The Ancestor and Descendant of Early American Sentimental Novels

Chikage TANABE

When did the history of American literature begin? This question is still problematic, because those who highly evaluate a so-called "American canon" consider that "original" American literature was born in the nineteenth century, while those who disagree with canonization of American literature insist that American literature has already been produced around the end of the eighteenth century. Recent critics even argue that it had existed before the Pilgrims arrived, because there had been "native" American literature. Indeed, so long as America is a country of immigrants, it is hard to define what "original" American literature is.

In search of "American" literature, this paper studies early American sentimental novels published right after the American Revolution. The popularity of these books was enormous because they contained the problems of contemporary America. To study the cultural background of America at that time, this paper also explores Puritan ideology which still widely remained in revolutionary America. How the Puritans prohibited the work of imagination, "fiction," becomes clue to understand why sentimental novels were national fiction in post-revolutionary America. The aim of this paper is to define early American sentimental novels as "American" novel even if their form was taken from English sentimental novels. Due to Puritanical views of imagination, early American sentimental novels produced "American" theme and characters and contributed to create a tradition of American novels. This paper evinces what is an American sentimental novel, how it is adapted to American society, and how it has exerted influence upon later American literature.

I. The Rise of American Sentimental Novel

In eighteenth-century England, a narrative which was designed to evoke the sympathies of the reader by demonstrating great adherence to morality, horror, and overwhelming emotion, became very popular. Such a narrative, called a sentimental novel, made an appeal to the new middle class who believed honest expression of feeling was a manifestation of virtue. One of the main reasons of the rise of the sentimental novel in England was an optimistic overemphasis on the goodness of humanity as expressed through sensibility.

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or the Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748), Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*

(1771) are good examples of this genre.[1] These novels were a reaction against rationalism and stoicism determined by orthodox Calvinistic theology, which regarded human nature as depraved. When the sentimental novels were brought into America, they became very popular, too. An examination of the loan book of the Union Library from 1762 to 1774 reveals the popularity of sentimental fictions not only in the city but also in the rural areas (Brown 19). American writers, then, tried to create "American" sentimental novels, and finally bore fruit, though the style and the significance differed from English sentimental novels.

In America, sentimental novels flourished from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. We can divide American sentimental novels into two major periods. Novels included in the first period are William Hill Brown's Power of Sympathy, which has been accepted as America's first novel (1789), Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794 in America), Hanna Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1801), and Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812). Added to the characteristics of English sentimental novels, these American sentimental novels have such common features as a young naive female, a skillful seducer, a conflict between father and daughter, adultery, poverty, suicide, and death in childbirth. The number of their publications was enormous, in spite of their expensive costs. Such characteristic features and remarkable popularity were an answer to the contemporary social ideology, that is, Puritanism.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Puritanical ideology still dominated the social opinion:

> [F]iction in the United States in the late eighteenth century was highly suspect. American readers had inherited the Puritan bias against fanciful writing, whether it be prose or poetry, as a ruse employed by the Devil to lure readers into frivolous or depraved thoughts. Since fiction was thought to distract men from God's truth, it often met with considerable resistance. (Martin 3)

Thomas Jefferson, for instance, saw in the "inordinate passion prevalent for novels" a national menace. "When this poison infects the mind," he wrote, "it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. . . .The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgement, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life" (Brown 4). Readers of novels were called "amorous follies of romances," and young girls, who were regarded as the dominant readers of sentimental novels, were principally censured. Timothy Dwight, another dominant figure of the established order in Connecticut, states, "The Reading of girls is regularly lighter than that of boys. . . .Girls sink down to songs, novels and plays"(Brown 4-5). These rejections against fiction were direct descendant of Puritan views of imagination.

II. Puritan Views of Imagination

> Imagination: The action of imagining, or forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the sense; the result of this process, a mental image or idea (often with implication that the conception does not correspond to the reality of things hence frequently vain, false, etc. *(OED)*

According to the definition of imagination, we may say that the Puritans were people of imagination. In his study of a similarity between Cotton Mather's writings and Herman Melville's novels, Michael Clark avers, "Puritanism clearly appears as a particular turn of mind rather than a historical fact, a way of looking at the world rather than a way the world ever was" (63). The Puritans interpreted visible incidents and objects around them as evidences of God's invisible and intangible world. Every concrete incident around them occurred in order to show God's invisible and intangible existence. For contemporary readers, this act of interpretation appears to be their imagination or fancy.

For instance, "by God's good providence," said William Bradford, the Pilgrims overcame the severe storm and finally reached Cape Cod. In retrospect, his writing seems to be a symbolic record of imaginative experience, not a factual representation of events. He changed every historical incident into a record of Providential occurrences. Roger B. Stein, in his study on Puritan imagination, defines Edward Johnson's *The Wonder-Working Providence* as "a dramatic reconstruction of the external and presentation from a divine perspective," which "obliterates the distinction between the actual voyage and the spiritual one" (24-25).

John Winthrop, in his journal, also derived religious meaning when a serpent appeared during his sermon:

> This being so remarkable, and nothing falling out but by divine providence. It is out of doubt, the Lord discovered somewhat of his mind in it. The serpent is the devil; the synod, the representative of the churches of Christ in New England. The devil had formerly and lately attempted their disturbance and dissolution; but their faith in the seed of the woman overcame him and crushed his head. (347-48)

In retrospect, Winthrop's interpretation seems to be mere fancy. What he conceived was neither a historical event, nor an act of an allegorical imagination, but was an experience that united the objectivity of history with the meaningfulness of Scripture. Inasmuch as the Puritans followed typology, a sense of pre-destination, they believed that the invisible/intangible world of Scripture was original and real, while their secular world was its projection and fiction. Consequently, Puritan imagination was on the basis of this reversal of view about reality and fiction (as compared with our point of view). For Puritans, their interpretation

was a fact which was predestined by God, and an evidence which could only be seen with "bodily eyes," the eyes of human but glorified.

John Owen, a Puritan divine, and Increase Mather define "bodily eyes" respectively as follows:

> There will be use herein, of *our bodily eyes*, as shall be declared. For Job says, in our *Flesh* shall *see* our Redeemer, and *our eyes* shall *behold* him. That our corporeal sense shall not be restored unto us, and that glorified above what we can conceive, but for this great use of the eternal *beholding* of Christ and his Glory. Unto whom is it not a matter of rejoicing, that with the same *eyes* wherewith they *see* the tokens and signs of him in the Sacrament of the Supper, they shall *behold* himself immediately, in his own person. (Owen 73, italics are mine)

> One Reason why Believers shall have *Bodily Eyes* restored to them at the Latter day is, that so they may *behold* the Glory of the God man Jesus Christ. (Mather 121, italics are mine)

Although their writings have been a target of contemporary criticism,[2] the concept of "bodily eyes" denotes Puritan belief. In his study on eschatological themes in the Puritan literature and gravestone art, David H. Watters analyzes Owen's idea of "bodily eyes" as follows:

> The significance of Owen's treatise lies in its form of Christian humanities, for the highest communion possible with God is achieved with the aid of human senses . . . Owen believes that the supernatural senses work through rather than bypass human sense. (33)

As the Puritans believed to "sense" the invisible God as a visible existence, they distinguished their vision to be more than mere enthusiasm or imagination. Besides, they were advocated to meditate on mental pictures drawn from Scripture.

While they believed their vision of God, they were prohibited from making physical images of God. Images of Christ, Mary and the saints were efficacious for instructing the ignorant, while the educated responded directly to the Word of God. Thus, from 1540 to 1660, the iconoclast destroyed roodscreens, altars, icons, whole churches and graves within and without the church. It was due to their belief that the power of idols to pollute people, especially a fear of sexual pollution by gorging the sense with idols, drawn from various biblical texts such as Ezekiel 16:17: "Though hast also taken thy fair jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given thee, and madest to thyself images of men, and didst commit whoredom with them" (Watters 13). The Puritan fear of idolatry was intimately connected

with their rejection of Catholic funeral rituals and traditions of commemoration of the dead.[3]

III. Visibility In invisibility, Invisiblity in Visibility

Another theological reason for the prohibitions against idolatry came from an idea of "invisible church" which originally dominated Puritanism. Edmund S. Morgan depicts this idea as follows:

> In answer to the Donatists St. Augustine developed the theory of the church which was to guide orthodox Christian thought on the subject. There were, according to Augustine, two churches. One was pure, but invisible; it included every person living, dead, or yet to be born, whom God had predestined for salvation. The other was visible but not entirely pure; it included only living persons who professed to believe in Christianity. (2-3)

Although the Puritans called for the invisible church, their saints had to be visible and physically existing. The proof of the visible saints was their narratives of religious experiences (Morgan 104). Here, we can surmise that the Puritans originally had contradictory values in their belief; invisible church/God and visible saints. This contradictory concept of invisibility/visibily led them to such extremes as screening of church membership, witch trials and anti-theatrical legislation. The Puritans were conflicted in their belief, since their boundaries between invisible/visible, truth/imagination were subjective and vague. Screening the visible saints, more specifically, shows us that the more the Puritans looked for an objective paradigm, the more they became dependent on subjective decisions.

In his famous writing, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, Cotton Mather stated that the Puritans had to be cautious of evil infection, because New England had been a land of Satan. Reading his account of the witchcraft trials held in Salem in 1692, one cannot but wonder how the Puritans distinguished "evidence" from "imagination/fancy." In the trials, the magistrates were trying to establish "evidence" that the accused women had pledged themselves to the devil. As they needed some "spectral evidence" which was regarded as the form of spirits, a sore was often used as a visible proof. As far as they were concerned, a sore was a "visible" evidence of the work of "invisible" evil spirits. In retrospect, this judgement seemed to be made on the basis of their analogical projection and imagination, which was forged by their own will to see evil.

Their analogy of physical symptom to the work of evil spirits appears to be just the same as that of natural incidents to the work of God's providence. To contemporary readers, both of them were linked by their imagination. The Puritans believed, nevertheless, that evil would be brought by one's imagination. They thus tried to avoid having fancies by banning theater. The most significant among these acts of anti-theatrical legislation were those

passed in Massachusetts in 1699, New York in 1709, Pennsylvania in 1710, Rhode Island and New Hampshire in 1762 (Davis 19). The main reason for the Puritan's anti-theatrical legislation was, of course, owing to Puritanical principle of morality, common decency and self-restraint (Davis 18). However, their fear of creating "spectral vision" was another reason for it, just like Anne Hutchinson's speeches were suspected because her "revelation" had a crucial meaning for their belief.[4]

All the above concepts manifest how powerful the Puritans believed the faculty of human visualization. They highly evaluated their power to see, but at the same time, they were afraid of creating (what they thought) "false images" by seeing. In contemporary usage, it is hard to distinguish "false" image from "true" one, because as far as something is "image," it cannot be true/real (objectively verified). For the Puritans, nonetheless, the purer they became, the clearer they could see invisible God's message. As I have already mentioned, even such a "glorified Puritan" as Increase Mather confused "witchcraft" with "Puritan deity." Ann Kibbey studies this confusion as follows:

> Mather had collected narratives from his fellow colonists to demonstrate that despite the Indian wars and loss of the colony's original charter, the deity had consistently singled out New Englanders for special benevolence. However, this collection of "remarkable and very memorable events" in New England included not only the narratives of providence, but also numerous accounts of sorcery, apparitions, demonic possession, magic and witchcraft - many of them culled from English collections. In short, Mather included every form of supernatural power he knew of, good or evil, and inexplicably offered them all under one cover as the "illustrious providences"of the Puritan deity. (127)

Not only Increase Mather, but also many Puritans began to jumble a similarity between divine and occult power. Accordingly, their concept of divine power developed in part by appropriating the powers attributed to sorcerers and witches in pre-Refirmation Europe (Kibbey 127). As both of the Puritan deity and the witch were born of imagination and of will to see invisible world, there was a startling resemblance between them. What determined the distinction between them? Gender? To put this big issue aside, Puritan detestation of what they called "imagination" and "fancy" was still in effect and in action even in the revolutionary era. Jefferson's and Dwight's arguments for fiction, which are mentioned earlier, are good and typical examples of Puritanical ideology. How, then, could the sentimental novels be popular under such circumstances?

IV. How Early American Sentimental Novels Obtained "Americanness"

Writers of early American sentimental novels tried to seek their own way to survive. Their efforts, in the end, gave early American sentimental novels remarkable characters which differ from English sentimental novels. With a view to getting an admission of the public, the authors of early American sentimental novels first insisted that the tales were not fiction, but based on truth, which "function[ed] most obviously to defend against the moralist's conventional accusation that the novel as a genre glamorized seduction" (Cherniavsky 26). To the charge that novels were lies, the authors answered with "Tales Founded upon Truth," "Founded on Incidents in Real Life" or "Based upon Recent Facts." In her preface to *Charlotte Temple,* Rowson claimed she had the story "by an old lady who had personally known Charlotte" and there was some reason to believe a relative of Mrs. Rowson's, Colonel John Montresor, actually was the original of Montraville (XLIX). Needless to say, this claim to a fact is merely a "fiction."

Such claims of authenticity were frequently made on the title pages and re-enforced in the prefaces and advertisements of many early novels with a view to parrying the current prejudice against "fiction" as "fiction." This reveals that the Americans (the descendants of the Puritans) still had problems with fact/fiction, reality/imagination. Their high respect for "fact/truth," was, ironically, based on their fondness for "fiction," and so the American sentimental novels became enormously popular.

The second way to counteract this bias against fiction, as well as to justify the social utility of fiction, was to insist on the didactic potential of the sentimental novels, especially for young women. For instance, *The Power of Sympathy* was addressed to "the young ladies of United Columbia" on the dedication page of the first edition in 1789. The implied readers of early American sentimental novels were thus "young, white, of good New England stock, and for the most part unmarried" (Davidson 112). The immorality of feminine characters in sentimental novels who were represented in historical narratives effectively frightened young women and kept them from imitating immoral heroines (Cherniavsky 27).

The writers also dared to condemn the evil work of "fancy," "imagination" and "fiction" in their "fictions," which won sympathy of those who believed Puritanical views of imagination. The heroines are destined to ruin in the sentimental novels, for they reject "reality" and indulge in "fancy." In Foster's *The Coquette,* a tragedy of a heroine named Eliza starts when she rejects "a man of *real* and *substantial* merit" (107 italics are mine), in spite of her shrewd friend's words, "your *fancy* will mislead you" (124). Eliza answers to the friend: "My reason and judgement entirely coincide with your opinion; but my *fancy* claims some share in the decision. . . .My sanguine *imagination* paints, in alluring colors, the *charms* of youth and freedom" (125-6 italics are mine). In *The Power of Sympathy,* Mr. Holmes, an old father, denounces books as deception: "[I]n books written in an easy flowing style, which excel in description and *the luxuriance of fancy,* the *imagination* is apt to get heated. . .[A young lady] is easily deceived [by fiction]" (22-23 italics are mine). By criticizing the evil

work of "fancy," "imagination" and "fiction" in their "fictions," the authors of early American sentimental novels gained popularity among wider range of generations.[5]

Such devices as insisting on a true story and on a didactic purpose, which were intentionally crafted by authors, are reasons for the popularity of the sentimental novel at that period. Nonetheless, there are more indispensable reasons why sentimental novels could dominate early American literature and raise the sympathy of people at that time.

V. Early American Sentimental Novels as Projection of Anxiety in the New Nation

When sentimental novels represented a particularly American form, the new nation was changing and growing at an unprecedented rate. Even though over seventy-five percent of the white population was English, Scotch, or Irish in origin, and most were Protestant, the community did not feel homogeneous or stable. This majority was highly mobile and various, made up of recent immigrants, and it was constantly blended with other groups. Added to this diverse and disoriented population, a new government which was trying to gain support and control, and all foundations which were left behind, fears of chaos, rootlessness, and abandonment dominated (Forcey 226). For most early Americans, the passage from the Old World to the New had brought on many changes to which they were struggling to adapt. They had a sense of homelessness, alienation, and isolation, which "was exaggerated by nostalgic idealization of a supposedly stable, communual, and cooperative colonial or European past" (Forcey 226), after they "had denied too many fathers to survive except as the fatherless man. . .The fatherland abandoned, the Pope rejected, the bishops denied, the king overthrown" (Fiedler 78).

Therefore, the hardships of sentimental heroines moving from the old world to the new, by rejecting her home, her father's will, became a parable of early American citizens. As mentioned above, sentimental novels were often dedicated to young women, but they were not the only readers of these novels. "Most potential readers, though seemingly least likely to identify with sentimental novels, battle scarred old soldiers, jaded prostitutes, sophisticated society matrons, successful merchants, or ambitious young entrepreneurs" had also been affected by the pervasive sense of "homelessness" (Forcey 220). Thus, it is not exaggerating to say that a sentimental novel became a *national* fiction both in its popularity and in its theme.[6]

As the early Americans were in the midst of blending with the outside of their groups, daughters' marriages became a central issue for their identity. The sentimental heroine's marriage (or bearing a child) with other groups represents their own anxiety. Nancy Armstrong, in her study of American sentimentalism, states:

> Whenever marriage outside a group threatens that group's ties to the country of its origin, daughters tend to be problematic. There is no question that North America

> provided such a situation. English people had to develop new courtship practices and marriage rules if they were going to remain English on this side of the Atlantic. Being in the colonies kept them from marrying in the same place and within the same group as their parents had, but since only birth guaranteed the continuity of the English family back in England, any other basis for constituting a household necessarily called into the question the English identity of those who had to live by modified cultural rules. (10)

Focusing on the role of a marriage both as a protection and a destruction of identity, Armstrong goes on to analyze the symbolic relationship between fathers and daughters appearing in Mary Rowlandson's narrative and sentimental novels:

> The miraculous return of Rowlandson's daughter is necessary to ensure that she remains her father's. According to the narrative tradition, it makes all the difference that he never buys her back from the Indians; if she is truly his, then he is the only one entitled to offer her in exchange. The exclusive nature of the patriarchal prerogative is what makes it possible for Englishness to descend from him to her and through her into the family of another Englishman, thereby preserving the Englishness of the colonial community. When an object conspicuously removed or somehow manages to remove itself from such a system of exchange, according to anthropologist Annette Weiner, it operates as the special kind of fetish she calls an "inalienable possession." This kind of object is so valuable to the identity of the group that it can neither be taken nor traded away without threatening that group's identity. Daughters who are thus invested with the power of culture bearers die (often willfully) when they leave the family. Thus we may find them returning through death to their fathers' homes, as Richardson's *Clarissa* does, or else reborn through their daughters, as in the case of *Charlotte Temple.* In both novels, the daughter ultimately proves to be the true one when she cannot live outside the family. (11)

Although American (canonical) literature tends to be defined as the literature of "American Adam," and of the relationship between "father and son," origins of American novels are based on the problem of "father and daughter." In the colonial period, a daughter was a symbol of love and at the same time, fear of a father, because of her potential to bear new generation both of identical race, but of alien (by miscegenation). She is, in other words, a contradictory figure who can at the same time inherit and destroy the identity of the race. In this way, early sentimental novels reflected the inevitable conflict of the age and they became very popular among people living in America's first revolutionary period.

VI. Descendants of Early American Sentimental Novels

The second climactic period of sentimental novels appeared around America's second revolutionary period. Harriet Beacher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World* (1852), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) are examples of American sentimental novels at their best. The theme of this second generation is neither seduction nor adultery, but it is still concerned with a pattern of sexual relationships, the proper roles of male and female. At that period, the political power of Puritanism and Calvinist dogma had already declined, and the social content of millenarianism exerted influence upon all kinds of evangelical writings, including these sentimental novels. The general charge against these sentimental fictions, that they are divorced from actual human experience, might come from their religious view of the world. Although sentimental novels are called domestic novels, they reflect the society. *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* for instance, greatly influenced the nation: "The enterprise of sentimental fiction is anything but domestic. . . .Its mission, on the contrary, is global and its interests identical with the interests of the race" (Tompkins 146).

Sentimental novels seemed to fade away from the mainstream of American literature, partly because their narrative could no longer mirror complicated problems of the twentieth century. However, they helped to create a fictional stereotype of American women. Charlotte Temple in particular has become an archetype of many momentous heroines in American literature, and her influence remains in such novels as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* and *The Blithedale Romance,* Crane's *Maggie,* James's *The Portrait of a Lady,* and *Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms.* Charlotte and those heroines "may have been naive and indiscreet but certainly not sinful. . .all of these heroines are social outcasts as a result of their unconventional behavior" (Martin 7). So long as America is a country which is consistently bearing problems of identity, roots, and races, such conflicts in the theme of American sentimental novels as conflicting with authority and searching for identity can never be vanish from American literature.[7]

Notes

[1] In *The Early American Novel,* Lillie Deming Loshe clearly depicts the idiosyncrasies of English sentimental novels as follows:

> The favorite ingredients of these tales are a lovely and gifted heroine, a devoted wife and mother with a brutal and vicious husband, or a vain and negligent mother, whose kind and pious spouse expires early in the first volume leaving his daughter without a protector, a heartless relative or guardian, preferably an aunt, a confident who is usually, as one of them describes herself, "a sprightly toad," a virtuous hero, a designing villain, one or two faithful retainers. Many of these tales can be reduced to the trials of a helpless maiden, consequent upon ill-treatment by an unfeeling relative. (5)

[2] Owen is censured for his imaginative writing which is "jumbling metaphors, and Allegories, and Types, and Figures, altogether and proving one thing from another in a most wonderful manner." (Lowance 14)

[3] In *Of Plymouth Plantation,* William Bradford elucidates this rejection:

> What though he wanted the riches and pleasures of the world in life, and pompous monuments at his funeral? Yet "the memorial of the just shall be blessed, when the name of the wicked shall not" (with their marble monuments). Proverbs, x.7. (360)

[4] Her following statesment might be crucial to the Puritans: "By the voive of His own spirit to my soul . . . the Lord *showed* me what he would do for me . . . . *He did let me see.*" (qtd. in Heimert and Delbanco 160 italics are mine)

[5] Of course, we can also conceive "subversive" messages from Foster's and Brown's depictions. See Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America.*

[6] In her *Romances of the Republic,* Shirley Samuels explores the correlation between American politics in the revolutionary period and early American sentimental novels.

[7] Not only its theme, but its language might be helpful to elucidate "Americanness" of the American sentimental novel. In *Symbolism and American Literature,* Charles Feidelson explores Puritan narrative as the origin of the symbolism in American literary tradition. I would like to subjoin the symbolism appeared in sentimental novels to this tradition. Their abundant use of symbols and metaphors "with [their] queer leap from fact as fact to fact as meaning" (Feidelson 77) is, of course, a direct descendant of Puritan figurative language.

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