

Sentimental Realism:  
Poverty and the Ethics of Empathy, 1832-1867

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English Language and Literature)  
in The University of Michigan  
2008

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To my mother,  
who taught me  
the power of reading.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would not exist if it weren't for the teachers who taught me to love the nineteenth century: Andrea Henderson, Virginia Jackson, John Kucich, Adela Pinch, Yopie Prins, Barry Qualls, Martha Vicinus, and Carolyn Williams. My father is not a scholar of the nineteenth century, but I am proud to follow his path into academia. He would remake himself into a Victorianist if he thought it would help his daughter.

My heartfelt thanks to the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the University of Michigan English Department, and the Rackham Graduate School for their generous support of this project. I am especially grateful for the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation's support of research that explores the role of ethics in human life.

The members of my dissertation committee have provided a different sort of support, but it is no less essential. Martha Vicinus has been my advisor since I arrived at Michigan, and her criticism has always made my work stronger. I feel very lucky to be one of her final students. Adela Pinch has been an encouraging voice in my professional and personal life for seven years, and she is a most extraordinary reader and respondent. Yopie Prins alerted me to my own formalist understanding of empathy during my preliminary exams, and this observation has structured my project ever since. Finally, this dissertation would not exist without Kendall Walton, whose talk on "Empathy and the Arts" I saw soon after arriving at Michigan. I am honored that he is a member of my committee.

Many many thanks to my friends who have sustained me during my years in graduate school. Jacqueline George is not only a generous reader but an astute scholar of reading; I hope our conversations about words and books continue for many years to come. Emily Harrington's thoughtfulness and care has improved my work and my life as well. The other members of my dissertation group read my writing with precision and good humor; thank you to Jess Roberts, Meredith Martin, and Julia Carlson for their intelligence and insight. Caroline Giordano stepped in late in the process and offered me valuable advice. Many people have helped me in other ways; thank you to my brothers, Ben, Jonathan, and William, and to Shannon Penano, Lisa Bailey, James Cunningham, John Fulton, Stephen Ball, Debashis Ghosh, Eric and Leah Lammers, Theresa Sarnecki, and Alice Clark. My thanks and love to Eve Sorum, who is not only a kindred spirit, but my ideal of a scholar, teacher, and colleague.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to John Sarnecki, who reads everything I write with a critic's eye and a husband's love. In our years together he has given me more than I could ever thank him for, but I thank him nonetheless for his constant companionship, his deep and challenging intelligence, his humor, his love, and most of all, for our daughter Evangeline.

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## Abstract

“Sentimental Realism: Poverty and the Ethics of Empathy, 1832-1867” reassesses Victorian social problem literature in light of emerging research on the social and ethical function of reading. In the years between the first two Reform bills, influential authors and artists including Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Caroline Norton, Thomas Hood, and Richard Redgrave documented and imagined poverty for a largely middle- and upper-class audience. Integrating characteristic elements of sentimentalism and realism, the texts they produced were predicated on the assumption that narratives can change the attitudes and beliefs of individual readers and the social and political policies of a nation. Modern criticism has typically dismissed these objectives as naïvely optimistic, but new research in psychology and cognitive science confirms that narrative texts have a significant impact on readers’ “real-world” beliefs and behaviors. Bringing this interdisciplinary research to bear on my own readings of canonical and non-canonical literature and visual arts, I argue that sentimental realism used strategies of narrative empathy to reshape Victorian class relationships. My organizing principle highlights the relationship between narrative empathy and form: Chapter 1 examines philosophical and psychological research on empathy and argues that empathy itself is a formal relationship based on metaphor—“I am you.” Chapter 2 explores the relationship between empathy and point of view and proposes that the use of narrative perspective instructs readers in the psychological mobility of cross-class empathy. Chapter 3 investigates narratives’ generic focus on character and argues that this “personification” of poverty gave

emotional and ethical force to an otherwise abstract or quantified social issue. Chapter 4 argues that proliferating “metaphors of realism” creates a synecdochal interpretation of character that extends beyond the boundaries of a fictional world. Chapter 5 considers apostrophe as a rhetorical strategy designed to mobilize social disparities between audience and subject, redefining English national identity in terms of ethical obligation and empathetic imagination. Integrating this formalist analysis with a scientific account of the long-term effects of reading, “Sentimental Realism” constructs an ethical theory of narrative empathy that contributes to our broader understanding of how readers understand and interact with narrative texts.