

MORALITY OF THE 18th CENTURY’S MAN OF FEELING – A VIRTUE OR A VICE?

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Abstract: A detailed and objective presentation of feeling in the context of a capitalist society whose main preoccupation is commercial transactions, Henry Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* leaves room for interpretation in terms of the main moral values guiding the individual in the late 18th century. Interpreted within the limits of the close interdependency established between literature and historical background, Harley’s conduct, as depicted in the novel, seems to reflect the powerful contradictions between the individual’s mental representation and attitudes and the ideological system, the patterns of value and mental structures featuring the European society at the time. By revealing his mental and psychological structures as such, Harley becomes, a hypostasis of the human condition which should be looked for somewhere in between the two contradictory viewpoints in vogue at that time: a determinism caused by the existence of the divine providence opposed to the causal sequence of innate feelings, that is somewhere between virtue or vice.

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The period of time envisaged in this study is the late 18th century, commonly known as the Age of Enlightenment. Considered by many a response to the Baroque, the Age of Enlightenment is a period of profound cultural developments, the main purpose being the removal of former dogmas and the enlightenment of people through the analysis of their own experiences, along with the renewal of commercial relations and cultural exchanges among countries. The organization of new artistic forms further supported the development of self and national consciousness, people witnessing a diffusion of learning through different cultural means. Arts and music were at their best during the Enlightenment age. Well-known composers, such as Mozart, Handel, George Frederic, Ludwig van Beethoven, Bach, Johann Sebastian. Joseph Haydn, considered to be more than writers of their music, performed their works. Modifications also occurred on literary levels as late 18th century was the time when the press, especially brochures, was very popular in people’s homes and individuals used to allow more of their time to reading. Moreover it was the time when artistic manifestations and reading in salons were fashionable. Under such circumstances, literature appears as the most suitable form, able to render the realities of the time, as, according to Richard B. Sher, publishers were developing “a ubiquitous book culture that was intimately tied to the espousal and promulgations of the Enlightenment”.

“Enlightenment thinkers were proclaiming, with obvious pathos, the need to fight against the traces of ignorance, expressing, at the same time, with no hesitation, their longing for the emancipation of the human being through the words of books”. This is one of the main purposes literature had at that time, still the extent to which it was achieved is still uncertain as the means of an elementary education were poor and the percent of illiterate people was still high at that time, even in countries with developed industrial civilization. In this respect, according to the author Romul Munteanu, only 29% from the people in England could read.

Apart from its many functions, literature, along with other forms of cultural initiations, has the distinguishing role of assisting literary critics and historians in their attempt to retrace a certain period of time from historical, cultural, economic or political viewpoints. Equally true is the fact that any single literary work cannot entirely enjoy an accurate, complete and thorough understanding from its readers unless the perusal relies on the restoration of the cultural environment governing the time of writing. It is within such a close interdependency, which is mandatory to be taken into consideration when approaching literary texts, that one should consider the late 18th century English literature.

In his book *Comparative Literature and History of Mentalities*, Alexandru Dutu mentions that “A literary work which opens a new series of such literary works, prefiguring a style, is usually created at times of great pressures, of great truths and deep doubts”. In an attempt to exemplify the above mentioned statement, our attention focuses on the sentimental novel, a literary genre which endeavored to affirm the so-much restricted functionality of feeling in a phase when the superiority of urban against rural locations, the complete trust in the virtues of technology, otherwise considered capable to solve any problem, the emphasis on immediate social efficiency, all such concerns and beliefs expressed during the Enlightenment Age highly praised reason.

Clarissa by Samuel Richardson is considered to be the novel which initiated the pattern of the sentimental character, this time a heroine, whose suffering sensibility can be finally awarded only by death or marriage. During the second half of the 18th Century, sentimental literature is turning towards the sentimental male character, usually depicted as either too kind or too naive for those times: *David Simple* by Sarah Fielding, *The Fool of Quality* by Henry Brooke, *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Oliver Goldsmith. In this end, the most representative sentimental novels are considered to be *Sentimental Journey* by Laurence Sterne and *The Man of Feeling* by Henry Mackenzie.

As part of the cultural expression popular in the Age of Enlightenment, Henry Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling* is mainly based on depicting feeling and kindness as fundamental innate values of human nature. The novel was published in 1771 anonymously, all data related to its origins being provided by a parish priest who had used the manuscript for the wadding of his gun: “Some time ago said he one HARLEY lived there, a whimsical sort of a man I am told,

but I was not there in the cure; though, if I had a turn for those things, I might know a good deal of his history, for the greatest part of it is still in my possession”.

The curate further confesses that the manuscript he now owns once belonged to a tenant the people in the parish used to call *The Ghost*. Found in the abandoned room of the tenant who has now passed away, the manuscript does not appeal to the landlord as:

Soon after I was made curate, he left the parish, and went nobody knows whither; and in his room was found a bundle of papers, which was brought to me by his landlord. I began to read them, but soon grew weary of the task; for, besides that the hand is intolerably bad, I could never find the author in one strain for two chapters together; and I believe there's a single syllogism from beginning to end.

Such an artifice, otherwise very common with the gothic novel, caused several misunderstandings among critics and readers about the real author of the novel. The novel caught the fancy of French readers and was soon translated into French. Once it was translated, as early as 1775, under the title of *L'Homme sensible*, the novel was assigned to the writer Henry Brooke.

The Irish Clergyman Charles Stewart Eeles intended to republish the manuscript and become its author. Such incidents seem to have determined Mackenzie to reveal, in 1777, after 6 years from the initial publishing of his book, the fact that he is the author of the novel *The Man of Feeling*.

The novel betrays its faithful compliance with the cultural framework of the time even from the first paragraphs in the *Introduction*. Disregarding a somehow narrative technique, *The Man of Feeling* starts nowhere, with no particular reference to the time, place or the story-teller of the action. It is “just a bundle of little episodes, put together without art, and of no importance on the whole, with something of nature, and little less in them” as the curate – the manuscript's editor himself confesses. For some critics, including Steven Bending, the *bundle of papers* is meant to symbolically represent, by reference to David Hume's interpretation of the self, the personal identity of the sentimental hero himself. By contradicting some philosophers in whose opinion the individual is at every moment conscious of his self, David Hume (*A Treatise of Human Nature, Section VI, O Personal Identity*) mentions that “they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement”.

While joining Harley in the range of states proposed by the author of the novel, we are likely to discover a prototype of the sentimental man, whose attitude towards his private life and especially towards society is completely different. The huge gap existing between the man of feeling and the society he lives in is firstly hinted at by the apparent lack of organization of the novel and by the loose literary narrative scheme. On the one hand, the narrative text is not chronologically arranged, it consists of random chapters, interrupted by editorial interventions and

missing parts of the manuscript. On the other hand, the text sometimes leaves Harley aside for including some scenes, or different characters and situations.

The world Harley lived in was a world of social differences engendered by monetary differences, the modern status of the individual being based on wealth: “nowadays it is money, not birth, that makes people respected”. That is why, most properties belonged to either merchants or stewards: “... great part of the property in his neighborhood being in the hands of merchants, who had got rich by their lawful calling abroad and the sons of stewards, who had got rich by their lawful calling at home”. In such a society, the artist was slightly welcomed: “Philosophers and poets have often protested against this decision; but their arguments have been despised as declamatory, or ridiculed as romantic”. Moreover, this society cannot take any interest in the individual’s feelings:

There are certain interests which the world supposes every man to have and which therefore are properly enough termed worldly, but the world is apt to make an enormous estimate: ignorant of the dispositions which constitute our happiness or misery, they bring to an undistinguished scale the means of the one, as connected to power, wealth, or grandeur, and of the other with their contraries.

Many of the episodes in the novel generate a sort of nostalgia for the loss of a flawless rural community, which leads us to the conclusion that for the 18th Century innovation does no longer mean a renewal of tradition but an alienation from it. On the other hand, this is a reasonable feeling taking into account the fact that countries like England and Holland were witnessing at that time the settlement of an industrial civilization which sensibly disagreed with the feudal agrarian civilization.

The obvious adversaries of the man of feeling appear to be the artificial, insidious and insincere individuals Harley gets acquainted with. Irrespective of their positions in society, the two acquaintances who join Harley before his meeting with the baronet, that is the *grazier* and the *prim*, seek to behave as if they were the most moral of men when they are in fact among the least. For many of the kind, the single feeling they are capable of when watching suffering is fun as the asylum’s keeper himself states: “...as he expressed it in the phrase of those that keep wild beasts for show, were much better worth seeing than any they had passed, being ten times more fierce and unmanageable”.

The same feels the “naturally impetuous, decisive, and overbearing” gentleman about *honour and politeness* when he describes an *amiable character*. For him and many of the kind, virtue is determined by vanity while *generosity and feeling* are proper only to those individuals who are incapable to achieve the wealth of others. In such a context, sentimentalism becomes morally irrelevant.

Situated between loneliness and engagement, trying to fight ignorance, content of his own innate reactions, Harley is subject to a long series of challenges until reaching the ideal of a happy existence. Closely related to morality, Harley’s ideal of happiness is entirely associated with benevolence

and feeling. Tempted by achieving of happiness by closely obeying his innate feelings, the sentimental man oscillates between the delight caused by senses, enthusiasm and melancholy and last but not least frustration.

Through a long range of devices envisaged by the author, such as occurrence of different events, situations, still life descriptions, even the obsessive use of a certain word in the whole novel, Harley reveals series of innate fundamental traits of character which, in fact, can be drawn to his principles of morality:

- bashfulness – defined as “a consciousness which the most delicate feelings produce, and the most extensive knowledge cannot always remove”;
- disregard of *pomp* and *grandeur* otherwise than “in the state which Providence assigned him”;
- a heartfelt consideration for inward beauty traits such as kindness, generosity, helpfulness to the detriment of outward beauty traits, as shown in Harley’s description of Miss Walton;
- Indignation at lies, hypocrisy, artificiality, affectation:

Harley began to despise him too, and to conceive some indignation at having sat with patience to hear such a fellow speak nonsense. But he corrected himself by reflecting that he was perhaps as well entertained, and instructed too, by this same modest gauger, as he should have been by such a man as he had thought proper to personate. And surely the fault may more properly be imputed to that rank where the futility is real than where it is feigned: to that rank whose opportunities for nobler accomplishments have only served to rear a fabric of folly which the untutored hand of affectation, even among the meanest of mankind, can imitate with success.

- satisfaction and contentment generated by the pleasure of being able to assist suffering people;
- empathy towards suffering individuals;
- the wish to fight against inhumanity.

Taking as a starting point the statement of Lucien Febvre (*Combats pour l’histoire*) – “... the reading public of a Middle Ages courteous novel is definitely different, both in quantity and manner, from the reading public of a 19th century serial novel or of a 20th century popular film”, we daresay a complex analysis shall first attempt to relate the image of the sentimental man, as such, to the temporal factors, contemporary to the time the novel was conceived.

By revealing his mental and psychological structures as such, Harley becomes, a hypostasis of the human condition which should be looked for somewhere in between the two contradictory viewpoints in vogue at that time: a determinism caused by the existence of the divine providence opposed to the causal sequence of innate feelings.

Different from the 17th century when morality was closely related to theology principles (for example, La Bruyere could not define an individual as morale unless

he believes in God), the 18th century requires an affirmation of secular morality. The 18th century morality imposes another vision on the relation between feeling and reason. Deists and atheists were focusing on human personality, on the individual's initiative and personal responsibility, on the innate feelings of human nature which can determine good or bad actions, all such principles causing a final evaluation of the social functionality of the human behavior. Within such a context, Harley's morality is completely strange even absurd, different from the morality as conceived by deists and atheists for whom the human being's behavior cannot be appreciated but in terms of social criteria.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke defines morality in terms of certain rules and voluntary relations among people, including the relation between good and evil. Theoretically, the notion of good meets our liking and the notion of evil our disliking, but interpreted from morality viewpoint the voluntary action of choosing between good and evil is subject to certain laws, such as: 1. **The divine law** – according to which such voluntary actions are sins or just the fulfillment of one's duty; 2. **The civil law** – according to which such actions are reprehensible or not; 3. **The law of opinion or reputation** – according to which voluntary actions are virtues or vices.

At this point, for the 18th century society Harley lives in, morality becomes a question of virtue or vice. For deists and atheists, sentimentalism is morally irrelevant and so it is for the wealthy aristocrats. For the society of that time the feeling was anti-aristocratic. A natural instinct for many, feeling is likely to be representative for lower classes, usually victims of an immoral and amoral market economy. For many writers and critics from then on this type of sensitive and sentimental hero is just a pleading for a new approach on human psychology and morale.

Harley himself attempts to associate kindness with virtue as “minds like Harley's are not very apt to make this distinction, and generally give our virtue credit for all that benevolence which is instinctive in our nature”.

The author himself seems to show deep appreciation and respect for Harley's noble character and his sensitivity, as he concludes:

I entered the room where his body lay; I approached it with reverence, not fear; I looked; the recollection of the past crowded upon me. I saw that form, which, but a little before, was animated with a soul which did honour to humanity, stretched without sense of feeling before me. (...) I sometimes visit his grave. I sit in the hollow of the tree. It is worth a thousand homilies! every nobler feeling rises within me! every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!

At the same time, uncertain about the readers' mental orientation, he leaves room for interpretation: “We would attempt to describe the joy which Harley felt on this occasion, did it not occur to us, that one half of the world could not understand it though we did, and the other half will, by this time, have understood it without any description at all.

Still a vice would have been morality if the temporal factors are shifted backwards to the 16th century. Totally unfitted to the cultural pattern which

focused on honor, reputation due to personal qualities in accordance with those imposed by society, esteem and prestige, Harley would appear an absurd even foolish type of individual.

Extending the temporal factors onwards to the 21st century, we can state that many concepts completing the mental framework of the late 18th century individuals are still familiar nowadays. Much of the modern reader's attitude towards the message transmitted depends on his mental orientation. That is why Harley offers a pattern of thinking and behavior to individuals who feel solidarity with him, individuals whose systems of values is the same. Moreover, shifting the interpretation to religious orientation, Harley is a pattern of commonsense individual, Christ like in everything he does.

Nevertheless, some parts of Harley's conduct can be considered obsolete by modern readers. For example, the word sentimental has nowadays a different acceptation, a derogatory sense which refers to an excessive and embarrassing sensitiveness or feeling. This entitles us to believe that, the 21st century reader would not appreciate Harley's excessive sentimentalism which sometimes can also generate ludicrous situations. Such an attitude is witnessed even in the novel by the tavern waiter the very moment when Harley realizes he has no longer any money left to pay his bill since he had spent it on an act of benevolence, that is, helping a prostitute. The waiter suggests Harley to give his watch as a pledge which Harley accepted quickly and willingly "without taking notice of the sneer of the waiter, who, twirling the watch in his hand, made him a profound bow at the door, and whispered to a girl who stood in the passage, something, in which the word CULLY was honoured with a particular emphasis". This is not the only situation when Harley learns he has been deceived. A similar scene is the one when Harley is cheated by a man who takes his money in a card game.

Whenever confronted with suffering, Harley is overwhelmed to the point of tears, so excessive sentimentalism certainly becomes a part of the sentimental man's mental discourse. It is also obvious from the 26 occurrence of the noun *tears* in the whole novel, otherwise considered a recurrent theme, which entitles us to see the word as the symbol of pain and discontent. At the same time, bursting into tears becomes a cliché, a stereotypical manner of reacting when confronted with suffering. Otherwise, the hero's sensibility is mainly conveyed by the physical suggestiveness of the language itself. Considering the centrality feeling gained in the novel, the author Ann Jessie Van Sant argued that "Mackenzie's title was probably more important than his novel, expressing without clarifying the multiple kinds of significance that the term feeling had acquired. In such a context," feeling was a defining term for man, first because moral and aesthetic life was experientially (subjectively) a form of feeling, and second, because all experience occurred through the physiological structures of feeling".

Within the context of such a close interdependency between a literary work and the collective mentality in vogue at the time of its writing, the difficulty faced by readers when trying to understand mental structures depicted by foregoing literary works becomes reasonable.