit of damp cardboard. Yet he and by definition Austen, is actually being pretty radical in his reaction to the young girl as a victim of her feelings in need of help, not rejection. It's one of many examples of apparently sentimental issues being used to make radical social comment.

Contemporary readers would probably have taken issue with Austen's morality if she had focused in greater detail on this story and it would have been unthinkable for Elinor to help the girl - Brandon is a man of the world - but Elinor would be tainted by association if she were to meet and help the girl. Austen had to be careful in the way she dealt with such a controversial issue. It is shocking enough that Brandon tells Elinor the truth about Willoughby - quite a daring breach of decorum to speak of such things but Brandon weighs up the matter carefully and, it would seem with Austen's approval, he tells Eleanor the awful truth about Willoughby so that one day Marianne will realise that she has been lucky to escape a man who is such an egocentric moral coward that he is in some respects very dangerous. Willoughby presents himself as a sentimental hero, a man of feeling but he is an example of the man of feeling gone wrong - he embodies the selfishness of feeling so long as it is conducive to his interests, something akin to the morally irresponsible literature of sensibility. Brandon is an older, wiser version of the man of feeling, a man who combines feeling with rational and courageous moral action.

Austen's subtle but nonetheless incisive approach was perhaps wiser in some respects than the impressive but ultimately tragic figure of Wollstonecraft, whose contribution to literature and debate concerning human rights was not recognised until well after her death. We are fortunate in that our literary heritage incorporates the work of both writers and so we can learn about 2 different but not unrelated approaches to the literature of sentiment and sensibility and the culture it explored.

Figes argues: 'Writers of the generation of Burney, Edgeworth and Austen were not feminist revolutionaries. Trying to accept the world as it was, and teach their readers to adapt to the standards of a male world in order to survive, they had little use for the tragic outlook. Only by adopting a detached comic voice could they hope to give conviction and consistency to their portrayal of a world where they and their heroines were required to obey and submit without question'(p.16). Not only does this fail to account for the radical women novelists of this generation - women like Mary Hays and Wollstonecraft; it is a fundamental misreading of the work and intentions of the writers Figes here dismisses. They do of course take on the detached comic voice Figes identifies but this does not negate the serious points they make; the comic voice is generally more sympathetic to the reader, encouraging him or her to agree with a fundamentally reasonable narrator; a more

stridently radical style tends to put readers on their guard; apparent sentimental comedies of manners are reassuring in appearance; their humour sugars the pill of the sometimes unpalatable truths they present.

It is also worth noting that writers rarely use only one narrative voice - Austen's mode of discourse cannot simply be described as detached and comic. There is no comedy in Austen's treatment of Lydia's elopement and potential ruin in *Pride and Prejudice*, nor in her presentation of Willoughby's seduction and abandonment of Eliza in *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen appropriates different narrative voices according to what may be expedient; the DOMINANT mode may be that of comic detachment but it is not the ONLY one.

This is important when dealing with comic sentimental novels, many of which are characterised by this dominant comic detachment - think of *Joseph Andrews*. Such novels by their very nature can deal with issues which would be too ugly for readers to face if they were dealt with in a different manner - tragic novels such as *Clarissa* invest their characters' sufferings with tragic grandeur and dignity but they require a degree of emotional investment on the part of the reader that comic novels appear not to demand. Students usually prefer reading comic novels because they find them easier but they prefer to write essays on tragic novels, feeling that they are somehow more 'meaty', that if the mode is serious, then the subject matter must be too. Yet we must be wary of dismissing comic novels; to return to Figs's comment, serious consideration of the work of Edgeworth, Burney and certainly Austen will reveal that far from seeking to internalise the values of the dominant patriarchal hierarchy, they use the sentimental mode to explore and challenge these values.

Austen's heroines rely on their own judgement - they make mistakes and learn from them but they are morally and intellectually independent - Austen is encouraging young women to think for themselves - a pretty dangerous thing to do in an 18th century context. She created not so much women of feeling but women of rational feeling - we'll look at that next week.