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Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World*: the Despair Way to Heaven

Throughout much of the critical discourse of the last century, Sentimentalism has been largely ignored as a literature that pandered to the masses. The tradition has been dismissed by esteemed scholars like Henry Nash Smith and others as the scribblings of religiously over-zealous women. However, as Jane Tompkins points out, Sentimentalism occupies a much more important place in our national literature. The tradition marks a period in history when the predominant culture in our nation was a religious one. Sentimentalism records the beliefs and thought patterns of that moment in American history. Characterized by earthly agony and despair, the religious side of Sentimentalism promises a heavenly reward that all pious Christians should desire.

Susan Warner's novel *The Wide Wide World* provides the reader with a classic study of Sentimentalism at its zenith. In Warner's work, the trials and tribulations of little Ellen are recorded. Almost incessantly, Ellen faces despair of monstrous proportions. Naturally, tears and weeping play a large part in this novel. In this work, two things will be accomplished. First, we will discover how *The Wide Wide World* perfectly embodies the primary characteristics of Sentimentalism. Second, and more importantly, we will come to an understanding of how this often overlooked novel becomes indispensable as a record of national history. Through an examination of Warner's novel, we can come to an understanding of the predominant culture that

led to this work's status as what Jane Tompkins calls "arguably America's first best-seller" (Sensational 425).

In order to understand how Warner's work epitomizes Sentimentalism, we must have a knowledge of what the tradition represents. Two critics with opposing views of Sentimentalism's worth provide their own definitions of the tradition. Barbara Welter represents one of the movement's staunchest supporters. Welter's text, *Dimity Convictions*, discusses Sentimentalism and its merits at length. In the book, Welter describes what she calls "The Cult of True Womanhood." The "true woman" held steadfastly to four virtues. The first, piety, entailed a humility of spirit and a devotion to God. The second, purity, indicated an unwillingness to be stained by things of the world. Third, submissiveness advocated an attitude of subservience toward men. Finally, the virtue of domesticity required that women be proficient in all areas dealing with their kingdom, the home. Followers of the Cult believed that their mission was one of evangelism, a responsibility to bring the world back from its state of sin. This could best be done from the home, where they reigned as defenders of religious values and the instigators of widespread reform.

Henry Nash Smith represents the opposite side of the coin. Speaking from a particularly dismissive standpoint, Smith, like Fred Pattee before him, dismisses Sentimentalism as fodder for the masses. However, Smith does offer an astute catalog of the tradition's characteristics. In his article, "The Scribbling Women and the Cosmic Success Story," the author contends that Sentimentalism reflects certain values. Conformity to society's expectations was a must. Women were not to behave in an unseemly manner. Absolute submission to authority was also promoted. As in Welter's definition, "authority" usually meant "men." Sentimental characters exhibit a

surrender of inner freedom. Not only were the women to be submissive to men, but they also had to give up control of their thoughts. This entailed a complete surrender of thought to God. Inner submission to God could be seen in a woman's everyday life. Finally, Smith adds that the discipline of deviant impulses was imperative to the success of a Sentimental heroine. Unlike today, in the 1850's, "deviant impulses" were those that society deemed unbecoming of a wife and mother.

Although these two critics differ in their estimation of Sentimentalism, we can draw a fairly specific working definition from their descriptions. For the purposes of this study, several of the above characteristics will be given further consideration. Although all of the traits appear in the text, time constraints require that we only consider three. By setting up the qualities of piety, submissiveness, and domesticity as a sort of criteria, we can examine *The Wide Wide World* and discover how well Warner writes in the tradition.

The reader need not venture far into the novel to discover the quality of piety. Warner's novel abounds with scripture and references to it. At every twist and turn, the heroine, young Ellen, is met by some source of solace who imparts a few choice words from the Bible. This begins at home for Ellen with her mother's daily devotions. In the first twenty pages, Ellen discovers that her mother is sick and must be removed to a more healthy climate. Unfortunately, Ellen's father has just lost a lawsuit, and he cannot afford for Ellen to come along with the family. In the few days before Ellen's parents leave, we witness some of the most heartbreaking encounters between Ellen and her mother.

As Ellen prepares for bed, her mother asks her if she will read to her from the Bible.

"Yes, indeed, mamma;" and Ellen brought the book. "Where shall I read?"

“The twenty-third psalm.”

Ellen began it, and went through it steadily and slowly, though her voice quavered a little...

Long before she had finished, Ellen’s eyes were full, and her heart too. ... She did not dare look up till the traces of tears had passed away; then she saw that her mother was asleep. Those first sweet words had fallen like balm upon the sore heart; and mind and body had instantly found rest together.(15)

From this passage, we can see the effect of scripture on the heart of a pious Christian woman. As a young girl, Ellen is not yet able to take comfort in the spiritual maturity that her mother possesses.

After her parents’ departure, Ellen is forced to live with her Aunt Fortune. While living with her brusque matronly aunt, Ellen begins to develop a sense of piety all her own. Through her encounters with the angelic Alice Humphreys, Ellen overcomes her unchristian dislike for her aunt and comes to a stronger understanding of Christian virtue. Ellen meets Alice for the first time on the slope of the mountain to which she has run after an angry confrontation with her aunt. Alice appears like an angel out of the mist to the teary-eyed Ellen.

When she is queried about her despair, Ellen replies, “Nobody in this world can help me.” To this, Alice offers her words of Christian comfort. “Then there’s one in heaven that can. Nothing is too bad for him to mend. Have you asked his help, Ellen?” These words naturally prick Ellen’s heart, and she begins to experience feelings of guilt over her spiritual neglect. Alice presses her, asking, “Then you neglected your Bible and prayer for some time past?” (153) With probing questions like this throughout the novel, Alice leads Ellen on the path to spiritual

maturity.

In addition to characters like Alice, Warner peoples her novel with a variety of characters who provide Ellen with examples of Christian piety. Early in the text, Ellen encounters a strange man on the steamboat who exhorts her to be a humble Christian. "And you are resolved you will obey Christ henceforth?" the old stranger asks (78). Naturally, Ellen vows to do her best. After her arrival at her aunt's house, Ellen comes to know Mr. and Mrs. Van Brunt, both of whom exhort the young girl to remember that she has in heaven a friend that is better than any on earth. Without a doubt, Christian piety abounds in this text.

The Sentimental virtue of submissiveness also makes its appearance in the text. From the beginning of the novel, we can see the submissive place that the women in the text hold. At the very beginning we witness the interaction between Ellen's father and the two females in the house. We see the heavy hand of Captain Montgomery in the opening pages of the novel. Ellen and her mother are understandably upset that they must soon part. However, Mrs. Montgomery is aware of her duty to her husband. Warner's language illustrates the order of power in the Montgomery home.

She [Mrs. Montgomery] had at first absolutely refused to leave Ellen, when her husband proposed it: declaring that she would rather stay with her and die than take the chance of recovery at such a cost....Captain Montgomery urged that it was better to submit to a temporary separation, than to cling obstinately to her child for a few months and then leave her forever...and to the pressure of argument Captain Montgomery added the weight of authority, insisting on her compliance." (12)

We see that Mrs. Montgomery yields not to the Captain's logic, but to his authority. Ellen's

mother comprehends her duty in the home and where her allegiances lie. This same Sentimental submission to men can be seen in Ellen's life as she grows older.

Once Ellen becomes a part of the Humphreys household, she meets Alice's older brother John, who goes to great lengths to groom Ellen in the ways of spiritual truths. From the beginning of this relationship, we sense Ellen's adoration for and obedience to John. Shortly after Ellen's arrival at the house, Warner comments on the fact that both Alice and John encourage Ellen in various ways to improve herself. The next few lines offer a telling comment on Ellen's submissiveness to John. "What she [Alice] asked of her Ellen indeed tried to do; what John told her was done." (351) Warner interestingly places the words "tried" and "was done" in italics as if to give the reader little doubt about Ellen's compliance with the man's directions. This submission to John continues through the end of the text at which point Ellen and John are to be married.

At one spot in the text, Ellen must decide whether to stay with relatives or to continue to live with John and his father. John's words in this passage reflect his consciousness of Ellen's subservient attitude. "It does not seem right to go home without you, Ellie....I think you belong to me more than to any body." (563) John continues, "What will they say to you then, Ellie if you leave them to give yourself to me?" In his words, we see a man's perspective of the male-female relationship. This relationship involves Ellen giving herself away. She becomes a possession. To this, Ellen readily agrees. In the very next passage, she states, "And I will tell you every thing about myself; and you will tell me how I ought to do in all sorts of things?" (564)

Clearly, this text exhibits the Sentimental idea of submission. In the text, Ellen repeatedly bends her will to that of John's. This submissiveness seems learned from her mother, a True

Woman before her. Submitting to the will of the husband was a passive duty of a Sentimental heroine. Active duties also presented themselves. They stemmed from the woman's place being in the home. I'm referring of course to the virtue of domesticity. Women were the keepers of the household and all that existed within. In *The Wide Wide World* we see this characteristic illustrated through various characters.

Ironically, even though Aunt Fortune treats Ellen cruelly, it is at her aunt's home that Ellen begins to learn how to keep house. We read that she had never ventured into a butter pantry until her aunt forces her to put things away. Ellen is also unaccustomed to making her own bed or doing her own laundry. In the course of her stay, she becomes quite capable of completing all of these chores. As she matures, Ellen becomes an increasingly able hostess and homemaker. This growth culminates with her marriage to John at the end of the text.

After the newlyweds have adjourned to their new home, John makes what he considers to an appropriate concession to his new bride.

You are to be my steward in all that concerns the interior arrangements of the household. I will not have your time taken up with petty details--Margery is to keep the house--but you must keep both house and housekeeper. Here you will always find your supply, both for that and for all other purposes to which you may wish to apply it.(582)

Notice that John tells Ellen that she will be his steward, not his equal or his partner, but his steward. This passage illustrates the author's belief in the Sentimental virtue of domesticity. Ellen will be responsible for the completion of all activities within the home. The house is her domain in which she must please her husband.

Piety, submission, and domesticity are all observable in the text. However, it may be their

combined effect that is most interesting. Throughout the text, Ellen seemingly spends most of her time shedding tears. From the beginning, she is distraught over her mother's illness. This is followed by the torturous relationship she experiences with her Aunt Fortune. When news of her mother's death arrives, Ellen is devastated. Her solace found in her friend Alice is short-lived since Alice dies soon afterward. At every turn, Ellen faces trials and tribulations. She only finds true peace when she has grown into a mature Christian at the end of the novel. As she settles into her life as wife and, inevitably, mother, Ellen seems, at least temporarily, happy. With a mature spiritual outlook, Ellen realizes that while earthly happiness is elusive, heavenly peace can eventually be obtained.

Based on these characteristics, it becomes obvious that *The Wide Wide World* epitomizes the Sentimental tradition. However, this fact, in and of itself, does not make this a particularly noteworthy text. Instead, the significance of this novel lies in its historical value. *The Wide Wide World* may not be a technical masterpiece, but it trumpets the arrival of sweeping changes that took place in the early and middle 1800's. To fully understand how this text captures the moment, we must possess a knowledge of the cultural, social, and religious movements that were afoot.

For an in depth look at these issues, Ann Douglas' book, *The Feminization of American Culture*, provides much of the following information:

The years 1820 to 1875 marked the transformation of the American economy into a capitalistic system, which served as a catalyst for changes more germane to the discussion, mainly social and religious upheaval. According to Douglas, until 1820 Calvinism maintained its role as the center of cultural and social intercourse (6); in following years, the religious scene began to change. Christians began to move away

from strict dogma towards something that was more livable and practicable. Douglas adds that the emphasis of the new religious interpretation centered on family morals, civic duty, and church as a social institution (7). Increasingly, women became the source of religious instruction, which took place primarily in the home. Barbara Welter acknowledges that women became the keepers of the faith (22).

In addition to the religious changes, important sociological changes began to occur. Henry Nash Smith reports that a new reading public emerged during this period (48). Smith relates that the creation of free schools led to increases in literacy (50). Lower costs of publishing and distribution encouraged the growth of a larger reading body. As a result of these changes, women started reading fiction more than they ever had before. Consequently, females comprised a larger percentage of the reading body and publishing body than in previous years.

These events led to the insurgence and increasing popularity of an older British tradition. The female readership in America demanded reading material that answered their need for a stable religious foundation which they would also find emotionally gratifying. American female authors adapted the tradition of Sentimentalism to suit their readers' needs. Douglas writes that female authors propagated their religion through the exertion of their literary influence (9). Sentimentality represents the female attempt to supplant the dry dogma of Calvinism with a feminized religion that met the needs of everyday life.

In light of this information, the historical significance of *The Wide Wide World* becomes more readily apparent. The text ceases to represent simply a passing trend in literature. It no longer deserves to be dismissed as the scribblings of the religiously overzealous. Instead, this text and other Sentimental works take on a new meaning. They become important documents that

capture a segment of American history. *The Wide Wide World* becomes a window through which we can develop a new understanding of American history.

Through Warner's text, we see our country as it once was. Warner's America contained substantial differences from our own. In the 1850's, religious piety was a valued quality. Men and women were honored by the masses for their religious fervor. A belief in God was a cornerstone of everyday living. Today, much the opposite seems to hold true. The religiously zealous are viewed with disdain by the masses. A daily war is waged to enforce the separation between church and state. In Warner's day, submission and domesticity were held in high esteem. Women believed that their place was in the home taking care of their children and husbands. With the onslaught of feminism today, the pendulum has swung dramatically in the other direction. More and more women find fulfillment outside the home, and to be in submission to a man is to sabotage the cause of the women's movement.

Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* may not be technically meritorious or worthy of literary praise in the traditional sense, but it is a novel deserving of attention. Warner's novel not only perfectly embodies the qualities of Sentimentalism, but it also provides the modern reader with an accurate snapshot of how America was in the 1850's when women first began to develop a collective consciousness. Sentimentalism holds an indispensable spot in American literary history as an age that to the modern mind of independence and secularity may seem completely foreign.

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