

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Modern Sentimentalism: Feeling, Femininity, and Female Authorship in Interwar America

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xz0m5fh>

Author

Mendelman, Lisa Anne

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Modern Sentimentalism:

Feeling, Femininity, and Female Authorship in Interwar America

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Lisa Anne Mendelman

2015

© Copyright by

Lisa Anne Mendelman

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Modern Sentimentalism:
Feeling, Femininity, and Female Authorship in Interwar America

by

Lisa Anne Mendelman

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Michael A. North, Chair

“Modern Sentimentalism” chronicles the myriad ways in which sentimentalism evolves as modernism emerges. I demonstrate that sentimental aesthetics are more complex than we have thought and that these aesthetics participate in modern literary innovation. I likewise demonstrate that modernity, and the American interwar period in particular, enjoys a more complex relation to the sentimental than we have understood, and that twentieth-century constructs of gender and emotion equally revise and restyle sentimental precedent. Finally, I demonstrate that, when it comes to analyzing historical cultures of feeling, contemporary theories of affect have much to gain from archival methods. Synthesizing these claims, I identify a new form of feeling in modern aesthetic experience. Neither an idealized lapse into the past nor a naïve vision of the future, what I call “modern sentimentalism” most often registers the ironic consciousness of an enduring sentimental impulse.

“Modern Sentimentalism” thus overturns conventional notions of sentimentalism as a nineteenth-century style antithetical to modern artistic innovation and to representations of modern sensibility. Participating in recent efforts to contextualize modernism and adding new historical and formalist dimensions to theories of twentieth-century sentimentality and affect, I reconstruct sentiment’s authoritative influence in the interwar period’s shifting constructions of gender, race, and sexuality; emergent concepts of emotional experience like “ambivalence” and “empathy”; and evolving literary interests like irony and stream-of-consciousness narration.

“Modern Sentimentalism” thus enriches our understanding of the originality and experimentation that characterize modernist-era literary production. At the same time, this project elucidates an archive of fiction by female authors, including lesser-known novels by canonical figures like Edith Wharton and Willa Cather and texts by under-studied authors like Anita Loos, Frances Newman, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. These authors idiosyncratically revise and update the aesthetic paradigm that forms a modern woman writer’s most obvious inheritance, but their novels collectively establish that interwar concepts of gender, emotion, and literature do not simply break with a sentimental past. Rather, these authors and their inventive modern novels signal how sentimentalism transforms with the times.

The dissertation of Lisa Anne Mendelman is approved.

Ellen DuBois

Kathleen McHugh

Richard Yarborough

Michael A. North, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
Sex Without Consequence: American Fiction and Femininity Between the Wars	1–20
CHAPTER 1	
“An un-sentimental sort of success”: Willa Cather’s Modern Sentimentalism	21–73
CHAPTER 2	
Sentimental Satire and Anita Loos’s <i>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</i>	74–98
CHAPTER 3	
Feeling Hard-Boiled: Frances Newman’s <i>The Hard-Boiled Virgin</i>	99–124
CHAPTER 4	
An Ambivalent Tradition: Race and Modern Sentimentalism	125–74
CONCLUSION	
After Happily Ever After: Marriage, Maternity, and the Future of the Modern Woman	175–197
APPENDIX	
Modern Sentimentalism in Digital Terms	198–202
Works Cited	203–29

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As William Saroyan once observed, whether or not one's writing is sentimental, it is a very sentimental thing to be a human being. My debts of gratitude are many. UCLA, and the Department of English in particular, has been a phenomenal place to grow as a scholar. I am grateful to UCLA's Institute of American Cultures and the Roter Research Fellowship for supporting my research in its early stages; the English Department, the Friends of English, and Graduate Division have generously seen it through. Richard Yarborough, Kathleen McHugh, and Ellen DuBois have provided invaluable feedback and mentorship at every turn. With equal measures of brilliance and patience, Michael North has transformed and improved this project and my thinking from the inside out. I am likewise indebted to Gordon Hutner and my anonymous readers at *American Literary History* for their expansion and enhancement of my work.

I am lucky to abound in generous readers and incisive interlocutors. Mitchell Thornton has been the most generous and incisive of them all. My family of several generations continues to offer living proof that the life of the mind and the life of the heart can be one and the same. I cannot imagine better, more inspiring models for being in the world. My brother Jeff and my parents Betsy and Paul are my best daily reminders that sentimental feeling not only endures but also matures in wonderful, unexpected ways. This project is dedicated to the three of them.

VITA

- 2004 B.A., English
 Stanford University
 Stanford, CA
- 2007 M.A., English
 Stanford University
 Stanford, CA
- 2012 C.Phil, English
 University of California, Los Angeles
 Los Angeles, CA

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- Mendelman, Lisa. "Feeling Hard-Boiled: Modern Sentimentalism and Frances Newman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*." *American Literary History* 26.4 (Winter 2014): 693–715.
- . "Sentimental Satire in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*." *The Sentimental Mode: Essays in Literature, Film and Television*. Ed. Jennifer A. Williamson, Jennifer Larson, and Ashley Reed. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 36–55.

Sex Without Consequence: American Fiction and Femininity Between the Wars

The birth of the modern woman has long been imagined as the death of sentimental feeling. The protagonist of Edna Ferber's 1917 novel *Fanny Herself* suggests as much. "I'm through being sentimental," marketing genius Fanny Brandeis asserts (65). "When a woman of my sort marries it's a miracle. I'm twenty-six, and intelligent and very successful. A frightful combination. Unmarried women of my type aren't content just to feel. They must analyze their feelings. And analysis is death to romance" (140). Declaring the end of "just feeling" in the wake of first-wave feminism and Freudian psychology, Fanny nonetheless judges her life by nineteenth-century paradigms of femininity and emotion: marriage is "a miracle," while her professional success and intellectual capacity present a challenge to a potential suitor and, it seems, to her as well. Fanny's analytical schema repeatedly returns to sentimental patterns, if only to measure her distance from them.

Fanny is indeed a "type": a Google Ngram search, like a reading of many interwar novels, proves that discourse about the sentimental—the literary mode and its cultural analogs—flourishes at the precise moment its cultural relevance supposedly ceases.¹ Despite this Foucauldian paradox, the perception of sentiment's waning authority in women's lives and in literary production has been remarkably durable in scholarship on modern femininity and interwar authorship. Even in recent critical work that recovers sentimental aspects of modernist writing, sentimentalism appears as the echo of a past that refuses to go away. "Modern Sentimentalism" overturns these notions. What Fanny perceives, and what critics have failed to note, is not a slow death but a vital rebirth.

¹ See Appendix.

“Modern Sentimentalism” chronicles the myriad ways in which sentimentalism evolves as modernism emerges. I demonstrate that sentimental aesthetics are more complex than we have thought and that these aesthetics participate in modern literary innovation. I likewise demonstrate that modernity, and the American interwar period in particular, enjoys a more complex relation to the sentimental than we have understood, and that twentieth-century constructs of gender and emotion equally revise and restyle sentimental precedent. Finally, I demonstrate that, when it comes to analyzing historical cultures of feeling, contemporary theories of affect have much to gain from archival methods. Synthesizing these claims, I identify a new form of feeling in modern aesthetic experience. At once experimental and revisionary, modern sentimentalism assimilates changing concepts of gender, emotion, and artistic merit to reinvent the sentimental mode.

A Definition of Modern Sentimentalism

Signifying genuine emotion and clichéd excess, thoughtful opinion and embodied reaction, sincerity and banality, sentiment has inspired an expansive and frequently contradictory reputation. Sentiment’s affiliated categories—which include a literary tradition, a rhetorical strategy, an individual sensibility, and a cultural ideology—make its analysis that much more difficult. I nonetheless endeavor to distinguish “sentiment” and its variants for the purposes of argument. As I use it, “sentimentalism” refers to the literary mode whose conventions emphasize feeling—corporeal sensation and emotional intuition—as a source of knowledge, meaning, and potential interpersonal connection. Modern sentimentalism retains this traditional emphasis on feeling, but integrates

developing ideas of emotion, cognition, and affective relation in its portrayal of psychic experience.

I use the adjective “sentimental” to describe a quality of a cultural construct like femininity, a character’s feeling state, or a literary tone. In each of these contexts, feeling trumps reason and saturates the described entity. “Sentimentality” refers to this feeling state as a sensibility and thus applies to people and characters; the textual equivalent of this sensibility is sentimentalism. The capacious category of “the sentimental” encompasses the preceding literary and non-literary meanings, including the literary mode in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century incarnations as well as popular discourse and concepts of sensibility.

I regard sentimentalism as a literary mode, not an exclusive aesthetic orientation or a genre that partitions the literary field. I nonetheless refer to “sentimental aesthetics.” In this context, “aesthetic” incorporates literary conventions (e.g., tropes, motifs, metaphors, stock characters), narrative arcs, formal techniques, and other stylistic choices, as well as harder to pinpoint affective qualities like tone. As the sentimental mode appears to some degree in many works, I designate a text a “modern sentimental novel” or a character a “modern sentimental protagonist” based on how accurately this mode characterizes the entire text or depicted character, rather than appears infrequently in a given work.

Although modern sentimentalism appears in texts by male and female authors alike, I focus on female-authored modern sentimental novels. This text selection comes in part from how thoroughly the sentimental is associated with femininity and female authorship and thus how readily a modern woman writer is read through this paradigm.

For the modern woman writer, the sentimental tradition operates as an inevitable literary inheritance and an influential cultural ideology that continues in reconfigured form.

Sentimental sensibility is likewise associated with domesticity, intimate attachment, religious morality, and related values like sympathy, chastity, and self-sacrifice. Nineteenth-century sentimental plots commonly reward the latter values (often with marriage as the happy ending) and punish their opposite with death. Nineteenth-century sentimentalism also typically reinforces these values through tropes of embodiment, ranging from the excessive (fainting, weeping, fleeing) to the more subtle (a touch, a gaze, a beating heart). While critics have argued that such a codified literary mode is inherently self-conscious, modern sentimentalism involves a particular critical distance from this legacy: modern works critique these historical conventions and associations *within* the narrative.² As I will show, this embedded critique facilitates modern sentimentalism's refashioning of the literary mode.

Written by such disparate figures as Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Anita Loos, Frances Newman, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, modern sentimental novels employ growing literary interests—unconventional narrative structures, complex prose styles, stream-of-consciousness narration—to simulate and often ironize the paradoxes, double standards, and double binds of modern femininity. The novels' female characters—many of them aspiring artists—explicitly criticize sentimental precedent, especially its unrealistic constructions of emotion and its narrow expectations of domestic femininity. These same characters frequently maintain classic sentimental hopes and ambitions (e.g.,

² Dobson and Merish discuss self-conscious deployment of sentimental convention in nineteenth-century literature; Howard and Maddock Dillon touch on this idea as well. Burstein and Dobson are among those who argue that critics have oversimplified sentimentalism's aesthetic practices.

uncomplicated love, felt simplicity, enduring satisfaction), but the women invariably come to recognize these ideals as fictions. By turns skeptical, hopeful, melancholic, and above all ambivalent, these novels' complex form of feeling demonstrates how sentimentalism transforms with the times.

A number of historical forces influence this transformation, but perhaps the two most important are the changes in American femininity and the spread of New Psychology in the first three decades of the twentieth century. From the New Woman, the college girl, and the flapper, to suffrage, free love, and pink-collar labor, the icons and issues of first-wave feminism appear in and help to shape modern sentimental plots and characters.³ Many modern sentimental novels feature female protagonists who are working professionals (e.g., Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Home-Maker* [1924], Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* [1933], James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce* [1941]). A number are *kunstlerromane* (e.g., Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* [1915], Frances Newman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* [1926], Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* [1928]). Modern sentimental novels thus introduce creative and career ambition to the classic sentimental conflicts of love, marriage, and family. Some works treat these subjects earnestly (Cather's *Lark*, Hurst's *Imitation*), others with irony (Ferber's *Fanny*, Edith Wharton's *The Gods Arrive* [1932]), and still others satirically (Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* [1925], Wharton's *Twilight Sleep* [1927]). Though varied in

³ Literary criticism on first-wave feminism tends to focus on the turn of the century, when the New Woman emerged as an iconic embodiment of the Progressive Era's widespread idealism, the feminist movement's specific goals, and the anxieties provoked by these cultural shifts. I focus on a twenty-year period after the Progressive Era dissipates around World War I, such that these novels assume the existence and cultural ubiquity of New Womanhood—and, in certain ways, already consider its most optimistic iterations and earlier responses to it to be naïve and dated. See Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*; Ledger; *New Woman Hybridities*; Patterson; and Rich.

tone, modern sentimental novels commonly register the paradoxical imperatives of a femininity that alternately demands sincere feeling and ironic intelligence, chastity and sexual exploration, marriage and independence, and, especially for non-white women, autonomy and racial responsibility.

Modern sentimentalism also assimilates developing concepts of emotional experience. Replacing effusive sympathy and hyperbolic emotion with self-aware analysis and ironic detachment, modern sentimental novels rewrite common sentimental tropes of subjectivity. Modern sentimental characters are typically ambivalent, self-conscious, and skeptical not just about love and work, but about feeling itself. Modern sentimental novels frequently amplify their characters' mixed feelings with experimental approaches to cognition and sensory perception, including stream-of-consciousness narration (Ferber's *Fanny*, Evelyn Scott's *Eva Gay* [1933]), vernacular language (Loos's *Blondes*, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* [1928]), and free indirect discourse (Floyd Dell's *Janet March* [1923], Wharton's *The Gods Arrive*). Such renderings of emotional life challenge popular perceptions of modern sensibility, and modern femininity in particular, as coolly pragmatic and unsentimental.

Modern Sentimentalism's Critical History

A contemporaneous archive substantiates modern sentimentalism's keen engagement with its cultural milieu and destabilizes critical notions of modernism as the most sophisticated and self-aware interwar aesthetic. The authors' letters, essays, and literary criticism elucidate their intentional reworking of sentimental aesthetics and their anticipation of being (mis)read in terms of conventional sentimentalism. Some original

reviews bear out these expectations; others appreciate the authors' nuanced dialogue with their literary predecessors and cultural contemporaries. Authorial materials also evince these writers' common critique of the modernist avant-garde as selectively receptive to aesthetic tradition. As these writers note, interwar debates about modern consciousness and its artistic representation are not new. Friedrich Schiller delineates similar conundrums in 1795 and identifies "the sentimental mood" as the consummate register of modernity's fragmented, alienated sensibility (16). Together with New Psychology treatises, legal briefs, and other period texts, this archive affirms the complex aesthetics of a category of American literature that is rarely thought to have aesthetic ambitions in the first place.

Reflecting New Critical standards, scholarship on the interwar period has assiduously documented—if perhaps over-emphasized and retrospectively codified—the modernist era's particular antipathy to sentimentalism. As Suzanne Clark summarizes, "The term *sentimental* marks a shorthand for everything modernism would exclude, the other of its literary/nonliterary dualism" (9, emphasis in original). This critical binary exacerbates the "double process of affirmation through negation" that Michael Bell observes in early-twentieth-century definitions of the sentimental, which identify the concept by all that it supposedly lacks (e.g., authenticity, originality, complexity) (3). Establishing an organizational logic that continues to dominate conversations about feeling in interwar literature, Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* (1991) seeks to "restore the sentimental within modernism" rather than to reevaluate sentimental aesthetics as such

(4).⁴ My partial inversion of Clark's title underscores my reversal of this persistent configuration. I emphasize sentimentalism in its own right and contend that the mode is not inherently dated, regressive, or otherwise antithetical to modern artistic innovation.

My focus on the aesthetic transformations of the sentimental mode departs from a long tradition of reading sentimental fiction for its cultural dynamics and alternately decrying or disregarding its artistic qualities. This approach arguably dates back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's notorious epithet about the "damned mob of scribbling women" amongst his contemporaries and resonates through the 1970s and 80s debates about the cultural work of nineteenth-century sentimentalism.⁵ More recent analyses of nineteenth-through twenty-first-century sentimentalism likewise consider its novels as artifacts of economic, political, or other social structures.⁶ Clark's monograph, for example, focuses on the underlying Leftist political commitments of sentimental modernist poetry. Lauren Berlant's influential national sentimentality trilogy highlights sentimentalism's "juxtapolitical" work in the social worlds it reflects and helps its subjects manage. Read

⁴ Extending and elaborating Clark's project, a number of scholars have recently detailed the sentimental aspects of canonical modernist texts. Nieland considers modernism's "public feelings," including works by "three sentimental male modernists," e.e. cummings, Joseph Cornell, and Marsden Hartley (24–25). Greenberg examines the sensibility of late modernist satire, while Taylor focuses on Djuna Barnes's oeuvre. Ritzenberg tracks the trope of "the sentimental touch" in novels by Sherwood Anderson and Nathaniel West. Kohlmann explores the "melodramatic affects" and sentimentality of political plays by Bertolt Brecht, W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood (337). Additional examples of sentimental-within-modernism scholarship include Altieri, Bell, and Chandler.

⁵ See Frederick for an early scholarly contextualization of Hawthorne; Douglas, *Feminization* and Tompkins for seminal examples of early scholarship on sentimentalism. Gould historicizes what others have called the "Douglas-Tompkins debates" in his introduction to a special issue of *differences* that complicates their legacy.

⁶ This growing body of scholarship includes Barnes; Brady; Halpern; Mesle; and Putzi. Seminal work on sentimentalism's cultural influence includes the anthologies *The Culture of Sentiment* and *Sentimental Men*.

through this cultural studies lens, the “literature of emotion”—which Charles Altieri distinguishes from the less defined, more inchoate, and therefore “non-coercive” feeling he finds in modernist poetry—often implicitly fails on one account (regrettable politics) or another (regrettable writing), even when the critical project is one of recovery (50). As Eve Sedgwick points out, “since anti-sentimentality itself becomes, in its structure, the very engine and expression of modern sentimental relations, to enter into the discourse of sentimentality . . . is almost inevitably to be caught up in a momentum of essentially scapegoating attribution” (*Epistemology* 154). Twenty-five years after Sedgwick’s observation, scholars continue to struggle to stay this momentum.

Despite efforts to move away from the value-laden perspective with which sentimentalism has long been discussed, recent work in new modernist studies perpetuates the mode’s lesser status. With few exceptions, this scholarship indexes interwar sentimentalism as an established nineteenth-century style immune to the sea change in American letters.⁷ Sentimentalism appears not an evolving mode that progresses and transforms along with its cultural moment, but as a static set of conventions and affects that persist and recur in twentieth-century writing. This recent work skirts “the relentless question of whether or not it is any good” that Elizabeth Maddock Dillon dates to sentimentalism’s eighteenth-century origin, but maintains the assumed aesthetic homogeneity that underpins such a question (498). My aim is not to

⁷ In an incisive exception to this paradigm, Burstein discusses the dissociative dynamics of Mina Loy’s and Dorothy Parker’s sentimentalism. Other critics argue for the modernity of interwar writing by and about modern women by skirting the term “sentimental” and focusing on topics like “domestic fiction” and “love poetry” instead. See Edmunds (*Grotesque Relations*) and Miller, respectively.

answer this relentless question but to challenge its reductive premise. Sentimentalism is no more monolithic than any other literary aesthetic.

The vexed status of the sentimental in interwar scholarship no doubt owes much to the concept's gendered trappings. My study focuses on female authors, most of them white. This selection is not intended to naturalize an equivalence of the sentimental with its historical associations but rather to consider its particular baggage for the modern woman writer. If recent scholarship is any indication, it continues to be less damning to point out the sentimental qualities of canonized male writers. A growing body of work highlights the continuities between the sentimental tradition and the work of interwar authors like Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson, hard-boiled novelists like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and later writers like Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin.⁸ Much of this scholarship explores thematic consistencies between a feminized cultural and literary past and an ungendered or masculine present. In the cases of Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin—whose position as historically sentimentalized racial subjects more closely resembles the position of my writers—the intentional exchanges with Harriet Beecher Stowe have largely been seen as

⁸ Cassuto traces the ideological affinities between nineteenth-century domestic novels and hard-boiled fiction, including work by Hemingway, Hammett, Chandler, and Himes. Ritzberg discusses the trope of the sentimental touch in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933). Diller argues that Ralph Ellison "signifies on the sentimental novel" by injecting its pedagogical framework and rhetorical strategies with modernist and masculine qualities (490). Edmunds delineates Richard Wright's rewriting of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an indictment of the New Deal's two-track welfare state, its domestic inscription of black subjects, and the long tradition of white women's sentimental activism ("Like Home"). Gordon likewise asserts that James Baldwin engages with the sentimentalism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to produce a new "model of sympathetic identification" (80). Jernigan traces Baldwin's "post-sentimental aesthetic" of "affective realism" (173).

oppositional responses to a solidified, nineteenth-century sentimentalism.⁹ The female authors in my study have likewise explicit investments in rewriting sentimental aesthetics, but I read their revisionary experiments as comprising a distinctive iteration of the sentimental mode. These women writers do not simply recycle or repurpose an older sentimental logic; they remodel and update sentimental aesthetics to reflect and critique modern sentimentality.

More Keywords

Modern sentimentalism renovates two storied forms in which sentimental aesthetics frequently appear: the female bildungsroman and the romance novel. In the fraught subgenre of the female bildungsroman, Susan Fraiman contends, coming-of-age narratives do not track the form's usual "progressive development" towards "masterful selfhood," but rather chronicle significant de-formation, disorientation, and a loss of authority (*Unbecoming* x).¹⁰ Fraiman's study of Georgian- and Victorian-era novels and conduct books concludes in the mid-nineteenth century; in many ways, my project takes up her subject matter a half-century later in an American context. These distinctions of time and place are critical, however, for as critics have observed, the bildungsroman evolves to keep pace with lived coming-of-age narratives. Responding to Franco

⁹ Recent scholarship on Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin complicates conventional notions of these mid-century authors' antisentimentality and their repudiation of Stowe in particular. Edmunds focuses on the thematic resonance between Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Stowe's novel ("Like Home"). Diller, Gordon, and Jernigan likewise argue that Ellison and Baldwin respectively reconfigure and update Stowe's model to produce something other than a sentimental aesthetic.

¹⁰ Feminist critics of the 1980s and 90s debate the existence of the female bildungsroman as heavily as the history of sentimental literature. See Fuderer for an overview of these debates.

Moretti's provocative claim that the Great War symbolically shattered the already-dissolving form, Gregory Castle argues that the bildungsroman undergoes a vigorous rehabilitation in the interwar years. Modern sentimental bildungsromane, and the more-specific kunstlerromane or artist novel, epitomize the "tremendous elastic[ity]" Castle describes (4).

Modern sentimentalism likewise rewrites the conventions of the romance novel and its central marriage plot. A form that perhaps begins with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), the romance novel tells the story of a courtship, often from the close perspective of its heroine, ending in her marriage to the hero.¹¹ In modern sentimental novels, the romance plot is only part of the narrative structure. Modern sentimental storylines typically feature their protagonists' equal desires for love and for creative fulfillment and their resistance to forgoing one ambition at the expense of the other. This narrative conflict mirrors the tension between older forms of sentimentality—wherein a woman's identity and self-worth are understood to derive from marriage, intimate attachment, community, and sympathy—and newer forms of femininity—wherein a woman's identity and self-worth are understood to derive, at least in part, from intellectual and artistic aspiration, professional success, economic autonomy, and other forms of independence. Whereas romance novels are typically seen to reinforce traditional gender roles of emotional femininity and stoic masculinity, modern sentimental novels disrupt such binaries and their oft-underlying biological essentialism.

¹¹ Radway details the history of the romance and its twentieth-century American form.

As this heterogeneous genealogy intimates, modern sentimental novels do not fit neatly into the usual categories of interwar literature. While it goes without saying that I think the particular novels I discuss are worth reading, I am less concerned with rehabilitating these specific texts than in recovering an important and wide-ranging interwar aesthetic. Some of the novels I discuss are frequently labeled “middlebrow”; a text like *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* might easily be called “modernist.”¹² My goal is not to dispute these labels but to construct a different paradigm for apprehending and interpreting the sentimental aesthetics that appear in an array of interwar novels, from runaway bestsellers to banned avant-garde works.

Affect and the Archive: A Note on Methodology

My study of modern sentimentalism participates in ongoing conversations about emotion and the aesthetic encounter. Like many literary scholars working in affect theory, I do not believe that effective—formal, materially-identifiable, “objective”—aesthetics can be separated from affective ones, which are less formal, structured, or codified but still arise from form, structure, and generic and sociolinguistic code. Owing to these challenging dynamics, discussions of literary affect frequently occur along with and in terms of effect, dating at least as far back as Kant’s “science of sensuous perception,” itself a return to the Greek *aesthetikos*, or “things perceptible by the senses, things material.”¹³ As such etymological evolutions illustrate, archival work is not simply

¹² *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Plum Bun* are frequently called “middlebrow.” Perhaps assuming the link that Botshon and Goldsmith note between middlebrow literature and aesthetic conservatism, most scholarship on the middlebrow takes a cultural studies approach and ignores its internal aesthetics. See also Blair; Harker; Perrin; Rubin.

¹³ This etymology comes from *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “aesthetic.”

a logical extension of reparative reading but essential to how we evaluate feeling in a literary text.¹⁴ The same narrative—a woman having sex out of wedlock, for example—suggests and evokes different feelings according to its immediate cultural context. While we might guess at these feelings based on general historical knowledge and other plot events (e.g., suicide or death in childbirth), it is more challenging to recover a text’s nuanced emotional codes. This is where the archive comes in. Feelings themselves may not change over time, but how we define, understand, and represent them does.

Here I should pause to offer a few important definitions. Affective aesthetics operate along the lines of Eve Sedgwick’s texture, which “comprises an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure” (*Touching* 16). Sedgwick’s texture resonates with—and arguably produces at the level of a single text—Raymond Williams’ well-known concept of a “structure of feeling,” which “is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities” (*Revolution* 64). Critics also describe this phenomenon with terms like “affect,” “emotion,” “feeling,” and, in literary discussions, “tone.” Although similarly resistant to simple definition, these words are not interchangeable. As Ann Cvetkovich summarizes, emotion typically refers to the “cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them,” while feeling connotes less structured, more diffuse, and imprecise “embodied sensations and . . . psychic or cognitive experiences” (*Depression* 4). I preserve these distinctions and reserve affect for the aesthetic register of a feeling, which

¹⁴ My use of archival work to inform the study of affect inverts the organizational logic of Cvetkovich’s compelling ongoing work on the affective and epistemological dynamics of archives and counterarchives. See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*.

can be perceived in an encounter with an object. Tone likewise constellates an aesthetic corollary for emotional experience, the attitude or “distinctive mood” a text expresses (“Tone”).

Of these concepts, socially codified emotion is the one that most clearly changes over time. This is especially true in the era of New Psychology, in which popular interest in emotion and cognition generates a host of new terms. “Ambivalence,” for example, emerges as the German *ambivalenz* in 1910 as a psychotic pathology of schizophrenia and soon becomes a mainstream neurosis associated with young women “caught in the toils of the same struggle between love and ambition” (Blanchard 104). Likewise, “empathy” first appears in English in 1895 as a “psychophysical” property of the nervous system, before it becomes E. B. Titchener’s disseminated, aestheticized concept of “feeling into” an object in 1909 (“Empathy”). My discussion of interwar feeling engages such rapidly evolving understandings of emotion as well as related concepts from new schools of thought like behaviorism and sexology. The novels’ original receptions corroborate and inform these readings.

In another departure from less historicized discussions of literary affect, the emotions I trace in these texts are not free-floating but specifically attached to the protagonists.¹⁵ This grounding in character evinces the interrelation of these feelings and modern femininity, but it also refutes a criticism of affect theory that, as affect’s “nonsignifying processes . . . take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning,” theoretical discussions of the “irreducibly bodily and autonomic” entity are

¹⁵ My project thus participates in the recent theoretical return to character, exemplified by Vermeule’s *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* and Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many*.

essentially reader-response theory (Leys 437; Massumi 28). Distinguishing between levels of feeling often conflated in literary criticism and affect theory, I detail the protagonist's articulated and characterized feeling state, the narrator's and other characters' explicit relation to this characterized feeling, and the given narrative's strategic mobilization of each character's affect. I likewise differentiate characterized physical sensation, "primary" emotion, and second-order feeling, and further distinguish these narratological aesthetics from textual affect. Respecting this distinction, this project has much more to say about the former than the latter. I do not define each modern sentimental novel in terms of a dominant affect or delineate specific literary equivalents of certain emotional states. Rather, in aggregating the diverse, complex, and often contradictory feelings the narratives register, I argue for the irreducibility of sentimentality in these novels.

A Taxonomy of Modern Sentiments

My study of modern sentimentalism moves chronologically and argues for the crucial connections between each text's aesthetics and its immediate cultural contexts. Yet I do not construct a tight developmental narrative or make a case for modern sentimentalism's cohesive progression over these two decades. The material conflicts and vexed expectations of modern femininity and women's artistic production recur throughout this project, as do the contradictions and anxieties of modern feeling. Fauset's protagonist, discussed in the fourth chapter, is as dispassionate about romance as Cather's character discussed in the first; Newman's novel, featured in the second chapter, and Wharton's text, featured in the conclusion, both critique modern marriage and the

enduring script of domestic femininity. The texts thus unsettle but do not dismantle the sense of tremendous change and unprecedented opportunity often attributed to their cultural moments. While challenging narratives of an era still frequently imagined as rife with revolution and rich with potential, these novels attest to the renewed appeal and reconfigured relevance of the sentimental in interwar America.

My study begins with a paradigmatic narrative of modern sentimental femininity, Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), in which a female opera singer achieves through an artistic career what she might otherwise have achieved through love and marriage: passion, psychic cohesion, and corporeal integrity. Redistributing sentimentality and its associated traits (marital ambition, domesticity, caretaking, self-sacrifice) across gender lines, *Lark*'s unorthodox marriage plot supports this adapted sentimental narrative: after eloping to Mexico, the couple separates for a decade; their wedding in the Epilogue is quite literally an afterthought. Yet, beginning with Cather's contemporaneous non-fiction, writing about the novel maintains the same logic: if *Lark* is an innovative modern text, it is "unsentimental"; if it is "sentimental," it must be nostalgic and derivative. I synthesize and reinterpret these opposing perspectives on Cather's most autobiographical work.

While Cather's modern sentimentalism is generally sincere (if also biting in its critique of traditional sentimental femininity's hyperbolic emotionality, uncritical reading practices, and moralizing piety), many modern sentimental novels are emphatically ironic. Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), for example, ironizes the enduring sentimentality of Jazz Age femininity and of supposedly unsentimental modern literary techniques like dialectal writing and stream-of-consciousness narration. As my

second chapter argues, Loos's "intimate diary of a professional lady" is not simply a satire of a nineteenth-century sentimental novel in which a working-class girl from Arkansas earns a happy ending—marrying up, becoming an author and a Hollywood actress—through her apparent sympathy, modesty, and moral "reverance [sic]." Rather, *Blondes* is itself a sentimental novel—one that traffics in the ironic pleasures of adapted sentimental enterprises like vague affiliation, ambiguous belonging, and uncertain understanding.

Loos's sentimental satire is but one example of the interchanges between modern sentimentalism and emergent stylistic practices. My third chapter delineates the dialogue between the sentimental tradition and hard-boiled fiction in Frances Newman's understudied novel, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926). Written in labyrinthine prose, *Virgin* follows the elliptical thought process of a young, female aspiring author who masturbates to orgasm and has sex out of wedlock, all while desiring the passionate sentimental romance she never experiences. *Virgin*'s trenchant irony and evocative, if euphemistic, treatment of female sexuality depict a sensibility that is as much about experiencing what one does not feel as what one does. Its negative aesthetic of emotion preserves—indeed, affirms—the sentimental ideal and its promise of aesthetic satisfaction for reader and character alike.

My fourth chapter turns to the tradition of sentimental writing about black Americans, focusing on Jessie Redmon Fauset's ironic revision of these narratives in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral* (1929). Rejecting modernist primitivism as well as the "race propaganda" popular with the black and white middlebrow, Fauset's anti-didactic *kunstlerroman*—the story of a young black female artist who tries and fails to

achieve a semblance of security, if not happiness, in twentieth-century America—diagnoses the contradictions within New Negro ideology, particularly with regard to femininity and artistic production. The enduring misreading of Fauset’s work reflects a misunderstanding not only of her ironic sentimental aesthetic, but also of the tensions she diagnosed in the Renaissance she helped inaugurate.

Edith Wharton’s rarely discussed late novel *The Gods Arrive* (1932) concentrates a similarly incisive critical eye on an increasingly solidified American modernism. Alternating between the perspectives of its male and female protagonists (a young novelist and his muse/collaborator), *The Gods Arrive*—the subject of my conclusion—is as much a catalog of modern love (trial marriage, companionate marriage, divorce, free love, and single motherhood) as a treatise on the politics of modern fiction. Critical of sentimental and modern fiction in her late work, Wharton nonetheless offers a picture in reverse of my project’s claims: her artistic capstone and its critical reception instantiate the enduringly conflicted gender constructs of the early 1930s and the corollary sexism of American letters.

These novels collectively testify to and interrogate the essential symbiosis between the sentimental and the modern in interwar America. Gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomics inflect and frequently overdetermine this relationship, but the central modern sentimental conflict supersedes such identity categories. This conflict is nothing less than the question of how to reconcile knowledge and desire—how, for example, to do satisfying work and have meaningful interpersonal relationships when these enterprises frequently fall short of uncompromising ideals. The answer these narratives and their authors provide is not to reject these ideals or other sentimental longings but to

recast the relationship between feeling and reason. Neither a romantic lapse into the past nor a naïve vision of the future, modern sentimentalism most often registers the ironic consciousness of an enduring sentimental impulse. For reader and character alike, the challenge is to understand such mixed feelings not as a regressive failure but a neutral quality of existence. This ambition equally impels the following pages.

“An un-sentimental sort of success”: Willa Cather’s Modern Sentimentalism

A week before *The Song of the Lark* was published in September 1915, Willa Cather wrote to her Houghton Mifflin editor Ferris Greenslet: “I think only young people will really like this book. I wish there were some way of advertising it in women’s colleges. I think the un-sentimental sort of success, the kind won hand-over fist, particularly appeals to the college girls just now, that it happens to be the question.”¹ Cather’s description articulates sentimentalism’s vexed legacy in the early interwar years. On the surface, she simply flags sentimentality as a topic of current debate, “the question” of the moment. But her “question” implies an uncertainty and indecision about sentimentalism’s nexus of feeling, femininity, and literary convention. What role does sentimentality play in a narrative of modern femininity? What happens to values like romantic love, marriage, and religious morality in the wake of young women’s increasing professional opportunities and personal choices? How do literary representations of female sensibility evolve in tandem with women’s lives? Such contemporary concerns, Cather suggests, are central to her novel. *The Song of the Lark* will appeal to young people—especially college girls—because it participates in these ongoing cultural and literary discussions. Less a rejection than a revision of sentimental precedent, *Lark* develops a sentimental aesthetic of modern femininity and artistic sensibility.

Indeed, one wonders, what exactly is “un-sentimental” about the story of a hard-working young woman who rises “hand-over fist” from teaching piano in a small Colorado town to starring at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House—and who marries a

¹ Cather, Letter to Ferris Greenslet, 1915. Houghton Mifflin Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

handsome, wealthy man to boot?² Certainly, this professional trajectory departs from conventional sentimental narratives that equate female success with marriage and domesticity. But as more than one contemporaneous reader recognized, Cather's *kunstlerroman*—which she also called “my own fairy tale”—relies on sentimental patterns (*Letters* 217). In a review titled “Cinderella the Nth,” H. L. Mencken avers, “There is nothing new in the story that Willa Sibert Cather tells in ‘The Song of the Lark’; it is, in fact, merely one more version, with few changes, of the ancient fable of Cinderella, probably the oldest of the world’s love stories, and surely the most steadily popular” (72).³ Nonetheless, Mencken concludes, “if the tale is thus conventional in its outlines, it is full of novelty and ingenuity in its details” (72). *Lark*'s originality, Mencken finds, lies in renovating a historical form rather than in wholesale invention. There is, however, far more to Cather's reworking of convention than Mencken appreciates.

This chapter details *The Song of the Lark*'s modern sentimentalism and links this aesthetic to *Lark*'s shifting status within Cather's oeuvre. Initially, Cather describes

² “Hand-over fist” has several near-contradictory meanings. Originally a nautical term, the phrase typically implies rapid, continuous progress, either in terms of physical movement (usually up or down a rope or ladder) or effortless financial activity (either gain or loss). The phrase thus alternately suggests intense effort or relative ease, self-generated success or preordained triumph. Cather seems to invoke the metaphor in the older, less common context, to describe the slow, steady exertion required to pull two ships together.

³ Other critics cast similar observations in a more positive light. Frederick Cooper echoes Mencken's opinion—“this story has a rather familiar ring,” with “a slight novelty introduced”—but Cooper emphasizes an alternate realm of creativity: Cather “has created a group of real persons; she takes us into their home and makes us share in their joys and sorrows, with a quickening sympathy such as we give to our friends in the real world” (65–66). Edward Hale observes, “Miss Cather's *The Song of the Lark* appears to be one of the biographies—childhood, education, love-affair or affairs, whatnot else—of which there are not a few nowadays,” but he goes on to distinguish *Lark* from this trend (68).

Lark's updated sentimental aesthetic as one of its primary selling points.

Contemporaneous reviews similarly emphasize the novel's modern relation to sentimental precedent, alternately lauding its refashioned sentimental sensibility and critiquing its recourse to sentimental patterns. As Cather's style develops and modernism coheres over the next two decades, both Cather and her critics reconsider *Lark*'s sentimentalism. Cather's 1932 preface to the Jonathan Cape edition of the novel expresses a perspective closer to Mencken's: "I should have disregarded conventional design and stopped where my first conception stopped, telling the latter part of the story by suggestion merely."⁴ Adopting a modernist attitude towards all things conventional, Cather discounts her early innovations as too enmeshed with their literary inheritance. Critics of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s similarly recast *Lark* as nostalgic, conservative, and traditionally sentimental. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars read the novel to near-opposite ends, identifying *Lark*'s protagonist as a proto-feminist heroine and repeating Cather's original "unsentimental" description of the work.⁵

One interpretation of this progression is that sentimentalism functions as something of an albatross for a modern woman writer. However, as this project contends and as this chapter will show, sentimentalism has been more of an albatross in modernist-era literary criticism than in the period's literary production itself. *Lark*'s critical sequence instantiates this phenomenon. Beginning with Cather's contemporaneous writing, two claims are repeated over a century: if *Lark* is an innovative modern novel, it is "unsentimental"; if it is "sentimental," it must be nostalgic and derivative. This chapter

⁴ Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, ed. Kari A. Ronning (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012), 618. Subsequent references to this volume abbreviated as *SOL*.

⁵ Early feminist readings of *The Song of the Lark* include Fryer; Moers; O'Brien; and Rosowski.

synthesizes and reinterprets these opposing perspectives. The first section outlines this reception history. The second and third sections chronicle *Lark*'s adapted sentimental narratives, focusing first on protagonist Thea Kronborg's professional trajectory and then the unconventional marriage plot subsumed within it. My basic argument is this: *Lark* replaces romantic love with the equal passion of an artistic career. The final section discusses *Lark*'s redistribution of sentimentality across gender lines. While critiquing traditional sentimental femininity and reiterating many of its stereotypes (hyperbolic emotionality, uncritical reading practices, moralizing piety), *Lark* develops and affirms a modern alternative.

Willa Cather's Conventional Designs

Cather's first novel after leaving her editorial position at *McClure's* magazine, *The Song of the Lark* is often referred to as her most autobiographical work.⁶ Also based in part on the life of opera singer Olive Fremstad, *Lark* details the evolution of a female artist from roughly 1890 until 1909.⁷ The *kunstlerroman* focuses on Thea Kronborg's early years, from her girlhood in Moonstone, Colorado to her music training in Chicago and her artistic awakening in the Arizona desert. The novel's final section and Epilogue relate Thea's eventual success as an international opera star. This artistic trajectory includes a minor but not unimportant marriage plot. From the suitor whose death endows

⁶ Moseley outlines these autobiographical elements and traces the connections to Fremstad ("Historical Essay" and "Explanatory Notes"). Porter also details the parallels between Thea and Mary Baker Eddy, the subject of Cather's editorial work at *McClure's* from December 1906 until May 1908. Stout identifies *Lark* as one in a cohort of stories about working women that Cather writes between 1915 and 1920 (*Willa*).

⁷ In the 1915 edition, the Epilogue explicitly occurs in 1909, only one year after Part VI. In 1937, Cather changed the timeframe to a more vague "nearly twenty years after Thea left [Moonstone] for the last time" to adjust the internal chronology (*SOL* 905).

her study in Chicago to the “beer prince” who provides his family’s ranch in Arizona, Thea’s creative development hinges on the sympathy and financial generosity of one male character after another (*SOL* 295). The Epilogue reports that Thea marries the “beer prince” more than a decade after they spend four unaccounted months together in Mexico and less than a decade after they part ways—a seemingly definitive separation that occurs because he is already married, and because Thea’s career matters too much to both of them to compromise it.

It is hardly surprising that Cather originally classifies her novel as “un-sentimental.” Her early literary criticism frequently targets sentimental fiction and reproduces its common associations with women writers and aesthetic inferiority. In an 1895 article, Cather identifies Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) as “one of the brightest minds of the last generation,” then declares that, despite Ouida’s potential, her work “contains some of the most driveling nonsense and mawkish sentimentality and contemptible feminine weakness to be found anywhere” (*Courier* 275). Ouida’s “sins,” Cather asserts, “are technical errors, as palpable as bad grammar or bad construction, sins of form and sense. Adjectives and sentimentality ran away with her, as they do with most women’s pens” (276). Adopting sentimentalism’s common moralizing discourse, Cather reprimands Ouida for failing to practice what she preaches: Ouida’s undisciplined emotional impulses lead to overwrought rhetoric and generally “bad” writing. Yet, in another article just nine months earlier, Cather avers, “If a woman writes any poetry at all worth reading it must be emotional in the extreme, self-centered, self-absorbed, centrifugal. . . . Learned literary women have such an unfortunate tendency to instruct the world. They must learn abandon. . . . A woman can be great only in proportion as God

put feeling in her” (“Three Women” 146). Emotional poetry, it seems, is of a different order than sentimental fiction, perhaps because poetry is less subject to the specific failures of form and feeling that Cather deplors in sentimental novels.

Anticipating her subsequent innovations, Cather pinpoints clichéd formalism and unrealistic depictions of female experience as the key shortcomings of female-authored fiction. In an 1897 career overview of another “‘light’ lady novelist,” Cather contends that *The Duchess’s* “most astonishing literary peculiarity is the fact that, though she wrote some thirty novels, she told only one story. But sometimes this story wore a pink dress and sometimes a blue; sometimes it had yellow ringlets and sometimes chestnut brown” (“*Duchess*”). Conflating story and character, Cather underscores the essential interchangeability of these “light” novels and their equally superficial iterations of femininity. Elsewhere Cather notes that thematic repetition is not inherently a bad thing: “Sappho wrote only of one theme, sang it, laughed it, sighed it, wept it, sobbed it. [. . . But] she invented the most wonderfully emotional meter in literature” (“Three Women” 147). In contrast to Sappho’s poetic invention and affective depth, *The Duchess’s* novels evince a hackneyed sentimentalism. Omitting everything but “‘true love’ and plenty of it,” her “literary methods were merciful and kindly in the extreme”; “never naughty nor original,” her “trash is as harmless as new milk and as sweet as honey” (“*Duchess*”). Cather thus both ironizes and promulgates popular discourse about women novelists and their sentimental literary practices.⁸

⁸ Although nominally about *The Duchess*, this entire piece is effectively an occasion to critique female novelists and their readers. *The Duchess*, Cather summarizes, “wrote trash pure and undefiled and made no pretensions to anything else. . . . Her sphere was large, and many women who have become useful and cultured members of society once dwelt entranced in her duchy where the nights were always moonlit and the roses always

Given Cather's later persona as a resolutely backward, if not outright antimodern, author, her early critique of female authors' conservative moral and aesthetic sensibility is perhaps unexpected.⁹ However, as her of-the-moment presentation of *The Song of the Lark* reminds us, Cather was not always so oriented. Between 1895 and 1898, Cather asserts several versions of this opinion: "I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they lie so about that" (*Courier* 276–77).¹⁰ To be a female novelist is to wrestle, largely unsuccessfully, with one's own sentimentality and with the disingenuous, narrow scope of the sentimental literary tradition. "They are so few, the ones who really did anything worthwhile; there were the great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand, and they were anything but women, and there was Miss Bronte who kept her sentimentality under control, and there was Jane Austen who certainly had more commonsense than any of them" (*Courier* 277). To produce "worthwhile" literature, a woman writer must either reject womanhood altogether or regulate her innate sentimentality as much as possible. Cather opts for the latter.

bloomed. Indeed almost every living specimen of the *genus femina* has at one time or another taken a whiff of 'The Duchess' on the sly" ("Duchess," emphasis in original).

⁹ In the introduction to 1936's *Not Under Forty*, Cather famously asserts, "the world split in two in 1922 or thereabouts," cleaving the "forward-goers" from "the backward"; as her title suggests, Cather addresses her text to "the backward" and counts herself "as one of their number" (812). For a recent discussion of Cather's "backwardness," see Love.

¹⁰ In November 1897, Cather asserts, "I have not a great deal of faith in women in literature. As a rule, if I see the announcement of a new book by a woman, I—well, I take one by a man instead. This may be a very narrow prejudice; I do not defend it. It is merely a personal feeling. I have noticed that the great masters of letters are men, and I prefer to take no chances when I read. There are, however, two great exceptions to this in English letters: Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot. There have been other women who have done wonderfully clever things in fiction, but these two alone were unquestionably masters of their craft, pre-eminently great" ("Old Books" 362).

Exemplifying this affective paradigm, Cather consistently describes *The Song of the Lark* in qualified sentimental terms. In another 1915 letter to Greenslet, she emphasizes “the feeling that [*Lark*] always gives me,” noting that the story “has gone through many incarnations, but the germ of it, the feeling of it, has never changed” (*Letters* 199). Acknowledging her sentimental language, Cather asserts that *Lark*’s emotional essence is perhaps over the top, but not formulaic: “Goodness knows this ought to be cheerful enough for you, happy ending and all! It seems, as I go over it this last time, better than cheerful to me. It seems to have a lot of the kind of warmth and kindness that can’t be made to order, and that you can only get into a story when the places and the people lie near your heart” (199). Cather repeats this sentimental metonymy—the heart as a symbol of utmost sincerity and intense feeling—in a 1916 letter: “I am pleased to the heart of me if [*Lark*] gave you that sense of real people and real feelings” (*Letters* 215). Another 1916 letter reiterates the “feeling [*Lark*] gave me” and concludes with an expression of sympathetic kinship: “I’m glad the story gave you the same kind of . . . feeling it gave me” (*Letters* 217–18). In these and other contemporaneous letters, Cather endorses a classic sentimental phenomenology, in which feeling seamlessly transfers from author to text to reader.¹¹ While Cather imagines such emotional reciprocity, she insists on the unique biographical experience and personal affection that distinguish her novel—“I didn’t play any sentimental tricks,” she contends, “but I cared . . . , and so [the reader] cared” (216).

Cather also initially relates *Lark*’s structure to sentimental patterns. In the latter 1916 letter, she calls the book “my own fairy tale,” inflecting another conventional

¹¹ Sanchez-Eppler offers a detailed account of nineteenth-century sentimental phenomenology.

template with personal distinction (*Letters* 217). Fairy tales and sentimental novels are not identical, but both generic frameworks typically involve prolonged emotional trial and causal logic (happily ever after for the virtuous, death for the wicked).¹² *Lark* does not fulfill the latter expectation. Writing five months after *Lark*'s publication, Cather summarizes, "most of the reviews have been sympathetic, but a few high, alabaster brows have clouded with pain. They say they wanted her to lose her voice or 'do something exquisite,' not by any means to go through with her job successfully" (*Letters* 218). This less extreme conclusion, Cather declares, was precisely her point. She explains her use of two narrative perspectives: "The entire book is done in two manners—one intimate, one remote. She goes on, while I stand still in *Moonstone*" (218). She also explains her structural paralleling of Thea's artistic "development . . . from the personal to the impersonal" (218). Cather's initial conception of the novel thus incorporates a more conventional sentimental perspective—intimate and personal—into an unconventional structure. "I think the book rather 'peters out,'" she admits, "but it's because all in Thea that is proper material for fiction 'peters out'" (218). While her formal choices destabilize sentimental expectations of narrative perspective and plot trajectory, Cather maintains a traditional sentimental notion of what is "proper material for fiction."

Within just a few years, Cather expresses more ambivalence about *Lark*'s sentimental qualities. In 1920's "On the Art of Fiction," Cather describes the "phases of natural development" an artist goes through: "In the beginning, the artist, like his public, is wedded to old forms, old ideals, and his vision is blurred by the memory of old delights he would like to recapture" (103–4). In language that is arguably sentimental itself,

¹² Callander elaborates the resonance between *Lark* and traditional fairy tales.

Cather describes the historical forms and ideals that inflect an artist's early work and her readership's expectations. Cather's later writings appraise *Lark*'s style and tone in similarly evolutionary terms. Her 1931 essay "My First Novels [There Were Two]" paraphrases British publisher William Heinemann's rejection of *Lark* on the grounds that "the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody, was not natural to me. . . . 'As for myself,' he wrote, 'I always find the friendly, confidential tone of writing of this sort distressingly familiar, even when the subject matter is very fine'" (96). "At the time," Cather notes, she "did not altogether agree with Mr. Heinemann," but "when the next book, *My Antonia*, came along, quite of itself and with no direction from me, it took the road of *O Pioneers!*—not the road of *The Song of the Lark*" (96). Without fully endorsing Heinemann's opinion or his grounds of critique, Cather establishes her subsequent departure from *Lark*'s "friendly, confidential" "familiar" tone and its "full-blooded" method.

Cather's 1932 preface is more overtly self-critical, not only denouncing *Lark*'s adherence to "conventional design," but also its "unfortunate" title and the tone shift of its final sections. Although many readers assume the title refers to Thea's voice, Cather clarifies, "the book was named for a rather second-rate French painting in the Chicago Art Museum" (SOL 617). Cather originally evaluates Jules Breton's "The Song of the Lark" more favorably: when Thea first sees Breton's painting, she "told herself that that picture was 'right.' Just what she meant by this, it would take a clever person to explain. But to her the word covered the almost boundless satisfaction she felt when she looked at the picture" (219–20). Such lines epitomize the sentimentalism from which Cather increasingly distances herself. She likewise reassesses her novel. "The chief fault of the

book is that it describes a descending curve. . . . Success is never so interesting as struggle. . . . The interesting and important fact that, in an artist of the type I chose, personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer, does not, however, excuse my story for becoming paler” (*SOL* 617–18). Evoking her initial descriptions, Cather identifies the “richness” of “personal life” as a wellspring of fictional material and the schematic rationale for *Lark*’s plot structure. In 1932, however, she emphasizes dispassionate “interest,” rather than feeling, as the determinant of literary value.

Cather’s extensive 1937 revisions for *Lark*’s Autograph Edition further her 1932 critique and her particular deprecation of the novel’s latter portions. Of the 6,900 words Cather cuts, which amount to roughly five percent of the 1915 novel, all but 153 of them are in the final two sections and the Epilogue.¹³ Robin Heyeck and James Woodress summarize these edits as an attempt to reduce “overwriting” and “eliminate some rather sentimental passages” (657). The *Times Literary Supplement* describes the edition’s “retouching of lesser psychological brush-strokes” (75). In addition to addressing many of the criticisms of *Lark*’s reviews, these edits reflect Cather’s well-known 1922 theory of the unfurnished novel, which “present[s its] scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration” (“Novel” 6). In keeping with the principles set forth in “The Novel D meubl ,” Cather cuts numerous instances where the narrator weighs in and directly addresses the reader (“This story attempts to . . . give some account of how a Moonstone girl found her way out of a vague, easy-going world into a life of disciplined endeavor. Any account of the loyalty of young hearts to some exalted ideal, and the passion with which they strive, will always, in some of us, rekindle generous emotions” [*SOL* 528]).

¹³ These statistics come from Heyeck and Woodress.

She removes many of the lengthy passages that rehearse Thea's artistic potential and transformation, including a treatise on Thea's aura (409–10). She also substantially abbreviates conversations between Thea and her future husband and cuts all but one reference to their marriage. Her editorial changes, in other words, verify the original text's sentimentalism.

Critical perspectives on the novel follow the pattern of Cather's own. Critics initially praise *Lark*'s uniquely modern sentimental qualities, though they disagree about just how innovative the novel is. Over the next three decades, critics, like Cather, reevaluate the novel as a work of traditional sentimentalism, discounting its original reception as a work of its moment. Houghton Mifflin, for example, advertises *Lark* as “a study of American life and temperament from a new angle.” Contemporaneous reviews largely affirm this perspective, lauding *Lark*'s “uncommon sincerity,” its “melancholy passion,” and the “quicken[ing] sympathy” inspired by its realistic and up-to-date characters (Boynton “Varieties” 461; Peattie 10; Cooper 66). Even Mencken commends the aspects of the novel that are “alive with . . . gestures of that gentle pity which is the fruit of understanding” (72).

Despite evaluating *Lark* in such sentimental terms, these reviews either skirt the word “sentimental” or explicitly distinguish the novel from this literary category. Elia Peattie locates the novel in an aesthetic hierarchy that echoes a common definition of sentimentalism as “pre-romanticism”: “Miss Cather's method of delineating her heroine is so deeply romantic that it goes past all mere sentimentality, down into the very roots of

romance, where the waters of reality spring eternally” (10).¹⁴ (Cather thought this description so accurate that she proposed using it as an advertising blurb.) Randolph Bourne critiques the title as “a play to sentimental chords,” but his issue with this moniker is primarily about false advertising: “One could forgive it perhaps if the song of the lark were actually the *leitmotif* of the story” (70–1, emphasis in original). The novel “could have been a crescendo of interpretation, with the contrast between the inner clutch and the conventional appeals of life made ever more inescapable,” but *Lark* rejects such an emotional conflict in favor of “wearisome objective detail” and “a sociological treatise” in the Epilogue (71–72). Underscoring his sentimental standards, Bourne attributes the novel’s shift in tone and narrative focus to Cather’s “unassimilated experience,” her failure to “read herself into this other life and mak[e] it so much hers that the actual and the imagined are no longer separable” (72). This sentimental conflation of author and character, and its assumed naïve biographical reflexivity, plagues Cather from both ends; what is elsewhere critiqued as inadequate distance here becomes insufficient collapse.¹⁵

While Bourne critiques *Lark* for failing to comport with sentimental expectation and Mencken sees the novel as a capitulation to conventional designs, at least one

¹⁴ The *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850* defines this concept of sentimentalism as pre-romanticism according to the modes’ common “idea that that individual’s knowledge, feelings, and identity are built from physical sensations received through the bodily senses” (905).

¹⁵ This sentimental assumption is thoroughly embedded in *Lark*’s criticism. More than sixty years later, Heyeck and Woodress reiterate Bourne’s critique. “When the character of the young singer ceases to be Willa Cather, however, and becomes Olive Fremstad, the novel no longer is based on the deeply felt experience that was the essential ingredient in Cather’s best work” (653). Cather refutes this notion of naïve reflexivity in a 1915 letter: “In spite of the fact that I had given her a good many of my own external experiences—because they were handy to get at—she remained so objective that I had grown to depend on her companionship more than I realized” (*Letters* 212).

contemporaneous reviewer appreciates Cather's creative updating of literary convention. In "Varieties of Realism," H. W. Boynton asserts that Thea's romantic (and presumably sexual) interlude in Mexico "has here, convention to the contrary, the place which such episodes have so frequently in real life: it *is* an episode, important but not determining or even focal" (462, emphasis in original). Thea goes unpunished and her career proceeds accordingly. In this piece and in a follow-up essay, "Realism and Recent American Fiction," Boynton describes *Lark* as an exemplar of "sincere, creative realism," a mode that synthesizes realism and what Boynton calls "romance" (380). Echoing common descriptions of sentimentalism, Boynton's "romance" focuses on "human emotions, situations, fancies, dreams" and "deliberately and agreeably conventionalizes character and action for its own sufficient ends," in which "virtue is rewarded and vice punished by a well-tested formula" (380). For Boynton, *Lark* exemplifies a "mongrel" text, whose "mixed parentage" advances a small but influential movement in American fiction (380). Associating *Lark* with a cohort of recent novels "built about young women of the present, striving in one way or another for some sort of independent existence and self-expression," Boynton concludes, "Miss Cather's triumph is in making us feel, without arguing it, that Thea's womanhood has not been slain for art, but has been rightly poured" into her career (381, 382).

While these early reviews compare *The Song of the Lark* to other works of recent fiction, within just a few years, critics read the novel in contrast to its successors in Cather's oeuvre.¹⁶ As early as 1928, critics locate "sentimental tendencies" in Cather's

¹⁶ *Lark* is commonly reviewed alongside Theodore Dreiser's 1915 novel *The 'Genius,'* and compared to W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915). Critical interest in the trajectory of Cather's style dates back at least to the 1919 publication of *My Antonia*,

first novels, though there is ample disagreement about what happens to this aesthetic influence thereafter. “[H]ow easily Miss Cather might have gone off on the sentimental track, had she not known better,” T. K. Whipple opines in 1928, commending her for “conquering” this “unforgivable” practice (43). Five years later, Granville Hicks observes a similar “nostalgic, romantic” tendency in Cather’s early work, but sees her later work as continuous with this “wrong choice” (“Case” 710). A review of 1935’s *Lucy Gayheart* likewise describes Cather’s “surrender to the temptation of facile sentimentalism which has been her greatest temptation from the beginning” (Troy 461). Noting the affinities between *Lark* and *Gayheart*, another 1935 review concludes, “it has long been clear that Willa Cather is incapable of seeing the predicament of the superior individual or the artist in anything but a softly reflected and sentimental light” (Arvin 465). Yet another pronounces, “She has duplicated her matter and pathos so narrowly . . . that what was once a sincere and vigorous theme has been subjected to a further attenuation of sentimental argument” (Zabel 504–5). A different critic frames a similar observation in more positive terms: “Miss Cather is blessedly unaffected by fashions in writing. She has always followed her own bent. . . . So, she is not afraid of embroidering what is called sentiment into her novels” (Robbins 462–63). Critics of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s thus largely agree that *Lark* is a sentimental novel.

More recently, critics have considered the feelings, sympathies, and other affective dynamics of Cather’s fiction from a cultural studies perspective, primarily locating her work within what Christopher Nealon calls an “affect-genealogy,” rather

which occasions comparisons to her three previous novels. Cather notes this critical tendency in a letter to Greenslet: “every review of *Antonia* was a review of my three novels and discussed them all as things forming a group by themselves” (*Letters* 277).

than an aesthetic genealogy.¹⁷ Discussions of *Lark*'s "conventional design" have traced the currents of romanticism, transcendentalism, and naturalism that inform the novel, as well as analyzed its early modernist sensibility.¹⁸ The two more recent considerations of *Lark*'s sentimentalism are brief and inflected by the critics' desire to distinguish Cather from the sentimental tradition. Sharon O'Brien observes, "In a sense, in her portrait of Thea, Cather returns full circle to the sentimentalist view of women, stressing the necessity of self-sacrifice and self-denial. But her heroine has a different goal than did the sentimentalists—she sacrifices herself for Art, not for husband and family" (22). While O'Brien accurately characterizes Thea's "unorthodox choice[s]," she neglects to note that Thea does, in fact, marry—an ending that mitigates "the immense distance" that O'Brien wants to claim between Cather and sentimental precedent (23). Focusing on Thea's untraditional romance rather than her career, Joan Acocella calls Thea's final conversation with her eventual husband "probably the most unsentimental betrothal scene in all Western fiction," ignoring the fact that the conversation is not actually a betrothal scene but a parting of ways (1). Like O'Brien, Acocella accurately observes many of the unconventional sentimental dynamics of *The Song of the Lark*. Both readings, however,

¹⁷ Nealon participates in an extended critical discussion focused on gender and sexuality in Cather's fiction. See also Butler; Herring; Goldberg; Lindemann; Love; and Sedgwick, "Across Gender." Cather's depictions of ethnic and national identity have also been discussed in terms of affiliation and community. See Michaels and Burrows. For discussions of ethnic and national affiliations in *The Song of the Lark* in particular, see Peck and Stout, "Brown and White."

¹⁸ For a reading of *Lark*'s romanticism, see Rosowski; transcendentalism, see Moseley, "Willa Cather's Transitional Novel." For readings of *Lark*'s naturalism see Ahearn and Pressman. For treatments of the novel's modernist sensibility, see Middleton; Millington; and Rose. Moseley finds an internal progression in *Lark* itself, describing it as Cather's "major transitional novel," a "romantic-naturalistic novel with a modernist center" that emerges "during a time of major transitions in dominant American literary movements" ("Willa Cather's Transitional Novel" 225–26).

go to the opposite extreme. The distance between nineteenth-century sentimentalism and *Lark's* modern sentimentalism is significant, but not nearly as immense as these critics make it out to be.

Unconventional Sentimental Trajectories, Part I

Thea achieves through an artistic career what she might otherwise have achieved through love and marriage: unmitigated passion, psychic cohesion, and corporeal integrity. These parallel trajectories—love and art—conflict not because they are antithetical to one another but because they are such well-matched rivals. Cather says as much in her 1896 reviews of the opera singer Mary Anderson's memoirs, in which she endeavors to explain how Anderson could "have been a queen and then [chosen] to be merely a woman" when she married and ended her career:

With her, art was unconsciously a means, not an end; a stepping stone, not an altar. . . . For a woman [marriage] is plainly the proper consummation—and the happy one. Has any woman ever really had the art instinct, the art necessity? Is it not with them a substitute, a transferred enthusiasm, an escape valve for what has sought or is seeking another channel? But no, there was Sappho and the two great Georges; they had it genuinely; they tried other things and none could satisfy them. (Rev. *A Few* 155, 158)

Most women, Cather concludes, need love and marriage, not art. The rare woman inverts this internal organization. Thea—"made to live with ideas and enthusiasms, not with a

husband,” for whom “marriage would be an incident, not an end”—is just such a rarity (462, 375–76).

Advancing this correspondence between love and art, Thea’s professional trajectory replicates and repurposes the arc of a traditional sentimental education. In the classic sentimental arc, a protagonist learns to discipline her feelings and is rewarded with domestic security and community enfranchisement (e.g., Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* [1850], Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* [1854], Augusta Jane Evans’s *St. Elmo* [1866]). Thea’s artistic development follows a similar course. Like many sentimental protagonists, Thea initially experiences a passionate struggle of incoherent desires and competing impulses.¹⁹ However, as O’Brien suggests, rather than the common sentimental conflicts of romantic love or familial demand, artistic ambition generates Thea’s internal discord. As in most sentimental novels, resolving—or rather achieving an ever-better management of—this psychic drama produces the narrative’s affective momentum.²⁰

Also as in many sentimental novels, Thea’s body is the bellwether of this psychic battle.²¹ The novel begins with Thea’s unruly physicality, uncontrolled internal chaos, and generally unconscious relation to her body. It concludes with her thoroughly conscious, pitch-perfect corporeal regulation in her triumphant performance at the Met:

¹⁹ As Cohen observes, “the paradigmatic sentimental plot is a plot of double bind,” in which the protagonist is caught “between two moral imperatives, each valid in its own right, but which meet in a situation of mutual contradiction” (34). The conventional sentimental double bind is between individual freedom and interpersonal connection.

²⁰ As Berlant notes, sentimental novels exhibit “an orientation toward agency that is focused on ongoing adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world as it presents itself” (*Complaint 2*).

²¹ For discussions of sentimental embodiment, see Dobson, Ritzenberg, and Sanchez-Eppler.

“While she was on the stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea” (*SOL* 525). Thea’s sentimental education is thus professional and artistic: she learns to regulate her body and discipline her emotions to perform coherent, unified sensibility. Because Thea is a singer, the imperative of corporeal control has a particularly literal cast. Her manipulation of her body directly, if invisibly, affects the bodies of her audience—her vibrating vocal cords transmit sound waves, causing their eardrums to vibrate in response. This aesthetic exchange dramatizes common sentimental characterizations of seamless visceral communication, affective contagion, and emotional reciprocity. As Thea’s first music teacher observes, “The feeling was in the voice itself” (85). Cather likewise notes that singing “is half art and half natural phenomenon; it’s personal, concrete, a living woman, a living voice there before” the audience (*Letters* 218). This “concrete” physicality makes Thea’s “living” art widely accessible.

Thea’s professional trajectory also adapts the common rewards of a sentimental education. The cohesion of her final performance is fleeting and rare, lasting only as long as she is on stage. Off stage, she continues to grapple with her uncooperative body, her unresolved longings, and her persistent sense of internal fragmentation. On stage, she successfully extinguishes these personal dynamics and channels the impersonal talent that T. S. Eliot would soon establish as a hallmark of modernist art.²² Furthering this sense of ongoing division, Thea’s trajectory alters the common sentimental exchange of independent selfhood for interpersonal union: her artistic development both requires a diminished individuality and distances her from the people around her, particularly those

²² Cather’s concept of Thea’s “impersonal” art anticipates Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by three years.

who do not appreciate or understand artistic sensibility. Thea's professional trajectory thus exacerbates, rather than resolves, her life-long sense of a "second," "separate," and "secret" self.²³ As Thea's operative persona coalesces and her artistic angst abates, the gap between what Cather later calls her "human life" and her "artistic life" widens. In her 1932 preface, Cather writes, "Her human life is made up of exacting engagements and dull business detail, of shifts to evade an idle, gaping world which is determined that no artist shall ever do his best. Her artistic life is the only one in which she is happy, or free, or even very real" (*SOL* 618). Internally fragmented and socially alienated, in relentless pursuit of those rare, vital moments of happy freedom, Thea is both a self-conscious modern individual and a committed sentimental subject.

Thea's unconventional sentimentality predates her conflict between love and art. As Thea, aged eleven, fights pneumonia in the opening scene, the narration establishes her as-yet-uneducated sentimental subjectivity, highlighting her unruly physicality and lack of corporeal understanding. While reproducing these sentimental tropes, the scene immediately differentiates Thea from two sentimental types, the innocent child struggling with mortality (e.g., Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and the woman who demonstrates her emotional fortitude and femininity through intensive physical and emotional trial (e.g., Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World*).²⁴

²³ Other critics chronicle *Lark's* interest in separate, second, secret selves. For a reading that links this phenomenon to romantic conceptions of the self, see Rosowski, *Voyage Perilous*. For readings aligned with Henri Bergson's theories of the self, see Moseley's "Historical Essay" and Quirk. For a psychoanalytic reading, see Galioto.

²⁴ Dobson surveys sentimental depictions of dying children. Cohen and Douglas (*Feminization*) elaborate feminine suffering in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental novels.

She had moments of stupor when she did not see anything, and moments of excitement when she felt that something unusual and pleasant was about to happen, when she saw everything clearly in the red light from the isinglass sides of the hard-coal burner [. . .]

As [the doctor] turned to her, she threw herself wearily toward him, half out of her bed. She would have tumbled to the floor had he not caught her. He gave her some medicine and went to the kitchen for something he needed. She drowsed and lost the sense of his being there.

. . . Thea had been moaning with every breath since the doctor came back, but she did not know it. She did not realize that she was suffering pain. When she was conscious at all, she seemed to be separated from her body; to be perched on top of the piano, or on the hanging lamp, watching the doctor sew her up. It was perplexing and unsatisfactory, like dreaming. She wished she could waken up and see what was going on. (9–10).

Lost in the throes of her sensory experience, Thea sees and feels, rather than thinks. She misinterprets her dissociation as a dream, misjudges her body's strength, and miscalculates her distance from the doctor. She is not entirely undiscerning—she knows that she only “seemed to be separated from her body” and that the experience is only “like dreaming”—but she lacks the appropriate framework through which to read and interpret her feelings.

Invoking sentimental archetypes of innocent suffering, *Lark* alters the traditional pathos of this characterization. Thea not only survives; she becomes a detached witness

who views the scene as “perplexing and unsatisfactory.” Thea’s suffering is not emotional; it is hardly physical. These shifts in narrative perspective further alter typical expectations of sentimental identification and the sympathy associated with such dynamics.²⁵ Cather’s subsequent explanation of *Lark*’s narrative perspective—“She goes on, while I stand still in Moonstone”—suggests a straightforward trajectory that parallels Thea’s artistic maturation, but as this opening scene indicates, the narrative perspective fluctuates from the beginning (*Letters* 218). Even when the third-person narrator adopts her point of view, Thea is only intermittently a site of emotional identification—and she is not meant to be. As in this opening scene, Thea’s intimate perspective arguably works against conventional sentimental sympathy. She often lacks feeling in commonly pathos-laden situations like this one. Meanwhile, she responds intensely to moments that inspire artistic passion, like her viewing of the Breton painting. This subjectivity identifies Thea as a unique sentimental type: the struggling artist.

Thea’s professional trajectory educates her in the intertwined dynamics of artistic feeling and feeling differently. Although Thea and those around her intuit her constitutional difference, no one initially understands it. Dr. Howard Archie searches for a physical source, feeling his patient’s head and concluding, “He couldn’t say that it was different from any other child’s head, though he believed that there was something very different about her” (11). Her piano teacher Wunsch wonders, “What was it about the child that one believed in? . . . There was something unconscious and unawakened about her” (107). As Wunsch’s foreshadowing suggests, Thea’s sentimental trajectory relies on the paradoxical familiarity and recognizable patterning of artistic genius. Thea similarly

²⁵ Chandler discusses the common workings of sentimental identification and sympathy.

“knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different”; “She took it for granted that some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it” (88, 238). Thea’s sense of her artistic capacity is thus also separate from her familiar, understood self. “It was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. . . . The something came and went, she never knew how” (87–88). Her “separate” creative self is not always “friendly”—it is equally a source of frustration, uncertainty, anxiety, and, as all of this cataloging of difference suggests, fundamental isolation.

This sense of difference plagues Thea for the entire narrative, even as she increasingly recognizes the other aesthetes in her midst. This affective phenomenon makes Thea an experiential orphan of sorts, one who ultimately finds and joins her family in an abstract aesthetic kinship.²⁶ For reasons Thea and her friends do not yet understand, she relates exclusively to Moonstone’s outsiders, seemingly all of whom possess an aesthetic sensibility. Wunsch is a musically gifted alcoholic wanderer, as is her friend Spanish Johnny. The German Kohlers live outside of Moonstone, in a home full of music and other art, including a striking painting by Mr. Kohler. Dr. Archie is “‘respected’ rather than popular in Moonstone,” where he feels he “is not among his own kind” (94). When an accordion-playing tramp is kicked out of Moonstone and then drowns himself in their water supply, Thea’s empathic response solidifies her allegiance with the outsider and her distance from the town’s uncharitable response. She similarly identifies with Moonstone’s geographically and socially isolated Mexican community. While inspiring

²⁶ Baym notes the frequency with which protagonists of nineteenth-century sentimental novels are orphans, or believe themselves to be (35).

these wide-ranging affinities, Thea's artistic capacity distinguishes her from her family, who (anticipating Virginia Woolf) understand her difference well enough to provide her own bedroom.

As in the common arc of a sentimental education, Thea develops an increasing awareness of and greater control over her internal struggle. Early on, she "unconsciously takes on" the attitudes of those around her and is likened more than once to a "vibrating" machine, who exists "not thinking, not feeling, but evaporating" in semi-conscious passivity (295, 156, 197). In "The Ancient People" section that is frequently cited as the "modernist center" of the novel, Thea's artistic awakening reflects a sentimental logic of corporeal and emotional transformation (Moseley, "Transitional" 225).

[A] song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering. Music had never come to her in that sensuous form before. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety and exaltation and chagrin—never content and indolence. . . . And now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas. (330)

Thea's "power to think" evolves into a mature "power of sensation." In contrast to earlier images of semi-conscious enervation, vague sensation, and unconscious absorption, Thea elects what to incorporate and chooses to "become" these synesthetic alternatives. The

narrative perspective reinforces this evolution in Thea's artistic subjectivity. Where previous instances of dramatic irony showcase Thea's naiveté, misunderstanding, and misperception, the free indirect discourse here emphasizes the accuracy of Thea's contemporaneous thinking and feeling.

Thea's transformation alters the gendered socialization of a common sentimental education. Rather than learning to discipline her feelings through relationships with her contemporaries, Thea recognizes and cedes to her "older and higher obligations" through solitude (339). In a feminized version of the typically masculine West cure, Panther Canyon, Arizona alleviates Thea's urban fatigue and produces a visceral kinship with the canyon's ancient female inhabitants. As "Thea climbed the water trail she began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path. . . . She found herself trying to walk as they must have walked. . . . She could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed" (332). This maternal intuition is out of character for Thea—a woman recurrently described as "not the marrying kind," who pronounces conventional family life "Perfectly hideous!" (113, 350). But as Sarah Clere notes, Cather integrates the ancient women's "ideal and organic" femininity into Thea's artistic development by having Thea recognize the Indian women's pottery as an art akin to her own (33). "[W]hat was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. . . . In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath" (334–35). Thea locates herself in a long line of attempts to capture life's "shining, elusive" essence—in her case, in her body. Solidified by her time in Panther Canyon,

Thea's artistic commitment is, as Boynton suggests, not a sacrifice of her "womanhood" but an ambitious enterprise that affiliates her with an alternative community.

Belonging to this alternative collective is as innate and instinctive as classic sentimental notions of community. *Lark's* detailed cohort of artists, patrons, and other sympathetic aesthetes transcends gender, time, place, and religion. In Panther Canyon, Thea recognizes "the inevitable hardness of human life. No artist gets far who doesn't know that. And you can't know it with your mind. You have to realize it in your body, somehow, deep. It's an animal sort of feeling" (509). This timeless artistic kinship is secular as well as primitive. Thea's "older and higher obligations" are to the kingdom of art, not to a religious body. "There was certainly no kindly Providence that directed one's life; and one's parents did not in the least care what became of one" (339). Juxtaposed to a number of religious characters—including her father the Methodist preacher and her pious sister, Thea belongs to a decidedly modern community.

Despite these moments of communion, Thea sustains a sharp sense of isolation. *Lark's* narrative structure reinforces the growing distance between Thea and those around her. In the final sections of the novel, Thea's narrative perspective appears less and less frequently until, in the Epilogue, it disappears entirely. Other characters' points of view thus establish her enduring fragmentation and increasing separation from those around her. Dr. Archie, the doctor who saves her life in the opening scene, observes that Thea still makes "unconscious" movements and continues to "unconsciously impersonate" people, but she also communicates "a fresh consciousness" and demonstrates a "greater positiveness" that equally makes her "freer in all her movements" (402, 408, 409). To Archie, Thea's evolution renders her increasingly illegible. "Her pale cheeks, her parted

lips, her flashing eyes, seemed suddenly to mean one thing—he did not know what. A light seemed to break upon her from far away—or perhaps from far within” (271). Fred Ottenburg, a cosmopolitan art consumer and the “beer prince” Thea ultimately marries, articulates a more knowledgeable aesthetic perspective. “Fred noticed for the hundredth time how vehemently her body proclaimed her state of feeling” (321). Despite this consistency, Fred also observes Thea’s progression. “She seemed to sit there on the edge, emerging from one world into another” (409). Fred at once contextualizes and depersonalizes Thea’s development. “It was in watching her as she emerged like this, in being near and not too near, that one got, for a moment, so much that one had lost; among other legendary things the legendary theme of the absolutely magical power of a beautiful woman” (409). As her artistic persona coheres, Thea becomes increasingly abstract and aestheticized. Her feelings recede from the narration, displaced by the feelings she inspires in others. This formal shift underscores the permanent emotional gulf between Thea and even her most intimate others and helps to disable any residual sentimental attachment between reader and protagonist.

Lark’s professional trajectory integrates this detachment into Thea’s sentimental accomplishment. Starring at the Met, Thea successfully, if fleetingly, unifies her perennially fragmented sensibility. She controls her body, mastering but not overpowering its sensations with a balance of flexibility and restraint.

That afternoon nothing new came to Thea Kronborg, no enlightenment, no inspiration. She merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long. Her inhibitions chanced to be fewer than usual, and, within herself, she entered into the

inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning.

. . . While she was on the stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea. . . . And her voice was as flexible as her body; equal to any demand, capable of every *nuance*. With the sense of its perfect companionship, its entire trustworthiness, she had been able to throw herself into the dramatic exigencies of the part, everything in her at its best and everything working together. (525–26, emphasis in original)

Incorporating the public persona of “Thea Kronborg,” the now-famous singer, into a self-witnessing perspective “within herself,” the passage reflects Thea’s achievement of her artistic ideal. When she now “throws herself into” singing, she elects to do so with an accurate perception of her target. Deploying sentimental language commonly associated with a trope of romantic union, Thea finds a “sense of perfect companionship” and “entire trustworthiness” in her voice. Further playing out this metaphor, Thea’s performance generates the sentimental novel’s common financial and spiritual rewards—she comes into “full possession” of “the inheritance that she herself had laid up” and “the faith she had kept before she knew its name.” In this moment of perfect union, Thea effectively marries her own talent.

Thea’s achievement is not, however, the “something exquisite” that Cather notes some of her readers desired. Her impeccable performance reflects “nothing new,” “no enlightenment, no inspiration.” It “merely” registers Thea’s steadfast dedication to her long-standing ambition. Numerous contemporaneous reviews affirm this perspective on

Thea's professional trajectory. The *Boston Evening Transcript* avers, "Thea suffered and struggled and above all she worked. Therefore she conquered" (G. 62). One of the readers who misinterpreted Cather's title finds, "She fights her way to the upper air, but her ascent is not a 'winged victory;' it is a resolute, stubborn achievement" (Mabie 64). The *Living Age* echoes this sense of "resolute, stubborn achievement": "Although she treats her art seriously, she has no illusions about it, and manages herself, body, soul and spirit, as coolly as she would discipline a valuable dog" (69). According to the *Living Age*, Thea's "firm determination" and her cool self-discipline identify her as a unique modern "type": "the musical heroine of to-day" (69). "She desires both fame and love, but most of all she longs for perfection in her art, and works for it in . . . dogged . . . fashion" (69–70). Such classification indicates the mundane difficulties as well as the fleeting triumphs of artistic life.²⁷ It also enunciates Thea's competing sentimental trajectories, and art's clear victory over love.

Further underscoring the difference between *Lark's* modern sentimentalism and traditional sentimental experience, Thea's professional trajectory ends with the isolated aftermath of this performance. Many of her fellow aesthetes are in the audience—including Archie, Fred, Spanish Johnny, and her Chicago piano teacher—but unlike the classic sentimental homecoming or wedding, this reunion remains abstract and disembodied. Thea leaves the theater, alone and veiled. Averting her eyes from the small

²⁷ As Thea tells Archie, "My life is full of jealousies and disappointments, you know. . . . If you love the good thing vitally, enough to give up for it all that one must give up for it, then you must hate the cheap thing just as hard. I tell you, there is such a thing as creative hate!" (504). Thea's use of the second person assumes the consistency of such an experience—not just for her, but for all artists.

crowd by the stage door, she gets into another cab. She fails to see the lone man, Spanish Johnny, who acknowledges her triumph:

Had she lifted her eyes an instant and glanced out through her white scarf, she must have seen the only man in the crowd who had removed his hat when she emerged, and who stood with it crushed up in his hand. And she would have known him, changed as he was. . . . But she would have known him. She passed so near that he could have touched her, and he did not put on his hat until her taxi had snorted away. Then he walked down Broadway with his hands in his overcoat pockets, wearing a smile which embraced all the stream of life that passed him and the lighted towers that rose into the limpid blue of the evening sky. If the singer, going home exhausted in her cab, was wondering what was the good of it all, that smile, could she have seen it, would have answered her. It is the only commensurate answer. (527)

Shifting to hypothetical rhetoric, the narrative perspective becomes increasingly distant, moving further and further away from “the singer” and her admirer. The thrice-repeated pronoun (“it”) makes it unclear whether the perfectly equal “commensurate answer” refers to what happens in the narrative (the potentially-witnessed yet unseen smile) or what does not happen in the narrative (a received smile). The melancholic implications are the same either way. For Thea as well as her admirer, interpersonal connection and shared emotional experience are theoretically available but unrealizable. In *Lark’s* narrative of modern artistic sensibility, connection coexists with a fundamentally isolated individual experience.

Unconventional Sentimental Trajectories, Part II

The Song of the Lark's marriage plot also repurposes conventional sentimental patterns. Perhaps the most obvious revision is the marriage plot's minor status in the novel as a whole. As Acocella describes, *Lark* "quietly secede[s] from the tradition" of literature about women, in which "who marries whom, or at least who goes to bed with whom, is not only a small matter, it is the subject" (1–2). Suggesting the comparative irrelevance of "who marries whom" in the novel, in 1937 Cather cut all but one reference to the marriage without needing to alter the plotline in any other capacity.²⁸ Further exemplifying the marriage's marginal status, Greenslet's original Reader's Report indicates that Thea marries Dr. Archie, rather than Fred.²⁹

Regardless of whether Greenslet confused the characters or whether Cather rewrote the ending, this anecdote suggests not only the peripheral nature of the marriage itself, but also the similar function of the novel's different male characters. While not entirely interchangeable, the male characters are equally supportive of Thea's artistic trajectory. As Fred tells Thea, "You ride and fence and walk and climb, but I know that all the while you're getting somewhere in your mind. All these things are instruments; and I, too, am an instrument" (348). Inverting the expected primacy of the marriage plot

²⁸ The majority of Cather's 1937 edits occur in Parts V and VI. Cather abbreviates Fred's dialogue and free indirect discourse without substantially altering his character, his role in the novel, or the nature of his relationship with Thea. There are no changes to plot events. For further discussion of these amendments, see Heyeck and Woodress and Ronning.

²⁹ Greenslet's report asserts that Thea "eventually marries the man who was a young doctor and has been the friend of her girlhood, but who later becomes a wealthy mine-owner, one of the leading men of Colorado."

and the individual importance of the male characters to Thea's development, *Lark* also alters the tension one might expect between Thea's professional ambition and her romantic relationships ("Oh, I don't mind," Fred tells her, "not a bit" [348]). In fact, Thea's artistic ambition presents the opposite of an obstacle to the marriage plot: it resolves the non-reciprocity and other unconventional romantic dynamics between Thea and the men who love her by channeling their love and devotion toward the shared object of her art.

Lark's marriage plot likewise reconfigures sentimental expectations of gender and sexuality. The next section details these role reversals and revised sentimental sensibilities at greater length. For the purposes of outlining the marriage plot, suffice it to say that Thea is repeatedly characterized as "not the marrying kind," while her four potential husbands clearly are: three of them are already married, and the fourth has thoroughly planned his honeymoon with Thea (113, 365). Fred and Dr. Archie are unhappily married to selfish women who seduce their husbands (a commonality that inspires several conversations between the men about marriage's "depressing" nature and its "barbarous" laws [437]). Thea's third married suitor, Nordquist, is also estranged from his wife and two children, for reasons that seem to have to do with his international opera career, his gambling, and his infidelity. Thea's fourth potential husband is a sentimental martyr: when he is mortally injured in a railroad accident, Ray Kennedy leaves Thea six hundred dollars intended to further her professional musical career.

In the context of the marriage plot, Thea is also a sentimental victim. First through foreshadowing and then through an extended backstory, the reader knows that Fred is already married when Thea goes to Mexico with him. By the time Thea and Fred get

married in the Epilogue, Thea has been romantically involved with two married men, one of whom (Nordquist) is a debtor who asks Thea to finance his divorce from his current wife, the other of whom (Fred) is an alcoholic who convinces her to travel unwed to Mexico rather than get married in Chicago as she proposes. Using his family and her professional commitment as excuses for remaining unwed, Fred does not disclose his estranged marital status until the couple is already in Mexico. The *Boston Evening Transcript* describes their relationship in classic sentimental terms: “In Chicago, she met the man who was to teach her what love and passion meant, to waken her through suffering to womanhood” (G. 62). As more recent critics have noted, Thea and Fred are remarkably similar and mutually unconventional. Their “homosocial romance,” I propose, includes their common sentimental victimhood, in which both characters learn through their respective emotional trials and thus earn their mutual marital reward.³⁰

Despite being introduced as “a lady-killer” who has “had a lot of sweethearts,” Fred is also a victim of his own emotions several times over (296, 358). His “dark and slender and fiery” wife seduces the unwitting Harvard junior while she is engaged to his friend, then refuses to grant Fred a divorce (368). Although Thea does not consciously seduce Fred, her talent exerts a magnetic force. Originally, Thea “seemed to him distinctly not the marrying kind. She impressed him as equipped to be an artist, and to be nothing else. . . . He had not anticipated that she would grow more fond of him than his immediate usefulness warranted. . . . A lovesick girl or a flirtatious woman he could have handled easily enough. But a personality like that, unconsciously revealing itself for the first time under the exaltation of a personal feeling . . . He had to watch it, and then he

³⁰ See Goldberg; Lindemann; Love; Nealon; Sedgwick, “Across Gender.”

had to share it” (374–75). The last two sections of the novel prove Fred’s sincere, unselfish interest in Thea’s art, as he continues to support her career and reproach himself for his earlier actions. Adapting the common source of sentimental reform, Thea’s unwavering devotion to her artistic principles (rather than her religious morals) inspires and facilitates Fred’s redemption. As he tells Thea, “Loving you is a heroic discipline” (514). He remains true to the cause for nearly a decade.

In a further twist to the classic seduction plot, the novel suggests that Fred and Thea are both victims of Thea’s talent, rather than anything conscious, active, or within the characters’ control. “You never do a single thing without an ulterior motive,” Fred tells Thea; but whereas “every woman, every interesting woman, has ulterior motives,” Thea’s “credible” and “unconscious” motives are not about marriage but about her creative future (348). Thea is equally subject to these motives. As she explains, “Your work becomes your personal life. . . . It’s like being woven into a big web. You can’t pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life” (501). This displaced agency works to explain and excuse the unconventional morality of Fred and Thea’s romance.

Critics who describe Fred and Thea’s relationship as a “homosocial romance” often cite the Panther Canyon exchanges as evidence of their queer relation and focus on the physical dynamics of their relationship. Altering sentimental definitions of femininity and masculinity, their symmetry also obfuscates classic distinctions of victim and victimizer. Fred and Thea are similarly passionate, physically robust, artistically expressive, and vigorously embodied. They both tend towards self-interest and self-involvement. They also look alike. As the ranch’s caretaker watches Fred and Thea throw

rocks, he perceives “two figures nimbly moving in the light, both slender and agile, entirely absorbed in their game. They looked like two boys. Both were hatless and both wore white shirts” (341). But they quickly differentiate themselves. Thea focuses intensely on the game; Fred focuses on Thea. When he impulsively tries to kiss her, Thea responds according to her own impulses: “Startled, [she] gave him an angry push, drove at him with her free hand in a manner quite hostile” (343). Fred responds in kind, “pinn[ing] both her arms down and kiss[ing] her resolutely” (343). Watching this scene play out, the caretaker concludes, “I guess that young lady can take care of herself. . . . Young Fred, though, he has quite a way with them” (344). This exchange demonstrates the particular functionality of Thea and Fred’s relationship, in which their physical and emotional impulses mediate and moderate each other’s, and in which both characters appreciate that Thea’s primary feelings and primitive desires attach to her personal achievement rather than her romantic future. The caretaker’s comment also instantiates the dramatic irony that recurs throughout their interaction, in which Thea appears naïve and vulnerable while remaining strong-willed and resilient.

Thea and Fred’s mutual unconventionality also inflects their untraditional romantic desires. Other men, Fred tells Thea, “would say you were all brain and muscle; that you have no feeling,” whereas he is willing to be less than “the whole target” of her affection (349). Fred shares Thea’s desire to “do almost everything” but sit quietly in a hammock as “the Apollo of a homey flat,” to have a relationship “hooked up with an idea” other than marriage (349). They both understand that Thea is, as Fred puts it, “not a nest-building bird,” that she “will never sit alone with a pacifier and a novel,” that if she had stayed in Moonstone and had “commonplace” children, she would “have killed them

with driving” (350, 394). As Fred explains, “You’ve no time to sit round and analyze your conduct or your feelings. Other women give their whole lives to it. They’ve nothing else to do” (394). Her different desires, Thea agrees, are less about domesticity, child-rearing, or a lack of feeling than her priorities of independence, freedom, and self-possession: “It’s waking up every morning with the feeling that your life is your own, and your strength is your own, and your talent is your own; that you’re all there, and there’s no sag in you” (350). Fred not only accepts Thea’s priorities; he values them, albeit for reasons that Thea does not fully comprehend.

Despite its overt unconventionality, Fred and Thea’s relationship takes a rather conventional turn. As a consequence of their time in Mexico, Thea confronts a classic sentimental dilemma: she becomes a fallen woman who must navigate social judgment while exhibiting her own form of moral integrity.³¹ As Boynton anticipates in his review, a number of readers were upset by this episode. In a 1916 letter, Cather notes that her usual readers “say they can’t read me because it’s all rot and most immoral. [. . . Others] cry imploringly ‘She didn’t live with him in Mexico anyhow, did she?’” (*Letters* 231). The novel omits the entirety of this episode and, as Cather’s letter suggests, does not provide much retrospective detail about the experience to mitigate its suggestive implications.³² Indeed, Cather notes, one reader “says that just because my bad morals are

³¹ Cohen notes that in eighteenth-century sentimental novels “virtue is an active process. It does not necessarily equal all avoidance of fault or even chastity” (60). Accordingly, “adultery is not simply passion transgressing the law. Both positions in the conflict [between adultery and chastity in the face of erotic love] are given moral dignity” in the sentimental novel (35).

³² Upon their return, Thea tells Fred, “I don’t think there will ever be a question of anybody else. Not if I can help it. I suppose I’ve given you every reason to think there will be,—at once, on shipboard, any time” (397). Fred dismisses this concern on several levels, “That’s one thing you’ve never done. That’s like any common woman” (397).

not very vulgar they are the more insidious” (*Letters* 231, emphasis in original). Thea’s trip to Mexico thus dramatizes her unique daring, her innate separation from social standards, and her connection to the historical freedoms and natural liberties also represented by Panther Canyon.³³ Although Thea has always possessed these qualities, her time in Mexico initiates her in the social costs of such untraditional organization of feeling.

Lark resolves this conundrum by turning it into a component of Thea’s artistic development. Fred inaugurates this logic of artistic exception, suggesting that Thea is not in altogether foreign territory: “From your cradle, as I once told you, you’ve been ‘doing it’ on the side, living your own life, admitting to yourself things that would horrify [Dr. Archie]. You’ve always deceived him to the extent of letting him think you different from what you are” (390–91). What makes the situation unique, Thea responds, is that her recent deviation is a question of behavior rather than emotional sensibility. “Of course, I’ve had my own thoughts. . . . But I’ve never done anything before that he would much mind” (391). The distinction between thought and deed plagues Thea, but also it transforms her ability to perform. Starring as the tragic heroine Sieglinde in Wagner’s *Die Walkure*, Thea delivers a masterful performance that mimics her exchange with Fred one chapter earlier.³⁴ For all its disappointments, her love supports her art.

³³ In 1915, Mexico was still in the midst of a revolution and represented general lawlessness in the American imagination. See Oles.

³⁴ Fred and Thea’s final exchange explicitly alludes to Wagner’s opera. Separated at birth, the twins Sieglinde and Siegmund are now both unhappily married. The characters fixate on a sword that they have been told will effectively set them both free; ultimately, Siegmund dies in battle when the sword shatters, while the pregnant Sieglinde flees. In Fred and Thea’s final exchange, the pair discuss their marriage-like sense of responsibility to one another over the past decade, the ways in which they were “caught young” (513). Fred reveals that he anticipated that Thea would one day play Brunnhilde,

The conclusion of *Lark*'s marriage plot seems to mirror and invert the professional conclusion, in which Thea again ends alone—this time without achieving her fairy tale. In the penultimate chapter, Thea and Fred discuss their vexed decade-long romance and decide to part as friends. As Thea tells Fred, “I don't see why anybody wants to marry an artist, anyhow. I remember Ray Kennedy used to say he didn't see how any woman could marry a gambler, for she would only be marrying what the game left” (514). Thea's analogy acknowledges the rivalry between her competing sentimental trajectories and reiterates art's clear victory. Fred draws a similar comparison. The morning after one of Thea's successful performances, Fred tells Archie, “I feel rather weddingish. . . . I was thinking to-night when they sprung the wedding music, how any fool can have that stuff played over him when he walks up the aisle with some dough-faced little hussy who's hooked him. But it isn't every fellow who can see—well, what we saw tonight. There are compensations in life, Dr. Howard Archie, though they come in disguise” (464). Thea's artistic success, Cather suggests, equally rewards the men who love her with feelings that approximate and supersede romantic love.

However, in the Epilogue, we learn through Thea's Aunt Tillie and the Denver papers that “Thea Kronborg had married Frederick Ottenburg, the head of the Brewers' Trust” (533). This is the only marital detail provided, suggesting the irrelevance of how the marriage came to pass and again how limited its function is in Thea's happy ending. Further underscoring this logic, in 1937 Cather cut this detail and simply replaced one

and that he had a sword made for this occasion. The “property spear” currently hangs over the fireplace in his library, but he promises to send it to her—symbolically severing their relationship as well (512). Thea reenacts this exchange onstage hours later, as the “pair began their loving inspection of each other's beauties, . . . love impelled her . . . [Thea's voice] blossomed into memories and prophecies, it recounted and it foretold” (523).

“he” with “her husband” so as not to delete the marriage entirely. Cather also cut a second detail that no doubt confused many readers: “Thea came down the stairs in the wedding robe embroidered in silver, with a train so long it took six women to carry it” (535). Focalized through Tillie’s perspective, this image seems to come from Thea’s performance of *Lohengrin* rather than her actual wedding, an uncertainty that reflects the parallels between these alternative trajectories as well as Tillie’s inability to distinguish between art and life. Indeed, *Lark*’s Epilogue is more about Tillie than about Thea. Implicitly responding to Thea’s conclusion that “We don’t get fairy tales in this world,” Thea achieves Tillie’s fairy tale ending, not her own (515).

[Tillie] had always insisted, against all evidence, that life was full of fairy tales, and it was! . . . Once more Tillie has to remind herself that it is all true, and is not something she has “made up.” Like all romancers, she is a little terrified at seeing one of her wildest conceits admitted by the hardheaded world. If our dream comes true, we are almost afraid to believe it; for that is the best of all good fortune, and nothing better can happen to any of us. (537–38)

Through Tillie, long characterized as “a soul too zealous,” *Lark* anticipates a critique of the novel’s recourse to a traditional sentimental conclusion (536). Like Thea, Tillie recognizes “all evidence” that fairy tales do not come true, that she is prone to making up stories, that the world is “hardheaded.” Also like Thea, Tillie’s dream has very little to do with marriage: although “Moonstone people expected that Tillie’s vain-gloriousness would take another form” once the already-famous Thea wed, Tillie “did not boast much about Ottenburg”; she continues to brag about her niece’s artistic success (533). In

Tillie's fairy tale, as in *Lark's* narrative of modern femininity, marriage is literally an afterthought.

Unconventional Sentimental Sensibilities

In *The Song of the Lark*, to be "sentimental" is to feel deeply, especially about romantic love, and to be governed by these strong feelings, rather than by pragmatic reason. This is what Fred means when he tells Thea, "you are not a sentimental person" (365). It is also what Thea means when she responds, "I think I am, a little; about you. . . . Maybe I'm not sentimental, but I'm not very light, either" (365). Thea's moderate sentimentality allows her to uncharacteristically "drift" according to her romantic desires in Panther Canyon, to elect to go to Mexico with Fred "without having any clear reason," and then to prioritize reason once again when she learns of his marriage (348, 365). As Thea tells Fred, "Being married is one thing and not being married is the other thing, and that's all there is to it. I can't see how you reasoned with yourself, if you took the trouble to reason" (396). To the extent that *Lark* criticizes sentimentality, the critique is not about being sentimental, but rather, echoing Cather's early criticism, about the consequences of unchecked sentimentality. While rebuking hyperbolic emotionality, uncritical reading practices, and moralizing piety, *Lark* endorses other repercussions of sentimentality, including altruism and self-sacrifice. Sentimentality itself is thus a neutral trait, albeit one that perpetually runs the risk of overexcitement and misdirection.

Lark meticulously redistributes sentimentality and its associations across gender lines, but the novel does not remove gender from the equation altogether.³⁵ While the negative consequences of sentimentality characterize both male and female characters, the novel is decidedly less critical of the masculine versions of strong emotion, sentimental reading, and religious belief. The sentimental men also more frequently exhibit the assets of sentimentality, often through traditionally feminine behaviors like caretaking and domestic labor. Through these gender distinctions and role reversals, *The Song of the Lark* develops and affirms an alternative sentimental sensibility—one that is circumspect about the perils of sentimentality and its idealistic ambitions.

Sentimental fiction has always been concerned with hyperbolic emotionality. In nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, Nina Baym notes, “[m]erely to feel strongly is to be at the mercy of oneself and others; it is to be self-absorbed. . . . From [nineteenth-century sentimental writers’] point of view, the merely feelingful person was selfish and superficial, hence incapable of love” (24). In *The Song of the Lark*, hyperbolic emotionality takes several offensive forms of selfish superficiality, ranging from the ultra-aggressive to the passive. Katarina Ottenburg, Fred’s mother, is “brutally sentimental and heavily romantic” (311). Katarina’s emotional intensity and dramatic flair persist from her youth, when the “handsome, headstrong girl, a rebellious and violent force in a provincial society” follows an aging Wagner around Europe and is engaged to three different men before her husband (311). At the opposite end of this emotionally masochistic spectrum, one of the women Thea meets in Chicago is “pale,

³⁵ Cather also reworks expectations of gender and sentimentality in two earlier short stories, “The Sentimentality of William Tavener” (1900) and “Tommy, the Unsentimental” (1896), her response to James M. Barrie’s *Sentimental Tommy* (Cather’s Tommy is female). For discussions of the latter, see Abate and Seivert.

anaemic, and sentimental”; “apologetic,” “sickly,” and “depressing,” Irene Andersen’s “manner was always that of withdrawing” (190–91). Widowed young, defrauded by her husband’s family, and still nursing her pain, Irene directs her “violent tastes” inwards and into rare aesthetic outlets (192). She “annoy[s]” Thea by “tr[ying] to make a heroine of her, just as Tillie Kronborg had always done” and, with the help of an equally “excitable and dramatic” dressmaker, designs a loud concert gown for Thea (192).

In *The Song of the Lark*, hyperbolic emotionality produces an even more objectionable outcome than an incapacity for love: superficial magnanimity, or parasitism disguised as generosity. Tillie’s emotionality is not quite as “violent” as Katarina’s or Irene’s, but it is equally sycophantic. “A foolish young girl, Tillie lived in the splendid sorrows of ‘Wanda’ and ‘Strathmore’; a foolish old girl, she lives in her niece’s triumphs” (534). Also a member of the local drama club and an avid follower of theatrical celebrities, Tillie perpetually “lives in” other people’s narratives. Like Katarina and Irene, she endlessly pursues vicarious emotional experience—the more reductive and undemanding the source, the better (*Wanda* and *Strathmore* are novels by Cather’s disdained Ouida). Tillie’s acting roles are similarly formulaic and hyperbolic, always “character parts, the flirtatious old maid or the spiteful *intrigante*” (73–74, emphasis in original). Like Irene, Tillie’s “romantic imagination found possibilities in her niece. . . . [S]he often built up brilliant futures for Thea, adapting freely the latest novel she had read” (73). For all her ridiculousness, Tillie’s “misguided aspirations” are hardly innocuous (74). When Thea is a girl in *Moonstone*, Tillie’s “conceited,” “condescending” “vaunting” of Thea’s talent regularly “made enemies for her niece” (76, 74). When Thea achieves success, Tillie boasts about her niece’s nightly income, not just to her immediate

neighbors but also in “the east part of town, where . . . the humbler people of Moonstone still live” (538). The narrator explains this behavior by reiterating Tillie’s childish nature—a quality that only furthers the critique of her character.

Although male characters also derive extensive pleasure from Thea and her artistic capacity, the narrative condones this ennobled aesthetic exchange. Fred describes what “one got, for a moment” by being near Thea in very different terms than her female fans: “among other legendary things [one got] the legendary theme of the absolutely magical power of a beautiful woman” (409). The difference between the sentimental women and the sentimental men is, apparently, a question of aesthetic sensibility. How Thea is perceived (a fairy tale heroine or “a beautiful woman”) determines what her audience “gets” or “takes” from her, and whether or not this is a parasitic or symbiotic exchange. The men’s feelings reflect a higher aesthetic nature, rather than the poor taste, naïve fantasy, and self-other collapse that characterize Thea’s female admirers. Irene and Tillie appear incapable of self-awareness, whereas Archie recognizes, “I guess I’m a romantic old fellow, underneath. And you’ve always been my romance” (503). Thea similarly functions as her music teachers’ aesthetic proxy. At her final performance, one mentor reflects, “She owes me nothing. . . . She paid her way. She always gave something back, even then” (524). These men recognize Thea as an artistic genius to revere, not a fairy tale heroine to consume. Even Ray Kennedy, a “deeply sentimental” “idealist” who perceives Thea as “like a wedding cake, a thing to dream on,” lives “for Thea,” not through her (51, 164, 120). The women’s feelings redound back to their personal pursuit of hyperbolic emotion and exchange direct lived experience for the

leeching of indirect pleasure. The men's feelings are less personal and sustain an inherent separation from Thea.

The pursuit of vicarious emotional experience engenders another problematic sentimental stereotype: uncritical reading. Anna, Thea's thoroughly "conventional" sister, "read sentimental religious story-books and emulated the spiritual struggles and magnanimous behavior of their persecuted heroines. Everything had to be interpreted for Anna. Her opinions about the smallest and most commonplace things were gleaned from the Denver papers" and various religious writings (147). Anna's inability to think for herself gives rise to her sheep-like piety: "Scarcely anything was attractive to her in its natural state—indeed, scarcely anything was decent until it was clothed by the opinion of some authority. Her ideas about habit, character, duty, love, marriage, were grouped under heads, like a book of popular quotations, and were totally unrelated to the emergencies of human living" (147). Anna's sentimental notions, like her preferred sentimental "story-books," are derivative and "totally unrelated" to real life (147). Anna is "harmless, mild except where her prejudices were concerned, neat and industrious, with no graver fault than priggishness; but her mind had really shocking habits of classification" (147). Despite Anna's lack "of warm impulses," traditional sentimental novels appeal to her because of their simple categories of good and evil (147). Comporting with Anna's prejudicial desire to classify everything within a reductive, moral superstructure, sentimental literature reinforces her parochial intolerance.

If sentimental literature does not mandate such a limited worldview, its unrealistic formulas do nothing to challenge or destabilize the reader. Fred references this soothing quality in his likening of a woman's novel and a pacifier—an analogy that yokes the

parasitic desire for vicarious emotion to a childish desire for palliative distraction that substitutes for actual nourishment. While the majority of *Lark*'s uncritical sentimental readers are women, there is at least one man amongst them. Reverend Lars Larsen "liked all the softer things of life,—in so far as he knew about them. He . . . read a great many novels, preferring sentimental ones" (184). Larsen's reading choices are in keeping with the rest of his vacuous personality. "Born lazy," Reverend Larsen "was simple-hearted and kind; he enjoyed his candy and his children and his sacred cantatas. He could work energetically at almost any form of play" (183–85). Like Anna and Tillie, Larsen's reading reflects his character—he is not insidious or dangerous, but he is hardly productive, creative, or admirable.

In contrast to these bad readers, Ray, Archie, and Thea are more expansive, sophisticated, and purposeful literary consumers. Ray, a self-educated "freethinker" and an aspiring travel writer, reads for "self-instruction": after "worr[ying] an old grammar to tatters, and read[ing] instructive books with the help of a pocket dictionary," the former sheep-herder "pondered upon Prescott's histories, and the works of Washington Irving" (56). Following this successful self-schooling, Ray, now a railroad engineer, "read Robert Ingersoll's speeches and 'The Age of Reason'"—examples of his desire to evaluate extant paradigms (56). Archie is a similarly thoughtful, wide-ranging, and reflective reader: "Though he read Balzac all the year through, he still enjoyed the Waverley Novels as much as when he had first come upon them. . . . He nearly always read Scott on Christmas and holidays, because it brought back the pleasures of his boyhood" (97). Archie's "romantic tastes" also include poetry, particularly the work of Robert Burns (97). But in addition to this nostalgic escapism, Archie, like Ray, also reads as a means to

a real-life end. “In his old Flint’s *Physiology* there was still a poem he had pasted there when he was a student; some verses by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes about the ideals of the medical profession”; he also owns Balzac’s *The Country Doctor* (96). Further excusing Archie’s escapism, his “habit” of reading “to lose himself” seemingly ends when his wife dies, freeing him from his unhappy life in Moonstone (50). Once he becomes a successful mining investor, Archie owns a Denver mansion with a large library, but there is no record of his reading.

Thea’s reading habits reflect an equivalent trajectory. As a child in Moonstone, Thea reads constantly. She prefers the disillusioned reflections of the wandering Byronic hero in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to the conventional love lyric “The Maid of Athens” (16). Her favorite fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen,” features an active young heroine who saves her friend (24). She also enjoys Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the non-fiction account of the Greely party’s polar expedition (66, 63). When she is slightly older, Thea buys a poor translation of *Anna Karenina* because of its foreign setting and “because the first sentence interested her very much,” presumably because she identifies with the concept of an idiosyncratic unhappy family (145). Although she considers reading her “business,” once Thea opens *Anna Karenina*, “It was the night of the ball in Moscow” (145). Like *Lark*’s sentimental readers, Thea also enjoys identifying with the protagonist and, as the free indirect discourse reinforces, viscerally inhabiting another world. But she chooses classic, more adventure-driven, and more challenging literature. Once her own artistic climb begins, she seemingly stops reading. Like Archie, she has a library in her New York apartment, but all we know is that “the white bookshelves [are] full of books and scores” (471).

Evoking Cather's description of art's function for most women, in *The Song of the Lark*, reading is "a substitute, a transferred enthusiasm, an escape valve for what has sought or is seeking another channel" (Rev. *A Few* 158). The proper channel of Thea's energy is her art; reading, like most other activities, is mere sublimation.³⁶

Sentimental reading also frequently accompanies and feeds into religiosity—one of the most disparaged traits in *The Song of the Lark*. In addition to the empty devotions and self-righteousness it inspires, religion is fraught with double standards, many of them gendered. When the town rejects the tramp, Thea questions the hypocrisy of nominally Christian people. "If [my father] believes the Bible, he ought to have gone to the calaboose and cleaned that man up and taken care of him. That's what I can't understand; do people believe the Bible, or don't they? . . . There's not one person in Moonstone that really lives the way the New Testament says" (154). Archie responds that "most religions are passive, and they tell us chiefly what we should not do" (142). This didacticism explains Anna's and Reverend Larsen's preference for sentimental literature, as well as the underlying logic of several books of religious poetry by various ministers' wives. Despite Ray's atheism, his "sentimental veneration for all women" includes the "sentimental conception of women that they should be deeply religious, though men were at liberty to doubt and finally to deny" (57, 153). Even as *Lark* critiques such gender norms, its own gender division largely supports the theory that women's uncritical emotionality inclines them toward religion.

Men's sentimentality often leads in more productive and truly generous directions. Dr. Archie's profession reflects his "sentimental," "romantic" nature and his

³⁶ For another account of Thea's reading practices, see Olin-Ammentorp, "You Are What You Read."

caretaking capacities (96). He is not just an intelligent doctor; “he was a good nurse, and had a reverence for the bodies of women and children” (97). The opening scene belabors this nursing skill: Archie gently wraps Thea’s chest with hot plaster and then takes out a needle and thread and sews her up in the plaster cast. When he finishes, he puts on the clean nightgown he has warmed by the fire, tucks her in to bed, and brushes the hair from her eyes. Archie’s wife throws her husband’s domestic competence, gentle care, and emotional generosity into further relief: “The little, lop-sided cake at the church supper, the cheapest pincushion, the skimpiest apron at the bazaar, were always Mrs. Archie’s contribution” (94). Late in the novel, the dust-phobic woman dies in a house fire caused by rubbing her furniture with gasoline. Dr. Archie, meanwhile, cultivates an abundant garden and gives away his famous strawberries. He also accompanies Thea to Chicago, funds her study in Germany, takes care of her dying mother, and attends her mother’s funeral in Thea’s stead. Thea refers to Archie as “almost like my father” and he operates in this parental role (389).

Lest there be any doubt about Archie’s “particular interest” in Thea, the narrator insists that it comes from his aesthetic sensibility (6). As he cares for Thea in the opening scene, “he thought to himself what a beautiful thing a little girl’s body was,—like a flower. It was so neatly and delicately fashioned, so soft, and so milky white. . . . Dr. Archie could not help thinking how he would cherish a little creature like this if she were his” (10–11). Although the age difference is unsettling (he is thirty, she is eleven), Dr. Archie’s fantasies of possession are more aesthetic than erotic: she is “a beautiful thing,” “like a flower,” “so neat and delicately fashioned.” Exemplifying what Margaret Cohen calls a “sentimental blazon,” these descriptions evoke tropes of virginal innocence and

feminine purity, though they also reveal the suggestive nature of theoretically chaste tropes (54). Cather anticipates the reader's potential discomfort by having Anna express these concerns: "Dr. Archie's whole manner with Thea, Anna often told her mother, was too free. . . . The kindlier manifestations of human nature (about which Anna sang and talked, in the interests of which she went to conventions and wore white ribbons) were never realities to her after all" (148). Cather thus dismisses Anna's reading of Dr. Archie's affection as an erroneous interpretation, colored by her religiosity and her lack of genuine sympathy, artistic appreciation, generosity, or human understanding.

As much as Archie embodies altruism, Ray Kennedy embodies self-sacrifice. Although he does not understand Thea's artistic aspirations, he is loyal to her desires, contributing his life savings to further her study when it becomes clear that he will not live to marry her. Prior to his mortal injury, Ray demonstrates his "steady kindness," "chivalry," and devotion to Thea by bringing her small gifts and resolutely maintaining his ideas of proper male-female conduct (120). He will not talk to Thea about subjects he deems inappropriate, including his plans to marry her when she comes of age. In keeping with *Lark's* gender role obfuscation, Ray is "as fussy about his car as an old maid about her birdcage," according to one of his brakemen, while another "call[s] him 'the bride,' because he kept the caboose and bunks so clean" (122). He also robs Indian graves and beats a man up for disparaging a woman.

A model of sentimental traits, Ray contributes numerous lessons to Thea's sentimental education. Their deathbed exchange features a series of meaningful gazes, blurred by mutual tears and solidified by tender touches. Two of the more subtle corporeal tropes that appear in sentimental novels, the touch and the gaze commonly

facilitate sentimentalism's basic organizing principle, in which subjective feeling functions as a primary source of interpersonal connection. In its bodily contact between two characters, the touch literalizes the unmediated transmission that many other sentimental tropes imply. The gaze connotes a similar instantaneous exchange between two bodies. For Ray and Thea, these profound exchanges are less about personal connection than about Thea's artistic future: "The simple, humble, faithful something in Ray's eyes went straight to Thea's heart. . . . It was the first time she had ever been conscious of that power to bestow intense happiness by simply being near any one. She always remembered this day as the beginning of that knowledge" (163). Ray's sincerity, humility, and faithfulness produce a professional lesson for Thea rather than translate to a mimetic relational response: physical proximity and abstraction, she recognizes, can inspire intense emotion in others.

So what about the protagonist herself? Other characters echo Thea's self-evaluation as just "a little" sentimental. Her mentor's wife gladly observes, "Miss Kronborg was not in the least sentimental about her husband" (199). Her father likewise reassures himself that Thea will be fine in Chicago because "you couldn't put much sentiment across with her" (173). Mr. Kronborg also refers to his daughter as "a born old maid" and suggests she leave school and become a piano teacher:

Thea is not the marrying kind. . . . I don't see Thea bringing up a family. She's got a good deal of her mother in her, but she hasn't got all. She's too peppery and too fond of having her own way. Then she's always got to be ahead in everything. That kind make good church-workers and

missionaries and school teachers, but they don't make good wives. They fret all their energy away, like colts, and get cut on the wire. (112–13)

Lacking certain feelings and possessing an excess of others, Thea is too ambitious, too competitive, too energetic, too selfish, and too devoted to a non-marital cause to comport with traditional definitions of sentimental femininity.

As her dual plot trajectories demonstrate, Thea is unconventionally sentimental, not “unsentimental” or lacking in emotion. Although her childhood feelings are more nebulous (she has not yet realized their artistic source), once Thea meets Fred, she understands romantic love in relation to the feelings inspired by art. For Thea, art always inspires stronger emotions, while her experience of love is more modulated. Her most intense feelings, however, fuse art and love. Following her seemingly final goodbye with Fred, Thea “think[s] of something serious, something that had touched her deeply” at a recent piano recital:

In front of her sat an old German couple, evidently poor people who had made sacrifices to pay for their excellent seats. Their intelligent enjoyment of the music, and their friendliness with each other, had interested her more than anything on the program. When the pianist began a lovely melody in the first movement of the Beethoven D minor sonata, the old lady put out her plump hand and touched her husband's sleeve and they looked at each other in recognition. They both wore glasses, but such a look! Like forget-me-nots, and so full of happy recollections. Thea wanted to put her arms around them and ask them how they had been able to keep a feeling like that, like a nosegay in a glass of water. (515–16)

In a one-two punch of sentimental tropes—the touch, the gaze—the passage establishes all that is inaccessible to Thea by virtue of her profession and her success, or so she imagines. This passage reverses the common order, in which Thea exists as an abstracted object for other characters’ fantasies. Here, in a passage focalized through her perspective, Thea imagines an unmediated emotional connection that is literally in front of her, yet beyond her reach. In fact, the passage’s connections are all triangulated and mediated—Thea watches the couple, the couple watches the pianist, the reader and the narrator watch Thea. Thus, the couple’s apparently conventional sentimental gaze is Thea’s telling projection. The two, she believes, are not artists, but fellow admirers and aficionados, whose happiness derives from a shared aesthetic sensibility and a long-standing joint experience as audience members. Thea imagines the couple shares an aesthetic pursuit that unites rather separates them. In Thea’s fantasy, the couple inverts her own organization, in which art subsumes romantic love.

Framed as a memory of a moment that “touched her deeply,” the anecdote crystallizes Thea’s competing sentimental ideals. In an idiosyncratic simile, Thea twice likens the couple’s imagined feeling to a flower. Her second synesthesia is particularly revealing: Thea wants “to ask them how they had been able to keep a feeling like that, like a nosegay in a glass of water.” Thea wants to ask not how to achieve such pseudo-natural perfection, but rather how to “keep a feeling like that” on indefinite display. Thea’s checked impulse to “put her arms around” the couple seems to be personally motivated, but her unasked question is arguably as much about the melodramatic love story she is about to perform as about her failed romance. Despite her self-conscious doubts and disbelief, Thea’s competing sentimental impulses—her desire for love as well

as art—persist. Art’s realm of exalted feeling may encompass and surpass romantic love, but that does not mean Thea abjures the pleasures and satisfactions of the latter. Although art wins every time, ultimately, and rather unexpectedly, Thea doesn’t have to choose between her greater and lesser sources of sentimental feeling. This unlikely synthesis comprises Cather’s “own fairy tale.”

Sentimental Satire and Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Menck liked me very much indeed; but in the matter of sentiment, he preferred a witless blonde.

—Anita Loos, “The Biography of a Book” (xxxviii)

Anita Loos's use of “sentiment” as a euphemism for sex in her 1963 preface to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* invokes a long literary tradition of implicit physical intimacy. Juxtaposing mere “liking” with the alternative embodied by the “witless blonde,” Loos does not simply redefine “sentiment” in terms of erotic desire. Rather, in this quip as in her 1925 bestseller, Loos plays with sentiment's various nineteenth-century connotations. Pitted against Loos's cynical persona, H. L. Mencken's preferred “witless blonde” evokes *Blondes*'s protagonist: a woman whose allure derives from her combination of apparent sincerity, sympathy, and naiveté, and the hint that she may not be as innocent or inexperienced as her exterior suggests.¹ Literary critics have largely ignored *Blondes*'s overt engagement with sentimentalism and Loos's persistent association of her work with this literary paradigm and cultural constructions of femininity. This chapter illuminates the centrality of sentimentalism to *Blondes*'s satire and to Loos's aesthetic practice. As Loos's ironic invocation of sentimentality intimates, *Blondes* is a layered revision rather than a straightforward rejection of traditional sentimentalism.

As I will argue, the phenomenally popular novel is not simply a satire of a nineteenth-century sentimental novel in which a working-class girl from Arkansas becomes an author and a Hollywood actress through her sympathy, understanding, and

¹ *Blondes*'s oft-repeated origin story, which I address later in this chapter, reinforces this parallel. Mencken's preferences, Loos implies, do not uniformly adhere to the intellectual rigor, progressive liberal ideals, and “disdain of sentimental weakness” he ascribes to “aesthetic sensibility” in *In Defense of Women* (33).

moral “reverance [sic]” (53).² Rather, I propose, *Blondes* is itself a sentimental novel—one that epitomizes the category of modern sentimentalism. As *Blondes* demonstrates, satire and its related technique of irony can be sentimental, as can stream-of-consciousness narration and dialectal writing. Reinventing the sentimental mode with these and other growing stylistic practices, Loos’s epistolary “diary of a professional lady” documents sentimentalism’s evolution in the interwar years.

This chapter begins with a brief theoretical and historical context for *Blondes*’s sentimental satire. I then delineate *Blondes*’s modern sentimental plot, heroine, and community. Finally, I link *Blondes*’s rendering of Jazz Age femininity, female sexuality, and women’s labor to the contemporaneous cultural discourse about these topics.³ In each of these capacities, *Blondes* exemplifies the shifting sensibilities and aesthetic interests of the interwar period and establishes the enduring relevance of sentimental feeling therein.

Sentimentalism and Satire

What I call “sentimental satire” maintains an ironic relation to feeling in general—and to the feelings associated with modern femininity in particular. Its ironic register simultaneously acknowledges a wish for an uncritical relation to feeling and critiques this same desire. This notion of sentimental satire calls for less of a radical

² Misspellings and malapropisms recur in Lorelei’s first-person narration and produce part of Loos’s ironic humor. I quote subsequent intentional errors without flagging them [sic].

³ There are significant racial and class dynamics at stake in *Blondes*’s representation of “Jazz Age femininity.” Nineteenth-century sentimentalism evolves as a white, middle-class mode, and *Blondes* fulfills these expectations. The novel is by and about a white woman. While the majority of its female characters work, the protagonist—a former stenographer whose expenses (including a black maid) are now paid by her various suitors—embodies a version of middle-class femininity. Her labor arises from a desire for status-oriented commodities.

departure from extant scholarship than a return to eighteenth-century understandings of the sentimental mode. In his 1795 essay *On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature*, Friedrich Schiller describes the sentimental mode as the manifestation of a distinctly modern consciousness, “the result of the attempt to restore the substance of naïve emotion even under the conditions of reflection” (16). Sentimental literature, Schiller posits, is born out of the lack of “correspondence between [an author’s] feeling and his thinking which existed in reality in the first state, [and] now only exists as an ideal,” “here in the state of culture where that harmonious co-operation of his whole nature is merely an idea” (39). This intellectual, emotional, and sensory dis-integration necessarily results in a satiric or an elegiac treatment. Schiller further distinguishes several types of sentimental satire, differentiating them by the locus of their critique and their affective nature:

A poet is satirical when he takes as his subject the distance from nature and the contradiction between reality and the ideal. . . . [H]e can accomplish this seriously and with emotion as well as jokingly and with merriment, according to whether he lingers in the area of the will or in the area of the understanding. The former occurs by means of castigating or pathetic satire, the latter by means of jocose satire. (43)

Unlike the mode’s later associations with hyperbolic emotion, Schiller’s “laughing satire” and its “mockery” require “the constant avoidance of passion,” as “the comic writer must avoid pathos and always entertain the understanding” (43–48). The author of sentimental satire and his imagined reader aim “to be free of passion, to look always clearly, always calmly around him and into himself, to find everywhere more chance than fate and to

laugh more over absurdity than to rage or to weep over malice” (46). Emerging from and instantiating such a detached, self-aware sensibility, sentimental satire, and the sentimental mode in general, emphasizes reflective critique and aesthetic instruction. Born out of this highly conscious relation to feeling, the sentimental mode insists on the centrality of emotion in the aesthetic encounter as well as the perceived limits and shortcomings of such emotional experience; it aspires to a reunified sensual and emotional experience that will never be achievable except as an aesthetic ideal.⁴

Like Schiller, I do not argue that all satire is sentimental. Rather, I propose that satire can be sentimental. Such thinking implicitly dismantles an enduring critical assumption that sentimentalism’s discursive, rhetorical styles are incompatible with modernist formalism and with satire. The conventional critical wisdom also differentiates sentimental affect from the modernist cultures of feeling that produce satire, suggesting that the former affirms emotions that the latter suspects are inauthentic, naïve, coercive, or simply no longer relevant. As Jonathan Greenberg describes, “Complementary to satire is the affective excess, often called sentimentality, that modernist satire aims to avoid, denounce, or expose” through “various stances—restraint, irony, aloofness, ridicule, aggression—[that] challeng[e] the perceived inauthenticity of sentimental feeling or moral sentiment” (xiv, 46). Whereas Greenberg positions modernist satire on an axis that intersects with sentimentality’s “affective excess,” I propose that the intersection he identifies is a continuum rather than a single plot-point. As *Blondes*

⁴ As Newmark observes, “Schiller’s own understanding of the aesthetic state was already less *naïvely* anachronistic and more *sentimentally* prudent than the contemporary ideologies that have ensued from it. To the extent that Schiller insisted that the aesthetic state was and could only be an ideal, it already emphasized a measure of negativity in its own theorization and understanding of beauty” (196, emphasis in original).

establishes, satiric treatments of sentiment can be less extreme than the “cruelty” and “sadistic or anarchic desires” Greenberg discusses (xvi, xiv). Indeed, as *Blondes* demonstrates, it is possible to regulate emotion without disavowing it, and to generate an ironic sensibility within sentimental feeling.

Irony can also be sentimental. While observing irony’s moral and ethical dimensions, scholars typically examine the technique’s epistemological, semantic dynamics, rather than its affective component.⁵ But irony is no less wrapped up in questions of feeling. As Linda Hutcheon argues, irony’s “evaluative attitude,” often referred to as “tone,” is crucial to communicating and appreciating what is meant by what is said (11). Thus, as Hutcheon details, irony intends and produces feelings that range from “derisive disparagement” to “detachment,” from anger to affection (38). Irony’s emotional component might also be seen in the “intuitive” dynamics that Wayne Booth attributes to irony’s cognitive processing. As Booth describes, irony’s “building of amiable communities” involves “the predominant emotion . . . of finding and communing with kindred spirits” (13, 28).⁶ Booth emphasizes intellectual affiliation, but his “amiable communities” bear a striking resemblance to the “intimate public” that Lauren Berlant identifies in twentieth-century sentimentalism. As Berlant writes, “what makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (*Complaint* viii, emphasis in original). In the case of *Gentlemen*

⁵ See, for example, Booth and Burke.

⁶ Booth’s descriptions of this “community of believers” specifically refers to the aesthetic he calls “stable irony.” While I identify *Blondes* as a work of “unstable-covert-local” irony within Booth’s taxonomy, *Blondes*’s unstable irony simply introduces instability *into* the sensibility that binds Booth’s “amiable community,” perhaps because its implied meanings are still “local” rather than “infinite.”

Prefer Blondes, I will argue, irony structures an intimate public based on a vague understanding and binds this amiable community with uncertain intimacy.

Anita Loos's Sentimental Aesthetics

Dubbed “The Soubrette of Satire” for the hundreds of Hollywood films she authored in the 1910s, Anita Loos was no stranger to satire or sentimental narratives when she wrote the first “Lorelei” sketch that ran in *Harper's Bazar* in March 1925 (Johnson 27). According to Loos's later accounts, the initial sketch was written as a joke intended only for H. L. Mencken, to “poke fun at his romance” with the latest in a series of “stupid little blondes” (*Kiss* 191). Although “it hit close to home and was an intrusion on his sentimental life, he suggested that the manuscript be published,” though not in his own *American Mercury* (“Biography” xl). “I don't dare to affront my readers,” Loos claimed Mencken told her. “Do you realize, young woman, that you're the first American writer ever to poke fun at sex?” (*Kiss* 191). Loos published the piece in *Harper's*, followed by four more monthly installments.⁷ The sketches were revised and published by Boni & Liveright as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in November 1925, and the book sold out the day of its release. Regardless of the veracity of her apocryphal origin narrative, Loos's anecdotes exemplify her enduring interest in the cultural imbrications of sex, sentiment, and irony and their combined value in the American literary marketplace.⁸

⁷ In 1930, Mencken married author, professor, and suffragette Sara Haardt after a tumultuous seven-year courtship—a timeframe in which he was also romantically linked to at least two other women. For a history of this decade in Mencken's romantic life, see Martin.

⁸ Various scholars have questioned the veracity of Loos's oft-retold origin story. As Barreca, Hegeman, and Hammill note, Loos's performance of this particular narrative is revealing in and of itself.

Loos's ironic sentimental rhetoric has generated near-paradoxical interpretations dating back to *Blondes*'s initial publication. Suggesting that the novel's depth would go unappreciated by the majority of its readers, William Faulkner wrote to Loos, "you have played a rotten trick on your admiring public. . . . [M]ost of them will be completely unmoved—even your clumsy gags won't get them—and the others will find it slight and humorous" (qtd. in Blom 39). As Faulkner anticipated, the implications of the novel's aesthetics have divided Loos's readers, producing what Susan Hegeman calls an "indecision about the generic status of *Blondes* . . . [in which] there is an impulse to see the book either as a satire of '20s morality, as a thinly disguised tragedy, or as a combination of the two: a tragedy problematically dressed up as satire" (526). Perceiving a similar schism, Faye Hammill concludes, "The primary difference between the admiring and the critical reads of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is that the former consider Loos as an ironic and perceptive commentator on mass culture and the latter see her as an emanation from the culture and a producer of its commodities. In fact, Loos's novels are self-consciously both products and critiques of American popular culture" (75).

These apparently incompatible readings support Booth's argument that "unstable ironies tend to dissolve generic distinctions," as they inspire a "series of further confusions" rather than lead "to some final point of clarity" (233, 241). *Blondes*'s multifaceted appeal derives precisely from its lack of clarity and its sustained confusion. For literary critics, this ambiguity enables the novel to be read in collaboration with any number of scholarly interests, from modernism and Marxism to feminism and vernacular

humor.⁹ Some of these interests are more tangential and anachronistic than others, but at least one through-line links these readings to *Blondes*'s cultural milieu and Loos's authorial intent: though often overlooked, sentimental discourse and its implicit values are the currency that fuels many of the novel's noted economies, including its sexual, linguistic, material, and cultural-capital structures of exchange.¹⁰ The sentimental tradition thus affords the terminology and the vehicle for Loos's critique, as well as being the target of her satire. The discrepancy and uncertainty about what lies beneath the novel's sentimental surface can be better understood, if not exactly resolved, by attending to this complex combination and the renovated sentimental mode it produces.

Modern Sentimental Satire

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes's sentimental narrative details the story of Lorelei Lee, whose unflinching belief in "fate" and upwardly-mobile "ambitions" propel her from working as a mandolin player and a stenographer in Little Rock, Arkansas, to Hollywood, New York, and Europe, where she meets and marries "the famous Henry Spoffard, who is the famous Spoffard family, who is a very very fine old family who is very very wealthy" (76). Chronicled in Lorelei's vernacular, this marriage plot and its apparently chaste romance adopt the tropes and discourse of a sentimental "education," wherein intellect, morality, sympathy, and emotional integrity explicitly trump the body that is

⁹ For readings that detail *Blondes*'s relationship to modernist discourse, see McGurl; feminist and Marxist perspectives, see Hegeman; vernacular humor, see Tracy.

¹⁰ Many readings touch upon the interrelated nature of the novel's economies. For extensive treatment of *Blondes*'s sexual economics see Blom and Hegeman. For readings of *Blondes*'s "vernacular modernism" and particular attention to its language, see Everett, Frost, and Tracy. For a reading of *Blondes*'s material economy, see Churchwell. For readings of *Blondes*'s circulation of cultural capital, see Hammill and McGurl.

implicitly Lorelei's biggest asset. Like many sentimental protagonists, Lorelei intuitively, though not unconsciously, understands of the value of sentiment. As her account of Henry's refined wealth and "very very strong morals" suggests, Lorelei appreciates the "Presbyterian" "sensurer's" potential to reward her with the triumphs of many nineteenth-century sentimental novels, including upper-class social status, financial security, and intimate connection (78). As she reports:

So then Henry said that when he looked at all of those large size diamonds he really felt that they did not have any sentiment, so he was going to give me his class ring from Amherst College instead. So then I looked at him and looked at him, but I am too full of self control to say anything at this stage of the game, so I said it was really very sweet of him to be so full of nothing but sentiment. (101)

In this economy, "sentiment" means nothing in terms of immediate material value and the cultural capital of conspicuous consumption, and everything in terms of intimate investment and the cultural capital of social position. Unlike Henry, Lorelei seemingly appreciates the "game" of sentimentality from the outset, such that she successfully exchanges the term's various meanings for one another. She becomes an author, a Hollywood actress, and a high-society bride, who is "very happy myself because, after all, the greatest thing in life is to always be making everybody else happy" (123).

Despite its obvious ironies, *Blondes*'s hyperbolic happy ending does not undermine sentimental satisfaction for its protagonist and its reader. In the final pages of the novel, the now-married Lorelei makes a sentimental appeal to Henry, and then follows through with it, albeit by her own notions of improvement and moral education.

As she tells him, “I wanted our life to mean something and I wanted to make the World a better place than it seemed to have been yet” (120). Her solution to this impulse is a decidedly modern, American source of meaning and global impact: Hollywood film production. Henry’s wealth and his attachments to Lorelei and to moral reform lead to a conclusion in which several structures of desire collapse into one. Henry opens a studio to make “pure” films, which Lorelei stars in and her lover writes (120). The screenwriter, Lorelei notes, “is happier than anyone else, because of all the understanding and sympathy he seems to get out of me” (123).

Loos’s style makes it unclear who receives the novel’s sentimental education: Henry and his family, who are “all delighted” by the immediate, material, consumer sentiments of Lorelei’s film studio “[b]ecause it is the first time since the war that [they] have had anything definite to put their minds on,” or Lorelei, who comes to appreciate the financial and social value of Henry’s sentiment many times over (120). For all of these characters, Hollywood and consumer culture not only promise but seemingly provide the community, affiliation, financial gain, and upward mobility that often figure as byproducts of sentimental connection. Succeeding the Great War as the object of national patriotism, Hollywood inspires a sense of belonging that appears more than adequate. Thus, Lorelei determines, “I really think I can say good-bye to my diary feeling that, after all, everything always turns out for the best” (123). Lorelei’s aphorism may be naïve, but the novel bears it out.

While satirizing the sentimental convention of a neatly resolved happy ending and an accompanying moral lesson, *Blondes* offers a different satisfaction to the reader: the ability to appreciate the novel’s layered ironies and thereby join the amiable community

of other readers. Joining this community, however, requires tolerating quite a bit of ambiguity. While Loos's authorial position is one of critique, Lorelei's apparently stream-of-conscious diary entries obfuscate the target of that critique. Lorelei's phonetic verisimilitude and its suggested lack of formal education predispose the reader to an ironic, if sympathetic, distance from Lorelei and an intellectual identification with Loos. However, this same narrative style prohibits a stable interpretation of Lorelei and of Loos's intent. As Mark McGurl writes, "Lorelei's 'unreliability,' arising not from duplicity but from stupidity, may be intended to place author and reader in a position of intellectual superiority to the story's narrator. . . . And yet this 'pathos of distance' hovers remarkably close to a stream of discourse that continues to solicit the reader's identification and sympathy" (107). Lorelei's speech patterns, for example, obscure but also reveal her intelligence. Challenging our assumptions about intellect and sophistication, these stylistic practices also make Lorelei available for intellectual identification rather than pity.

In other words, Lorelei's simplicity looks suspiciously like dissemblance. Although Lorelei may appear to be an example of Wyndham Lewis's modernist "child-cult," her expressed naiveté clearly supports more than a little conscious manipulation (qtd. in McGurl 110). She deploys "self-control," fakes illness, determines "what kind of conversation to use on" people, and, in the novel's most elaborate economic exchange, manages to obtain, sell, steal, and then re-steal a diamond tiara (79). Last but certainly not least, Lorelei seems to have shot, and been acquitted for shooting, her former boss, when she discovered him with a girl "famous all over Little Rock for not being nice" (25). "I had quite a bad case of hysterics and my mind was really a blank and when I came out of

it, it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings” (25). Lest we miss the displacement of agency, “Mr. Jennings became shot” by the gun that seems to have been in her hand (25). Reinforced by retrospective distance (Lorelei relates the long-ago trial upon running into her former prosecuting attorney), the narration’s ironic distance diminishes as much as it accentuates the anecdote’s disturbing potential. It is unclear whether Mr. Jennings died, whether Lorelei’s assertion that “he was not the kind of a gentleman that a young girl is safe with” qualifies her action as self-defense, or whether her temporary “hysterics” translate into any feelings or other awareness about the incident (24). Thus, even in a moment that directly challenges the reader’s identification with or sympathy for Lorelei, Loos’s style resists a definitive reading. This instability, coupled with the narration’s ironic humor, sustains the hovering pathos that McGurl describes. As the shooting anecdote iterates, this hovering phenomenon derives less from Lorelei’s apparent stupidity or simplicity than from our inability to determine what occurs underneath the surface of her narration.

Blondes’s other characters reinforce this shifting sympathy, offering assessments that contradict one another and reverse their own previous conclusions. These characters, however, consistently imagine Lorelei’s desire according to their own wishes. Her cynical, “unrefined” counterpart Dorothy suggests that Lorelei is a gifted performer best suited for “a part that only had three expressions: Joy, Sorrow, and Indigestion” (122). Her former prosecuting lawyer reverses his original opinion upon further contact. “He said he always thought that I only used my brains against gentlemen and really had quite a cold heart. But now . . . it seems that he really is madly in love with me because he did not sleep a wink since we became friendly” (27–31). None other than the father of

psychoanalysis, the “very very sympathetic” “Dr. Froyd,” “looked at me and looked at me,” “seemed very very intreeged at a girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to do,” and then determines Lorelei’s apparent lack of inhibition makes her “quite a famous case” (90). Freud’s response to Lorelei reinforces the dynamics at work with the other characters. He apparently falls for her superficial appeal (suggested by all of his “looking”) and idealizes her interiority according to his own standards (an absence of repression or neurosis). Such a clinical interpretation is as subjective as the sentimental fantasy it would reject. Freud sees what he wants to see and determines that Lorelei feels what he wants her to feel.

If we take Lorelei’s discursive patterns at face value, her intent and agency are seemingly unclear to her as well. Her heavily qualified narration, in which she “seem[s] to be thinking practically all of the time,” expresses a provisional relationship to her own thoughts and feelings that does not entirely seem to be a performance (3). Her refrain—“I really do not seem to care”—accompanies the awareness that feelings can be misleading (32). Men can “make you feel quite good about yourself and you really seem to have a delightful time but when you get home and come to think it all over, all you have got is a fan” (55). This linguistic economy is shot through with irony. In its exchanges, ignorance and intelligence bear an uncanny resemblance, and straightforward communication undermines, rather than facilitates, a sense of intimacy. Lest we consider Lorelei’s diary a transparent expression of her interiority, Lorelei highlights her selectivity. Her narration is an explicit performance from the seventh entry: “I am taking special pains with my diary from now on as I am really writing it for Gerry” (12). She tells a suitor and then Freud “things that I really would not even put in my diary” (11, 90). Given this

combination of reliability and unreliability, any given analysis of Lorelei's interiority can be reversed or undone. Lorelei thus functions as a remarkably malleable object for others' projection—an act of identification or disidentification that is, I contend, always sentimental (motivated by an emotional wish).

The more we scrutinize Lorelei's intent, the less clear it becomes. Lorelei can be perceived as a performing modern subject, available for reader identification. Alternatively, the reader can disidentify with Lorelei and identify with her various "gentlemen friends," her cynical friend Dorothy, or any of the other characters who refract her ambiguous affect, some of whom no doubt prefer the pleasure of not knowing what she really means. Additionally, one can disidentify with all of the characters and affiliate with Loos and other readers. Or, as McGurl suggests, one can hover between these various responses. Lorelei's appeal involves not thinking too hard and enjoying an uncertain intimacy, rather than pitching into the vertiginous interpretive project of determining what she means or thinks. If this insistence on the pleasures of surface reading formulates part of Loos's critique, it remains unclear whether thinking too much or thinking too little is her target. The reader's ability to appreciate this particular irony structures a connection with Loos, with other readers, and perhaps with Lorelei that is akin to the connections within the novel: an understanding predicated on ambiguity.

In addition to animating these gender-neutral dynamics of modern subjectivity, Lorelei embodies the contradictions of modern femininity. In her interactions with other characters as well as her narration, Lorelei's success comes from her ability to maintain many of these contradictions: to appear naïve while clearly manipulating at least some of this appearance, to be an indirect agent of unclear ambition, and to remain utterly opaque

when it comes to her emotional interiority. Scholars often associate Lorelei with the 1920s' icon of young white womanhood, the flapper.¹¹ While this association is certainly merited, it is worth noting that Lorelei explicitly disidentifies with flapperhood, identifying instead as “more old fashioned.” The flapper enjoys a complex, if undertheorized, relation to sentimentality and the sentimental tradition. Lorelei's disidentification in fact locates her squarely in the middle of modern femininity and its complex negotiation of alternating demands of innocence and knowledge, agency and passivity, sincere feeling and ironic detachment (94).

In many ways, the iconic flapper extends the ambivalent sentimentality of her predecessor, the New Woman, who was and still is frequently characterized as coolly pragmatic and rational at best, calculatingly unfeeling at worst.¹² Although distanced from the New Woman's progressive activism and her first-wave-feminist agenda, the flapper often appears equally unemotional, particularly when it comes to sex (no doubt related to the popularization of birth control and the free love movement in the 1910s and early 1920s). In a 1922 *New York Times* article, Virginia Potter, the President of the New York League of Girls Clubs, lauds the flapper as a “modern young girl” who “looks life right straight in the eye; she knows just what she wants and goes after it, whether it is a man, a career, a job, or a new hat” (O'Leary 49). Potter's description of the “newest woman” and her “fierce intensity” implies the flapper's unsympathetic, self-absorbed

¹¹ See Churchwell, Hammill, and Hegeman.

¹³ The New Woman appeared, as Patterson notes, in many, often paradoxical, “incarnations—degenerate, evolved type; race leader or race traitor; brow-beating suffragette, prohibitionist, mannish lesbian, college girl, savvy professional woman, barren spinster, club woman, lady drummer, restless woman, wheelwoman, or insatiable shopper—represent[ing] a complex response to an emerging, feminized conception of modernity” (16). Nearly all of these characterizations, I would add, keep emotion at arm's length.

pursuits, in which every desire functions according to consumer-driven market logic (49). In the same article, actress Doris Keane pronounces the flapper to be the singular antidote to American sentimentalism:

I think the flapper is the one hope of our stage today. Day in, day out, here in America the public get fed—and fed up—with pap—sugary, sloppy, sentimental plays; drama for the eight-year-old mind, I call it. The flapper won't stand for it, she passed that stage long ago. While her elders emote and all weep all over the place she laughs. Hers is not a nervous, hysterical laugh, either. Heaven forbid! No! It is a superior, supercilious chuckle betraying the right amount, just the fashionable amount, of amusement.

(49)

The flapper's dispassionate relationship to emotion, Keane suggests, advances modern femininity and in doing so promises to advance American popular art. In its pitch-perfect modulation, the flapper's detached "amusement" undoes historical constructions of hyperbolic, over-emotional, and neurotic femininity. Instead, the flapper exhibits a condescending distance from expressive emotion that renders her interiority opaque.

Although these descriptions of the flapper clearly echo some of Lorelei's characteristics, she does not identify as one. As when "the bullet went in Mr. Jennings lung," *Blondes* constitutes Lorelei's femininity indirectly, through disidentification, deflection, disavowal, and other negations (90). She tells Henry's mother, "I did not seem to like all of the flappers that we seem to have nowadays because I was brought up to be more old fashioned" (94). Identifying as a "more old fashioned girl," Lorelei maintains the material and physical interests associated with the flapper by behaving according to a

traditional femininity of understanding, sympathy, naïve emotion, matrimonial desire, and sexual passivity. Far from being at odds with each other, *Blondes* suggests, old-fashioned sentimentality in fact undergirds new constructs of femininity. Being “so old fashioned that I was always full of respect for all of my elders” is precisely what produces Lorelei’s modern appeal to other characters and to the reader (94). She appears naïve and sincere for the characters—men and older women—who desire a femininity of naiveté and sincerity. She also appears ironically detached and ambitious enough for the characters—Dorothy, her maid, her gay male peers—who desire a femininity of intellect, cynicism, and self-interest. To the extent that these desires often contradict (e.g., a simultaneous demand for both sexual knowledge and virginal inexperience), Lorelei’s opacity allows her to sustain these near-paradoxical mandates. She evinces a femininity of unclear intelligence, agency, sexual desire, professional ambition, and sentiment.

Blondes capitalizes on sentimentalism’s associations with bodily sensation and emotional experience, and plays with the ambiguous implications of this physical and emotional activity. Lorelei’s “sympathetic” interactions with her “gentlemen friends” occur in the name of “friendship” and “education,” wherein Lorelei and her “nice,” “understanding” friends “always seem to want to improve my mind and not waste any time” (6–7). This sentimental discourse suggests that Lorelei has sex, or at least promises sex, in return for jewelry and other material goods. Through this rhetoric, Susan Hegeman notes, “The narrative prolongs the erasure of sex to such an extent that sex becomes its central preoccupation”—a pronounced omission also seen in conventional sentimental marriage plots (534).

Blondes' sentimental discourse replicates a femininity that both accentuates and deemphasizes sexuality. One reading of *Blondes*' linguistic economy would simply replace friendship and platonic desire with sex and erotic desire. However, the novel does not allow such one-to-one translation. There is no explicit reference or revealing detail to indicate that any sex occurs whatsoever and, as Sarah Churchwell observes, the implications of Lorelei's vocabulary are not stable. Thus, Churchwell argues, "[t]he object of Loos's satire is not only sex, but also euphemism itself" (149). Although certainly an object of satire, Loos's euphemisms serve several additional purposes. As Catherine Keyser notes, the "loose and baggy syntax, malapropisms, euphemisms and misspellings obscure both [Lorelei's] body and the events she describes" (65). Offering little physical detail, Lorelei's narrative voice is, ironically, quite disembodied.

As Keyser suggests, *Blondes*' language effectively euphemizes and obscures *all* of Lorelei's labor. Although Lorelei concludes the novel as an author and an actress, she achieves this professional success without naming either vocation as her goal. As she writes on the first page, "It would be strange if I turn out to be an authoress" (3). Her early career as a mandolin player required too much work, so Lorelei prefers the "recreation" of authorship: "Writing is different because you do not have to learn or practise and it is more tempermental because practising seems to take all the temperment out of me" (3, 5). Despite her various professional endeavors, Lorelei's explicit goal remains her matrimonial "romantic ideal" (98). This intent aligns Lorelei with the trajectory of most working women in the 1920s, who were predominantly young, single, and in the workforce only until marriage.

Lorelei's seeming exchange of sex for money also echoes contemporaneous debates about working women, as advocates as well as critics of a gendered minimum wage cautioned against the "loss of virtue" women would be driven to with or without such protection. In a 1918 argument that anticipates the Supreme Court's 1923 ruling on the unconstitutionality of a minimum wage for women, an Arkansas judge declares:

I am unwilling to say that woman's health of virtue is dependent upon financial circumstances so as to justify the State in attempting to regulate her wages. Her virtue is without price in gold. She may become the victim of her misplaced affections and yield her virtue, but sell it for money—no. When she falls so low as that it is only from the isolated helplessness of her shame and degradation. (qtd. in Kessler-Harris 49)

Invoking the tropes of a seduction plot—victimhood, misplaced affections, yielded virtue—as an explanation for prostitution, the legal brief illuminates the sentimental conceptions of sex, work, and femininity from which Loos's "professional lady" emerges.

For Lorelei, as for Loos's reader, sentimental language and tropes suggest many different things (including sex) without committing to them—implications that Lorelei and Loos cash in on. As Jessica Burstein notes, "sentiment involves certain cognitive operations based on the imagination of connections" (247). In the diamond tiara exchange, Lorelei collaborates with Dorothy to acquire, and then reacquire, the coveted object from two men hired to get it back to its original owner, the wife of one of her "gentlemen friends." Lorelei concludes, "We all seem to understand one another because, after all, Dorothy and I could really have a platonick friendship with gentlemen like

Louie and Robber. I mean there seems to be something common between us” (72). This apparent understanding forms as an alliance against a bulwark of old money, morality, and conservative femininity—a woman who wears long skirts, large hats, and is “unrefined” enough not to know the difference between real diamonds and paste (60).

Sexuality structures this “platonick” community differently—but no less significantly—than Lorelei’s potentially non-platonic friendships. Louie and Robber are, the novel suggests, gay lovers. “I mean Louie is always kissing Robber and Dorothy told Louie that if he did not stop kissing Robber, people would think that he painted batiks” (68). Watching the two men interact, Lorelei determines, “[e]ven if it is unusual for an American to see a French gentleman always kissing his father, I really think it is refreshing and I think that we Americans would be better off if we American fathers and sons would love one another more like Louie and Robber” (70). Thus, the two women and the two men share not just the mutual desire for wealth and a class-based alliance against dated social mores, but also, perhaps, a sexual desire for men. As in the novel’s Hollywood ending, this community emerges from shared desires, recognition, and values. Its collaborations and affinities simply formulate collectivity in terms that differ from the traditional sentimental novel.

But are these collective values anything other than financial and self-interested? For as frequently as she has been identified as a gold-digger, Lorelei *does* express desires that cannot be traced to money. She apparently misreads the affection between Louie and Robber, but, inadvertently or otherwise, she communicates a liberal wish for the social acceptance of varying expressions of love. Critics also observe Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s commitment to mutual advancement and highlight Lorelei’s supportive, if

condescending, treatment of her black maid Lulu, whose included commentary identifies her as an ironic, intelligent interlocutor.¹³ Time and again, Lorelei attempts to “reform” Dorothy, and she consistently follows through on her belief that “I really think that there is nothing so wonderful as two girls when they stand up for each other and help each other a lot” (79, 58).

Lorelei’s relationship with Lulu is more problematic. Sympathetic to Lulu’s “very sad life” of extramarital affair and divorce, Lorelei promises her a career for life and appreciates Lulu’s affection. “I mean I really believe she could not care any more for me if she was light and not colored” (20). Juxtaposing “light,” rather than “white,” with “colored,” Lorelei determines Lulu’s depth of feeling less by race per se than by skin-tone—a distinction that may make Lorelei more or less unwittingly racist. Such discourse suggests not only that Lorelei manipulates appearances but that she responds to superficial distinctions as well. These charged surfaces include the bodies that are implicitly central to *Blondes* and the language Lorelei carefully edits. “I nearly made a mistake and gave her a book by the title of ‘The Nigger of Narcissus’ which really would have hurt her feelings. I mean I do not know why authors cannot say ‘Negro’ instead of ‘Nigger’ as they have their feelings just the same as we have” (13). Again, the implications of Loos’s irony are unclear. Is she criticizing Lorelei’s naïve fantasy that language has the power to correct or restructure social inequality, or the racism embedded in her protagonist’s pseudo-universalism (“they have their feelings just the same as we have”)? Is she critical of Joseph Conrad’s title and in agreement with Lorelei? Is she

¹³ For discussion of feminist criticism on Lorelei and Dorothy, see Barreca, xvii. For a brief treatment of Lorelei’s relationship with Lulu, see McGurl, 206n31.

critical of the American publishing house that changed Conrad's title for the first printing of his novel on this side of the Atlantic?¹⁴ *Blondes* does not provide an answer.

As these suspended criticisms indicate, Loos's novel is not about resolving its irony or appreciating some consistent ironic joke. Much as the narrative runs on vague understanding and uncertain intimacy, *Blondes* provokes this uncertainty in its reader, who is in on the irony but not quite sure what it implies. If this unstable irony produces a discomfiting sense of inadequacy or a desire for greater certainty, *Blondes* invites the reader to appreciate that the joke is not as simple as it looks, to recognize that our interpretive strategies and expectations might be part of the problem, and to enjoy the pleasures of this knowledge. Regardless of how a given reader responds to these aesthetics, *Blondes* ably demonstrates that sentimentalism and the feelings it induces are far from simple.

***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes's* Amoral Lessons**

Blondes develops an ironic version of the moral instruction historically associated with sentimental literature. A number of Loos's contemporaries and early critics fail to appreciate the ironic distance between Loos and Lorelei, dismissing both women as depthless and imitative, but Carl Van Vechten immediately recognized Loos's innovative sentimental aesthetics.¹⁵ Van Vechten praises *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* "as a work of

¹⁴ Hawthorn elaborates *The Nigger of Narcissus's* vexed publication history.

¹⁵ As noted earlier, the critical debate that surrounds *Blondes* dates back to its reception. Two oft-quoted examples of the extremes: while Edith Wharton called it "the great American novel," Wyndham Lewis identified Lorelei as Loos's (and middle-class America's) tragic victim, asserting that Loos "makes fun of the illiteracy, hypocrisy, and business instinct of an uneducated American flapper-harlot for the benefit of the middle-

art. . . . Not once, in spelling, phraseology, or point of view, does [Loos] depart a hair's breadth from the mental attitude of her subjective heroine. This, in itself, may be considered a feat." After praising Loos's talent, Van Vechten assumes a different tone in the remainder of his review. Adopting Loos's rhetorical irony, Van Vechten enumerates the "salutary lessons" to be learned from the "profound book":

As a warning to young men, pointing out the danger of encountering high-power blondes in New York, the value of this sociological work cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, I would suggest that every father, whose son nurses any intention of leaving home for a great city, should insert a copy in his offspring's carpet-bag, and I am convinced that it would be an excellent plan for sons to protect their papas in the same generous manner. If papa doesn't need the advice he will enjoy the text anyway.

. . . There are further salutary lessons to be derived from an inspection of Miss Loos's pregnant pages. Travellers to Europe will learn to their horror that traps are set for unsuspecting Americans in the homes of English duchesses. When it is generally known that Bessie and Uncle Ed are usually invited to spend week-ends at Windsor for the purpose of selling them something in the old family manor, it is to be expected that the pair will be a little more shy about accepting these tempting invitations.

class public who can spell . . . and Miss Loos arrives at this by affecting to be her victim ('told from the inside' method)" (qtd. in Hammill, 59–60).

I am inclined to believe, indeed, that “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” will be more epoch-making, will have more far-reaching effects on American life, than any book which has appeared here since Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Already, I hear, it has driven three hitherto successful gold-diggers to seek honest employment. (“Fast and Loos”)

Comparing the novel to an enduring touchstone of sentimental American literature, Van Vechten emulates the modern sentimental aesthetics that Loos employs. His review catalogs the moral lessons embedded in the feelings the novel produces in its various readers—enjoyment, generosity, worry, horror, shyness, suspicion. As in the novel itself, the majority of these feelings and Van Vechten’s asserted “aesthetic and ethical value of the volume” are underwritten by the implicit sexuality of “Miss Loos’s pregnant pages.” Also as in Loos’s novel, the layered implications of Van Vechten’s review destabilize its ostensible criticism and invite a range of contradictory interpretations. Just how ironic is Van Vechten? To what extent does his irony indicate praise or denigration? Is his initial admiration of the novel just as tongue-in-cheek as his subsequent claims of aesthetic and ethical value?

Grounded in imagined connections of shared knowledge and ironic humor in which the victim is uncertain and potentially multiple, Van Vechten’s and *Blondes*’s sentimental aesthetics are contingent upon ambiguity.¹⁶ This ambiguity produces a perpetual relativism that does not destroy morality so much as qualify it, reminding us, as Booth says of irony, “to say *both-and*, not *either-or*, when we see that people and works

¹⁶ For more on the pleasurable ambiguity of ironic humor and its diagnostic implications for “specific problems of modernity” in Loos’s work and other modern magazine writers, see Keyser. As Keyser notes, “play with language permits the critical aims of the joke to land without immediately alerting its target” (5).

of art are too complex for simple true-false tests” (ix). Indeed, any moral or political meaning a reader would derive from the irony would be based on her own desires—which would, of course, make her just as naïve as the characters who perceive Lorelei’s feelings according to what they want her to feel. Ironizing Lorelei’s critical self-consciousness as well as the naiveté or intelligence we would read into it, *Blondes* reminds the modern reader of her own desire for the sentimental fallacies of simplified connection and definitive moral and literary structures. Equally generating and ironizing a critical self-consciousness in its reader, *Blondes* offers a sentimental education in the pleasures and discomforts of modern feeling.

Feeling Hard-Boiled: Frances Newman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*

In August 1926, Frances Newman sent her publisher Horace Liveright the manuscript she declared was “the first novel in which a woman ever told the truth about how women feel” (*Letters* 205). In characteristic deadpan, Newman casts her literary debut as a new rendition of a classic sentimental subject, at once a response to and a departure from traditional representations of female feeling. Her provocative title, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, is similarly referential and distinctive. Appending a new slang phrase to a well-established sentimental topic, Newman’s title invokes and undermines conventional associations of femininity and emotion. The novel sustains this destabilizing dynamic. A *kunstlerroman* set in turn-of-the-century Atlanta, *Virgin* chronicles the coming-of-age of a young female writer whose primary goal is to experience a passionate sentimental romance. She experiments with masturbation and even sex out of wedlock, but the feelings she expects and desires elude her. Stylistically avant-garde and structurally ambitious, Newman’s work illustrates sentimentalism’s evolution in the interwar period.

This chapter begins by introducing Newman and *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*. I then discuss two growing literary interests that transform *Virgin*’s sentimental aesthetics: the concept of hard-boiled fiction and a pervasive use of irony. As new modernist critics have reminded us, the canonized version of modernism developed in dialogue with a

range of practices.¹ Sentimentalism participates in this literary conversation in more thoroughgoing ways than we have understood.

Frances Newman's Sentimental Aesthetics

Though little known today, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* enjoyed five reprintings within two months of its publication, selling over 20,000 copies in the United States and prompting a British edition. The novel was banned in Boston and, Newman proudly reported, “shocked” her hometown of Atlanta “almost into convulsions” (*Letters* 229). One critic called *Virgin*'s content “the ugly whisperings of a repressed and naughty child” and likened Newman's prose to “the writing of defeated Europeans like Joyce and jabbering expatriates like Gertrude Stein”—comparisons that likely pleased Newman (Davidson 28).² At the other extreme, *Virgin* was deemed a “shining, minor masterpiece,” and a “novelist's novel” akin to the dramas of Henry James and Sherwood Anderson (*Letters* vi; Overton 222). Although she claimed to avoid reading *Virgin*'s reviews,

¹ As Mao and Walkowitz describe, “the new modernist studies has moved toward a pluralism or fusion of theoretical commitments, as well as a heightened attention to continuities across the boundaries of artistic media, to collaborations and influences across national and linguistic borders, and (especially) to the relationship between individual works of art and the larger cultures in which they emerged” (2). Exemplifying this new modernist approach, Ardis emphasizes modernism's “original simultaneity with other aesthetic practices . . . [as] an emergent rather than a dominant aesthetic mode or movement” (“Dialogics” 407).

² Newman regularly praised Joyce's innovative style and psychological acuity. *The Short Story's Mutations* includes his “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” along with an enthusiastic summary of his oeuvre to date. Classifying Joyce as a uniquely gifted “Freudian primitive,” Newman asserts that his artful rendering of consciousness makes him “not so much a follower than a contemporary of Freud's” (241, 304). *Mutations* also lauds Stein's ability to internally critique the conventions of her chosen forms (308). According to her friend Hansell Baugh, Newman intended to include Stein in *Mutations*; the annotated typescript of “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene” in Newman's papers at Emory suggests that this is true (Johnson 93). For a brief description of Newman's writing on Joyce, see Smith.

Newman noted, “Apparently my book is either detested or liked a great deal. Atlanta is still raging—I’ll probably have to form a public relations department myself” (*Letters* 230). This range of opinions might be attributed not just to *Virgin*’s evocative, if euphemistic, treatment of female sexuality and its oblique references to menstruation, birth control, venereal disease, and abortion, but also to its provocative author and her demanding literary methods.

Newman’s signature style features esoteric allusions, elliptical syntax, repetitive diction, odd parallelisms, and generally elaborate prose. Dorothy Parker calls her “manner of writing” “so difficult and tortuous . . . that the reader is left panting and groggy with exhaustion” (93). In *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, Newman flirts with stream-of-consciousness narration, approximating her protagonist’s labyrinthine currents of thought through endless qualification, negation, and indirection. Each episode is a single paragraph and there is no dialogue. One typical sentence reads: “After she had sat beside him during the second act of Tristan and Isolde, she was almost sure that some day her cheek would lie against his deep ivory cheek and that she would curve her hand around his beautifully modeled ear, and that when he had gone she would lie down flat on her face and feel a strange aching, and that the electric spray would fall down her arms and cut a burning exit through the palms of her hands” (283). This challenging style and controversial content made *Virgin* an immediate best-seller and established its Southern author in national literary circles. As Newman’s mentor James Branch Cabell pronounced, “You have arrived with the unreticence and the amiability of a thunder-bolt” (*Letters* 213).

So who was she? In part, Newman's abrupt death in 1928 has precluded her lasting reputation in modernist-era literary networks. In her brief lifetime, however, the charismatic writer and prolific critic cultivated an impressive number of high-profile literary friends and enemies. Her sardonic wit and uncompromising discernment earned the respect and friendship of H. L. Mencken, Carl Van Vechten, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Alfred Knopf, among other influential figures of modern American letters. Newman's incisive commentary also inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald to write his first letter to a critic ("I feel as if I had pulled a spoiled baby's curls and made him cry," she reported [*Letters* 44]). Van Vechten later reflected, "I did know Frances Newman, who loathed me," playfully referencing Newman's affectionate acidity ("Literary Ladies" 116).

Educated in Atlanta, Washington, DC, and New York City, Newman began writing book reviews while working as a librarian. Her reviews garnered national attention and led to further nonfiction publications, including the book-length treatise *The Short Story's Mutations* (1924). Tracing the evolution of the short story from Petronius to Paul Morand, *Mutations* includes Newman's acerbic analysis and her translations from five languages. Newman also penned a story of her own; "Rachel and Her Children" was published in Mencken's *American Mercury* and won a 1924 O. Henry Award.³ Shortly thereafter, the first three sketches of *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* were published in the Richmond-based literary magazine *The Reviewer*, which led to a contract with Boni & Liveright. On the strength of recommendations by Anderson and Mencken, Newman

³ Newman's original foray into fiction was an unsuccessful 1921 novel titled *The Gold-Fish Bowl*, about a female librarian in Atlanta. Newman later reflected that she tried to "write the story so wittily and so charmingly that it would delight low-brows and high-brows, and even medium-brows" (qtd. in *Letters* 29). At least one publisher rejected her "hybrid book" and the novel remained unpublished until 1986, when it was edited as a doctoral dissertation (Wade 98).

completed the novel at the MacDowell Colony. Following the publication of her second novel, *Dead Lovers Are Faithful Lovers* (1928), however, Newman became ill. She was found dead in a New York City hotel room, apparently due to a cerebral hemorrhage, though subsequent reports cited a barbiturate overdose.

Erudite and idiosyncratic, Newman developed unique literary theories and methods. In *Mutations*, Newman describes the process by which “literary mutants” inspire new schools of literature:

[W]hether the mutation theory or the theory of the new Lamarckians is sound in biology, they are both sound in the arts. . . . Disciples inherit their masters’ techniques, and they add their own; but only two of our world’s foundations are as primary as blue and red—the emotional and the intellectual join in a curious osmotic union and become the aesthetic. The union is not tranquil, and the intellectual—which becomes the technical—is slowly, though not steadily, submerging the emotional—which now and then becomes the spiritual. . . . But since techniques cumulate and emotions do not, [writers] have only their own emotion [to work with]. (4–5)

Emphasizing the role of personal emotion in artistic creation, Newman articulates a less clinical, but no less methodical and specialized approach to authorship than, say, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.⁴ Her theory of aesthetic synthesis applies not only to the “literary

⁴ Compare Newman’s lines to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. . . . And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. . . . The emotion of art is impersonal” (57–59).

mutants” she discusses in *Mutations*, but also to her long-form debut. In an exchange with Boni & Liveright about *Virgin*’s jacket design, Newman writes, “if we use the *Mutations* idea, [*Virgin*’s cover] should be fuchsia and violet rather than this red and blue” (*Letters* 206). Newman’s suggestion reflects her novel’s ambitious fusion of intellect and emotion, as well as her commitment to reworking and renewing inherited forms.

Newman’s penchant for lengthy sentences and unusual syntax extends from her criticism to her fiction. She aspires to write prose “not cluttered up by reminiscences of other writers. I write long sentences because I like inferences, not flat-footed declarations, and of course that requires a protasis and an apodosis” (Overton 225). Owing to these conditional statements, an absolute “lack [of] conversation,” “action . . . well hidden,” and other stylistic choices, Newman concludes that *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* “will be absolutely unintelligible, I think, but perhaps that’s just as well” (*Letters* 170; 196; 121). In another letter, Newman notes that fellow MacDowell resident Thornton Wilder “thinks I don’t realize that the *Virgin* is likely to cause an uproar. I can’t believe it will, because too many people will be bored by it” (*Letters* 195). Aligning her work with the contemporaneous interest in new approaches to literary subjectivity, Newman’s assessments iterate *Virgin*’s complex style and ironic, self-deprecating humor.⁵

⁵ In addition to Davidson’s negative comparison of Newman with Joyce and Stein, Newman’s “alluring method” was favorably likened to Joyce’s and Virginia Woolf’s in at least one other review of *Virgin* (Butcher 4). In his prefatory remarks in Newman’s *Letters*, Baugh contends that Newman anticipated Percy Lubbock’s idea of “a novel in which there should be no dialogue, no immediate scene, nothing at all but a diffused and purely subjective impression” (28). Proving the remarkable symmetry between *Virgin*’s aesthetics and Lubbock’s concept (indebted to Henry James), several critics have erroneously attributed Baugh’s quotation of Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) to Newman.

Virgin's reception proves Wilder and Newman equally correct. Those who admire the novel's style often dislike its content; those who appreciate the content often regret the style.⁶ Nearly every review struggles to classify the novel.⁷ The *Atlanta Constitution* headline reads: "Hard-Boiled Virgin Neither Mediocre Book or a Classic." (The review ends with the "middle verdict . . . it is assuredly an interesting experiment" [Cadett 13].) The *New York Times* considers this categorical instability an asset: "It was inevitable that the search for fresh improvisations on an old theme should, sooner or later, produce a novel of the calibre [sic] of 'The Hard-Boiled Virgin.' . . . From a certain point of view books like Frances Newman's first novel register something that may be looked at either as the end of one stage or the beginning of another" ("Frances Newman Cuts A New Caper" BR12). Echoing Newman's theory of literary mutation, the *Times* identifies *Virgin* as a significant progression in an evolutionary process, a creative advance that

⁶ West praises Newman's stylistic "dexterity," but finds her "ugly humor" often has "the romping moronic quality of a tabloid front page" (296–97). The *Los Angeles Times* admires *Virgin*'s "frank and hard-boiled tale" but regrets the "set style, in which involved sentences prevail [along with] a dull monotone, unrelieved by conversation" (Ford C20). The reviews are rife with such contradiction. *Virgin* is alternately "caviare [sic] to the general" readership or "tabloid" material by an author who is "too simple" (Ford C20; West 296–97). The novel is "scrupulously euphemistical [and thus] thoroughly chaste" or "hurls the sexual facts of life around like custard pies" (Pumpnickel 3; West 296). Even Newman's style inspires disagreement: Mencken blurbs the novel as "an original and first-rate job," while Davidson asserts that her prose "exploits the worst faults of freshman themes. . . . [It] express[es] complete artistic weariness" (Ad for *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*; Davidson 27–28).

⁷ Cabell's blurb exemplifies this dynamic—and is rather backhanded—in its positioning of the novel as "the most brilliant, the most candid, the most civilized, and—always within the limits of its chosen field—the most profound book yet written by any American woman" (Ad for *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*). Many reviews default to similarly vague definitions of what the novel is not. After declaring that the book is "wholly misnamed" because "there is nothing on earth hard-boiled about" it, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* concludes, "Certainly, she has done a book which has not been done before in these United States, at least. There is nothing salacious about it, nothing put in to pander, nothing to make an impression, but it is a profoundly honest and outspoken book" (Butcher 4).

incorporates a range of influences. Newman's "improvisations" on the "old theme" of sexuality link her to Jane Austen (for her "atonic," "ironic" style), Charlotte Brontë (for her "devastating . . . pathos"), and Lawrence Sterne (for *Virgin*'s "Shandyian . . . relish of what might be called the domestico-physiological side of life"). Offering no recent comparisons for Newman's work, the *Times* review signals the difficulty of classifying *Virgin* in contemporaneous paradigms: "a new province is opened up, or, shall we say?—an old one is thrown open anew."

Paralleling Newman's 1927 assertion that "Practically no one has taken the book as I meant it both technically and emotionally," the minimal scholarship on *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* primarily attempts to locate the novel in one established category or another (*Letters* 233). *Virgin* is alternately read as the work of a "pervasive and corrosive" feminist or "a Southern lady still" (Scott xvi; Abbott "Southern" 51). Newman anticipates these paradoxical misreadings in her protagonist's recognition "that a southern lady's charms are estimated entirely by their agreement with tradition and that her intelligence is judged entirely by her ability to disagree with tradition" (244). Reducing *Virgin* to either side of this paradox suggests that we have yet to move beyond the traditional categories and gendered expectations of the novel's original readership. Rather than fit Newman's fiction into a single tradition (feminist, Southern, modernist, sentimentalist), I propose that her work exemplifies the distinctive category of modern sentimentalism.

Like other works of modern sentimentalism, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* exhibits evolving notions of feeling and femininity. Although protagonist Katharine Faraday ultimately becomes a moderately successful playwright, she longs, more than anything

else, for a sentimental romance. Her creative desires—indeed, her entire lived experience—pale in comparison to these fantasies. In one romantic encounter after another, Katharine fails to feel the transcendent sensation she expects based on her reading and her upbringing. This experiential failure leads her to conclude that she is regrettably hard-boiled. She reads Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and the sexual theories of psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, but these up-to-date notions of desire do little to dissolve her entrenched sentimental ideals of love and marriage.⁸ "Even after Katharine Faraday began to consider the possibility of becoming important herself instead of waiting to find honourable favour in the sight of a man . . . she still thought a presentable man between eight o'clock and twelve was as necessary as a violet velvet evening coat and nicely waved hair" (230). Increasingly skeptical yet persistently hopeful, Katharine gradually develops an ironic attitude toward her own sentimentality. Resolutely maintaining the contradictory lessons of her reading, her socialization, and her lived experience, Katharine is simultaneously erudite and ignorant, clever and naïve, a hopeless romantic and a cynical realist. She is, in other words, hard-boiled, ironic, sentimental, and thoroughly modern.

⁸ A comprehensive list of the authors and texts Katharine reads would be pages long, but includes Edith Wharton (*Ethan Frome*, which she dislikes), Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The House of the Seven Gables*, which she also dislikes), Shakespeare (*Macbeth*), Jane Austen, Joel Chandler Harris, Disraeli, Elizabeth Browning, Oscar Wilde, George Meredith, George Eliot, George Sand, Samuel Johnson, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Richard Harding Davis, *The Duchess*, Ouida, Anthony Hope, and Sir Max Beerbohm. She reads *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Life*, *The Yale Review*, and *The North American Review*, as well as the local papers *The Atlanta Journal*, *The Atlanta Georgian*, and *The Atlanta Constitution*. Katharine also attends a range of musical, operatic, and theatrical performances, including a show featuring Sarah Bernhardt, the horror plays at Paris's Grand Guignol, Pirandello's absurdist *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), and Georg Kaiser's expressionist drama *Gilles et Jeanne* (1923). For a discussion of Katharine's reading, see Abbott's "A Southern Lady Still," 67–69n4.

Centering on such a heroine, *Virgin*'s modern sentimentalism is near-paradoxical and ultimately unresolved. Critiquing the sentimental tradition's unrealistic constructions of emotion, its narrow expectations of domestic femininity, and the uncritical reading practices it supposedly encourages, *Virgin* also affirms the continued relevance and remarkable staying power of the sentimental mode. Like Katharine, *Virgin*'s close-third-person narrative perspective expresses a skeptical distance from emotion and an enduring commitment to and desire for intense feeling. This difference between feeling and emotion is particularly important in Newman's novel. Relying on codified sentimental narratives as an internal standard, Katharine measures her personal feelings against her desired, anticipated, culturally codified emotions. Her feelings come up short, but this disparity seems only to increase Katharine's attachment to sentimental emotion.⁹ In the novel's final episode, Katharine recognizes this feedback loop without disrupting it—an ironic, melancholic conclusion that suggests the durability of her modern sentimentality.

Feeling Hard-Boiled

What is a hard-boiled virgin? And how does this concept participate in *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*'s modern sentimentalism? The answer to the first question—the definition of Newman's titular phrase—is relatively straightforward, if perhaps counterintuitive: Katharine's hard-boiled virginity refers to her emotional experience as an inveterate

⁹ Katharine's attachment to sentimental emotion evokes Berlant's definition of an optimistic attachment: "an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (*Cruel 2*, emphasis in original). *Virgin*'s ambiguity makes it unclear whether Katharine's sentimentality is "an obstacle to [her] flourishing," the determining factor in Berlant's "relation of cruel optimism" (*Cruel 1*).

romantic and a diehard idealist, and to her physical experience as a dispassionate sensualist, particularly when it comes to sex. To the extent that these definitions verge on antinomy, they underscore Newman's interest in containing seeming contradiction within a sentimental framework. During the novel's composition, Newman described her protagonist as "a woman who has a great capacity for love and even for tenderness, but none for passion, and naturally has difficulty in finding a man who cares for her kind of love" (*Letters* 134). Newman's description—the presence of "love" and "tenderness" alongside the absence of "passion"—illustrates the inverted symmetries between Katharine's "kind of love" and the proscriptions of a sentimental femininity that is only supposed to feel passion according to another's desire (her husband's). Katharine's hard-boiled sensibility thus adapts a traditional sentimental logic.

In 1926 "hard-boiled fiction" had not yet taken on its more narrow associations with crime and detective fiction; rather, the phrase referred more broadly to the realist-influenced portrayals of sex and violence in magazines like Mencken's *Black Mask*. For the male protagonists of these early hard-boiled narratives, sex is merely another emotionless physical act. Consistent with later hard-boiled characterization, this "tough guy" sensibility, Christopher Breu notes, "organize[s] around the rigorous suppression of affect" and requires projection, displacement, and other psychic work—a relationship to feeling that we might recognize as a masculine version of modern sentimentality (1).¹⁰

¹⁰ Cassuto has previously proposed that hard-boiled and sentimental sensibilities—and thus their literary modes—exist on a common affective axis. Focusing on the crime genre that coalesces several years after *Virgin*'s 1926 publication, Cassuto connects nineteenth-century sentimental ideology to hard-boiled fiction by authors including Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ernest Hemingway, and Chester Himes. Forter similarly details the psychological and emotional dynamics of male-focused hard-boiled fiction.

Newman gives this emergent discourse a feminine form.¹¹ Although *Virgin* does not employ the stripped-down style then beginning to be associated with hard-boiled fiction, the novel depicts a similarly undemonstrative experience of sex. Katharine, however, has no desire to be unaffected or withdrawn. She has sex because “she was sure that she was about to feel the melting of the hard little core of consciousness she had instead of a soul” (273). But intercourse only confirms the resilience of Katharine’s unwanted “hard little core.” Combined with her entrenched romantic idealism, this lack of carnal passion makes Katharine emotionally virginal and corporeally hard-boiled.

But Katharine’s sentimentality does not simply coexist with her hard-boiled virginity: her sentimentality generates her hard-boiled virginity. The youngest daughter of a well-established Southern family, Katharine is born when “the prestige of double beds and double standards was not seriously diminished” in turn-of-the-century Atlanta (9–10). Her intellectual, artistic, emotional, and sexual development proceeds in similarly convoluted and indirect fashion—first through her voracious reading, then through her social education. Given the nonphysical “nature of well-bred love” that Katharine gleans from over two centuries of international literature, she understands sex as either a threat to spiritual, emotional union or its consummate product—dangerously destructive, or the height of lived passion (61). She combines this incongruous sentimental literary education with the equally conflicted lessons of Southern femininity. While her mother,

¹¹ A frequent contributor to Mencken’s *Smart Set* (whose operating losses were initially covered by *Black Mask*), Newman was certainly familiar with the developing genre. Initially, she wrote, “I told my more intimate acquaintances that I might call the book *Parthenos*, because I was writing a book about a hard-boiled virgin” (qtd. in *Letters* 30). At the suggestion of editor and publisher Guy Holt, Newman swapped her descriptor for her original title—an epithet applied to various virgin Greek goddesses, and also the name of Apollo’s and Chrysothemis’s daughter who died an unmarried virgin and became the star constellation Virgo.

sisters, and female friends insist that marriage is the ultimate triumph, their stories also indicate that connubial and maternal bonds preclude individual freedom, inhibit professional ambition, and occasionally lead to death. Accordingly, Katharine learns never to compromise and always to compromise; to expect no emotional, intellectual, spiritual connection and to settle for nothing less. Her attempt to reconcile these logics with each other and with her own less extreme experience only increases her desire for the transcendent sensation she associates with sex and romance. Her sentimental attitude towards sex thus solidifies—hard-boils—her emotional virginity.

Katharine's hard-boiled virginity equally refers to her dispassionate experience of physical intercourse. Subsequent to a series of disappointing interactions with disappointing men, Katharine considers the possibility that sex is the missing ingredient in the all-consuming passion she has yet to feel. Instead, she finds sex as unsatisfying as her disillusioning encounters with over twenty would-be heroes (a cast that includes numerous unfortunately married men, several self-important scholars and authors, a narrow-minded Georgia politician, and one appealingly resolute bachelor).¹² In these

¹² Katharine's more notable suitors include Captain Edward Cabot, who "offer[s] her the insult of an unbetrothed kiss" when she expects a proposal, and aspiring Georgia legislator Neal Lumpkin, whose "sound masculine views" demand the thoughtless "echoing [of] his confidence in all the faiths of his fathers which concerned God and women and Negroes and cotton" (151, 174, 177). She also spends time with a Viennese diplomat, a Nashville-born journalist, "a doctor of philosophy from a German university of which she had never heard and which looked down its nose at Heidelberg," and a surgeon who is "suspected of an operation which was not for appendicitis" (195, 232). Katharine eventually decides "she would never again be conscious of a man's existence unless he enjoyed the distinction of being a celebrated writer" (242). She then meets a series of literary personalities, including "an author who had penetrated American literature as a banana penetrates a box of sandwiches," the less miasmatic obstinate bachelor who appreciates "their common sufferings in pursuit of a style," and a man whose monologue "seemed to be either a rehearsal or a recital of an article he might

encounters, Katharine is primarily aware of her lack of feeling. For example, “Even with such encouraging scenery, she had never felt the electric spray of her fountain after an evening with him, and she had not yet been able to enjoy imagining the heroic and touching endurance of her affection for him after he had his back broken in the hunting field . . . and she began to fear that she would never be magnificently in love with him” (178).

In contrast to the lengthy not-felt detail of these previous passages, *Virgin*'s single sex scene is the shortest, most temporally and rhetorically condensed episode, as the narration replaces its usual circuitous qualifications with a syntactical and discursive certainty that signals Katharine's anticipated climax:

[S]he felt that at last she could enjoy hearing the only music in which her rainbow fountain rose and fell, and she was sure that she understood herself at last. When she was lying in his arms on the day-bed in his sitting room, she was wondering if the violet and fuchsia pillows did not mean that he had been expecting her to go back with him, but she was sure that she was about to feel the melting of the hard little core of consciousness she had instead of a soul, and that she was about to feel everything Isolde had ever felt for Tristan. She still wanted to wait another night, but she could not tell Alden Ames that she did not want what he was trembling with desire to give her, and what seemed to her much more remote than a kiss after he had given it to her. (273)

easily be writing . . . and when he reached its neatly arranged climax she told him that he was far more important than anything he had ever written” (245, 242, 250).

Disproving the narrative of surrendered virginity as a climactic event in a woman's life, Katharine skips from before to after with a single conjunction. Her analytic filter returns immediately. She compares sex to her previous encounters and deems it even "more remote" than those indifferent kisses. Further distinguishing Katharine's interpersonal reality from her aesthetically-cultivated fantasies, the Wagnerian opera she attends just prior to intercourse inspires a more powerful visceral response—elsewhere in the novel "the rainbow fountain" describes Katharine's self-induced orgasms.

Confirming her sense of her hard-boiled virginity, Katharine remains unaffected by sex until she fears she may be pregnant. Suddenly, she is flooded with feelings. Pregnancy, not intercourse, Katharine realizes, may well be the event that defines a modern narrative of femininity. "Suffering because she did not know what was happening in her own body and because she could not control her own body," Katharine contemplates suicide but "could not endure the idea of having Alden Ames think" he inspired her action (274–75). For once, Katharine experiences what she determines to be the appropriate, strong emotions, only to find that, even then, her analytic tendencies remain. She rejects the sentimental narrative that presents itself (suicide inspired by truncated romance) and returns to intellectual analysis, concluding the episode with one of her "discoveries": "She discovered that she had been right when she thought she was not brave enough not to be virtuous" (276). Rather than diminishing her romantic ideals, Katharine's sexual experience and its aftermath only reinforce—further hard-boil—her attachment to the sentimental virtue of female chastity.

Determined to act according to her lack of bravery, Katharine rejects one version of hard-boiled sensibility in favor of another. She experiments with being the brave

individual who operates according to her own moral code, but opts instead to be the virtuous individual who operates according to a socially-recognized, if marginalized, moral code.¹³ Hard-boiled femininity, or at least Katharine's version of it, perceives bravery and idiosyncratic individualism as incompatible with romance, a dichotomy that leaves Katharine oscillating between self-determined and socially codified female virtue. In the final episode, Katharine "had begun to feel at last that a peg has at least as much right to be square as a hole has to be round," but just a few lines later, "she wrote down her conviction that successful women are the women who learn to take advantage of being women before their throats begin to droop" (281–82). Given her dispassionate sexual encounter, Katharine tells her final suitor that she is "as glad to be rid of her virginity as she was to be rid of her religion" but that she is still "hopelessly virginal" (284). This distinction is crucial. Katharine has already "realized how much her future life might be influenced by the knowledge that if a woman *tells* a man she is hopelessly virginal, he will almost immediately try to prove that she is mistaken" (253, my emphasis). Maintaining sentimental ideals of love, romance, and marriage, Katharine determines that she is perpetually *like* a virgin—or at least, she determines that she needs or wants to act like one.

Katharine's hard-boiled maturation is thus not about detaching from the sentimental traditions of Southern femininity and several centuries of literary precedent, or abandoning their standards wholesale (options that seem neither possible nor desirable in the novel), but about developing an ironic separation from her enduring attachment to

¹³ Classic examples of hard-boiled male protagonists who adopt and meld these models of bravery and virtue include Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, and Chester Himes's Bob Jones.

them. As *Virgin* and its hard-boiled protagonist demonstrate, it is possible to be ironically distant from unconscious feeling and at the same time to desire unfiltered sensation, unexamined impulses, and a generally sentimental experience. Maintaining this duality, Katharine inverts the notion of sentimental sensibility as too hyperbolic to be real: her real sensibility fails to be as sentimental as she would like it to be or as she determines it should be. Newman's novel thus replicates a modernist critique of sentimentalism's unreality, as its cultural and literary codifications of femininity shape Katharine's standards. Katharine is at once a "bad" sentimental reader—not adequately critical of her reading—and a "good" modern subject—self-conscious, skeptical, and critical of her own experience. As paradoxical as this combination might seem, the hard-boiled sensibility it produces is hardly exclusive. Like any number of hard-boiled male protagonists, Katharine's sensibility marries the world as it is to the world as she would like it to be.

Feeling Ironic

I was going to write a novel about a girl who began by believing everything that her family and her teachers said to her, and who ended by disbelieving most of these things, but by finding that she couldn't keep herself from behaving as if she still believed them—about a girl who was born and bred to be a southern lady, and whose mind could never triumph over the ideas she was presumably born with, and the ideas she was undoubtedly taught.

—Frances Newman, *Letters* (29–30)

The ironies of Katharine's experience are by no means lost on her. The ambiguously close-third-person narrative perspective and its retrospective point of view suggest that an older Katharine, perhaps the Katharine of the final episode, may be the narrator. Regardless of whether narrator and protagonist coincide, the novel indicates that Katharine ultimately appreciates dramatic and rhetorical irony as thoroughly as her

narrator and, presumably, her reader. Though it remains unclear where her awareness ends, Katharine evinces a progressively more ironic stance toward her own sentimentality. The retrospective narration registers Katharine's eventual sense of her previous naïveté from the novel's first page, such that the reader watches this now-conscious disillusionment come into being. *Virgin's* dramatic and rhetorical irony thus simulates Katharine's psychology. Increasingly cynical, abidingly romantic, and, as Newman asserts, a Southern lady in spite of herself, Katharine is simultaneously sentimental and ironic.

Virgin's dramatic irony recapitulates Katharine's concurrent naïveté and knowledge. Although the episodes are chronological, the knowledge gap between Katharine and the narrative voice and therefore the extent of the dramatic irony fluctuate from one episode, even one sentence, to the next, frustrating any sense of stable relation between them. As one might expect of a coming-of-age story, initially the narrative perspective is clearly distinct from Katharine's point of view. When the novel begins, Katharine is eight-years-old, and the narrator frequently relates not only what she does not know or does not suspect in the present but also what she will not realize for some time: "If she had known that she was beginning to walk in the holy footprints of Saint Katharine of Alexandria [a virginal martyr], she could not have wept longer when she discovered that the horrifying felicities of the holy bonds of matrimony sometimes follow the horrors of connubial fury" (11). Although there are fewer proleptic comments as the narrative goes on and an increasing likelihood that Katharine understands the obscure allusions, several comments suggest the narrator's omniscience, such that even a much-older Katharine could not possibly obtain this knowledge. Reinforcing this unclear

temporal distance and degree of separation, Katharine is typically referred to by full name (“Katharine Faraday”).

Despite this sustained separation between Katharine and the narrator, the narration implies that Katharine eventually shares the narrator’s ironic attitude. As the novel progresses, Katharine’s free indirect discourse includes the same rhetorical irony and epigrammatic wit that characterizes the narrative voice. In one instance of Katharine’s self-described “peculiarly subtle cleverness,” “she told him that she thought there was a great deal to be said for the Old South, but not nearly as much as people had already said” (236, 244). In another, “she enjoyed saying that Christianity is a sadist’s religion, and after patriotism introduced large American flags of the best quality into churches [during the Great War], she enjoyed saying that the American clergy were reducing their own god to a tribal deity” (226). The narrator lays the groundwork for Katharine’s quips early on: “If Katharine Faraday had not brought herself up on the literature of the Beardsley period, she would certainly not have developed an early taste for epigrams, and for the constant repetition of her belief that nothing is so immodest as modesty” (94). This ironic wit occurs in Katharine’s reported thoughts and writing as well. Her first publication is an essay titled “Virginal Succession,” “which she thought managed to prove that marriage has a bad effect on a woman’s writing, and that George Eliot and George Sand might easily have been writing to prove that living in sin is just as injurious to feminine literary style as a union preceded by a civil and a religious ceremony” (235). The targets of Katharine’s irony thus coincide with the narrator’s subjects of critique—marriage, religion, female sexuality, literary precedent, Southern tradition, and the sentimental expectations that infuse these topics.

In addition to this correspondence in attitude, *Virgin*'s ironic narration parallels Katharine's cognitive dynamics. As Peter Goldie observes, dramatic irony and free indirect style are particularly amenable to reproducing human consciousness, in which evaluative, emotional, and temporal gaps construct the inevitable ironies that come from the present-day witness of oneself as a character in now-past narratives.¹⁴ *Virgin*'s narrative perspective reflects this phenomenon of belated knowledge and rethinking of past events. All events are reported indirectly and retrospectively, expressed through Katharine's narrated thoughts about the action. Many of the novel's verbs are synonyms for thought (to know, to think, to suspect, to be sure, to be certain, to be unsure, to be uncertain, to wonder, etc.). Katharine's feelings are also often narrated as thoughts, rather than primary sensation. Subsequent to yet another disappointing romantic interaction, "she was still sure she had never been so unhappy before and she wrote in her notebook that unhappiness is a state where a mind cannot rest happily on either the past or the future, and where it aches from tossing back from the past it cannot look at and back from the future it cannot look at" (260). The narration also dramatizes this revisionary thinking. Just a moment earlier, Katharine "felt that she had been very young and very inexperienced" at a prior point in time, but this recognition does not affect her confidence in the maximal unhappiness of the moment (259). Subsequently aware of her previous naïveté, Katharine shares the narration's sense of irony in terms of her past. By the end of the novel, Katharine learns to appreciate the ironies of the present as well.

¹⁴ Goldie's philosophical study of "the ways in which we think about our lives" aligns the psychological phenomenon of *tatonnement*—a "tentative, groping procedure [that seeks] the appropriate evaluative and emotional import of what is narrated"—with the recursive, non-linear process of subjective narration (ix; 11).

Virgin's irony also emulates Katharine's emotional experience. The narration's ironic distance echoes Katharine's self-conscious assessment of her feelings and parallels the perpetual gap between what she feels and what she would like to feel. Reginald Abbott observes, "Newman's wit and style bring life to her heroine, but that same style and wit keep Katharine and the reader at a distance, just as Katharine herself is distanced in the novel from those around her" (52). Although Abbott accurately characterizes the novel's sustained sense of ironic separation, I propose that this ironic distance does not conceal or obscure Katharine's intimate, emotional experience: this ironic distance mimics Katharine's intimate, emotional experience. As I have suggested, the narration's "style and wit" approximates the self-witnessing analysis of Katharine's thinking and her thinking about her feeling in particular. It also reproduces her feeling of experiencing "the shifting sand of her own ideas and her own emotions" from a close distance (93). Katharine thus shares Abbott's sense of mild alienation—or rather, Abbott shares Katharine's unsatisfying remove from her affective life. A reader's desire for Katharine to express greater certainty or feel more intensely in order to close a perceived affective gap replicates the character's desire to do the same.

This question of adequate or genuine feeling haunts Katharine herself. In a reversal of common aesthetic endeavors (art approximating life), Katharine's life is an attempt to approximate literary emotion, specifically the sentimental apotheosis of love. As with many of her feelings, the narration reports Katharine's experience of love through the filter of thought. She develops "a romantic attachment which she did not doubt was love"; she regularly "decided that she had fallen in love"; she "was never able to think she was in love with any man who lived in the same town with her" (45, 233,

233). Katharine continually compares her own feelings to her aesthetic standards, “suffer[ing] all the mortification Beatrice Portinari could have suffered when Dante Alighieri turned a tragic adoration towards her” (49). Here and elsewhere, the narration documents Katharine thinking about her feeling to determine whether it is an adequate literary emotion (“all the mortification”) for “her own story of her own life” (159). Late in the novel, a new interpretive method through which to filter her feelings temporarily relieves Katharine: “She went on suffering from her belief that she was in love with him until . . . the theories of Sigmund Freud convinced her that she could not possibly be in love” (248). Again, however, Katharine’s reading reinforces her romantic ideals. Applying her understanding of Freud to her psychic experience does not challenge Katharine’s faith in romantic love; it simply convinces her that she has not yet felt the hallowed emotion. The extent to which Katharine appreciates this particular irony is unclear.

The narration’s theatrical vocabulary also mirrors Katharine’s internalized expectations of emotion, indicating a conscious performance that dovetails with Katharine’s sense of dramatic irony. Initially an aspiring novelist, Katharine eventually turns to the theater and writes a play titled “No Sheets” (presumably a semi-autobiographical work based on her experience with Alden Ames). Accordingly, the diction in “her own story of her own life” shifts from episodes, motifs, and minor characters to prologues, lines, and acts (159). Over the course of the novel, the play in which Katharine imagines herself to be acting transitions from a “romantic tragedy” to a “romantic drama” to a “high comedy” to a “cynical comedy,” suggesting an equivalent trajectory in Katharine’s sensibility (102, 195, 220, 249). Given the narrative

perspective's shifting distance from Katharine, it is unclear how much she performs for her own third-person sense of herself or for her suitors and others around her. As a young girl, she understood that "the family processional was ready to . . . see her show the touching childish belief in Santa Claus's existence and the rapturous satisfaction with his gifts which she knew were the correct rewards of her father's bills and her mother's labours," so she "played the pleasant part of a delighted child" (31).

While Katharine performs such filial duty without much trouble, narratives of romantic passion present a distinct challenge: she does not simply want to act as a romantic heroine; she wants to be one. As Katharine anticipates the end of a courtship, the role she will play and the clever lines she will deliver do not diminish her disappointment: "She knew she would not be consoled by the opportunity of using a phrase she admired" (284). Again, Katharine reverses common aesthetic logic. She acts as the romantic heroine she would like to be, in the hopes of experiencing the dramatic emotion she imagines accompanies said behavior. This conceptual sequence echoes 1922's popular James-Lange theory of physiology-based emotion in which action precedes emotion. In line with this theory's impersonal logic of emotion (feeling ensues from behavior more than attachment), Katharine's anticipated disappointment seems to have little to do with the loss of the relationship itself. Rather, her disappointment comes from the failure to achieve the happy ending of a sentimental romance. As tragic endings often inspire disappointment in their protagonists, it is impossible to identify the origin of Katharine's feelings: a desire to feel the emotions of a codified sentimental narrative or a desire to generate her own narrative (which, for Katharine, is always a variation on a sentimental theme).

This performative logic aligns with Katharine's socialization in Southern femininity. From a young age, Katharine recognizes "the conscious reticence" with which "southern ladies and gentlemen respect the polite fictions of society," particularly when it comes to female sexuality (145, 51). The references to reading Freud, Krafft-Ebing, Darwin, and *Gray's Anatomy* imply that Katharine eventually learns biological terminology for sexual organs and processes, but the narrative voice maintains its recurrent euphemisms—"the rainbow fountain," "the electric spray," "the delicate brown line which ran down what she still called her stomach"—implying that Katharine's initial ignorance eventually becomes a social performance of the naïve female sexuality dictated by cultural tradition (259, 76). These codes of feminine innocence and untainted virtue not only overtly contradict Katharine's embodied experience (more than once, she is "obliged to act an outraged virtue she could not feel") but are outright contradictory in and of themselves: "She knew that in Georgia no lady was supposed to know she was a virgin until she had ceased to be one" (186, 174). The dramatic irony of the narrative perspective and its uncertain distance from Katharine thus recapitulate the necessarily indecipherable performance of Southern femininity and its internal contradictions, in which a woman is expected to know that she cannot know that she is a virgin until she no longer is.

In Newman's *kunstlerroman*, growing up is an education in negative knowledge. As Katharine increasingly recognizes the ironic contradictions and near-paradoxes of the world she inhabits, she also accepts the impossibility of resolving these tensions or operating outside of their psychic and social systems. The novel's closing lines evince Katharine's growing ability to appreciate the dramatic irony of her own life, with herself

as a character. Meeting yet another suitor, “she began to think that at last Georgia was providing another hero for the romance of Katharine Faraday. . . . [S]he was sure she would tell him that he had shattered her last illusion, but she knew that she would go on discovering that one illusion had been left her a minute before, and that she would discover it every time she heard another illusion shattering on the path behind her” (284–85). Ultimately, then, Katharine recognizes the extent of what she cannot know. She accurately anticipates that future knowledge will undermine her present understanding and reveal her current blindspots and naïveté.

The tone of this final recognition is ambiguous, an uncertainty that is crucial to *Virgin*’s pathos. Given the nebulous relationship between Katharine and the narrator, it is unclear where Katharine’s final self-disclosure stops. Is she “sure” she will share the entirety of her awareness, or that she will withhold the latter half and maintain the romantic fiction for her potential hero and for herself? The question speaks to the entire novel: What is Katharine sure of? For the character and for the reader, this uncertainty maintains Katharine in a suspended state of dramatic irony and virginal sentimentality, in which there is always an as-yet-unshattered illusion. The prose suggests an acceptance of this reality—the impossibility of omniscience—inflected by the melancholy of inevitable future loss, as well as a residual, if diminished, attachment to the possibility of living out a grander, more passionate narrative.

Achieved through a simultaneously detached and highly personal perspective, Newman’s depiction of modern femininity, and perhaps subjectivity more broadly, is ultimately neither tragic nor comic, but a more ambivalent phenomenon. Her cognitive and affective experience appreciates its enduring sentimentality through the register of

irony. In *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, irony participates not only in the literary representation of knowledge and its limits, but also in the feelings that accompany this epistemological awareness. The sensibility *Virgin* develops is about experiencing what one does *not* feel as well as what one does. This negative aesthetic of emotion preserves—indeed, affirms—the sentimental ideal and the aesthetic pleasure it promises.

Like its unsettled heroine, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*'s emphatic ambiguity suspends the novel between an incendiary satire of Southern culture and its enduring sentimentality, an ironic critique of modern femininity and its enduring sentimentality, and a sincere attempt to register the ambivalence of modern sentimentality. The ambivalent status of sentimentalism within these possible readings evokes Newman's "truth about how women feel" and advances an analogy between Katharine's sentimentality and the novel's relationship to sentimental literary precedent. At the age of thirty, Katharine recognizes that, had she attended a different childhood school, "her brain would have been extracted in the process which the Misses Rutherford felt their duty to southern womanhood required," whereas her teacher "felt her duty ended when she left the brains of her young ladies in a state of paralysis" (58). While Katharine and Newman's novel clearly move beyond paralysis, they continue to grapple with the sentimental traditions from which they emerge, constantly returning to, rethinking, and revising these lessons. Like other works of modern sentimentalism, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* makes sentimental convention into something new.

An Ambivalent Tradition: Race and Modern Sentimentalism

On March 21, 1924, over one hundred men and women of American letters gathered at New York City's Civic Club for an event often credited with inaugurating the "Negro Renaissance," as the *Herald-Tribune* dubbed it shortly thereafter.¹ The illustrious interracial guest list included W. E. B. Du Bois, Horace Liveright, Alain Locke, H. L. Mencken, Eugene O'Neill, and James Weldon Johnson, as well as editors and other key figures from *Harper's*, *Nation*, *Century*, *Survey*, *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Scribner's*, and *The World Tomorrow*. Ostensibly, "the intellectual leaders of the metropolis" came together to "celebrat[e] the birthday of a new sort of book about colored people," but both the book and its author were lost in the collective attention to the promising future of a nascent artistic movement (Ad for *There Is Confusion*). Not yet a day old, the still-unreleased novel was already passé.

The nature of this occasion and its surrounding politics have been discussed elsewhere, as has the repeated marginalization of the evening's purported guest of honor Jessie Redmon Fauset and an oeuvre that includes 1924's *There Is Confusion*, three subsequent novels, copious essays, stories, and poems, and several works of French translation.² With uncanny consistency, Fauset manages to be at the fore of the literary vanguard, in the midst of the avant-garde, yet disregarded as already belated and outmoded. As others have noted, Fauset's age, gender, perceived class background,

¹ The *Herald-Tribune*'s original editorial ran several days after the gathering and was reprinted in full under "Pot-Pourri" in *Opportunity*.

² For a contemporaneous summary of the night, see Johnson, "Debut." For critical considerations of the evening, see Hutchinson, *Harlem* 389–95 and Lewis, *Harlem* 93. For a reading of Fauset's position that evening and some of its parallels to her literary history, see Levison, 825–6, and Wall, 69–71.

assumed political beliefs, and, perhaps above all, aesthetic interests have played a substantial role in this persistent displacement.³ What concerns me here is how Fauset's artistic practice anticipates and deconstructs this dynamic of misrecognition as symptomatic of the contradictions within New Negro ideology, particularly with regard to femininity and artistic production. This enduring misreading of Fauset's work reflects a misunderstanding not only of her innovative aesthetic, but also of the tensions she diagnosed in the Renaissance in which she participated.

Taking many of the period's prominent writers and critics at face value, we have continued to assume that a modern African American aesthetic must be free of sentimentality—that in evolving new modes of self-expression, twentieth-century black authors must disclaim the tradition of sentimental writing about race, repudiating those narrative conventions, stock characters, depicted emotions, and implicit values as not simply unrealistic, inauthentic, and artificial but as antithetical to genuine racial art. As Fauset's fiction suggests and her critical history bears out, this expectation—the idea that authentic racial feeling can only be represented by categorically abandoning the sentimental mode (rather than reinventing it)—has unfortunate consequences for a black female artist, especially one who is interested in preserving a sense of artistic heritage and locating her work in a racially-informed aesthetic genealogy.

This chapter proposes a new model for recognizing Fauset's idiosyncratic contribution to the artistic renewal known as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance. The four sections proceed as follows. The first describes a theoretical framework for Fauset's modern sentimentalism and its evocative form of racial feeling. The second

³ It has become commonplace to rehearse these identity politics in Fauset's critical history before reading her work. See, for example, Kuenz; Sylvander; Wall.

contextualizes Fauset's aesthetic choices in the 1920s debates about black art. The third explores the freight of sentimentalism in Fauset's reception over the past eight decades. The final section details Fauset's experiments with an ironic sentimental mode in her second and best-known novel, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral* (1929). A kunstlerroman set in early-twentieth-century Philadelphia and New York, *Plum Bun* demonstrates that life as a young black female artist in modern America is not devoid of sentimentality so much as animated by a different relation to it.

Defining Perceptions: Sentimentalism, Irony, Melancholy

“No lynchings, no inferiority complexes, *no propaganda*,” declare Boni & Liveright's ads for *There Is Confusion* (emphasis in original). As such negative descriptors indicate, Fauset's fiction invokes and destabilizes a host of race-related literary expectations. At a time when the black and white avant-garde was taking an interest in abstraction, primitivism, and folk culture, and making every effort to overtly distinguish itself from nineteenth-century sentimental paradigms, Fauset wrote standardized prose about Northern, middle-class city dwellers who desire apparently conventional sentimental ends like love, marriage, financial security, and a modicum of professional success. The key words here are “apparently conventional”—terms that beg the questions: Apparent to whom? Contemporaneous black readers, white readers, literary critics, Fauset's characters, Fauset herself? And whose conventions? That of nineteenth-century writing by white authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child, or black authors like Pauline Hopkins and Frances E. W. Harper? What about

emergent race-related patterns in works by white authors like T. S. Stribling and Julia Peterkin, or black authors like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston?

Introducing her work as both unprecedented and revisionary, Boni & Liveright's ad (which ran in identical form in newspapers with predominantly black and white audiences) instantiates Fauset's artistic philosophy. A champion of black art as a means of cultural and social advance, Fauset envisions an aesthetic that responds and adds nuance to established and evolving conventions of racial representation. She repeatedly rails against "propaganda," "preachments," and "purposeful literature" and praises "discreet," "realistic and objective methods" and "a dispassionate presentation of color-prejudice."⁴ At one point, she indicts an author for "writ[ing] in the vein of a Sunday-school teacher" ("No End" 208). Confounding many critics, this fierce anti-didacticism, emphatic secularity, and commitment to subtlety, objectivity, and dispassion coincides with an interest in traditional sentimental discourse and ideology, and an attention to sentimentalism's endurance in cultural and literary mores. For Fauset, however, such concerns not merely are continuous with a modern racial artistic project, but are a means of pointing out and negotiating this project's conflicted demands: identifying a legacy for African American art while disavowing a problematic past, distinguishing authentic representation from fallacious construction, refuting racial essentialism without evacuating the category of race altogether, developing modes of racial expression that

⁴ The term "propaganda" appears as an epithet in nearly all of Fauset's book reviews. She lauds Rene Maran's *Batouala* (1922) for its "realistic and objective methods" and its "almost cinema-like sharpness of picturization"; the novel features "[n]o propaganda, no preachments, just an actual portrayal of life" in which "the color problem is only indirectly indicated" ("No End," 208–210). She lauds Percival Gibbons's *Flower O' The Peach* (1911) for being similarly "discreet" in its message and for its "dispassionate presentation of color-prejudice" ("What to Read," 211–12).

resist reductive conventionalization and appropriation, balancing individual aims with collective goals, and legitimating black art while transforming the social norms that define these same terms.

Synthesizing Fauset's aesthetic priorities and accounting for the sum total of her artistic vision has proved a hard task not just because her pronounced engagement with sentimentalism runs counter to critical expectations of Renaissance writing, but because of *how* she engages the sentimental mode. Reproducing a phenomenon of reception that Fauset notes has long plagued black artists—circumscribing their creative range and then downplaying the ways they transform templates largely scripted by whites, for whites—critics have both appreciated Fauset's sentimentalism and consistently overlooked her ironic adaptation of this mode. In one of the countless ironies of her critical history, Fauset's incisive, subtle irony—the lynchpin of her own “discreet,” “dispassionate,” “realistic and objective methods”—has been as crucial to her work's misperception and underestimation as its apparent sentimentalism.

In Fauset's tripartite aesthetic practice, sentimentalism functions as mode and generic superstructure, irony as dominant literary technique, melancholy as tone and affective formation. Such an aesthetic delineates but by no means resolves two endemic modern questions, applicable but not limited to the artistic realm. First, how might one deconstruct essentialist racial logic without destroying a valuable sense of history, heritage, and solidarity? And second, how can one articulate the manifold ironies that make up quotidian experience as a racial subject in modern America, without reducing social or emotional complexity?

These perennial conundrums form the essence of Fauset's modern sentimentalism. Mapping these conflicts without simplifying them, Fauset's fiction represents and diagnoses, rather than resolves and instructs. Her aesthetic repudiates the limiting conventions and stereotypes associated with nineteenth-century representations of race while preserving an overt tie to this tradition. In addition to reworking this archive's artistic expectations, interrogating its abiding cultural influence for women in particular, and negotiating contemporary market demands, Fauset reconfigures, rather than abandons or disclaims, sentimental sensibility. Simultaneously skeptical and hopeful, ambitious and resigned, pragmatic and idealistic, ironic and sentimental—these mixed emotions and apparently paradoxical combinations describe Fauset's rendering of modern black experience.

As in the previous two chapters, irony here refers to an instance, an expression, or a structure in which surface and depth do not coincide—for example, when the plot unfolds in a manner contrary to what the character or the reader expect (dramatic and structural irony, respectively), or when language signifies an opposite meaning (verbal irony). As the previous chapter elaborates, literary irony can be understood to emulate certain cognitive processes. This chapter particularly considers irony's resemblance to double consciousness, a cognitive framework that likewise sustains an awareness of difference, multiplicity, and complex surface-depth relations or, as Du Bois defined his concept of “two-ness”: “a peculiar sensation, . . . [a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). Like Fauset, I am particularly interested in the affective dimensions of this cognitive dynamic.

Deployed with an ironic sensibility, sentimentalism can evoke a more complex constellation of racial feeling than is commonly associated with the sentimental mode: the affective formation that Anne Anlin Cheng calls “racial melancholy.” Cheng’s concept describes the racial subject’s “incorporation *as self* of the excluded other,” a model of ego-formation that, like Freud’s melancholia, perpetually mourns the lost-and-remembered object with which the subject identifies (“Melancholy” 50, emphasis in original). For Cheng, melancholia’s psychopathology metaphorizes the act of American racialization, an institutional and imaginative process that simultaneously excludes and retains the racial other. This suspended condition correlates to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of feeling brown, an affective circuit that involves “not quite feel[ing] right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment” (676). Alluding to Stowe’s famous conclusion to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—“There is one thing that every individual can do [in the face of slavery], they can see to it that *they feel right*”—Muñoz implies that Stowe’s call to “*feel strongly, healthily and justly*” is not simply impossible for a non-white subject, but that the ways critics tend to think about such a racialized imperative are part of the problem we seek to explore (i.e., we contemplate the ways Stowe’s sentiment establishes paradigms of feeling that we then judge to be impossible for a non-white subject) (624, my emphasis). Overdetermined by this expectation, Muñoz suggests, our approaches to race, affect, and aesthetics rarely actually consider “minoritarian aesthetic and political practice” on their own terms (676).

The claim that irony, double consciousness, and racial melancholy can be generatively read together in the context of modern American literature is perhaps not as provocative as the claim that these concepts might all be identified within the supposedly

one-dimensional rubric of sentimentalism. Think, for example, of the protagonist's conclusion in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912): "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet . . . I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (207). Shot through with irony, the protagonist's tautological self-definition is at once self-multiplying and self-obliterating. His attempt to repress the melancholic remainder of his black identity promises to fail endlessly. Compare this dialectic of disavowed loss and compensatory regret to the ending of *There Is Confusion*. After the talented Joanna Marshall has given up a promising career as a concert singer and dancer to marry a not-particularly-hard-working medical student, the narrator interjects:

Perhaps it is wrong to imply that Joanna had lost her ambition. She was still ambitious, only the field of her ambition lay without herself. It was Peter now whom she wished to see succeed. If his success depended ever so little on his achievement of a sense of responsibility, then she meant to develop that sense. . . . In a thousand little ways she deferred to him, and showed him that as a matter of course he was the arbiter of her own and her child's destiny[,] the *fons et origo* of authority. (292, emphasis in original)

As the vertiginous ironies of this passage reiterate, Joanna is and is not the literal, assumed, and scripted authority in her new household. This linguistic play ironizes the expectation that a New Negro woman uplift the race indirectly through her male relatives, but there is a further, more melancholic irony in the observation that now "her ambition

lay without herself.” As a black female artist, Joanna’s ambition has *always* required a performance that evacuates, dislocates, and reinscribes her gendered, racial self: her big break comes in reverse blackface, when she replaces a white actress in “The Dance of the Nation” as “America,” wearing a white mask. As Fauset’s ironic titles indicate, the apparently conventional sentimental ending that feminist critics often struggle with does not undo the rest of the novel or reverse its logic vis a vis female agency and desire—to the contrary, this conclusion extends and clarifies the problematic position of a character who can never directly express herself.

This chapter explores Fauset’s rendering of these paradoxical expectations of New Negro femininity and artistic production, and reexamines a moment in literary history in which an entire category of literature becomes the rejected-and-retained other of Cheng’s melancholic condition. This description perhaps applies to the entirety of the sentimental tradition in the interwar imaginary, but it has unique relevance for a black writer’s relation to a canon shaped by a largely white market. Cheng’s concept is illuminating in part because, like irony, melancholy appears in Fauset’s own critical vocabulary, but also because the “spectral drama” Cheng elaborates speaks so palpably to Fauset’s artistic position and her aesthetic practice (*Melancholy* 10). For a black female writer in the 1920s, a return to the sentimental tradition involves both finding and losing herself, recognizing and not recognizing her ghostly presence in an archive of silhouettes.

Sentimentalism and New Negro Art

It is not surprising that Fauset’s sentimentalism has inspired so many misreadings. For all the vociferous disagreement about racial representation and artistic priorities,

critics in the 1920s seemingly unanimously concur that a modern racial aesthetic is not sentimental. The seminal 1925 anthology *The New Negro*—a project born that fateful night at the Civic Club—announces a departure from historical sentimentalism no less than fourteen times.⁵ In his essay “The Negro in American Literature,” William Stanley Braithwaite summarizes nineteenth-century white writing about African Americans as a “tradition” of “indulgent sentimentalities”:

Antebellum literature imposed the distortions of moralistic controversy and made the Negro a wax-figure of the market place: post-bellum literature retaliated with the condescending reactions of sentiment and caricature, and made the Negro a *genre* stereotype. . . . The ‘Uncle’ and the ‘Mammy’ traditions, unobjectionable as they are in the setting of their day and generation, and in the atmosphere of sentimental humor, can never stand as the great fiction of their theme and subject. (29–32, emphasis in original)

Braithwaite finds most nineteenth-century black writing equally steeped in a distorted, market-imposed sentimentalism. Dismissing black authors from Phillis Wheatley to Paul Laurence Dunbar as “of historical interest only,” Braithwaite describes “Dunbar, the sentimentalist” in terms that define this mode for many of his contemporaries: “The two chief qualities in Dunbar’s work are pathos and humor”; his poetry is “spontaneous” and lacks “intellectual substance”; “Dunbar was the end of a regime, and not the beginning of

⁵ Purportedly inspired by the evening’s proceedings, editor Paul Kellogg determined to devote an entire issue of *Survey Graphic* to the new writers. The March 1925 edition of *Survey Graphic*, titled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” garnered a readership of more than 40,000 and laid the groundwork for *The New Negro*. See Johnson and Johnson, 70–72.

a tradition” (36, 43, 37, 38).⁶ A retrograde system of “forceful stereotypes” (the loyal uncle, the effusive mammy, the tragic mulatta) and “spurious values” (condescending white sympathy, submissive black piety), sentimentalism is antithetical to an artistic project of cultural and social advancement (31, 43).⁷

If Braithwaite’s perspective seems less nuanced from a twenty-first-century critical standpoint, his commentary reflects the dominant attitude of his peers. Other *New Negro* essayists describe similar advances from a retrogressive sentimentalism in theater and music, while a third scholar revalues traditional folk tales by arguing that they are less sentimental than critics recognize.⁸ Approaching the topic from a slightly different angle, editor Alain Locke identifies sentimentality as one of the primary influences of

⁶ Reiterating this notion of sentimentalism as fundamentally regressive, Braithwaite asserts that contemporary poet Georgia Douglass Johnson occasionally “lapses into the sentimental and the platitudinous, [but] she has an authentic gift” (40).

⁷ Given that Braithwaite dismisses nearly all nineteenth-century black writing, he does not attend to the variegated and complex use of sentimentalism in post-Reconstruction literature by black authors like Hopkins, Harper, and Chesnutt. Without naming names, Braithwaite implies that this body of work represents an unfortunate if understandable artistic capitulation to white standards, accommodating, if not explicitly endorsing, the model of racial representation established by texts like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. My discussion of *Plum Bun* reconsiders this canon at greater length.

⁸ Gregory’s essay on drama notes the “tremendous sentimental interest” in black characters that gave rise first to Aphra Behn’s “sentimental romance” *Oronooko*, then to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and which, Gregory asserts, has only recently begun to dissipate (154). Locke’s essay on music likewise describes a historical sentimentalism on the part of a white audience: “Still the predominant values of this [earlier] period in estimating the spirituals were the sentimental, degenerating often into patronizing curiosity on the one side, and hectic exhibitionism on the other” (“Spirituals” 202). Fauset’s half brother, Arthur Huff Fauset, provides an essay on folk tales that similarly highlights this reception history, while also asserting that the tales themselves are not sentimental (describing their aesthetic in terms fascinatingly evocative of his half-sister’s fiction): “It is not necessary to draw upon sentiment in order to realize the masterful quality of some Negro tales: it is simply necessary to read them. Moralism, sober and almost grim, irony, shrewd and frequently subtle, are their fundamental tone and mood . . . the quaint and sentimental humor so popularly prized is oftener than not an overtone merely” (241).

American experience on African American expression: “African art expressions are rigid, controlled, disciplined, abstract, heavily conventionalized; those of the Aframerican—free, exuberant, emotional, sentimental and human. . . . What we have thought primitive in the American Negro—his naiveté, his sentimentalism, his exuberance and his improvising spontaneity . . . are the result of his peculiar experience in America” (“Legacy” 254). For Locke, America’s sentimental influence on black art has been liberating to a certain extent, but he agrees with his contributors that sentimentalism is a mode to abandon as black art progresses.⁹ In a carefully mapped trajectory, Locke emphasizes that modern black artists must first recognize and then incorporate the disciplinary lessons of the African tradition. Such lessons will regulate, if not eradicate, sentimental excess through “the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery” (256). This (imagined) non-sentimental affiliation with a non-sentimental artistic heritage will produce an equally non-sentimental aesthetic.

Fauset envisions a more dialogic relation between twentieth-century African American art and its sentimental past. In “The Symbolism of Bert Williams,” Fauset lauds Williams’s performance of “that deep, ineluctable strain of melancholy, which no Negro in a mixed civilization ever lacks. He was supposed to make the world laugh and so he did but not by the welling over of his own spontaneous subjective joy, but by the humorously objective presentation of his personal woes and sorrows” (12). Epitomizing Fauset’s aesthetic ideal, Williams locates his work in an artistic lineage while critiquing

⁹ Locke’s four essays in *The New Negro* repeat this concept of historical sentimentalism and emphasize the white audience demands that have shaped black artistic production. In his introduction, for example, Locke declares that the New Negro “welcomes the new scientific rather than the old sentimental interest. Sentimental interest in the Negro has ebbed. We used to lament this as the falling off of our friends; now we rejoice and pray to be delivered both from self-pity and condescension” (8).

this same inheritance. His self-reflexive performance acknowledges and discredits the anti-intellectual caricatures it reanimates. His art does not evacuate physicality or strong feeling; rather, his “humorously objective presentation” adapts and redirects expected emotion (the demand “to make the world laugh” with “spontaneous subjective joy”) to express both “his personal woes and sorrows” and a “deep, ineluctable” collective “strain of melancholy.” Imbuing stock characters with affective depth, Williams invites nuanced sympathy rather than simple pity from black and white viewers alike.

These interpretations, of course, reflect Fauset’s vision of Williams, and might be challenged by another viewer or Williams himself. But as Fauset notes, Williams’s layered performance and the multiple interpretations it supports simply further his symbolic function. Noting that the light-skinned, Nassau-born Williams engineered every aspect of his “American Negro” persona from dialect to gait, Fauset elaborates the “strange and amazing contradiction” that Williams’s performances embody and his biography recapitulates (13, 12). He “fostered and deliberately trained his genius toward the delineation of this type . . . the shambling, stupid, wholly pathetic dupe,” until he successfully embodied “the essence of awkward naturalness” (12–13). These paradoxes, which Williams inhabits, manages, and reproduces with apparent aplomb, make him the archetypal black artist—both for the audience members who appreciate his performance’s melancholic depth and for the audience members who only perceive its superficial conformity.

Retitled “The Gift of Laughter” and anthologized in *The New Negro*, Fauset’s revision of “The Symbolism of Bert Williams” highlights this broader, historical dynamic, embedding her discussion of Williams in a treatise on the minstrel tradition.

Tracing the “chameleon adaptability” of black actors from past to present, Fauset describes the perennially paradoxical position of the black artist: “The colored man who finally succeeds in impressing any considerable number of whites with the truth that he does not conform to these measurements is regarded as the striking exception proving an unshakable rule” (167, 161). Anticipating Eric Lott’s observations about minstrelsy’s dialectical production of race, Fauset notes that this tradition reflects a mutual falsehood with regard to racial feeling: “[O]ne pauses to wonder if this picture of the black American as a living comic supplement has not been painted in order to camouflage the real feeling and knowledge of his white compatriot. Certainly the plight of the slaves under even the mildest of masters could never have been one to awaken laughter” (161–62). Like the circumstances and performances it describes, Fauset’s second title is ironic. For the black artist, laughter is at once an adaptive gift and a creative prison, an ironic response to an enduringly ironic reality.

Anticipating her own bad press, Fauset recognizes that audiences can miss the nuances of such an aesthetic, interpreting it as an acceptance of convention rather than an indictment. But this potential for misunderstanding—mistaking astute performance for untutored candor—seemingly inheres in being a black artist, especially where white audiences are concerned. The final irony of Williams’s career, Fauset notes in the original essay, came after his death, when “the press was instant with expression of sympathy, regret, and appreciation” and Williams was “compared, as indeed he deserved to be, with those other great wits of the world, Shakespeare and Moliere and Mark Twain” after a lifetime of racial qualification, mitigated praise, limited roles, and artistic denigration (14). Fauset’s response to this duality aligns with her reading of Williams’s

racial melancholy and indicates the tenor of her sentimental aesthetic. “The irony of it has made us all a little sadder so much so that when this morning I, who unfortunately did not know him, read in the *Tribune*: ‘Eddie Cantor gets a clean face,’ my eyelids stung with the prick of sudden tears” (14). The Jewish Cantor performed plenty of white roles as well as donning blackface, so the *Tribune* may not intend the layered ironies of its headline, but as with Williams’s performance, this indeterminacy fosters the racial feeling that compels Fauset.¹⁰ The white publication and its audience may take the headline at face value, but Fauset ascribes ironic appreciation and sadness to the entirety of *The Crisis*’s readership.

As such an assumed emotional mutuality suggests, Fauset’s ironic sentimental aesthetic intends to emulate the experience of black Americans, writ large. In a 1922 autobiographical essay, Fauset describes the “network of misunderstanding—to speak mildly—[of] the misrepresentation of things as they really are” that proliferates in twentieth-century America (“Some Notes” 355). Chronicling her quotidian experience as an “average American done over in brown,” Fauset details the “inhibition of natural liberties” that recurs explicitly and implicitly, in education and employment, on the subway, in restaurants, and at the movie theater (357). For the colored American, daily life “undermine[s] the very roots of our belief in mankind. In school we sing ‘America,’ we learn the Declaration of Independence, we read and even memorize some of the passages in the Constitution. Chivalry, kindness, consideration are the ideals held up

¹⁰ Douglas details the manifold ways that the Williams-Cantor duo inverts stereotypes. “Socially and culturally, Cantor’s claim on Williams . . . marked a step *up* for the white person. . . . Cantor was an ill-educated, Yiddish-speaking kid from the Lower East Side. . . his art was plebian and rowdy all the way, but Williams was an aristocrat of comedy” (*Terrible Honesty* 328, emphasis in original).

before us,” but a colored child recognizes that “the good things of life, the true, the beautiful, the just, these are not meant for us” (356).

Fauset’s literary priorities similarly extend and reformulate classic sentimental principles. In *The Crisis*’s 1926 symposium “The Negro In Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed,” Fauset asserts that black writers “must learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive that their portraits, even of the ‘best Negroes,’ those presumably most like ‘white folks,’ will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike” (71). Here and elsewhere, Fauset develops a concept of “literary sincerity” that emphasizes subtlety and understatement as a means of realistic and truthful representation. Combining humor with pathos and emphasizing aesthetic precision, Fauset attempts to negotiate a multiplicity of contemporaneous audiences—a choice that distinguishes her from authors like Langston Hughes who in the same year insists that reception ought to be largely irrelevant to the New Negro artist.¹¹ Fauset’s literary sincerity equally reflects a concern about the ease with which emergent conventions can be read into an essentialist paradigm. Responding to another question in *The Crisis* symposium, about the danger of young writers “following popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld,” Fauset concurs “Emphatically. This is a grave danger making for a literary insincerity both insidious and abominable” (71). Criticizing supposedly realistic work as not just insincere but immoral, Fauset again signals the continuity between her aesthetic priorities and nineteenth-century

¹¹ In “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain,” Hughes declares, “If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either” (693). Though this declaration can be taken with a sizeable grain of salt, the authorial persona it expresses differs sharply from Fauset’s.

sentimentalism and explains her interest in middle-class characters. Although Fauset notes the market demands at work, she repeatedly accuses black writers to date of insincerity—a somewhat counterintuitive charge given the sense of probity and earnestness that characterizes much nineteenth-century black writing, and the sense of authenticity and candor that characterizes much of the work of her contemporaries.

Fauset's literary sincerity refashions two qualities associated with earlier sentimental writing: an investment in profound emotion and an interest in universal humanity. Good literature, Fauset asserts, describes and provokes intense emotion, but a work's authorial persona must remain impassive and objective. In fact, authorial dispassion is necessary to produce compelling literary emotion. Fauset identifies this quality in many of the young writers she promotes. Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows*, for example, reflects a "deep emotionalism, a perception of what is fundamentally important to mankind everywhere—love of kind, love of home, and love of race. . . . [McKay] has dwelt in fiery, impassioned language on the sufferings of his race. Yet there is no propaganda. This is the truest mark of genius" ("As to Books" 66). Fauset similarly commends Hughes's poetry for its balance of thought and feeling. At times "the calm philosopher" who "achieves" a "remarkable objectivity," Hughes also "has feeling a-plenty and is not ashamed to show it. . . . I doubt if anyone will ever write more tenderly, more understandingly, more humorously of the life of Harlem shot through as it is with mirth, abandon and pain" ("Book Shelf" 239). Hughes's art lies in his discerning affective quality—his "brilliant, sensitive interpretation" of life and love—which redeems artistic choices that Fauset regards with more ambivalence, like a use of dialect and an apparent neglect of traditional forms (239).

As the priorities of these reviews intimate, Fauset also envisions a productive dynamism between universality and racial specificity—a synthesis that neither evacuates racial distinction nor signals assimilation, but rather elevates black literature to consummate art.¹² In a 1922 review, Fauset echoes Weldon Johnson’s priorities for modern black writers: “What is still more important is the possession on the part of the Negro of what Mr. Johnson calls a ‘transfusive quality,’ that is the ability to adopt the original spirit of his milieu into something ‘artistic and original, which yet possesses the note of universal appeal’” (“As to Books” 66). Reversing a common organization, universality here inflects and embellishes racial individuality. Hughes’s “Song for a Banjo Dance,” for example, combines “the doctrine of the old Biblical exhortation, ‘eat drink and be merry for tomorrow ye die,’ Horace’s ‘Carpe diem,’ the German ‘Freut euch des Lebens,’ and Herrick’s ‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.’ This is indeed a universal subject served Negro-style” (“Book Shelf” 239).¹³ Similarly, Jean Toomer’s “contribution to literature [is] distinctly negroid and without propaganda. It [has] in it an element of universality too, in that it shows the individual’s reaction to his own tradition” (qtd. in Sylvander 60). “React[ing] to his own tradition,” a modern black artist renovates “the original spirit of his milieu into something” highly individual, racially distinctive, and unquestionably new.

¹² Wall is among the critics who discuss Fauset’s “pull toward a vague universalism” (58). Whereas critics like Wall tend to see Fauset’s universalism as ill-formulated, semi-conscious, or problematic, I propose that her universalism is highly motivated and self-consciously ambivalent.

¹³ Fauset similarly notes that Countee Cullen’s *Color* features “the new expression of a struggle now centuries old,” demonstrating that “There *is* no ‘universal treatment’; it is all specialized” (“Book Shelf” 238, emphasis in original).

Jessie Fauset and the Politics of Harlem Renaissance Criticism

Not surprisingly given Fauset's modern artistic sensibility, she did not consider her work sentimental—or at least, not traditionally so. In a 1934 review, Locke finds her “style too mid-Victorian for moving power today,” with a “point of view [that] falls into the sentimental hazard” (“Saving Grace” 9). In response, Fauset composed a lengthy letter decrying his critical perspective.

I have always disliked your attitude toward my work dating from the time years ago when you went out of your way to tell my brother that the dinner given at the Civic Club for “There Is Confusion” wasn't for me. . . . But today's article is positively the worst because in it you have shown yourself so clearly as a subscriber to that purely Negroid school whose motto is “whatever is white is right.” . . . If I had been . . . poor mid-Victorian, sentimental persevering Miss Fauset, [I] would have told the story from a different angle. . . . And would you kindly, Alain, send me pages on which Mid-Victorian style prevails. . . . No dear Alain, your malice, your lack of true discrimination and above all your tendency to play safe with the grand white folks renders you anything but a reliable critic. (qtd. in Harker 53–54)

Like the discrepancy between Fauset's vision of what was meant to transpire at the Civic Club and what did transpire that evening, this letter exemplifies the disparity between Fauset's sense of her aesthetic choices and an interpretation of them that solidified in the 1930s and lingers to this day. While denying her “mid-Victorian” sensibility, Fauset does not repudiate her connection to the sentimental tradition altogether. Rather, she suggests

that, “lack[ing] true discrimination” (and adopting white standards), Locke misreads her nuanced aesthetic and its modern “angle” on these traditions.

As this exchange with Locke instantiates, the misrecognition of Fauset’s modern sentimental aesthetic dates back to her contemporaneous reception. While there is a general initial consensus that Fauset’s work is inventive and unorthodox, particularly in its “daring” point of view, her critical history rapidly collapses more nuanced readings into reductive attempts to answer two pressing questions: is her aesthetic black? And is her aesthetic modern? The initial responses to these questions alternate between yes and no, with all possible combinations inspiring compliment and criticism from both black and white reviewers.

In the same year as Locke dismisses her, Braithwaite places Fauset “at the head of the procession” of black writers and “in the front rank of American women novelists in general” (“Novels” 24). Locating Fauset in multiple literary traditions, Braithwaite declares Fauset “the potential Jane Austen of Negro literature,” a title that reflects the authors’ similarly ironic style and their mutual interest in interrogating social constructs (26). For Braithwaite, kinship with a legendary white author does not imply that Fauset’s aesthetic is white-washed, assimilative, or behind the times; to the contrary, it is racially specific and decidedly of the moment. Lauding Fauset’s ability to author “both a tragedy and a comedy of manners” with each volume, Braithwaite offers perhaps the most astute reading of her aesthetic to date: Fauset’s novels, he asserts, manifest a “passionate sympathy and understanding of [blacks’] ironic position in the flimsy web of American civilization” (26).

Less overtly forecasting the difficulty of categorizing Fauset's aesthetic, many original reviews identify her work by the myriad ways it does not conform to established and evolving expectations—again, a dynamic that inspires praise and condemnation. In his favorable review of *There Is Confusion*, Fred DeArmond notes, “Miss Fauset scorns precedent by writing a novel of polite Negro society, minus dialect and other thought-to-be-indispensable ear-marks of race literature” (332). George S. Schuyler likewise identifies Fauset and Nella Larsen as “delightful exceptions to the prevailing vogue” of “sewer sensationalism and misguided primitivism” (377). Exemplifying the problematic essentialism these emergent conventions invite, the white reviewer in the *New Republic* criticizes *Plum Bun*'s “story [as] melodramatic, unreal” at least in part because “Miss Fauset has disdained all use of dialect, [and] she has discarded as well the full rich idiom of the colored race” (K 235). Black critics also read Fauset through this conflicted paradigm. In the *Chicago Defender*, Ephraim Berry impugns Fauset for shunning “Harlem” subject matter and “jazz” aesthetics, determining that “under Miss Fauset's calm writing [her potentially modern theme] has been tuned down to the speed of a good old-fashioned buggy ride” (A1). Comparing Fauset to Julia Peterkin and DuBose Heyward, Berry effectively accuses Fauset of literary passing: “I certainly hope that the next book she writes will be about Negroes,” he concludes (A1).

The latter view of Fauset's work as aesthetically belated and racially disloyal informs the first fifty years of Renaissance criticism. For decades, critics reiterated versions of McKay's 1937 assessment of Fauset's literary output: “Miss Fauset is prim and dainty as a primrose, and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious. Primroses are pretty. . . . When the primroses spread themselves across the barren hillsides [of

Morocco] before the sudden summer blazed hot over the land, I often thought of Jessie Fauset and her novels” (91–2). Likening her work to a superficial, pleasant spring that precedes the intense heat of summer, McKay places Fauset temporally before and artistically behind the Renaissance’s blazing vitality. Her novels are overly tidy, excessively refined, and short-lived—decidedly minor and aesthetically uninteresting, if not repetitive and clichéd. In a telling and oft-repeated move, McKay frames these artistic choices in political terms, conflating Fauset’s art with her personality and assumed politics: “All the radicals liked her, although in her social viewpoint she was away over on the other side of the fence” (91).¹⁴ Although McKay avoids the freighted term, “sentimental” rapidly becomes shorthand for this perceived artistic and political conservatism.¹⁵

Feminist critics of the 1980s and 90s make more of Fauset’s prolific output and expend more energy interrogating her assumed politics, but they tend to further flatten

¹⁴ For discussions of Fauset’s politics, see Garcia; Sylvander, especially chapters three and four; and Wall.

¹⁵ Many of the most-famous early dismissals of Fauset’s fiction implicitly acknowledge her renovation of the sentimental mode, albeit with frequently backhanded compliments. Locke describes Fauset’s “persevering and slowly maturing art” as well as her “mid-Victorian literary habits” and “sentimental” point of view (“Saving Grace” 9). Brown cites Fauset as a “sentimental” example of “bourgeois realism,” a “continu[ation] of the earlier apologist tradition, with propaganda a little less direct” (142, 139). For Bone, Fauset exemplifies the aesthetic and ideological intermediacy of the “Rear Guard” of Harlem Renaissance-era novelists, “who sought a middle ground between the established traditions of the Negro novel and the radical innovations of the Harlem School” (97). Fauset in particular “expresses” the Rear Guard’s “fundamental attitude in all its ambivalence” (98). A convenient strawman for such political commentary, Fauset’s aesthetic itself is not really of interest to these critics, but their dismissive descriptions inadvertently advance a version of my argument about her reinvented sentimental aesthetic.

earlier assessments of her formal practices.¹⁶ Even her advocates suggest that Fauset's sentimentalism is problematic, a quality to either excuse or ignore. Some identify a progressive agenda beneath Fauset's seemingly conventional sentimental surface. Using the language of "masks," "protective mimicry," "buried plots," "literary veiling," "double structures," and "performative style," Deborah McDowell, Elizabeth Ammons, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Joseph Feeney, and Jane Kuenz characterize Fauset's sentimentalism as a complex form of literary passing, albeit to very different ends than Berry imagines.¹⁷ Other scholars focus primarily on her thematic concerns, implicitly endorsing the notion of Fauset's outdated and unremarkable, if not regressive and conservative, aesthetic.¹⁸ Several recent critics challenge this stigma by validating her aesthetic ambitions in non-

¹⁶ According to Christian, Fauset "accept[s] the literary conventions of the nineteenth-century black novel" without "any critical distance"; her novels are "bad fairytales" whose "plots seldom rise above melodrama" (43–4). Dearborn similarly collapses Fauset into the "black genteel tradition" of Frances Harper et al—both act as "mediator[s who] bring two cultures together by asserting their sameness rather than their differences" (51). Carby sees Fauset's novels, like her politics, as fundamentally "conservative"; Fauset "adapt[s] but [does] not transcend the form of the romance" (167–68). Wall likewise asserts, "Following the example of earlier black women writers, Fauset attempted to adapt the conventions of the sentimental novel to her own purposes. . . . The more progressive issues that Fauset explored in her essays are relegated to subplots; . . . more often these concerns are eclipsed by her reliance on convention" (66).

¹⁷ McDowell asserts that Fauset uses "the convention of the novel of manners . . . as protective mimicry, a kind of deflecting mask for her more challenging concerns," primarily in order to get published ("Neglected" 87). Elsewhere, McDowell claims that "*Plum Bun*, like the protagonist whose story it tells, is passing"—a concept that Ammons cites and extends in her discussion of Fauset's "buried plots" (*Changing* 76; *Conflicting* 159). Foreman similarly characterizes Fauset's "literary veiling" "under a sentimental discourse," an aesthetic practice she likens to Du Bois's double consciousness (655). Feeney likewise describes Fauset's "double structure": "on the surface [Fauset's novels] read as conventional middle-class love stories with happy endings; underneath . . . lies a counterstructure which expresses either the souring of childhood hopes, or a near-tragedy, or sardonic comedy" (366–67). Focusing on Fauset's use of melodrama, Kuenz identifies Fauset's "ill-considered" "performative style" as an attempt "to articulate the cultural politics of African-American modernism" (91–93).

¹⁸ See Allen; McLendon; Pfeiffer; Rottenberg; Sherrard-Johnson; Stokes; Tomlinson; Zakodnik.

sentimental realms.¹⁹ To my reading, no one has yet proposed that Fauset thoroughly reinvents sentimentalism, and that this reinvention constitutes a new racial aesthetic.

A Question of Perspective: *Plum Bun*'s Modern Sentimentalism

Implementing her concept of literary sincerity, Fauset's fiction registers the contradictions and tensions of New Negro femininity and artistic production. Epitomizing her vision of the black artist's gift of laughter, Fauset depicts these incongruities with an ironic, melancholic sensibility that comprehends these disparate realities without suggesting that they might be easily rectified or transformed.

Plum Bun's modern sentimental education involves learning to see through this complex lens, accept these melancholic feelings, and produce art that reflects this nuanced worldview. Black protagonist Angela Murray begins her *kunstlerroman* with a reductive (one might say "black and white") perspective and an accordant confidence in her ability to "master life" (137). Believing herself "objective" and "no sentimentalist," Angela is certain she can achieve her goals—"to know light, pleasure, gaiety, and freedom"—with uncompromised pragmatism and dispassionate strategy (88, 142, 13). As

¹⁹ duCille determines, "Fauset writ[es] neither realism nor naturalism; nor is she falling back on pure romanticism. She is interrogating old forms and inventing something new. This re-writing, re-creation, this confusion of genre is indeed fundamental . . . [and] is Fauset's particular, though unacknowledged, gift to modernism" (100). duCille mentions sentimentalism only once in her chapter, and then to only to refute it as a misreading. Sylvander is less complimentary than duCille: Fauset "makes use of the freedoms of the American romance in order to tell a story with appeal for unsophisticated audiences, and perhaps also in order to indulge in her own confessed attraction to the romantic and the sentimental" (188). Although less pejorative than Sylvander, Barker likewise considers sentimentalism a stable repository of dated conventions that Fauset "uses" to "renegotiate the conflict between nineteenth-century goals of racial uplift and the black modernist aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance" (163). In a related but distinct vein, Kuenz and Levison reframe Fauset's formal practices in light of her interest in performance and the minstrel tradition.

Angela gradually realizes, this perception of herself and the world she inhabits is remarkably naïve, one-dimensional, and unwittingly sentimental. Light-skinned enough to pass as white, Angela believes that operationalizing conventions of white femininity will not only produce the pleasant life she desires, but will resolve her double consciousness and its discomfiting sense of lack. As she recognizes the impossibility of this project (the impossibility of resolving racial melancholy), Angela comes to regard her prior naiveté, her contemporary feelings, and her position in the world with an ironic sensibility. An illustrator and a painter, Angela envisions a work of art that documents her transformed perspective: her final masterpiece features an anthropomorphized, emaciated “Life” standing back “laughing uproariously yet with a certain chilling malevolence . . . at the poor people who fall into the traps which she sets for us” (280).

If Angela’s sensibility gradually approaches her creator’s artistic ethos, Fauset dramatizes how short Angela falls from this ideal. After trying and failing to achieve a semblance of happiness in America, Angela ends the novel abroad as an art student in Paris. She has not figured out how to make a life for herself in the United States or as a black female artist; indeed, she has only completed a few of her elaborately imagined sketches. There is, moreover, a crucial distinction to be made between Angela’s final perspective, the narrator’s, and Fauset’s—a disparity often ignored or minimized by critics and one that might best be summarized as a difference in degree, but not kind, of irony. Impassive and incisive, *Plum Bun*’s omniscient narrator ironizes Angela’s limited point of view from start to finish. Angela’s evolving sensibility echoes this ironic perspective, but the two never coincide—Angela remains limited and emotional in ways that the narrative voice is not. This gap between character and narrative persona parallels

the gap between Fauset and her dispassionate narrator, and mirrors the gap between Angela's final point of view and that of her envisioned masterpiece. Like Fauset, Angela deploys irony on paper to inspire feeling off the page, but her portrait of "Life" inverts Fauset's artistic priorities. As her emphatically universal image indicates, Angela sees no value in identifying her work in a racially informed tradition; she does not view art as a collective project at all.

I elaborate these distinct yet analogous sensibilities in the final portion of this chapter, but first I detail how thoroughly *Plum Bun* rewrites and ironizes common nineteenth-century sentimental plotlines. This structural affinity provides a crucial template for the novel and for Angela's initial cognitive paradigm. These formal dynamics also exemplify Fauset's interest in claiming a diverse literary inheritance, her attempt to synthesize and renovate these sources, and her desire to locate her work in an expansive aesthetic genealogy.²⁰ Like the sensibility that infuses the novel, the irony that informs these affiliations modernizes the affective dimension of this emotion-laden archive.

²⁰ *Plum Bun*'s title alone indicates these ambitions. The primary moniker comes from a nursery rhyme, "To Market, To Market,/ To buy a Plum Bun;/ Home again, Home again,/ Market is done." Used as the novel's epigraph, this rhyme also structures the book's five sections, "Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market is Done." Fauset, of course, invokes this simple paradigm of desire, pursuit, and fulfillment only to disprove its merit. Her subtitle—"A novel without a moral"—performs a similar layered function. At once invoking and repudiating sentimental convention, the anti-didactic descriptor also links *Plum Bun* to contemporaneous debates about race propaganda and to an unusual literary ancestor, William Thackeray's satire *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847–48). Though not as cynical, as intelligent, or as much of an anti-heroine as Thackeray's Becky Sharp, *Plum Bun*'s protagonist similarly lacks a conventional moral conscience and equally endeavors to orchestrate her self-interested goals. Fauset's subtitle also counterposes her novel to Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), reviewed positively in the *New York Age* under the title "A Novel Without a Moral," and perhaps does the same with Claude McKay's novel published just a few months earlier, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (see Hutchinson, *Search* 315).

In dialogue with the white sentimental tradition, Angela's trajectory parallels and negates the "overplot" that Nina Baym observes in what she calls "woman's fiction," a nineteenth-century genre in which female protagonists—often thrust out on their own by their parents' death—learn self-reliance, independence, and emotional discipline, and, as a result of this evolution, receive the rewards of marriage and communal acceptance. Angela, too, begins her sentimental education as an orphan; the funds and freedom to leave her native Philadelphia come from her parents' near-simultaneous death. Rather than feeling bereft or devastatingly adrift, Angela perceives this double loss as an opportunity to re-invent herself. Innately self-reliant, she happily leaves her remaining family and friends, moves to New York City, and invents a white persona. Arriving in Manhattan, Angela realizes that complete independence is not optimal—she lacks money and friends, and she is female. But no matter. Marrying a white man will ensure social connection and financial security.

Thus begins a pattern of disillusionment in which Angela pursues an ideal, encounters unanticipated obstacles, and then identifies an equally promising, ironically more conventionally sentimental, alternative. Following independence, Angela pursues marriage and domesticity, then romantic love, friendship, sisterhood, and racial solidarity. Angela does not believe in or discover the essential truth, moral value, or higher purpose of these classic sentimental aims; they simply seem the most probable, least onerous means of achieving her self-interested ends. After all, she has long since recognized the incongruity between virtue and reward, effort and compensation. "At a very early age she had observed that the good things of life are unevenly distributed; merit is not always rewarded; hard labor does not necessarily entail adequate

recompense” (12). Her adult life only reinforces her faith in the “blind,” “disproportionate” nature of “the forces which control life” (12). Over the course of the novel, her goals shift from unfettered happiness to security, from narcissistic self-interest to more relational, if not wholeheartedly generous, pursuits. But although Angela receives a semblance of a happy ending (a reconciliation with friends and family, a possible marriage, a potential artistic career), *Plum Bun* does not suggest that she has earned these outcomes, secured her future, or developed a sense of agency, authority, and self-worth. To the contrary, Angela has come to “[see] life, even her own life, as an entity quite outside her own ken and her own directing” (314).

Plum Bun also rewrites the conventions of post-Reconstruction literature by black female authors. As Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate elaborate, this canon adapts traditional sentimental femininity (i.e., that advanced by much of Baym’s archive) to suit the narratives of women denied control over their chastity, domesticity, matrimony, and maternity, for whom piety and submission have problematic implications.²¹ *Plum Bun* depicts the modern equivalent of this dynamic, ironizing the enduring double standards of American sentimentality and black femininity. Pointing out these contemporaneous tensions, the novel also distances itself from the model of black femininity advanced by novels like Emma Dunham Kelly’s *Megda* (1891), Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, and Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*. Whereas these novels emphasize piety, chastity, and self-sacrifice in the service of the race, *Plum Bun* describes Angela’s secular outlook, her experiments with free love, and her individual pursuits untethered to goals of racial uplift. Repeatedly justifying selfish choices in the moment by envisioning that she will help her former

²¹ For discussions of race in nineteenth-century American sentimentalism by white authors see Armstrong; Berlant “Poor Eliza”; and *The Culture of Sentiment*.

friends and family in the future, Angela is, as she puts it, “no sentimentalist,” and, as *Plum Bun*’s narrator puts it, “a complete egotist” (100). While these earlier novels focus on marriage, maternity, and domestic idealism as a means of racial progress, *Plum Bun* features numerous black female characters with creative and professional ambitions—in Angela’s case, ambitions without a greater racial purpose.

Further revising sentimental convention, *Plum Bun* offers no moral lessons. While Angela’s behavior is hardly admirable, neither the plot nor the narrator condemn or condone this behavior. The wealthy white man Angela expects to wed convinces her to have sex and then refuses to marry her (because of her class standing, not her unknown racial background), and she survives without dire consequence or even much remorse. When she reveals her racial heritage in an impulsive effort to defend another black female artist, Angela loses her job and an art scholarship—and everyone concerned agrees that there was no great value in her choice. Angela is also no more or less successful than her sister—the aptly named Virginia—who embodies a more traditional version of sentimental femininity. Virginia is pious, domestic, chaste, self-sacrificing, deeply committed to family continuity, and frequently referred to as an innocent child. When she moves to Harlem, Virginia stops going to church, undertakes elaborate beauty rituals, and “[tries] to look at things without sentiment” (171). This evolution is irrelevant. At the end of the novel, Virginia prepares to marry a man she does not love out of loneliness, domestic longing, and a sense of need. Angela intervenes indirectly, prompting Virginia’s childhood sweetheart to visit her, and in the final line, we learn that the couple has reunited. If, as Tate suggests, post-Reconstruction sentimental novels “offer a vision of female self-authority” and “emancipatory protocol” for their black

female characters, *Plum Bun* disproves this didactic paradigm (*Domestic* 66). Naïve and sentimental in very different ways, Angela and Virginia face choices that are similarly limited and hardly liberating. Neither woman significantly controls or determines her path.

Plum Bun additionally invokes and interrogates the conventions of the passing novel. Refuting the racial essentialism that frequently undergirds passing plots and other sentimental representations of race, Angela does not realize an authentic racial self, reconnect with an organic racial community, or recognize some inherent racial truth.²² She does not find redemption in her African American roots, nor is she a tragic mulatta, doomed to death or genetic turmoil.²³ Further distancing her from the tragic mulatta trope, Angela's choice to live as a white woman does not reflect a forced break with her family or an uncomplicated cutting of communal ties. As her chosen moniker, Angèle Mory, indicates, her decision is actually an odd tether to her family and a logical extension of her past: Angela first experiences the pleasures of passing with her light-skinned mother, when the women spend Saturday afternoons shopping and taking tea in white establishments.

Like many passing narratives, *Plum Bun* makes use of dramatic irony (instances in which reader, narrator, and certain characters know that racial appearance does not coincide with racial heritage); but Angela's passing project itself does not reflect a

²² Sollors discusses these and other common themes in "interracial fiction."

²³ Classic examples of the redeemed mixed-race protagonist include Ryder in Charles Chesnut's "The Wife of His Youth" (1898) and Mimi in Walter White's *Flight* (1926); examples of the tragic mulatta include Rosa in Lydia Maria Child's "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843) and Clotel, Althesa, Ellen, and Jane in William Wells Brown's *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (1853). For discussions of these novels, see Sollors. For more on the figure of the tragic mulatta, see Sollors's chapter on "the fate of a stereotype"; Gillman; and Raimon.

particularly ironic sensibility on her part. *Plum Bun* thus further criticizes the implicit racial essentialism of common passing tropes. The lone moment in which Angela fears exposure—a dramatic tableau in which she stands at the base of two stairways in Grand Central Station as her darker-skinned sister descends from one and her white lover from the other—comes and goes without an external hiccup. This encounter has emotional ramifications for Angela and Virginia, but as Angela later asserts, she “look[s] just the same as I’ve ever looked” (353). There is no such thing as a telling physical detail; appearances are just that. Angela similarly does not recognize other characters who pass (even critics seem to have overlooked one character who passes, without consequence, for the entire novel).²⁴ In *Plum Bun*, race is hardly determinative and frequently ambivalent.

Rewriting these established sentimental plotlines, *Plum Bun* depicts modern female identity as a haphazard project of self-creation, rather than a straightforward program of self-realization. Race, gender, and feeling prove to be as central to this modern project as its more programmatic predecessor, but for very different reasons. Whereas programs of self-realization—especially sentimental ones—often rely on visceral recognitions that tend to track back to race and gender, a project of self-creation, perhaps especially for a “visual minded” painter like Angela, hinges more on perception and intellectual interpretation (128). One might say the process works more outside-in than inside-out. The irony here is that Angela begins not by devaluing perception but by overinvesting in her own capacity for it. In her “unsentimental” worldview, race appears an empty social

²⁴ There are many hints that Ralph Ashley, one of Angela’s friends and admirers in New York City, is also passing as white. To my reading, this character detail has received no critical attention to date.

construct, white femininity unlimited, feeling an easily discarded impediment. Re-inventing herself according to this view, Angela comes to recognize the complexity of race, gender, and feeling, and their intertwined contributions to modern identity. This mutual impact is not because, as some nineteenth-century thinkers suggest, there are essential racial or gendered differences in emotion, but because, as many twentieth-century thinkers argue, race and gender are not exclusively negative social constructs.²⁵ In *Plum Bun*, to jettison race is to jettison connection and affiliation in favor of alienation and lonely despair. But connection and affiliation are fraught and disappointing as well. The ideal solution seems to be to adjust one's perspective and one's expectations—to learn to see race, gender, and feeling in shades of gray.

In many ways, Angela embodies a logical extreme of New Negro ideology. Consciously unsentimental and individualist, she defines herself in opposition to her parents' generation and to the contemporaries she identifies as inadequately ambitious. Taking newness to its furthest conclusion, Angela dramatizes the risks and losses inherent in this self-definition. Exemplifying Fauset's style, *Plum Bun* makes this case indirectly and without rendering a simple judgment of Angela or her choices. To the contrary, the narration actually preserves a modicum of sympathy for Angela, while also, of course, critiquing her. Foreshadowing, proleptic commentary, and other characters' internal discourse frequently cast Angela as an unwitting victim of other's thoughts and desires. The lengthy focalizations in Angela's point of view evoke a similar form of sympathy. Her reasoning appears flawed but understandable, artless and unsophisticated but internally consistent, self-involved but not unkind or dishonorable. The narrator

²⁵ For a discussion of the former, see Schuller. As an example of the latter, see Gayatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism.

reiterates this perspective, pinpointing Angela's primary failure as an issue of perception rather than impropriety or unintelligence. Indeed, her main character flaws seem to be narcissistic myopia and a lack of adequate irony.

The narrator frames Angela's initial view of race as an oversimplification of an accurate perception—an unironic response to an ironic reality. From passing with her mother, for example, Angela “drew for herself certain clearly formed conclusions which her subconscious mind thus codified: First, that the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only. Second, that [her father and sister] were denied these privileges because they were dark; here, her reasoning bore at least an element of verisimilitude but she missed the essential fact that her father and sister did not care for this type of pleasure” (17–18). Laying the groundwork for her subsequent thought pattern, Angela's internalized prejudice reflects her ignorance and naiveté, but not immorality, lack of virtue, or complete illogic. Her omission of an “essential fact” is a perceptual, rather than a moral, failure. Her “subconscious mind” codifies these conclusions, which thus linger somewhere between intention and instinct, below the surface of her own awareness yet influential in her actions and feelings.

Angela's oversimplified view of race collaborates with her sentimental view of American ideology and its implicit gender roles. Angela fervently believes in freedom, self-determination, and the uncompromising pursuit of happiness. Her experience of passing challenges her faith that one need only be white to actualize these promises, but again Angela responds with minimal irony.

She remembered an expression “free, white, and twenty-one”—this was what it meant then, this sense of owning the world, this realization that

other things being equal, all things were possible. “If I were a man,” she said, “I could be president,” and laughed at herself for the “if” itself proclaimed a limitation. But that inconsistency bothered her little; she did not want to be a man. Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. (88)

Angela does not view the world according to traditional gender distinctions—note the absence of gender in her triptych of meaningful identity qualities—but as the passage reveals, this perspective is more about her reductive logic than a disregard for sentimental notions of gender. She goes from a pleasurable “sense of owning the world” to dismissing a desire for “power, greatness, authority” without much, if any, awareness of how rapidly her thinking undermines her previous perceptions. Perceiving an “inconsistency” between national ideology (“other things being equal, all things were possible”) and its most symbolic form (the presidency), Angela laughs not at this external reality but at herself—thus making her desire the source of the incongruity. This self-oriented perspective both perpetuates a sentimental logic and comports with Angela’s ideas about self-reliance, allowing her to resolve the perceived discord with a new, unironic ideal of separate but equal, or equal enough.

As her perceptions of race, gender, and American identity suggest, Angela idealizes her own point of view. She “possessed the instinct for self-appraisal which taught her that she had much to learn” in her artistic practice, but she unquestioningly believes in her “objective” view of the world, her “instinct for clarity, for a complete understanding of her own emotional life,” and her unbiased interpretations of these perceptions (13, 223).

Her ability to map the power structure she inhabits—“she knew that men had a better time of it than women, colored men than colored women, white men than white women”—simply feeds her fantasy that she can manipulate her position in this hierarchy (88). As surfaces can be altered, she believes, differences can be made insignificant. Her first days as Angèle Mory support this illusion, as Angela imagines that she has nearly resolved her double-consciousness: “She was at once almost irreconcilably too concentrated and too objective. Her living during these days was so intense, so almost solidified, as though her desire to live as she did and she herself were so one and the same thing that it would have been practically impossible for another onlooker like herself to insert the point of his discrimination into her firm panoply of satisfaction” (90). Note the conventional sentimentality reflected in the gender mixing of the last sentence, which juxtaposes a “discriminating” masculine point of view with feminine feeling and peripheral “onlooking.” Again, Angela seems unaware of these internal contradictions and the sentimental notions they reflect. Admitting just enough critical distance to continue scripting her narrative, Angela contemplates the possibility of another perspective only to fortify her own. This combination of depth perception and nearsightedness, self-consciousness and insensibility, proves remarkably durable, especially because Angela is so confident in her “unsentimental” vision.

Angela’s faith in herself extends to her strategic performance of white femininity, complete with domestic ambition, sexual passivity, and self-sacrifice. She truly believes that her calculated behavior will produce its desired ends. Although she views passing as “the joke which she was having upon custom and tradition,” her joke aims at personal satisfaction through the trappings of a conventional sentimental narrative, albeit without

the underlying moral or religious principle (108). Marrying a white man, for example, will provide “power and protection” as well as “money and influence,” which will, in turn, enable “her sympathy and magnetism” to flourish (88). This sequence reverses conventional sentimental logic—sympathy and magnetism typically enable marriage, rather than the other way around—but it follows the association of these qualities with white femininity, a status that Angela imagines she will confirm through marriage. Her interest in these conventional aims is sincere as well as pragmatic. When the man she plans to marry reveals his racism, she determines to “take Roger back and get married and settle down to a pleasant, safe, beautiful life” that will also be “very useful”: “Perhaps she’d win Roger around to helping colored people. She’d look up all sorts of down-and-outers and give them a hand” (144). Angela’s convoluted version of racial uplift reflects a self-interested attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance, but there are less generous forms of self-justification.

Angela’s combination of irony and sentimentality gradually transforms into a perspective that more closely resembles Fauset’s own. Perpetually forced to reckon with the profound disconnect between her expectations and reality, Angela reevaluates conventional sentimental concepts she originally discounts (feeling, interpersonal relationships, familial and racial heritage) and her unconventional sentimentality (in which she reifies whiteness, American ideology, and her own perspective). If this process of reevaluation and reconfiguration recalls the common trajectory of a sentimental education, its result does not. A long-time optimist, Angela eventually goes through a depressed, vaguely suicidal period of cynicism and fatalism, but these sensibilities prove hyperbolic and one-dimensional as well. Finally, she evolves a coping mechanism akin to

Fauset's gift of laughter: she develops an ironic appreciation for the limits of pragmatism and intellectual strategy, the wisdom of history and cultural convention, the qualified value of collectivity, and the circumscribed individuality of a racial subject. Like Newman's Katharine Faraday, Angela becomes increasingly ironic and differently sentimental. The cycle works like this: Angela is at first unwittingly sentimental. She then recognizes her own prior sentimentality and ironizes the cultural sentimentality that has enabled her initial point of view. Finally, she evolves an ironic sentimentality that accommodates these reconfigured sentimental paradigms and adapts these conventions to suit her needs and desires.

This pattern begins with Angela's experience of modern romance. With only childhood fairy tales and her mother's equally simplistic courtship narrative as referential frameworks, Angela initially interprets Roger Fielding's attention and affection as love and marital intent. She imagines the white, wealthy Roger as Sir Walter Raleigh, Angèle as the gentle maiden, and "her life rounding out like a fairy-tale" (131). Soon enough, she realizes that her paradigm for romantic interaction is outdated and incomplete, but by no means obsolete. Offered a suburban "love-nest" instead of the marriage proposal and Upper East Side mansion she expects, Angela ironizes her own naïve expectations as much as Roger's assumptions: "So this was her castle, her fortress of protection, her refuge," she thinks (182). The ironic resemblance between old and new romantic paradigms extends beyond this exchange of one isolated locale for another. Angela's misinterpretation of Roger's intent, she realizes, occurs in part because conventional courtship language now potentially describes a very different arrangement. Moreover, she could only have known what to expect with prior experience—experience that, as a

woman, she is not supposed to have. Indeed, Roger tells her, Angèle's apparent innocence precipitates his attraction to her. Although she recognizes "this obvious lack of logic," her recognition is not much help (185). Feminine passivity still seems the only way to produce a marital outcome. Identifying modern love as a battlefield, Angela reconceives of her interaction with Roger as a "duel" in which deferral, negation, and refusal are her only "weapons" (190, 198–99). This revised sentimental framework ironizes the purported gender equity of modern romance (they are both knights), as well as the enduring sentimentality of the female side of this dynamic (a woman's weapons are still deferral, negation, and refusal; her agency is still circumscribed and indirect).

Angela equally updates her perspective on female sexuality. In keeping with her pragmatism and unwitting sentimentality, her initial romantic paradigm discounts female sexual desire altogether. "There was one enemy with whom she had never thought to reckon, she had never counted on the treachery of the forces of nature; she had never dreamed of the unaccountable weakening of those forces within" (198). Repeatedly describing her desire as a "treacherous" "enemy," Angela's amended fairy-tale language again ironizes her prior naiveté and frames her contemporary experience in different sentimental terms. Her euphemisms sentimentalize both her sexual desire and her sense of threat and betrayal. Lest there be any doubt about the source of her fear and dismay, the narrator weighs in: "Her purity was not a matter of morals, not of religion, nor of racial pride; it was a matter of fastidiousness. . . . [S]he would have none of the relationship which Roger urged so insistently, not because according to all the training which she had ever received, it was unlawful, but because viewed in the light of the great battle which she was waging for pleasure, protection and power, it was inexpedient"

(199–200). Angela is not concerned with social standards or the evolving fight to claim feminine respectability for black women; sexual desire is dangerous because it threatens to disorganize and disrupt her personal plan. Angela’s thinking thus inverts the implicit logic of New Negro femininity—which subsumes a female individual’s goals within those of the racial whole and suggests that these aims are naturally one and the same—and exposes the instability of a construct that casts women as race mothers while downplaying their sexuality.²⁶

Angela’s response to this crisis of unruly desire reflects her increasingly ironic relation to sentimental scripts of femininity. She gives herself over to feeling (“all that she could do was to feel; feel that she was Roger’s totally”), but she does so with a dose of irony: Angela “told herself with a slight tendency toward self-mockery that this was the explanation of being, of her being; that men had other aims, other uses but that the sole excuse for being a woman was to be just that—a woman” (203–04). Recognizing the limits of pragmatism and purely intellectual strategy, Angela’s rationale for free love ironically affirms the power of visceral experience. In a pattern that recurs throughout the novel, sentimental logic provides an ironic “excuse” for a decidedly untraditional choice.

Angela’s increasingly ironic vision of herself initially allows her to read herself out of a sentimental paradigm—a vision that ironically aligns with New Negro sensibility, both in its overt anti-sentimentality and its sense of exceptionality (Angela jettisons the “representative” quality meant to counterbalance the latter). Her experiment with free love, however, reverses this vision, illuminating modern America’s reconfigured sentimentality and her ironic position within this structure. Impressed by white female

²⁶ Chapman elaborates the double standards surrounding black female sexuality in the 1920s.

friends who seem to flout convention without consequence, Angela “adopt[s] a curious detachment toward life tempered by a faint cynicism—a detachment which enabled her to say to herself: ‘Rules are for ordinary people but not for me’” (207). This cynical perspective proves less nuanced than Angela first believes. As Roger grows distant, she wonders, “Was it a fact that the conventions were more important than the fundamental impulses of life, than generosity, kindness, unselfishness?” (228). These latter values have come to characterize Angela’s view of free love, courtesy of Roger’s initial arguments in favor of the arrangement.

With a malleable sentimentality that alternately endorses marriage and free love, Angela performs an ever-more-traditional femininity with increasing irony. She deploys “patience, steadfastness and affection,” along with generosity and kindness, but attempting “to be dependent, fragile, sought for, feminine . . . ‘womanly’ to the point of ineptitude” fails as well (225, 297). In Roger’s good-bye—“you knew perfectly well what you were letting yourself in for”—Angela recognizes “a cosmic echo; perhaps men had been saying it to women since the beginning of time. Doubtless their biblical equivalent were the last words uttered by Abraham to Hagar before she fared forth into the wilderness” (231). Identifying with the rejected slave woman, Angela reads herself into a racial, gendered paradigm. Conventions, she realizes, need not be sensible in order to be influential. Marriage paradoxically continues to confine and protect women.

There is a further ironic layer to Angela’s relationship with Roger: the love affair allows Fauset to assert feminine respectability for her protagonist using the same sentimental framework that her character disregards. At no point during their relationship does Roger recognize any difference from what he expects of a chaste white woman.

Further undermining charges of black women's hypersexuality, licentiousness, or immodesty, the narration reiterates Angela's innocence and inexperience. The novel's lone sex scene reads as a classic seduction, complete with all the fears and hesitation of a conventional sentimental heroine, though carefully written to suggest that Angela has been seduced by her own physical desire, rather than Roger's empty promises. She is virginal, but not devoid of sexuality. She gives in to herself, rather than to Roger. Fauset thus claims feminine respectability for her protagonist while also pointing out—and trying to avoid repeating—the problematic elements of common approaches to this enduring concern. On some level, Fauset suggests, the manner in which New Negro ideology validates feminine virtue (casting women as asexual race mothers) ends up reinscribing the racial difference that its arguments seek to overturn, and replicating the double standards of white gender roles, in which women can only be victims of desire.

Angela comes to value a non-marital set of sentimental connections—friendship, sisterhood, and racial solidarity—but she values them with an increasingly ironic consciousness, born out of a sense of the loneliness of pure individualism and the limits of pragmatism. Initially, Angela views every relationship as a means to an end and only pursues those that will further her self-interested aims. As her romantic strategies fail, she befriends a downstairs neighbor with a new agenda: “‘If anything comes out of this friendship to advance me in any way,’ she told herself solemnly, ‘it will happen just because it happens but I shall go into this with clean hands and a pure heart’” (245). A product of urban migration and working womanhood, this “sisterly intimacy” dissipates when her neighbor moves for a new job, and completely falls apart when her friend, a Jewish woman secretly engaged to a Catholic man, rebuffs a sympathetic comment about

interracial marriage with a racist reply (244). Angela's "only answer" is to "burst into unrestrained and bitter laughter" (313). This image of Angela laughing—now not at herself but at an ironic reality—recurs and evolves in the second half of the novel. Here, the laughter is "unrestrained and bitter"; later, it becomes melancholic. As Angela gradually realizes, white privilege insulates some people from the consequences of their internal contradictions, but everyone expresses ideals that they do not live out, even those who are not "constantly being torn between theory and practice" (195). The best bet, she finally determines, is to find people whose hypocrisy better aligns with one's own, though that proves hard to judge.

Angela's relationship with her sister traces a similar arc of evolving sentimentality and increasing irony. Having abandoned Virginia in Philadelphia and then ignored her in Grand Central Station (a choice she retrospectively deems "the one really cruel and unjust action of her whole life"), Angela determines that "She would never break faith with Jinny again" and "thanked God in her heart for the stability implied in sisterhood" (308, 317, 349). Attending now to extended implications rather than momentary experience, Angela bears the compromises of kinship. No relationship guarantees sustained connection, let alone some sense of perfect union. Belonging only occurs in fleeting moments. Familial commitments are preferable precisely because relationships are so often disappointing and unpredictable. Jinny, it turns out, is engaged to the man Angela loves, but not in love with him; she loves her seemingly uninterested childhood sweetheart. Contemplating this misaligned quartet, Angela thinks, "The irony of it was so palpable, so ridiculously palpable that it put her in a better mood; life was bitter but it was amusingly bitter; if she could laugh at it she might be able to outwit it yet" (316).

Angela's growing ironic sensibility is not just a means of bearing relational disappointment; it has become the new means by which she might "outwit" life. In keeping with her increased capacity for nuance, however, her qualifiers reflect her uncertainty about this enduring impulse.

Angela's ultimate notion of racial solidarity is similarly ironic and differently sentimental. When a black female art student, Rachel Powell, loses a scholarship because of her race, Angela feels compelled to defend Angèle's fellow awardee. Animated by a vague sense of identification and an abstract sense of justice, she goes to see Rachel and, finding an apartment full of reporters, endeavors to defend her without discussing Angèle's racial identity. When that fails, Angela impulsively reveals her own racial heritage in a decidedly sentimental moment: "Some icy crust which had formed over Angela's heart shifted, wavered, broke and melted. Suddenly it seemed as though nothing in the world were so important as to allay the poignancy of Miss Powell's situation; for this, she determined quixotically, no price would be too dear" (346). Angela's revelation—"a whim," not a calculated decision—is a sentimental gesture, not a moment of truth (350). It reflects a personal impulse, not a political stand or a revised sense of racial meaning. Guilt, justice, and the "poignancy of Miss Powell's situation" motivate Angela, but so too does sheer exhaustion. As she tells her sister, "[B]ecause this country of ours makes [race] so important, against my own conviction I was beginning to feel as though I were laden down with a great secret. . . . [T]he whole business was just making me fagged to death" (354). Her quixotic behavior also materializes from more superficial issues of self-image: it refutes a white reporter's accusation of Angèle's racism and aligns her with her love interest Anthony—the light-skinned child of a black American and a

mixed-race Brazilian national—who makes a similar stand just six pages earlier. Like friendship and sisterhood, racial affiliation simply feels better, in any given moment, than alienation.

Angela eventually performs sentimental conventions of black femininity with a new sense of irony. After she declares her heritage and reconciles with her sister, she returns to her childhood home—not with the sense that this act has meaning, but because it feels vaguely compelling. Like her racial revelation, the homecoming that might redress her prior thoughts and actions instead appears as a borrowed impulse. Earlier, a friend tells Angela she is “awfully glad to go home” because “I always have my old room; it’s like beginning life all over again” (241). “[W]holly envious” of her friend’s “roots,” Angela thinks, “This was a relationship which she had forfeited” (241). Angela repeats the symbolic gesture all the same. Returning to her parents’ since-sold Philadelphia house, she thinks, “[i]f she could just stand once in that little back room and cry and cry—perhaps her tears would flood away all that mass of regret and confusion and futile memories, and she could begin life all over with a blank page. . . . Suddenly it seemed to her that entering the house once more, standing in that room would be a complete panacea” (363). As her qualifiers suggest, Angela no longer believes in “complete panaceas” or that “begin[ing] life all over with a blank page”—erasing history and creating oneself from scratch—is possible or even necessarily desirable. (Fittingly, the new owner dismisses Angela as “poor white trash,” slams the door in her face, and pulls down the blinds for good measure [363].)

Angela finally performs sentimental acts not because she believes they will produce the desired outcome (in the case of the homecoming: reunion, redemption, renewal), but

because the behavior itself appeals to her self-image and thus offers its own form of comfort. This comfort, however, has limits. At the end of the novel, Angela contemplates her sentimental impulses and does not follow through. Abroad in Paris and overcome with a wave of homesickness, “For a moment she envisaged the possibility of throwing herself on the bed and sobbing her heart out” (377). She goes out dancing instead. There is no reason to overestimate her own despair, or even entertain its self-centered hyperbole.

As she redefines her individual identity, Angela also redefines her perspective on race. Initially, her ironic perspective helps distance her from the racial group she has disclaimed. A Harlem street at first appears “like many others in New York,” with “pseudo elegance” and “ostentatious regularity and simplicity,” though “a second glance reveal[s] its down-at-heel condition” (276–77). Reviewing the situation dispassionately, Angela observes: “There was something faintly humorous, ironical, about being cooped up in these deceptive palaces; according to one’s temperament one might laugh or weep at the thought of how these structures, the product of human energy could yet cramp, imprison, even ruin the very activity which had created them” (277). As her perspective evolves, she no longer holds herself so far apart from “the race of her parents” (309). The irony of “their” situation becomes less faint and more melancholic as she acknowledges it as her own. “[F]rom now on, so far as sides are concerned, I am on the colored side,” she tells a suitor who may be black, and who she apparently believes to be white. “I don’t want you to come over on that side. . . . Too many complications even for you.’ For though she knew he believed in his brave words, she was too sadly experienced to ask an American to put them to the test” (373). This cryptic exchange reflects Angela’s final

vision of American race relations: sad, complicated, and unresolvable despite the best of intentions.

Increasingly circumspect about her own perspective, Angela persists in her faith that race is a uniquely American problem. In Europe, she imagines, race is not irrelevant, but “the consequences could not engender the pain and difficulties attendant upon them here” (340). Abroad, she believes, she will “literally in every sense start over” (340). But racial melancholy haunts her in Paris as well. Following an initial spell of distraction, and despite the “persistent comradeship” of a Philadelphia acquaintance and her social set, Angela “had never felt so lonely in her life” (375). After six months of art classes, rampant social activity, and “utter loneliness,” “she lost forever the blind optimism of youth” (376). Yet again Angela has underestimated the value of community and overvalued her individual pursuits.

Angela’s artistic trajectory recapitulates the evolution in her sensibility, but it also establishes her distance from Fauset’s ideal. As in non-artistic realms, Angela begins with hyperbolic confidence in her own perspective: “She was sure that [artistic] knowledge once gained would flower in her case to perfection” and “her own specialty she felt sure lay along the line of reproducing, of interpreting on a face the emotion which lay back of that expression” (13, 111). Also as in non-artistic realms, she initially deploys creative pursuit as a strategic means to an unconventional end. She uses art “deliberately,” “to get in touch with interesting people and with a more attractive atmosphere” (110). When she reevaluates this history, “It both amused and saddened her to realize that her talent which she had once used as a blind to shield her real motives for breaking loose and coming to New York had now become the greatest, most real force in her life” (332). The sadness,

however, seems to come as much from her failure to achieve her non-artistic goals as from the ways she might have found meaning in art earlier. The former reading is reinforced by the novel's end. In Paris, she has to "school herself to remember that . . . her aim, her one ambition, was to become an acknowledged" portraitist (375). Angela does not come to value art for art's sake or experience it as a source of meaning or satisfaction. Despite its role in her trajectory, art does little more than help her become "aware of the blessed narcotic value of interesting occupation" (318).

Fauset and Angela equally differ in their perspectives on racial art. Initially, Angela views the possibility of black art through the same distorted lens with which she views the rest of the world. Visiting Harlem in her first days in New York, she sees an evidently "high-bred" man, wonders if he is an artist, and decides he might be a musician. "It was unlikely that he would be her kind of an artist, for how could he exist?" (96). Angela's notion of the almost impossible nature of black art contorts a matrilineal perception in much the same way she refashions her mother's passing adventures. Her mother originally wants both her daughters "to be great artists," but accepts her husband's pragmatic desire that his daughters be trained as teachers (55). As in other arenas, Virginia conforms her goals to these parameters, aspiring to "some day invent a marvelous method for teaching the pianoforte," while Angela attempts to conform these parameters to her goals, passing in part to enable her unfettered artistic pursuits (13). Neither sister questions the parameters as such. Raised to believe African American art does not exist and cannot emerge from a middle-class household, the Murray girls embody Fauset's critique of New Negro artistic myopia (Fauset comes from just such a background). Looking to Africa for an artistic tradition and an authentic racial essence

will hardly resolve this perceived vacuum in black middle-class life—that logic simply furthers the notion that there is neither precedent nor potential therein.

Angela eventually evolves a different appreciation for the seemingly irresolvable conflicts of modern racial art. Explaining Rachel Powell's decision not to challenge the revoked scholarship, Angela concludes, "[S]he was perfectly justified in letting go so she could avoid still greater bitterness and disappointment and so she could have something left in her to devote to her art. You can't fight and create at the same time" (354). This rationale may or may not explain Fauset's own later choices, but it certainly articulates her distinction between art and propaganda. It also seems to be Angela's final stance on the imperfect choices of a modern black artist and part of the impetus for her Paris relocation—a move that distances her from the American fight and allows her to focus on personal creation. With her sense of racial responsibility and her Harlem residence, Rachel Powell perhaps better approximates Fauset's own position in 1929, but Rachel is no martyr. If her skin was light enough and she had the option, she, too, would pass, she tells Angela. In other words, neither character fully embodies Fauset's ideal—the point being that such an ideal is not simply possible in the world as it is.

Angela's art likewise emulates and differentiates her from Fauset's artistic vision. During her first days in New York, Angela begins her "Fourteenth Street Types," a series of sketches that depict the people she encounters and whose title aligns her with the Fourteenth Street School of realist painters. This connection to a largely white early-twentieth-century school underscores Angela's presentist orientation as well as her disavowal of her racial heritage.²⁷ At the risk of replicating a paradox of reception that

²⁷ For more on this aesthetic school and *Plum Bun*'s relation to it, see Barker.

has worked against Fauset (the expectation that genuine racial art must look a certain way, such that too much or too little apparent individuality invites accusations of disloyalty and abandonment), it seems safe to say that Angela's artistic practice obscures her racial identity. Her masterpiece features "a mass of lightly indicated figures passing apparently in review before the tall, cloaked form of a woman, thin to emaciation, her hands on her bony hips, slightly bent forward, laughing uproariously yet with a certain chilling malevolence" (280). As she describes it, "The tall woman is Life and the idea is that she laughs at us; laughs at the poor people who fall into the traps which she sets for us" (280). This amalgam of the Grim Reaper and Lady Liberty inverts the logic and the illusion of agency of the woman who originally views passing as "the joke which she was having upon custom and tradition," and reproduces Fauset's gift of laughter with an important difference. Moving the artist's point of view outside of the frame and foregrounding a timeless, universal perspective on humanity, the image displaces racial melancholy and imbues its existential laughter with hostility.

The further conversation between this image and Fauset's aesthetic philosophy is perhaps obvious. Angela's artistic perspective is dispassionate, non-didactic, and secular, while also inviting the viewer's sympathy for the "poor people." The moral, to the extent that there is one, seems to be that, as life's "traps" cannot be avoided, this ironic reality might be negotiated by how one responds emotionally. Pain and disappointment can be managed, if not mitigated, by ironic expectation and melancholic acceptance. Like the image's universal quality, this altered concept of emotional adjustment—a far less empowered version of Stowe's "feeling right"—perhaps reflects a fantasy of artistic assimilation, or perhaps endeavors to express a distinctive racial experience in terms that

do not mark the feelings themselves as other. The reading depends on how one sees the artist herself. While Angela's position hovers in a suspended melancholic state of disavowal and incorporation, Fauset's own perspective is clear: art is a vital, difficult, and collaborative racial project, a challenging prospect that can only be enhanced by recognizing diverse modes of self-expression and integrating numerous traditions. If this commitment to racial collectivity and artistic heritage makes Fauset more sentimental than her protagonist, her ironic vision of these endeavors identifies her as no less modern.

After Happily Ever After: Marriage, Maternity, and the Future of the Modern Woman

A woman can think ironically and, this project has shown, feel ironically, but no one can live ironically. Developing an ironic critical distance from “what is” still produces a cognitive, not an embodied, duality. The basic problem of modern sentimental novels—the conflict between love and work—thus turns out not to be sentimental—ideological or psychological—but rather material. Nineteenth-century sentimental fiction forestalls these conflicts by answering the questions before they’ve been posed: love, don’t work; marry and don’t have sex outside of wedlock; prioritize domestic and familial bonds over individual desire; accept economic dependence. Modern sentimental novels dramatize these conflicted choices of modern femininity but do not simply answer them.

If, as Newman’s Katharine Faraday discovers, pregnancy, not sex or marriage, turns out to be the defining event of modern femininity, modern sentimental novels frequently deflect and defer such definition. Leaving their protagonists in early adulthood, either before or just after marriage, the modern sentimental novels discussed in the past four chapters only gesture towards the conundrums that maternity poses to modern feminine ideals of independence. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea and Fred agree that if she had children, she would “kill them with driving” (394). The narrative honors this perception; Fred returns to Thea only after she tells him to find a woman who wants to bear him the son he apparently decides to forego. Choosing work over children seems a non-compromise for Thea, whose single maternal impulse—imagining the weight of an Indian child on her back as she hikes through Panther Canyon—can be understood in

context to corroborate how thoroughly her physically taxing artistic career replaces the Indian mothers' domestic labor.

Anita Loos addresses these concerns with characteristic irony. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* concludes with Lorelei's happy-for-now ending: she has love (or at least sex), marriage, and an acting career that not only allows but ironically secures her relationship to her studio-owning husband and her screenwriter lover. Loos's sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928), tackles the question of Lorelei's continuing career directly: "I think practically every married girl ought to have a career if she is wealthy enough to have the home life carried on by the servants," Lorelei writes (127). This home life includes a child "knicknamed [sic]" "Little Mouse," whose birth disrupts an afternoon of shopping and who arrives in between two sentences: "I went home instead. And when they put the 'Little Mouse' in my arms that afternoon, I felt repayed [sic] for giving up everything" (130, 136). Lorelei has not in fact given up much: "Little Mouse" only shows up one other time in the narrative. When a friend calls Lorelei for bail, Lorelei reflects, "I mean, it is really quite a shock for a society matron who is a Mother, to be paged at 4 o'clock in the morning at the Club Lido" (237). Loos thus satirizes another solution to the maternal conundrums of modern femininity: if you can afford it, hire someone else to be a primary caregiver.

Newman and Fauset skirt the conflicts of work and motherhood by rendering them in abstract rather than practical terms. Katharine Faraday's sudden fear of pregnancy after intercourse leads her to determine she is not brave enough not to be virtuous; she does not have sex again for the duration of the novel and perhaps, it is suggested, thereafter. *Plum Bun*'s Angela Murray has no desire to lead her mother's life

of domestic sacrifice, but she seemingly has sex without fear that this behavior will result in similar ends. Despite the sex that implicitly occurs in all four novels, only *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* elliptically references birth control and abortion.¹ Focusing on their protagonists' thinking, the texts de-emphasize the physiological realities of sexual activity. Newman's and Fauset's narratives also conclude before marriage and its attendant question of children threaten to destabilize the women's respective career ambitions. Maternity thus forms a conspicuous absence in these novels.

If modern sentimental novels largely imagine young women's increased opportunities to be contingent upon remaining childless, this logic resonates with contemporaneous conversations about female labor. Even before the 30s' increasing unemployment leads to greater pressure to keep women out of the wage-earning workforce, bans on employing married women are common policy.² Despite the reality that men and women rarely compete for the same jobs in interwar America, such institutional regulations—including state and federal laws—are imagined to protect a male head of household, among other traditional aspects of the nuclear family. The concept of the “nuclear family” itself dates to the 1920s, suggesting the amount of contemporaneous debate surrounding this sociological unit.³

Even more progressive marital models tend to draw conventional lines where children are concerned. In the late 1920s, companionate marriage emerges as a new model of matrimony “the partners in which are animated by mere affection and do not want children” (“Companionate”). Often associated with the co-author of *The*

¹ For more on abortion in interwar literature, see Weingarten.

² For more on women and work in the interwar years, see Hapke and Kessler-Harris.

³ See “Nuclear Family.”

Companionate Marriage (1927), Judge Ben B. Lindsey, companionate marriage begins with a yearlong, childless trial marriage to ensure compatibility. At the end of this year, couples could then choose to remain married, divorce without alimony, or transition to what was called a “traditional family marriage” and have children. The necessity of birth control as well as the licensing of sex for pleasure provoked strong reactions and led companionate marriage to be incorrectly conflated with free love, but proponents insisted that their concept protects the institution of marriage.⁴ Free love enfranchises unions by affection and apart from law, whereas companionate and trial marriage refer to legally sanctioned unions that can be easily dissolved by both parties. Companionate marriage indefinitely sustains trial marriage’s agreed-upon “trial” period without children. Though their critics cast them otherwise, companionate and trial marriage in fact shore up traditional constructs of maternity and implicitly discourage working motherhood.

Theorists of the nascent concept of female adolescence likewise envision work and maternity as either/or prospects for the modern woman. In 1920’s *The Adolescent Girl: A Study from a Psychoanalytic Viewpoint*, psychologist Phyllis Blanchard identifies a ubiquitous “adolescent conflict” in young women “caught in the toils of the same struggle between love and ambition” (104). This developmental struggle, Blanchard asserts, is a rational expression of the conflicting desires, imperfect choices, and oft-paradoxical demands of modern femininity. Herself a twenty-five year old woman with a Ph.D. and an academic career, Blanchard normalizes young women’s wishes to sustain professional or artistic employment and validates their fear that these ambitions cannot be

⁴ See “Judge Lindsey Denies Advocating Free Love.”

easily reconciled with romantic love, marriage, and children.⁵ Although she stresses the immediate cultural magnitude of this psychological phenomenon, Blanchard historicizes the tension between women's desires to be independent and to couple: "The sexual impulse of woman is not the simple momentary desire of the male, but a highly ambivalent emotion, in which fear is intimately mingled with desire, because a long evolutionary history has made the sexual act fraught with dire and painful consequences for the female" (178). An early Freudian-turned-Jungian, Blanchard thus adapts Jung's collective unconscious and Freud's pleasure principle to naturalize young women's fraught emotions attached to sex and, by extension, to love. Although she encourages young women to find male partners who will allow them to continue working if the women so desire, Blanchard does not attempt to reconcile "the dire and painful consequences" of sex with this new relational model. Children and work remain mutually exclusive female life paths.

Blanchard's account of her own experience in the 1927 *Nation* series "The Modern Woman" epitomizes the reconfigured sentimentality often at work in these paradigms of modern love. She recounts her "attempts to effect a reconciliation of my natural longing for love with my desire for personal autonomy" ("Long" 108). "The long

⁵ Blanchard's case studies echo many of the concerns of this project's novels. "Aesthetic expression" repeatedly competes with and presents a viable alternative to sexual reproduction. One young woman asserts, "Though I love children, I do not like the idea of being tied down. If I could combine my ambitions with married life and motherhood without hurting either, I should be most happy. I cannot tell which call will prove the strongest, but at present it seems that art is" (74). Blanchard does not challenge this perception of mutual exclusion. Another woman suffers through several disappointing romantic affairs and equally unfulfilling jobs, only to eventually find "the compromise which served to solve the long conflict between [her sexual desire] and the will to power": "in creative artistic work she found . . . a sublimated outlet for her sexual energy, now turned into proper channels to emerge as a highly socialized product" (103-4).

struggle between my two greatest needs—the need for love and the need for independence” concludes when, at age thirty, Blanchard meets and marries a man who “respects my work as much as I do his” (108–09). They “regard marriage as a form to which we have submitted because it is the only way in which we can give expression to our love without interference. With marriage, thus interpreted, I am content. It is as if I had accomplished the impossible feat of eating my cake and having it—for I have both love and freedom, which once seemed to me such incompatible bedfellows” (109). This individually rescripted happily ever after—the product of mutual negotiation and hard psychic work, if apparently not sacrifice—can accommodate two equals. The question of motherhood again forms a conspicuous absence.

As Blanchard’s personal and professional writing suggests, the sentimental and the conventional need not be synonymous. We tend to associate these two categories and think of both as old-fashioned. But Blanchard’s discourse is decidedly sentimental without being conventional. Her sentimental ideal—in which a woman has “both love and freedom” (marriage and work) without compromising either—transforms convention by differently inhabiting it. As an ideological construct, marriage is open to internal reinterpretation and redefinition. As a material reality, maternity does not seem to be available for such renovation.

Old-Fashioned Ends

I want to conclude by looking at a text that more directly addresses these material, maternal conundrums than the novels of the preceding chapters: Edith Wharton’s last finished novel, *The Gods Arrive* (1932). Given Wharton’s antipathy toward sentimental

and modern fiction, she may seem an odd choice for an exploration of these dynamics. But if Wharton is, by her own cast, twice superannuated by the early 1930s, her asynchronous sensibility helps contextualize marital, sexual, and domestic relations in interwar America. Her novel's reception likewise attests to the vexed expectations of female authorship in these years. The conflicts of women's work and love, Wharton suggests, are not modern inventions but rather long-standing—and in certain biological regards, endemic—gender inequities. Wharton thus echoes Blanchard's historicized perspective on femininity's perennial challenges, but the conclusions Wharton draws about the essential continuities between past and present are more pessimistic. Highlighting the reconfigured sentimentality of free love and companionate marriage, and the enduring sentimentality of modern divorce law and notions of women's work, *The Gods Arrive* suggests that the modern woman's future looks disappointingly similar to her precursor's, if not even worse.

I am not inclined to endorse Wharton's opinion that, especially where sentiment and femininity are concerned, modernity's changes are superficial, short-sighted, and unknowingly detrimental. *The Gods Arrive* nonetheless illuminates the vexed sentimentality of modern femininity from another angle. If Wharton's late work—and her female characters in particular—frustrate many a modern reader, we might recognize this frustration as productive for what it reveals: the unresolved issues of modern femininity and certain sentimental aspects of modern literary expectations. Emulating Blanchard's investments in agency and consciousness, frustrated readers of interwar fiction want a female protagonist to at least be intentional in her choices, whatever they may be. Instead, aspiring to have both work and love, *The Gods Arrive*'s female protagonist backslides

into domestic femininity and maternity—a position she neither wants nor rejects. The talk about the modern woman’s self-determination and self-actualization, it seems, is so much smoke and mirrors. In *The Gods Arrive*, factors beyond a woman’s conscious control still make many of her choices for her. An ironic perspective makes little difference in these material outcomes.

A sequel to 1929’s *Hudson River Bracketed*, *The Gods Arrive* interrogates what comes after a modern happily ever after. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, aspiring author Advance “Vance” Weston meets Heloise “Halo” Spear, an erudite, intelligent, free-spirited woman from a financially failing old New York family. Patient, generous, and discerning, Halo critiques and collaborates on Vance’s manuscript, which becomes a critical darling. But the pair’s romantic destinies diverge: Vance falls for and marries his distant cousin, the fragile beauty Laura Lou; Halo marries the wealthy Lewis Tarrant to pay off her family’s debts. As luck would have it, Lewis is also the editor of the little magazine where Vance has a poorly paying contract. Eventually, Laura Lou dies of tuberculosis (absorbed in his creative struggles, Vance fails to notice her illness); upon a female relative’s death, Halo inherits money and the old family mansion; and Lewis, long unfaithful, asks for a divorce. In the novel’s final pages, Halo and Vance meet and discover their mutual freedom.

This rather conventional sentimental narrative of ill-fated love and tormented creative genius dissolves in the sequel, which Wharton planned before completing the first novel’s serialized run in *The Delineator* (Lewis 490). *The Gods Arrive* picks up several months later and rapidly dismantles the lingering romantic promise of *Hudson River Bracketed*. Sailing to Europe, Halo, not yet officially divorced, and Vance, newly

widowed, agree to live as if married until Halo's divorce comes through. Nursing a wounded ego, Lewis now refuses to grant the divorce. As Vance struggles to write a second novel, the pair travel across Europe, establishing a new routine in which Halo assumes the apparently sentimental position previously occupied by Laura Lou. Vance is no longer interested in Halo as a collaborator or critic, so she focuses on providing the best possible environment for his elusive creativity. Halo, however, is hardly a traditional sentimental domestic laborer: she is not weak, fragile, or submissive, nor is she interested in mute renunciation; she assumes the role of highly-capable caretaker and begins to explore the tensions between individual sacrifice and the sacrifice of individualism that figure in many Wharton novels. Vance starts disappearing for days at a stretch and eventually runs off with Floss Delaney, his long-ago fiancé, now a cutthroat entrepreneur managing her father's former estate. In the final chapters, a pregnant Halo returns to her home in New York, where Vance—unaware of Halo's pregnancy but rejected by Floss four times over—stumbles upon her.

The Gods Arrive thus depicts something like the opposite of *The Song of the Lark*: Halo chooses—or, more accurately, accepts—maternity and domesticity over the professional collaboration and intellectual partnership she desires. As in *The Song of the Lark*, these outcomes align with Halo's characterization and so appear natural and intuitive. But whereas Thea achieves her primary goal (a logic facilitated by the narrative omission of the only time she chooses love over work and elopes with Fred to Mexico), Halo copes with a disappointed primary aim almost from the beginning of *The Gods Arrive*. Her choice of Vance is a choice of work and love—a fantasy of synthesis that Wharton's novel reveals to be naïve and unsustainable. Halo expects the couple's

creative alliance to continue once they become lovers, but like Lewis before him, Vance possesses a latent misogyny. He cannot imagine her as both lover and collaborator. Soon “even her services on the Remington were no longer required” (333). Cut out from Vance’s creative life, Halo “caught herself praying for the next book as lonely wives pray for a child. . .” (86). As such ambivalent analogies intimate, Halo remains constrained by concepts of gender and art that she can recognize but not reconfigure. She never imagines she might become an artist herself rather than fulfilling her creative ambitions vicariously.

Part of why Halo doesn’t imagine independent work is based on the unqualified mutuality she expects from modern love. Operating as companionate marriage’s critics feared, Halo rationalizes a free love experiment by thinking of it as a temporarily unofficial trial marriage. Echoing the Bible’s oft-cited precedent for free love, Halo determines, “in such a heaven as ours there’s no marrying or giving in marriage” (60). Yet she ends up “giving” herself to Vance in conventional forms of emotional nurturing, self-sacrifice, and domestic labor. “Intellectual companionship and spiritual sympathy” are wonderful ideals, but someone still has to cook, clean, set up house, and manage the finances (57). Viewing this trajectory from an ironic distance, Halo “felt herself sinking into the character of the blindly admiring wife,” though “that had not been her dream, or his” (40). The couple’s shared desire for an unconventional union thus backfires for Halo: their mutual belief in Vance’s artistic gift and Halo’s immense capability mean that Halo takes on both traditionally masculine and feminine roles of care. To the extent that her “skill in driving nails and mending broken furniture” and her ability to “drive a masterly bargain” in several languages threaten to defeminize her in Vance’s eyes, Halo

unironically adopts an old-fashioned emotional paradigm: “Her yoke should be so light, her nearness so pleasant, that when he came back it should never be because he felt obliged to, but because he was happier with her than elsewhere” (29, 150). Initially, Halo feels “herself a new woman in a new world”; soon, she realizes that such redefinition depends on Vance’s cooperation (10).

The work-related options Halo perceives likewise limit her, especially in light of her class background. In *The Gods Arrive*, women support the arts in significant ways: as patrons, salon conveners, avant-garde booksellers, beat writers, and diligent, if largely uncomprehending, readers.⁶ Men produce art, collaborate as editors, and work as discerning critics.⁷ This gendering of the professional sphere extends beyond the art world. Animating the contradictions surrounding working women, the novel’s female entrepreneurs Floss Delaney and bookstore owner Jane Meggs get cast as alternately unwomanly and emasculating, cold and hypersexual. Floss’s father avows, “I think the inside of my daughter is a combination of a ticker and a refrigerator”—a perception reinforced by the contract Floss compels him to sign, in which he receives a small annuity and she multiplies his former wealth (228). In a logical extension of the conflicts

⁶ These women include patrons and salon-conveners Lady Imp Pevensey, Lady Gwen Plunder, Mrs. Jet Pulsifer, and Mrs. Glaisher; Jane Meggs (née Violet Southernwood) and her business partner; the unintelligent London correspondent for the Des Moines *Daily Ubiquity*; the likewise limited “leading literary critic” of Oubli-Sur-Mer; and countless nameless women who gush over Vance’s celebrity (165). Two active female artists, the Berlin ballerina Fraulein Sady Lenz and the young New York sculptor Rebecca Stram, appear in less than favorable lights: Lenz performs a barely-clad dance and Stram is only discussed as a convener of a salon known for its “stale paradoxes” (172).

⁷ In addition to Vance, the novel’s male artists include Halo’s brother Lorry, the realist novelist Gratz Blemer, and the suicidal Chris Churley. Lewis Tarrant is an editor. Incisive literary critics include George Frenside, Savignac, and Derek Fane. Again, there is one man who breaks from this pattern: Charlie Tarlton convenes a London salon that rivals Lady Pevensey’s.

she embodies, Floss both capitalizes on and endeavors to trump the sexual economy she cannot avoid. She flirts and blackmails her way into business deals with more clear intent than Loos's Lorelei (a character Wharton famously admires, perhaps because of how successfully Lorelei mobilizes, and Loos critiques, modern sentimentality and its gendered trappings). Floss justifies her behavior: "Do you suppose I'm going to risk having to hang round some day and whine for alimony? Not me. . . . I'll never marry till I'm independent of everybody. Then I'll begin to think about it" (389). Wharton casts her unsentimental machinations in a harsh light, but Floss could also be called far-sighted and realistic.

The sexual economy Halo experiences supports Floss's rationale and reveals the limits of her purely financial logic. Though Halo never appears as cold and calculating as Floss, her choices in *Hudson River Bracketed* are similarly borne out of economic pragmatism; in *The Gods Arrive*, Halo imagines her inheritance has liberated from such gendered inequity. Yet even without economic constraints, "free" love, Halo finds, has significant social and emotional costs for the female half of the couple. It is only "her situation" that "has to explained to others," not Vance's (73). Only her "demoralizing influence" gets blamed for a young man's suicide (264). She alone "had to love Vance more passionately, and to believe in his genius more fervently and continuously, because she had staked so much on her love and her faith" (84). Economic realities are not the only stakes that influence sexual pairings. Free love does not liberate Halo from a sentimental femininity—it forces her to double-down on this construct. She bites her tongue, invalidates her negative emotions, blames herself for the couple's conflicts, and practices "quiet unquestioning tenderness" (180, 326). To Vance, "the mere fact that she

was so patient with him, didn't nag, didn't question, didn't taunt" "make[s] her less woman," but recognizing his modern standard simply causes Halo to further adapt her sentimental femininity: she now endeavors to avoid "any sign of exaggerated sympathy" (326, 332). Financially free but emotionally bound, Halo's untethered position makes her more vulnerable and dependent, not less.

Modern love thus disappoints Halo in the practice of its theories. Whereas free love purports to increase intimacy—"The new generation argues that it's easier to separate if married, since divorce formalities were easier than a sentimental break"—Halo and Vance find "their perpetual mutual insistence on not being a burden to each other, on scrupulously respecting each other's freedom, had somehow worn the tie thin instead of strengthening it" (83, 367). Rather than inspiring a new sentimental bond between equals, free love installs an old sentimental bind: a friend suggests that Halo "chain[s Vance] up all the tighter" by being "the defenseless woman, and all that. If you were his wife, you and he'd be on a level" (313). But neither this older friend nor "the new generation" is entirely correct: "divorce formalities" do not put Halo "on a level" with her husband.

In an alliance with Judge Lindsey, who argued that mutual consent should be adequate grounds for dissolving a childless marriage, Wharton critiques the enduring sentimental logic of contemporaneous divorce law.⁸ Divorce law in the 1930s requires an injured party—presumably a faithful woman—who can prove unilateral adultery or violence. Mutual misconduct as in the case of Halo and Lewis requires collusion between

⁸ This critique resonates throughout Wharton's "divorce corpus," in which divorce laws make matters worse for a number of women. See Bauer, *Edith* 132–44 and Haytock, 131–57.

the divorcing couple to frame the story in one-sided terms. Once she elopes with Vance, Halo loses her claim to injury and needs Lewis's participation to see the divorce through. Alternatively, she could move to Reno for six weeks and commit perjury on her own, but as Vance recognizes, "the crowd she was brought up in hate that kind of thing worse than poison" (366). As Halo's mother tells her, the problem is not her desire to divorce and remarry, but her "taking liberties with those institutions [of church and law]" by eloping with Vance before securing her divorce (31). These institutions remain equally sentimental in their divorce policies.

In addition to the gender stereotypes they preserve and the legal fictions they necessitate, modern divorce laws still leave women dependent on men. As soon as Vance realizes that Lewis has prevented the divorce, he visits Lewis and demands Halo's "release" (138). Imagining "her husband and her lover had been talking her over," "it seemed to her that she was gazing at herself stripped and exposed, between these two men who were disputing for her possession" (153). As this negotiation for her repossession fails, Halo retains Lewis's last name. Once pregnant, Halo accepts the abject position she must assume and asks Lewis to grant her "freedom" (362). He refuses until she swears that she will not tell Vance of her pregnancy and has no intention of remarrying. "I want to be alone; to go my own way, without depending on anybody. I want to be Halo Spear again—that's all" (362). This express desire—in many ways a succinct rendering of modern feminine ideals—proves both understandable and impossible. Halo is about to give birth; she will not be alone any more than she can simply go back to "being Halo Spear again."

Despite this nod to single motherhood, *The Gods Arrive* ultimately endorses a renewed form of the conventional family. Halo and Vance arrive at this pragmatic, secular ideal by different routes. For Vance, marriage insulates men from their own bad behavior. Early on, he surmises, “Marriage was a trick, a sham, if you looked at it in one way; but it was the only means man had yet devised for defending himself from his own frivolity” (117). Later, he determines, “Marriage and a home; normal conditions; that was what he craved and needed” (382). His affair with Floss Delaney, like his free love arrangement with Halo, does not disrupt or even destabilize these traditional gender concepts—they remain the unchallenged “normal conditions” to which he returns at will.

Whereas Vance’s imagined panaceas begin and end with marriage, Halo’s solutions to her modern condition center on motherhood. Like Vance’s matrimonial desires, Halo’s maternal fantasies are less about a biological truth or spiritual calling than a pragmatic desire for security and a buffer from loneliness. Before the couple dissolves, Halo imagines she and Vance “might have a child, and then there would be something about which to build the frame-work. They would become a nucleus, their contradictory cravings would meet in a common purpose, their being together and belonging to each other would acquire a natural meaning” (317). Figuring a child as the “natural meaning” between man and woman, Halo imagines a biological connection as the only “common purpose” they might share. When Halo determines to let Vance go, she imagines, “Perhaps in the end she would marry somebody else, have children, live on as a totally different being, preoccupied about ordering another man’s dinner and bringing up his family” (345). Like Vance’s view of marriage (“an emanation of the will of man,” not “a divine institution”), Halo’s maternity functions as a means to an end of self-protection

and distraction (117). She does not identify with the “being” she imagines becoming any more than the family she imagines raising belongs to her.

The novel’s conclusion knits these oddly complementary models together in an ironic, sentimental, and ultimately ambiguous end.⁹ Halo returns to New York and “quietly,” “neither defiantly nor apologetically,” with “her usual ironic courage” prepares to “follow her own way” in raising her child alone (418, 423–4). Dramatizing the distinction between physiological maternity and emotional maternality, Halo detaches from her parents, retreats to her suburban home, and becomes remote even from herself. “There were moments when she wondered if, after her baby was born, she would lapse from her state of ruminating calm, and become again the passionate anxious Halo of old” (424). As her recurrent dissociation intimates, Halo recedes more into maternal abstraction than develops into motherly presence. Vance too changes without straightforward progress—after a bout of pneumonia, he must learn to walk again. In a developmental pattern that underscores their paradoxical commonality, Halo “recovers” by getting pregnant while Vance “grows” by physically returning to infancy.¹⁰

The Gods Arrive’s final tableau establishes Halo in a contentious female iconography. “With a kind of tranquil gravity she lifted up her arms in the ancient attitude

⁹ Olin-Ammentorp describes the tone of the final scene as “complex,” but also asserts “there is no chance that any of this can be seen as satirical. . . . The ending of the novel is sober” and not “mock[ing]” (“Wharton” 296). While I agree that the tone is complex, sober, and neither satirical nor mocking, it is critical and ironic as well.

¹⁰ Halo believes, “The decision to live at the Willows had been her final step toward recovery” though her lassitude prior to Vance’s arrival and “the old tremors in her breast” when he reappears suggest that this recovery is an ongoing process (422, 432). In characteristic vacillation, Vance asserts “he felt like a grown man” long before “he felt that at last he was ready to taste of the food of the full-grown, however bitter to the lips it might be” (325, 412). He later revises this assessment (cast in terms of Augustine’s *Confessions*), “He felt will-less and adrift, and the food of the full-grown seemed too strong a fare for him” (414).

of prayer. . . . ‘You see we belong to each other after all,’ she said; but as her arms sank about his neck he bent his head and put his lips to a fold of her loose dress” (432).

Though critics tend to read this scene as unequivocally sincere, Wharton repeatedly undercuts Vance’s tendency to mythologize Halo; when he previously imagines her as Mary, the narration ironizes his unexamined narcissistic associations. Far from elevating her to a higher plain, Halo’s symbolic position works against her: she remains conveniently abstract for Vance, while living the painful consequences of this objectification. Her final joke—“I shall have two children to take care of instead of one!”—ironizes and apparently embraces this role (432). The iconic pose Halo assumes may reflect an earnest acceptance of her lot, but she is all too aware of the impossibility of sustaining paradoxes like virginal maternity, among other long-lived sentimental expectations of femininity.

Halo’s ultimately conventional relationship to female labor hardly appears ideal. Her intellectual and creative dissatisfaction with domestic work throughout the narrative colors all of her choices in this arena. Indeed, her “choices” look more like defaults to old familiar patterns, rather than intentional decisions. As she sets up house at the end of the novel, “It was curious, she thought, how far pots and pans could go toward filling an empty heart; and she remembered how she had vaguely resented Vance’s faculty for escaping from anxiety and unhappiness by plunging into his work. House-making and housekeeping were her escape, she supposed: she must build up a home for her son . . .” (424, ellipses in original). This solution is not new. Halo has long imagined domestic enterprise as both “her escape” and her appropriate role in relation to a man (it is unclear

how she knows she carries a son). Though Halo can envy Vance his alternatives, she cannot seem to adopt his model.¹¹

The Gods Arrive's initial reviews underscore the vexed nature of this conclusion. One review predicts a trilogy (Davis 495). Another critiques Wharton for sidestepping the most controversial aspects of her subject matter:

Halo Tarrant, separated from her lover, returns to her old home on the Hudson and there prepares for the birth of her illegitimate child. This is the point where interest grows tense. What is to become of Halo and her baby? How will she behave, how will others behave towards her, when she is in a position which, despite all present-day talk of freedom and the woman's right to complete sexual liberty, still remains distinctly unconventional? . . . Dozens of questions arise. But having brought her heroine thus far, Mrs. Wharton evades every issue. The only solution she can offer is to make 'an honest woman' of Halo in true Eighteenth Century fashion. She presents her problems; then disposes of them by

¹¹ Vance is not the only male artist Halo consciously envies. "She envied [her brother] Lorry the place he had made for himself in the busy experimental world of the arts. . . . She thought how changed he was since he had found the job he was meant for. He would always be unreliable about money, careless as to other people's feelings, sweetly frivolous, gaily unfeeling; but where his work was concerned he was a rock" (86–7). The tensions in Halo's framework—Lorry both makes his place and finds it—reflect her conflicted notion of how to go about achieving what she repeatedly envies. Just as she imagines unfettered access the key to the grounding capacity of Lorry's work, she imagines the ideal solution for her dissatisfaction to be permanent access to Vance's art. When she asks Lorry to help her find a job, it is only as a distraction from her relational discontent: "I feel at a loose end, with all the rest of you absorbed in your village industries. Why can't I have one too? Won't Jane take me on as an apprentice in her book-shop?" (88). Like her brother (who tells her marriage is her proper "job"), Halo believes that her main "occupation" must be interpersonal (88).

means of a reconciliation in which, it may be incidentally remarked, the reader does not believe for a moment. (Field 499–500)

The reader's disbelief does not seem intended, but this response is part of a larger critical matrix that exemplifies the double binds Wharton limns. Several periodicals rejected *The Gods Arrive* owing to Halo's distance from old-fashioned femininity, while another frustrated reviewer finds Wharton's narrative as dated as Halo's sentimentality: "Whether or not by her creator's intention, Halo is a complete embodiment of the sentimental nineteenth century ideal of a woman as the inspiration of genius, mistress, and school mistress in one. If such a being ever existed, her function vanished with the passing of the century" (Lewis 502; Paterson 490). Both of these disappointed critics are female.

Assailing the author from both ends—as alternately too modern and too old-fashioned, overdetermined and potentially unconscious in her scripting—Wharton's original reception could be seen to validate her argument that the more things change for the modern woman, the more they stay the same. Yet the response of these female reviewers also destabilizes this perception and illustrates the changing expectations of interwar readers.

Wharton's scholarly history is equally symptomatic of the agonistic expectations of interwar female authorship. For decades, the scant attention to Wharton's late writing—everything published after the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—repeats notions of her isolation from America's political and social climate and her corollary immunity to the sea change in modern letters. "Old-fashioned" and

“sentimental” become shorthand for her personal beliefs and artistic tendencies.¹² Recent scholarship that complicates concepts of Wharton’s sentimentality continues to collapse these two terms, almost exclusively focusing on the first half of her career.¹³ Even as critics have begun to reassess Wharton’s late fiction and her contentious relation to literary modernism, they have largely avoided discussing her last novels’ aesthetics and either explicitly or implicitly endorsed notions of her distance from the major artistic concerns of interwar writing.¹⁴

¹² This perspective was initiated by contemporaneous critics such as Granville Hicks, whose 1933 conclusion that Wharton “has ended in romantic trivialities” yet also “lost her sense of moral values” reflects the new strain of sentimentalism in Depression-era writing (*Great* 219). The notion of Wharton’s sentimental decline solidifies in Edmund Wilson’s 1938 *New Republic* essay, ironically titled “Justice to Edith Wharton,” and feminist critics of the 1980s and 90s largely repeat this narrative of lapse. In a characteristic example, Boydston argues that Wharton takes “the plunge into a fully romanticized celebration of motherhood” in the 1920s (38). Ammons (*Argument*), Lewis, and Vita-Finzi make similar claims about Wharton’s increasing sentimentality and decreasing artistic strength. Hoeller summarizes this critical history (20–23). In an effort to rehabilitate Wharton’s politics, Bauer focuses more on her social concerns and political ideology than her late style (*Edith*).

¹³ Fraiman argues for Wharton’s anti-sentimental domestic view in her *Decoration of Houses* (“Domesticity”). Jurecic suggests that Wharton interweaves the sentimental novel and the “industrial novel” in *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907). Singley connects the sentimental tradition to Wharton’s “ironic realism” in her early short stories and *The House of Mirth*. Hoeller suggests that Wharton “never stopped revising” her realist aesthetic and its dialogue with sentimental fiction, but within this dialectic, sentimentalism functions as a stable repository of nineteenth-century conventions rather than an endlessly renewed literary mode (197). See also Boydston and Kim, “Dialogue.”

¹⁴ A growing body of work looks at Wharton’s dialogues with literary modernism in her late fiction. See Haytock. Wegener is among those who argue for Wharton’s antimodernism—as well as her “antiliberal, indeed antidemocratic” attitude in her late work; Peel concludes her study prior to World War I to wage a similar argument (133, 116). Acknowledging Wharton’s antipathy towards modernist aesthetics, Colquitt and Waid find Wharton “a radical experimentalist *malgre lui*” (547). Others argue for considering Wharton a modernist by focusing on her content rather than her style. Knights notes that her “later fictions . . . suggest some experimentation” in their themes and “oblique and fragmented vision” (114–15). Examining “the religious and spiritual dimensions” of her novels, Singley contends that Wharton is “a realistic and modernist innovator in her own right” (*Matters* 7). Sensibar likewise considers Wharton’s

Like Wharton's anti-sentimental and anti-modern discourse, this critical reception instantiates another type of modern sentimentality.¹⁵ True originality, Wharton argues as early as 1897, comes from creatively transforming convention, not just ceding to older artistic structures, superficially playing with these patterns, or imagining one might explode them altogether.¹⁶ Even as Wharton draws very different conclusions about where and how such originality occurs in interwar fiction, she nonetheless agrees with her critics that the modern female author, like the characters she creates, must actively work to denaturalize and recast her cultural legacy. If we judge Wharton to be lacking in these enterprises, we nonetheless fortify our own modern sentimental commitments to the new, the different, and other uncompromising alternatives to old paradigms.

After Happily Ever After: Or, The Good Enough Life

“revision” of one modernist trope, “the bachelor type” (159). Her short stories are more often read for their stylistic experimentation. See Campbell; Kim “Epiphany”; Ware; Whitehead.

¹⁵ “Real originality,” Wharton avers in 1934, emerges from the “incessant renovation of old types by creative action” (“Permanent” 176–7). Most modern fiction, Wharton asserts, unwittingly renovates one of the least aesthetic literary forms: “pleaders of special causes—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Reade, Mrs. [Elizabeth] Gaskell, for example—. . . produced (often with immensely remunerative results) that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose”; “the modern writer with a purpose (no less a purpose because no longer a moral one)” produces the next generation of this “unhappy hybrid,” the novel that prioritizes theory and technique over story and character (175). The complementarity Wharton sees between the modern and the sentimental extends beyond contemporary literary production. “Two perils beset the average reader: he is apt to be taken either by sheer sentimentality, or by what one might call a cultured mediocrity” (178). Shuttling between extreme feeling and middling intellect, the modern reader confuses nuanced experiments with rote repetition.

¹⁶ In 1897's *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton avows, “The supposed conflict between originality and tradition is no conflict at all” (10). She elaborates these sentiments in the 1925's *The Writing of Fiction* and her essays of the 1930s, including “Permanent Values in Fiction.”

I have argued that collapsing the sentimental, the conventional, and the old-fashioned is a quintessential modern move: conflating these categories allows one to theoretically reject sentimental feeling by rejecting the overt trappings of convention. Yet as this project's novels invariably suggest, this enterprise is doomed to fail—sentimental feeling seemingly always returns. My point has been that the sentimental is not inherently a regressive, outdated, or anti-modern aesthetic or affective mode; it is woven into modern femininity, modern literature, and modern life in ways that are by turns productive and stymying. I have also argued that the goal of diminishing—if not fully getting rid of—sentimentality is a misplaced aim. We would be better off trying to understand it.

If modern sentimentalism most often manifests in the ironic consciousness of one's own enduring sentimentality, then the modern sentimental ideal these novels construct—either directly or indirectly—is about knowing one's emotions as well as feeling them. Such an endeavor is animated by a sense that all of this psychic work pays off not in a definite happily ever after, but rather in something like good enough most of the time. This does not mean giving up the utopian wish or any other primitive desire, but regarding these impulses critically, maintaining them in a context of knowing, which frequently means from an ironic distance. As Lauren Berlant has observed, sentimental literature's fantasies are about an ongoing, ever-better management of ambivalence, not out and out solution.¹⁷ Such management requires an increasing knowledge of and tolerance for the full range of emotional life, including its disappointments and uncertainties. Even interwar psychologists who believe in normative resolution to modern

¹⁷ Berlant observes that “middlebrow popular genres are about the management of ambivalence, and not the destruction of pleasures or power” (*Complaint* 5).

women's ambivalence nonetheless emphasize self-awareness and critical consciousness as the lynchpin of this process. The modern sentimental goal is to know the conflict rather than be run by it.

Yet the goal of knowing and managing ambivalence has clear practical limits. For one thing, such psychic endeavor does not change material conflicts. Like many modern sentimental protagonists, Halo initially overinvests in her own perspective and overlooks her own inconsistencies. Wharton's main critique is less that Halo is naïve or inadequately analytical than that all of this cognitive activity and social redescription distract from lived realities that cannot be individually outthought or culturally renovated out of existence. Perhaps Wharton's biggest argument with modernity is the pervasive fantasy that one might live without pain. Modernity's problematic attempts to obviate human suffering resonate through much of Wharton's late work. In *The Gods Arrive*, Vance's grandmother imparts the deathbed wisdom, "Maybe we haven't made enough of pain—been too afraid of it. Don't be afraid of it" (402). In her modern sentimentality, Halo imagines she can avoid pain if she makes the right choices.

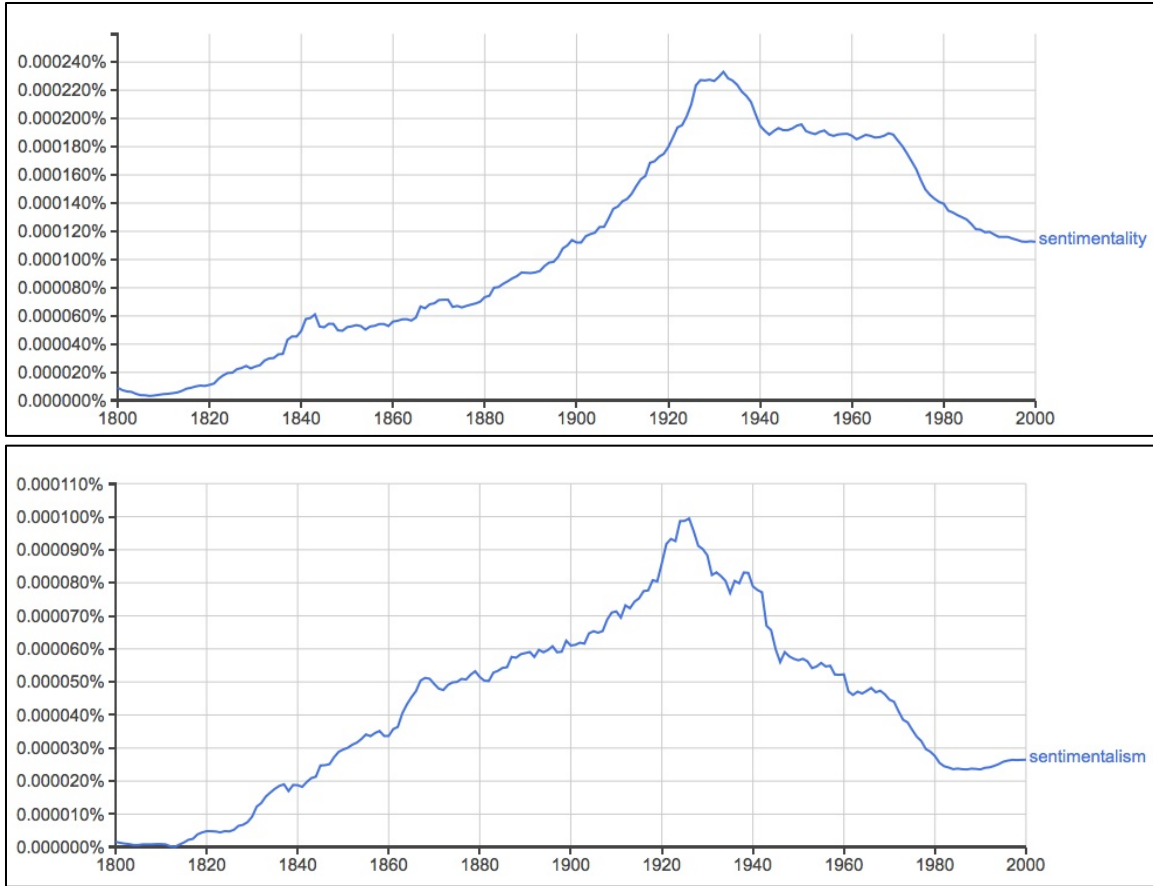
In this, Halo is in good company. The resolutions to the material and maternal conflicts of modern femininity proposed by Blanchard, Lindsey, and others may seem dated—indeed, old-fashioned—in their narratives of how to achieve a life with minimal pain. But these interwar theorists, like this project's novelists, articulate a sentimental ambition that I would argue continues to transform, rather than die out. If, as Schiller suggests in 1795, modern consciousness sentimentalizes a life without conflict, the sentimental desire to resolve conflict without compromise is perhaps the most durable modern sentimental wish of all.

Appendix: Modern Sentimentalism in Digital Terms

As the following graphs establish, critical conversations about sentimentalism as an artistic practice have not kept pace with its cultural relevance in the twentieth century. The lines below testify to an enduring interest in the sentimental but are limited by Google Ngram's own limits, including the impossibility of distinguishing "American" text from all text published in English. My qualitative analysis complements and adds nuance to this quantitative overview. Non-digital research proves that the sentimental mode itself evolves in American interwar fiction.

The following graphs indicate the incidence of the word "sentimental," "sentimentality," and "sentimentalism" in digitized (and Google-accessible) books in English, from the years 1800 to 2000:





Note the steady upward trends in the early twentieth century, with the peak of “sentimentalism” in 1926 and the peaks of “sentimental” and “sentimentality” in roughly 1932. Far from dissipating, the cultural discourse surrounding sentimentality and its literary mode increases in the interwar period.

Compare these trajectories to the incidence of the word “unsentimental” in digitized books in English, over the same two hundred years:



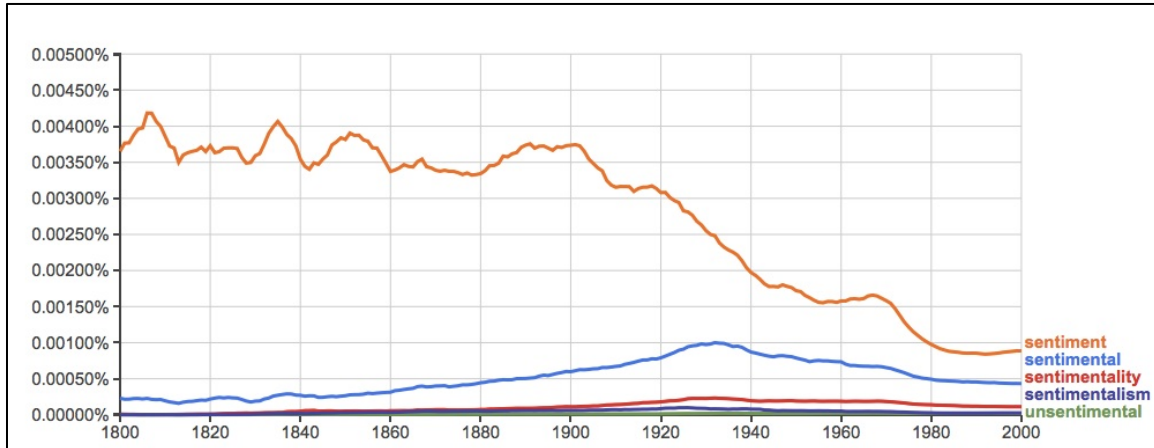
Whereas discourse about sentimentality declines after 1932, discourse about being “unsentimental” holds steady, presumably reflecting its association with modern sensibility. (One rather obvious limit of Ngram in the context of literary history is that these graphs suggest the frequency with which people talk about a topic, but offer no insight into what is said. My reading of novels and nonfiction from the period suggests that, while much of the attention to sentimentality has a negative valence, these conversations equally adapt and reconfigure these concepts of feeling and sensibility).

Compare all four of these trajectories to the incidence of the word “sentiment” in digitized books in English during the same time frame:



Note the inverse relationship between “sentiment” and the adjectives above.

Whereas sentiment is a significant topic of discourse until about 1900, it tracks steadily downward thereafter. Meanwhile, being sentimental (or not) does not hold much import until the 1920s. It’s worth noting, however, that “sentiment” remains the most-discussed term of the lot:

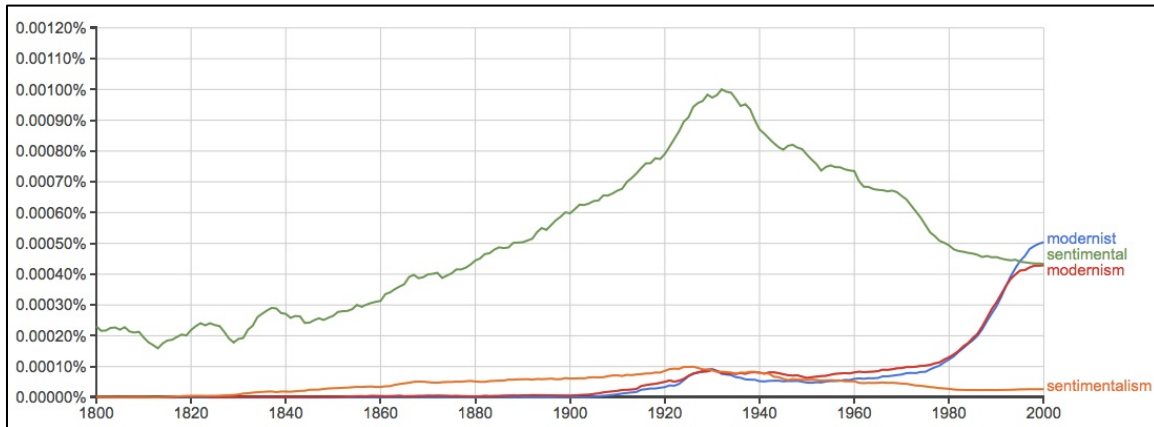


Finally, compare the discourse about sentiment and its literary mode to the conversations about modernism:



Discourse about the two aesthetic practices intersects around 1930 and remains roughly equal until 1941. It is not until 1970 that modernism skyrockets as a privileged keyword, while sentimentalism falls out of favor.

Again, however, the relative frequency of terms further nuances the story:



This particular graph is perhaps the most telling in terms of critical dispositions and cultural sensibilities. Interest in the sentimental mode steadily declines in the twentieth century, while conversations about modernism steadily increase. However, only in the last decade of the twentieth century do modernism and its adjective surpass the debates about sentimental sensibility. In other words, discourse about sentimentalism as an artistic practice lags behind the cultural interest in sentimental modes of thinking, feeling, and being.

Works Cited

- Abate, Michelle Ann. "Constructing Modernist Lesbian Affect from Late Victorian Masculine Emotionalism: Willa Cather's 'Tommy, the Unsentimental' and J. M. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy*." *Women's Writing* 18.4 (2011): 468–85.
- Abbott, Reginald. "A Southern Lady Still." *The Southern Quarterly* 27.4 (1989): 49–70.
- . "Purple Prejudices: The Critical Writings of Frances Newman." Diss. Vanderbilt U, 1992.
- Acocella, Joan. *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2000.
- Advertisement for *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*. Boni & Liveright. *Los Angeles Times* 5 Dec. 1926: C21.
- Advertisement for *There Is Confusion*. Boni & Liveright. *New York Times* 3 Apr. 1924: BR16.
- Advertisement for *The Song of the Lark*. Houghton Mifflin. *New York Times* 3 Oct. 1915: 84.
- "Aesthetic." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- Ahearn, Amy. "Full-Blooded Writing and Journalistic Fictions: Naturalism, the Female Artist and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*." *American Literary Realism* 33 (2001): 143–56.
- Allen, Carol. *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner*. New York: Garland P, 1998.
- Altieri, Charles. *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Ithaca: Cornell

- UP, 2003.
- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- . *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980.
- Ardis, Ann. "The Dialogics of Modernism(s) in the New Age." *Modernism/modernity* 14.3 (2007): 407–34.
- . *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990.
- Armstrong, Nancy. "Why Daughters Die: The Racial Logic of American Sentimentalism." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 7.2 (1994): 1–24.
- Arvin, Newton. "Sweet Story." Rev. of *Lucy Gayheart*, by Willa Cather. *New Republic* 1935. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 465–66.
- Barker, Deborah. *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature: Portraits of the Woman Artist*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2000.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. "Drowning (in) Kittens: The Reproduction of Girlhood in Victorian America." *American Literature* 86.2 (2014): 305–31.
- Barreca, Regina. Introduction. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. By Anita Loos. New York: Penguin, 1998. vii–xxiv.
- Bauer, Dale M. *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994.
- Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-70*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978.
- Bell, Michael. *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling*. New York: St.

- Martin's, 2000.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.
- . *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.
- . "Poor Eliza." *American Literature* 70.3 (Sept 1998): 635–68.
- Berry, Ephraim A. "To Market, To Market." Rev. of *Plum Bun*, by Jessie Fauset. *Chicago Defender* 8 June 1929: A1.
- Blair, Amy L. *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012.
- Blanchard, Phyllis. *The Adolescent Girl: A Study from the Psychoanalytic Viewpoint*. New York: Moffat, Yard and Co, 1920.
- . "The Long Journey." *Nation*. 1927. Rpt. *These Modern Women: Autobiographical Essays from the Twenties*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Feminist P at CUNY, 1989. 105–09.
- Blom, T. E. "Anita Loos and Sexual Economics: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 7.1 (1976): 39–47.
- Bone, Robert. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1958.
- Botshon, Lisa and Goldsmith, Meredith. Introduction. *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*. Eds. Botshon and Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. 3–21.
- Booth, Wayne. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.
- Bourne, Randolph. [Unsigned] "Diminuendo." *New Republic* 11 Dec. 1915. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge:

- Cambridge UP, 2001. 70–2.
- Boydston, Jeanne. “‘Grave Endearing Traditions’: Edith Wharton and the Domestic Novel” *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*. Eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien. New York: Greenwood P, 1988. 31–40.
- Boynton, H[enry] W[alcott]. “Realism and Recent American Fiction.” *Nation* 6 Apr. 1916: 380–82.
- . “Varieties of Realism.” *Nation* 14 Oct. 1915: 461–62.
- Brady, Jennifer L. “Theorizing a Reading Public: Sentimentality and Advice about Novel Reading in the Antebellum United States.” *American Literature* 83.4 (2011): 719–46.
- Braithwaite, William Stanley. “The Negro in American Literature.” *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 29–44.
- . “The Novels of Jessie Fauset.” *Opportunity* 12 (Jan 1934): 24–28.
- Breu, Christopher. *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Brown, Sterling. *The Negro in American Fiction*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat P Inc, 1937.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: George Braziller, 1950.
- Burrows, Stuart. “Losing the Whole In the Parts: Identity in *The Professor’s House*.” *Arizona Quarterly* 64.4 (2008): 21–48.
- Burstein, Jessica. “A Few Words About Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé.” *American Literary History* 14.2 (2002): 227–54.
- Butcher, Fanny. “Title Only Poor Part of Newman Novel, ‘Virgin.’” Rev. of *The Hard-*

- Boiled Virgin*, by Frances Newman. *Chicago Daily Tribune* 25 Dec. 1926: 4.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cadett, Thomas. “‘Hard-Boiled Virgin’ Neither Mediocre Book or a Classic.” Rev. of *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, by Frances Newman. *The Atlanta Constitution* 9 Jan. 1927: 13.
- Callander, Marilyn Berg. *Willa Cather and the Fairy Tale*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989.
- Campbell, Donna. “Edith Wharton’s ‘Book of the Grotesque’: Sherwood Anderson, Modernism, and the Late Stories.” *Edith Wharton Review* (Fall 2010): 1–5.
- Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Cassuto, Leonard. *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.
- Castle, Gregory. *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2006.
- Cather, Willa. [Untitled]. *Courier* 23 Nov. 1895. Rpt. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Ed. William M. Curtin. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 275–77.
- . Letter to Ferris Greenslet, 1915. Houghton Mifflin Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- . “My First Novels [There Were Two].” *The Colophon*. 1931. Rpt. *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. New York: Knopf, 1949. 91–97.
- . *Not Under Forty*. 1936. Rpt. *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*. New York:

- Knopf, 1992. 811–83.
- . “On the Art of Fiction.” *The Borzoi*. 1920. Rpt. *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. New York: Knopf, 1949. 101–04.
- . “The Novel Démeublé.” *New Republic* 12 Apr. 1922: 5–6.
- . “Old Books and New.” *Home Monthly* Nov. 1897. Rpt. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Ed. William M. Curtin. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 361–65.
- . [Unsigned] “The Passing of the ‘Duchess’.” *Home Monthly* 6 (Mar. 1897): 7.
- . Rev. of *A Few Memories*, by Mary Anderson. *Nebraska State Journal* 3 May 1896. Rpt. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*. Ed. Bernice Slote. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966. 155–59.
- . *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Eds. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. New York: Knopf, 2013.
- . *The Song of the Lark*. 1915. Ed. Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012.
- . “Three Women Poets.” *Nebraska State Journal* 13 Jan. 1895. Rpt. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Ed. William M. Curtin. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970. 142–7.
- Chandler, James. *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013.
- Chapman, Erin. *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.

- Cheng, Ann Anlin. "The Melancholy of Race." *The Kenyon Review* 19.1 (Winter 1997): 49–61.
- . *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1980.
- Churchwell, Sarah. "'Lost Among the Ads': *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Politics of Imitation." *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*. Eds. Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003. 135–64.
- Clark, Suzanne. *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Clere, Sarah. "Locating Mexicans in *The Song of the Lark*." *Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark*. Ed. Debra L. Cumberland. Amsterdam: Rodopi P, 2010. 149–63.
- Cohen, Margaret. *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.
- Colquitt, Claire and Candace Waid. "Toward a Modernist Aesthetic: The Literary Legacy of Edith Wharton." *A Companion to American Fiction 1865–1914*. Ed. Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. 536–56.
- "Companionate." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 12 May 2015.
- Cooper, Frederick Taber. Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *Bookman* Nov. 1915. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 65–66.

- The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Shirley Samuels. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- . *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Davidson, Donald. "Frances Newman." *Critics Almanac* 13 May 1928. Rpt. *The Spyglass: Views and Reviews, 1924-1930*. Selected and ed. John Tyree Fain. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1963. 26–29.
- Davis, Elmer. "History of an Artist." *Saturday Review of Literature* 1932. Rpt. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. James W. Tuttleton and Kristin O. Lauer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 493–95.
- Dearborn, Mary. *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- DeArmond, Fred. "A Note on the Sociology of Negro Literature." 1925. Rpt. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. 330–33.
- Diller, Christopher G. "Signifying on Stowe: Ralph Ellison and the Sentimental Rhetoric of *Invisible Man*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 75.4 (2014): 487–509.
- Dobson, Joanne. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature." *American Literature* 69 (1997): 263–88.
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977.

- . *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Rpt. New York: Bantam Classic, 1989.
- duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Edmunds, Susan. *Grotesque Relations: Modernist Domestic Fiction and the U. S. Welfare State*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- . “‘Just Like Home’: Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the New Deal” *American Literature* 86.1 (2014): 61–86.
- Eliot, T. S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1920. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1934. 47–59.
- “Empathy.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760-1850*. Ed. Christopher John Murray. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Everett, Barbara. “The New Style of *Sweeney Agonistes*.” *Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984): 243–63.
- Fauset, Arthur Huff. “American Negro Folk Literature.” *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 238–44.
- Fauset, Jessie Redmon. “As to Books.” *The Crisis* 24.2 (June 1922): 66–68.
- . “The Gift of Laughter.” *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 161–67.
- . “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed.” *The Crisis* 31.8 (June 1926):

71.

- . “No End of Books.” *The Crisis* 23.5 (March 1922): 208–10.
- . “Our Book Shelf.” *The Crisis* 31.5 (March 1926), 238–39.
- . *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. 1929. Rpt. Boston: Beacon P, 1990.
- . “Some Notes on Color,” *The World Tomorrow*. 1922. Rpt. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, 1910-1932*. Ed. Herbert Aptheker. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel P, 1973. 354–58.
- . “The Symbolism of Bert Williams.” *The Crisis* 24.1 (May 1922): 12–15.
- . *There Is Confusion*. 1924. Rpt. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989.
- . “What to Read.” *The Crisis* 3.5 (March 1912): 211–12.
- Feeney, Joseph. “A Sardonic, Unconventional Jessie Fauset: The Double Structure and Double Vision of Her Novels.” *College Language Association Journal* 22 (June 1979): 365–82.
- Ferber, Edna. *Fanny Herself*. 1917. Lexington, KY: Filiquarian Publishing, 2011.
- Field, Louise Maunsell. “The Modest Novelist.” *North American Review*. 1932. Rpt. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. James W. Tuttleton and Kristin O. Lauer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 499–500.
- Ford, Lillian. “A Fiddler and a Virgin.” Rev. of *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, by Frances Newman. *Los Angeles Times* 5 Dec. 1926: C20.
- Foreman, P. Gabrielle. “Looking Back From Zora, or Talking Out Both Sides My Mouth for those Who Have Two Ears.” *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 (Winter 1990): 649–66.
- Forster, Gregory. *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the*

- American Crime Novel*. New York: New York UP, 2000.
- Fraiman, Susan. "Domesticity Beyond Sentiment: Edith Wharton, Decoration, and Divorce." *American Literature* 83.3 (Sept 2011): 479–507.
- . *Unbecoming Women*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- "Frances Newman Cuts a New Caper in the Novel." *New York Times* 12 Dec. 1926: BR12.
- Frederick, John T. "Hawthorne's 'Scribbling Women.'" *New England Quarterly* 48.2 (1975): 231–40.
- Frost, Laura. "Blondes Have More Fun: Anita Loos and the Language of Silent Cinema." *Modernism/modernity* 17.2 (2010): 291–311.
- Fryer, Judith. *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986.
- Fuderer, Laura Sue. *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*. New York: MLA, 1990.
- G., F. A. "A Woman's Climb from Nebraska to the Stage." Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *Boston Evening Transcript* 13 Oct. 1915. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 61–62.
- Galioto, Erica D. "Künstlerroman Revised: Doubleness and Catharsis in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*." *Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark*. Ed. Debra L. Cumberland. Amsterdam: Rodopi P, 2010. 39–63.
- Garcia, Claire Oberon. "Jessie Redmon Fauset Reconsidered." *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited*. Ed. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. 93–108.

- Gillman, Susan. "The Mulatto, Tragic or Triumphant? The Nineteenth-Century American Race Melodrama." *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Shirley Samuels. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 221–43.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. *Willa Cather and Others*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Goldie, Peter. *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Gordon, Brandon. "Physical Sympathy: Hip and Sentimentalism in James Baldwin's *Another Country*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 57.1 (2011): 75–95.
- Gould, Philip. "Revisiting the 'Feminization' of American Culture." *differences* 11.3 (1999): i–xii.
- Greenberg, Jonathan. *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Greenslet, Ferris L. Reader's Report on Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*. 5 Apr 1915. Houghton Mifflin Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- Gregory, Montgomery. "The Drama of Negro Life." *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 153–60.
- Hale, Edward E. Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *Dial* Nov. 1915. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 68–69.
- Halpern, Faye. *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2013.

- Hammill, Faye. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2007.
- Hapke, Laura. *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995.
- . *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890-1925*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992.
- Harker, Jaime. *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2007.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. "Lookalikes: Conrad and the Denial of Human Individuality." *Conrad First: The Joseph Conrad Periodical Online*, 2006. Web. 1 March 2013.
- Haytock, Jennifer. *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Hegeman, Susan. "Taking Blondes Seriously." *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995): 525–54.
- Herring, Scott. "Catherian Friendship; or, How Not to Do the History of Homosexuality." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 66–91.
- Heyeck, Robin and Woodress, James. "Willa Cather's Cuts and Revisions in *The Song of the Lark*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 25.4 (Winter 1979/1980): 651–58.
- Hicks, Granville. "The Case Against Willa Cather." *The English Journal* 22.9 (1933): 703–10.
- . *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1935.
- Hoeller, Hildegard. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue With Realism and Sentimental Fiction*.

- Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2000.
- Howard, June. "What is Sentimentality?" *American Literary History* 11.1 (1999): 63–81.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain." *Nation* 122 (23 June 1926): 692–94.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- . *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Jernigan, Adam T. "James Baldwin's Post-Sentimental Fiction: From 'Previous Condition' to *Another Country*." *Arizona Quarterly* 70.1 (2014): 173–201.
- Johnson, Abby Arthur and Ronald Maberry Johnson. *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century*. Boston: U of Massachusetts P, 1979.
- Johnson, Charles S. "The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers." *Opportunity* 2 (May 1924): 143–44.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912.
- Johnson, Julian. "The Soubrette of Satire." *Photoplay* (July 1917): 27–28, 148.
- Johnson, Nancy Beers. "Parthenos Exalted: Frances Newman's (Re)vision of the South." Diss. U of Alabama, 1994.
- "Judge Lindsey Denies Advocating Free Love." *New York Times* 31 Jan. 1927: 11.

- Jurecic, Ann. "The Fall of the Knowledgeable Woman: The Diminished Female Healer in Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*." *American Literary Realism* 29.1 (Fall 1996): 29–53.
- K., B. "Fiction Notes." *New Republic* 10 Apr. 1929: 235.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice. *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1991.
- Keyser, Catherine. *Playing Smart*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2010.
- Kim, Sharon. "Edith Wharton and Epiphany." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.3 (Spring 2006): 150–75.
- . "Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Susan Warner." *Hudson River Valley Review* 23.1 (2006): 15–23.
- Kohlmann, Benjamin. "Awkward Moments: Melodrama, Modernism, and the Politics of Affect." *PMLA* 128.2 (2013): 337–52.
- Knights, Pamela. *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Kuenz, Jane. "The Face of America: Performing Race and Nation in Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion*." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12.1 (1999): 89–111.
- Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.
- Levison, Susan. "Performance and the 'Strange Place' of Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There Is Confusion*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.4 (Winter 2000): 825–48.
- Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was In Vogue*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (2011): 434–72.
- Lindemann, Marilee. *Willa Cather: Queering America*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Lindsey, Ben B. and Wainwright Evans. *The Companionate Marriage*. New York: Ayer Co. Pub, 1927.
- Locke, Alain. "The New Negro." *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 3–16.
- . "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 254–67.
- . "The Negro Spirituals." *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Ed. Locke. 1925. Rpt. Salem: AYER Company, 1986. 199–210.
- . "The Saving Grace of Realism." *Opportunity* 12 (Jan 1934): 8–11, 30.
- Loos, Anita. "The Biography of a Book." 1963. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. New York: Penguin, 1989. xxxvii–xlii.
- . *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. 1925 and 1927. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- . *Kiss Hollywood Good-by*. New York: Viking, 1974.
- Lott, Eric. *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Mabie, Hamilton Wright. Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *Outlook* Oct. 1915. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 63–64.
- Maddock Dillon, Elizabeth. "Sentimental Aesthetics." *American Literature* 76.3 (2004):

495–523.

Martin, Edward A. *In Defense of Marion: The Love of Marion Bloom and H. L. Mencken*.

Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke

UP, 2002.

Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. “Modernisms Bad and New.” Introduction.

Bad Modernisms. Ed. Mao and Walkowitz. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. 1–17.

McDowell, Deborah. *The Changing Same*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

———. “The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Fauset.” *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction,*

and Tradition. Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana

UP, 1985. 86–104.

McGurl, Mark. *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James*.

Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

McKay, Claude. *A Long Way From Home*. 1937. Rpt. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP,

2007.

McLendon, Jacquelyn. *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella*

Larsen. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995.

Mencken, Henry Louis. “Cinderella the Nth.” *Smart Set*. 1916. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The*

Contemporary Reviews. Ed. Margaret Anne O’Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge

UP, 2001. 72–73.

———. *In Defense of Women*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918.

Merish, Lori. *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-*

Century American Literature. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

- Mesle, Sarah. "Sentimentalism's Nation: Maria J. McIntosh and the Antebellum Contexts of 'Southern' Fiction." *Studies in American Fiction* 40.2 (2013): 203–30.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- Middleton, Jo Ann. *Willa Cather's Modernism*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990.
- Miller, Nina. *Making Love Modern: The Intimate Public Worlds of New York's Literary Women*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Millington, Richard H. "Willa Cather's American Modernism." *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Ed. Marilee Lindemann. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 51–65.
- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976.
- Morretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. 1987. New York: Verso, 2000.
- Moseley, Ann. "Historical Essay." *The Song of the Lark*. By Willa Cather. Ed. Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. 549–615.
- . "Explanatory Notes." *The Song of the Lark*. By Willa Cather. Ed. Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. 619–809.
- . "Willa Cather's Transitional Novel: *The Song of the Lark* as a Romantic-Naturalistic Novel with a Modernist Center." *Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark*. Ed. Debra L. Cumberland. Amsterdam: Rodopi P, 2010. 225–40.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs* 31.3 (Spring 2006): 675–88.

- Nealon, Christopher. "Affect-Genealogy: Feeling and Affiliation in Willa Cather." *American Literature* 69 (1997): 5–37.
- . *Foundlings*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- . *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism, and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930*. Eds. Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Newman, Frances. *Frances Newman's Letters*. Ed. Hansell Baugh. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929.
- . *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*. 1926. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980.
- . *The Short Story's Mutations: From Petronius to Paul Morand*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1925.
- Newmark, Kevin. *Irony on Occasion: from Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012.
- Nieland, Justus. *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2008.
- "Nuclear Family." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 9 May 2015.
- O'Brien, Sharon. "Sentiment, Local Color, and the New Woman Writer: Kate Chopin and Willa Cather." *Kate Chopin Newsletter* 2 (Winter 1976/1977): 16–24.
- . *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- O'Leary Margaret. "More Ado About the Flapper." *The New York Times Book Review* 16 Apr. 1922: 49.
- Oles, James. *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute P, 1993.

- Olin-Ammentorp, Julie. “‘You Are What You Read’: Wharton’s Undine Spragg and Cather’s Thea Kronborg.” *Willa Cather’s The Song of the Lark*. Ed. Debra L. Cumberland. Amsterdam: Rodopi P, 2010. 165–81.
- . “Wharton Through a Kristevan Lens: The Maternality of *The Gods Arrive*.” *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*. Ed. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. 295–312.
- Overton, Grant. *The Women Who Make Our Novels*. New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1928.
- Parker, Dorothy [writing as Constant Reader]. “Hard-Boiled Virgins Are Faithful Lovers.” *The New Yorker* 4.92 (May 1928): 92–94.
- Paterson, Isabel. “Egeria on the Left Bank.” *New York Herald Tribune Books*. 1933. Rpt. *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. James W. Tuttleton and Kristin O. Lauer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 489–90.
- Patterson, Martha. *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2005.
- Peattie, Elia W. “Miss Willa Cather’s ‘The Song of the Lark.’” *Chicago Daily Tribune* 9 Oct. 1915: 10.
- Peck, Demaree. *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa Cather’s Fiction*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1996.
- Peel, Robin. *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics, and Fiction before World War I*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson P, 2005.
- Perrin, Tom. “Rebuilding Bildung: The Middlebrow Novel of Aesthetic Education in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States.” *Novel* 44.3 (2011): 382–401.

- Pfeiffer, Kathleen. "The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*." *Legacy* 18.1 (2001): 79–93.
- "Pot-Pourri." *Opportunity* 3 (June 1925) 187.
- Porter, David. *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- Pressman, Richard S. "'The Inevitable Hardness of Human Life': *The Song of the Lark* as Naturalism." *Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark*. Ed. Debra L. Cumberland. Amsterdam: Rodopi P, 2010. 205–23.
- Pumpernickel, Marcia. "Belated Critique." *The Technique* 18 Feb. 1927: 3.
- Putzi, Jennifer L. "'Some Queer Freak of Taste': Gender, Authorship, and the 'Rock Me to Sleep' Controversy." *American Literature* 84.4 (2012): 769–95.
- Quirk, Tom. *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Raimon, Eve Allegra. *The 'Tragic Mulatta' Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004.
- Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *The Living Age* 27 Nov. 1915.
- Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 69–70.
- Rev. of *The Song of the Lark*, by Willa Cather. *Times Literary Supplement* 26 Nov. 1938.
- Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 75.

- Rich, Charlotte. *Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2009.
- Ritzenberg, Aaron. *The Sentimental Touch: The Language of Feeling in the Age of Modernism*. New York: Fordham UP, 2013.
- Robbins, Frances C. Lamont. "The New Fiction." Rev. of *Lucy Gayheart*, by Willa Cather. *American Mercury* Sept. 1935. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 462–63.
- Ronning, Kari. Textual Essay. *The Song of the Lark*. By Willa Cather. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. 813–42.
- Rose, Phyllis. "Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather." *Modernism Reconsidered*. Ed. Robert Kiely. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. 123–45.
- Rosowski, Susan. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- . "Willa Cather's Female Landscapes: *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*." *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 233–46.
- . "Writing Against Silences: Female Adolescent Development in the Novels of Willa Cather." *Studies in the Novel* 21 (1989): 60–77.
- Rottenberg, Catherine. "Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and the City's Transformative Potential." *Legacy* 30.2 (2013): 265–86.
- Rubin, Joan Shelley. *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1992.
- Sanchez-Eppler, Karen. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and

- Abolitionism.” *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988): 25–59.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Naïve and Sentimental in Literature*. 1795. Trans. Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly. Manchester: Carcanet New Press Limited, 1981.
- Schuller, Kyla. “Taxonomies of Feeling: The Epistemology of Sentimentalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Racial and Sexual Science.” *American Quarterly* 64.2 (June 2012): 277–99.
- Schuyler, George S. “Negro Authors Must Eat” 1929. Rpt. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. 376–78.
- Scott, Anne Firor. Foreword. *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*. By Frances Newman. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980. v–xix.
- Sedgwick, Eve. “Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989): 53–72.
- . *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990.
- . *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.
- Seivert, Debra J. “Responding to Romance with Realism in Cather’s ‘Tommy, the Unsentimental.’” *American Literary Realism* 33.2 (Winter 2001): 104–09.
- Sensibar, Judith L. “Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type: Her Critique of Modernism’s Representative Man.” *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays* Ed. Alfred Bendixen and Annettee Zilversmit. New York: Garland P, 1992. 159–80.
- Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*. Ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999.

- Sherrard-Johnson, Cherene. *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007.
- Singley, Carol. "Edith Wharton's Ironic Realism." *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization*. Ed. Joyce W. Warren and Margaret Dickie. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000. 226–47.
- . *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Smith, James Penny. "Frances Newman and James Joyce." *James Joyce Quarterly* 12 (1975): 307–9.
- Stokes, Mason. "There is Heterosexuality: Jessie Fauset, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Problem of Desire." *African American Review* 44 (2011): 67–83.
- Stout, Janis. "Brown and White at the Dance: Another Word on Cather and Race." *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 49 (2005): 37–39.
- . *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1852. Rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Sylvander, Carolyn W. *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*. Troy, NY: Whitson P, 1981.
- Tate, Claudia. "Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall.

- New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. 98–126.
- . *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Taylor, Julie. *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012.
- Tomlinson, Susan. “Vision to Visionary: The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*.” *Legacy* 19.1 (2002): 90–97.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- “Tone.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 26 Apr. 2015.
- Tracy, Daniel. “From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow Modernism: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Creation of Literary Value.” *Arizona Quarterly* 66.1 (2010): 115–43.
- Troy, William. “Footprints in Cement.” Rev. of *Lucy Gayheart*, by Willa Cather. *Nation* 1935. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O’Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 460–61.
- Van Vechten, Carl. “Fast and Loos.” Unpublished rev. of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, by Anita Loos. TS. Dated 17 Nov. 1925. Accessed in the Carl Van Vechten Papers. The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. 13 Sept. 2011. Rev. subsequently published, under same title, in *Book Review* 1:20 (January 1926). Reprinted by permission from the Carl Van Vechten Trust.
- . “Some ‘Literary Ladies’ I Have Known.” *The Yale University Library Gazette* 26.3 (Jan. 1952): 97–116.
- Vermeule, Blakey. *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Baltimore: Johns

- Hopkins UP, 2009.
- Vita-Finzi, Penelope. *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*. New York: St. Martins, 1990.
- Wade, Barbara Ann. *Frances Newman: Southern Satirist and Literary Rebel*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.
- Ware, Michele S. "The Architecture of the Short Story: Edith Wharton's Modernist Practice." *Edith Wharton Review* (Fall 2004): 17–23.
- Wegener, Frederick. "Form, 'Selection,' and Ideology in Edith Wharton's Antimodernist Aesthetic." *A Forward Glance* Ed. Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999. 116–38.
- Weingarten, Karen. *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2014.
- West, Rebecca. "Battlefield and Sky." *The Strange Necessity*. 1928. London: Virago P, 1987. 291–301.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Gods Arrive*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1932.
- . "Permanent Values in Fiction" *The Uncollected Critical Writings* Ed. Frederick Wegener. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. 175-79.
- . *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- Wharton, Edith and Ogden Codman Jr. *The Decoration of Houses*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897.
- Whipple, T. K. "Willa Cather." *Spokesmen* 1928. Rpt. *Willa Cather and Her Critics*. Ed. James Schroeter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967. 35–51.

- Whitehead, Sarah. "Make It Short: Edith Wharton's Modernist Practices in her Short Stories." *Journal of the Short Story in English* 58 (2012): 25–43.
- Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. 1961. Ontario: Broadview, 2001.
- . *Politics and Letters*. New York: Verso, 1981.
- Wilson, Edmund. "Justice to Edith Wharton." *New Republic* 29 June 1938: 209–13.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Zabel, Morton Dauwen. "The Tone of the Time." Rev. of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, by Willa Cather. *Nation* Dec. 1940. Rpt. *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 504–06.
- Zakodnik, Teresa. *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2010.