Infantile Informers: The Child Narrator as Mitigator of Sentiment in Sentimental Political Fiction

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Abstract

From Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tim's Cabin* to Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, the genre of sentimental political fiction—fiction that tugs on our heartstrings for socio-political end—is often circumscribed to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This thesis, however, traces the extension of this tradition, widely condemned for its manipulative, moralistic and mawkish character, into contemporary literary culture. Through close analysis of a series of politically-charged twentieth- and twenty-first century literary novels that feature a child narrator—Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Lloyd Jones' *Mr Pip,* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*—the thesis argues that the device of the child narrator has helped these novels evade the accusations of "mawkish sentimentality" that tarnished their nineteenth-century kin. As it will show, our western understanding of childhood as naïve and unschooled enables the child narrator to disguise sensationalism, subjectivism and didacticism, ensuring that, unlike their historical counterparts, these novels tug on our heartstrings in the pursuit of a socio-political agenda without foregoing critical acclaim.

Method: Other than close reading, the primary method employed to substantiate this claim is reader response theory. Thus, reviews of the novels, both reader and scholarly, feature strongly as evidence that these novels escape aspersions of sentimentality.

Methodology: Though there are no studies directly addressing the work of the child narrator in fiction, the two main bodies of work in which this thesis intervenes are the literature on sentimental political fiction and the literature on

the depiction of children in fiction. In addition, this thesis draws on two areas of study that inform the research. The first is the field of childhood studies, focussing specifically on the child narrator, rather than just the child. This field provided the framework for interpretation of the various models of childhood which inform the way that each novel constructs their child narrator. The second is affect theory, which helped ground speculations about the way tonal nuances in both the primary and secondary texts can affect our response to the message these texts impart.

This thesis, then, not only fills a critical gap, but also suggests that the very fact that critics have ignored the device testifies to its efficient subterfuge and, in this sense as the child narrator has the capacity to foment genuine social awareness, they should no longer be overlooked.

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Introduction

> He coughs some more and I listen to the awful sound tearing the air. His body folds and rocks with each cough but I don't even feel for him because I'm thinking, *I hate you for this, I hate you for going to South Africa and coming back sick and all bones, I hate you for making me stop playing with my friends.* When the coughing finally ceases he is sweating and breathing like somebody chased him all the way from Budapest and up and down Fambeki, and I don't even hear him because I am hating him for making me stop my life like this. (Bulawayo 96)

Narrated by a ten-year-old girl called Darling, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* lays bare the realities and hardships of life for disadvantaged people in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. Reminiscent of nineteenth-century sentimental novels that aimed to engender social and political change by leveraging readerly emotion (Tompkins J. xvii; Douglas 9; Burdett 187), this deathbed scene exposes the terrible consequences of the disease that has wrought havoc on Bulawayo's native Zimbabwe. Darling's father is dying of AIDS, and in the wake of his death Darling will become the ultimate sentimental emblem—the AIDS orphan, an "object of pity and charity appeals" (Adebe 460). And yet, despite the sentimentality at the heart of this tableau, *We Need New Names* has not been subjected to the same aspersive accusations of mawkishness that plagued socially motivated Victorian sentimental political fiction and that, according to many critics, resulted in the genre's apparent demise (Dillon 496; Jefferson 519 - 520; Tanner 128). In fact, reviewers have

unanimously noted Bulawayo's refusal "to play the pity card" (Hewlett; Sanai) and hailed the novel as a hard-hitting political exposé (Iweala, Muganiwa).

The question must be asked, then: how has this contemporary political novel, and others like it, slipped the net and avoided the taint of sentimentality? I would suggest that, although this book, peppered with deathbed scenes and orphaned children, performs the traditionally sentimental task of intimately exposing social wrongs in the domestic sphere (Burdett 190; Fisher 90; Howard 74-76; Wexler 9), the fact that the novel is voiced by a child narrator disguises its sentimental rhetoric. Using the sort of straightforward candour that only a child can get away with, she maintains our sympathy while effectively dissimulating the sentimentality and obscuring the emotion evoked by the social situations the novel exposes. As a preteen child, she is uniquely skilled for the task: old enough to know something of what is going on, but too young to understand the consequences. She is too self-centred to feel and express the true pathos and, by virtue of her limited viewpoint, we are spared an overly emotional account. Thus, the sentimentality of the novel is disguised and, despite the fact that we understand the sadness of the subject matter, not a tear is shed.

Situating Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* alongside a handful of other contemporary "politically aware" fiction that depend on the child narrator, this thesis advances a simple, twofold argument about this small but significant body of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century fiction. First, it contends that these novels—all of them celebrated for their political force in documenting or intervening in complex political situations—share a great deal in common with the tradition of "sentimental fiction" discussed by critics like Nina Baym,

Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins. Second, it contends that these novels' reliance on the child narrator has helped them avoid the taint of "sentimentality" that has conventionally attached to sentimental political fiction. The tradition of, what I will call "sentimental political fiction"—fiction that presents social and political messages in a purposeful manner designed to make us feel and motivate action—is a long one and has been known by many labels. In the eighteenth century, "novels of sensibility" valorised feeling as a means to shape society (McDowell 383), developing into overtly didactic "sentimental moralist novels" (Munday 211-212) and then, in the nineteenth century, becoming known as "social problem" novels (Guy 3) and "social conscience" novels (Roberts chap.2). The terms "domestic fiction" and latterly "woman's fiction" define the particular strand of the genre written by women (Baym ix). Yet, since the Victorian era, the "sentimentality" at the heart of this tradition attracts "an automatic prejudice" (Tompkins, J 25). Indeed, understood as forfeiting the "authenticity: the spontaneity, the sincerity" (Howard 65) of honest emotion and "forcing [readers] to feel" (Noble 299)—sentimental appeals have been dismissed as manipulative, moralistic, mawkish, didactic and sensationalist (Dillon 496; Solomon 304; Tanner 128). This thesis' aim, then, is to show that despite sentiment's fall from grace, as readers and writers, we have not abandoned our designs on political and social reform through the manipulation of readerly feeling and that many of the sentimental functions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction have been "smuggled in" to contemporary sentimental political fiction through the device of the child narrator. The handful of novels I will examine all participate in the sentimental political fiction tradition. Indeed, amongst other traditionally sentimental functions, they work to impart

knowledge, connect people, chronicle history and expose social wrongs. What sets them apart, however, is that reading alongside the child, readers and critics are licensed to drop their guard and embrace these novels' agendas without dismissing them as sentimental.

We Need New Names is far from being an isolated example of fiction that employs a child to bear our socio-political burden. Indeed, setting aside for the moment the question of whether this work can be included within the sentimental tradition, the ubiquity of the child narrator within politically-charged twentieth and early twenty-first-century literary fiction is worthy of note. A classic example of this literary tradition is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*—a novel often hailed for its political impact (Patel; Randall; Shapiro). Famously narrated by the peppery and irreverent Scout Finch, it gives insight into life in the American south during the Great Depression of the 1930's, and, because it was published in 1960, instructs on the issue of racism at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was very much in the public eye. Yet, over the last two decades, a range of other novels have sprung up that also use the child narrator as a device for mediating their complex political subject matter. *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Husseini, is another example of a novel narrated by a child that readers assert has a socially transformative effect (Aubry 25, 28, 30). Set in Afghanistan before and during Taliban rule and voiced by a young Afghan boy named Amir, readers testify to its ability to personalise the lives of Afghan people at a time when they were only viewed as the enemy (Guthmann). *Mr Pip*, by Lloyd Jones, published in 2006, is set in 1989 during the blockade of Bougainville when Papua New Guinea screened off the island from the rest of the world for ten years, isolating the inhabitants. Young Matilda,

a native to the island, chronicles the atrocities experienced by her people and the novel raises awareness for the disenfranchised and the marginalised in our world (Byrt; Laing). Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is set in a post-colonial African country which, for all intents and purposes, may as well be named as Bulawayo's homeland, Zimbabwe. The child narrator, Darling, exposes the harsh reality of the poverty and political upheaval of Southern Africa and the diaspora caused by hardship as citizens flee their homes in droves in search of a better life on foreign soil. This prevalence of the child narrator in contemporary political fiction suggests that children have been put to work as agents of reform. A significant corollary to this observation is that the novels listed in The Huffington Post's "Listen to the Kids:12 Memorable Novels with Child Narrators" all deal with either social or political subject matter.

In many respects this thesis has been motivated by an effort to account for the omnipresence of the child narrator within this body of critically acclaimed, politically-charged literary fiction. This effort has yielded two key lines of argument. On the one hand, the thesis proposes that the novels under discussion bear a great deal in common with the category of "sentimental" political fiction—a mode that, while not always travelling under this particular terminological banner, is usually described as dying out at the end of the nineteenth century (Dobson 264; Dillon 495-496). As I show, like eighteenth and nineteenth-century "sentimental" fiction, these works all have an agenda, delivering discernible directives aimed at influencing the reader to care about situations other than their own: *To Kill a Mockingbird* aims to impart knowledge; *The Kite Runner* aims to connect disparate cultures; *Mr Pip* aims to chronicle history and *We Need New Names* exposes social wrongs, allying them closely

with the purposes of sentimental political fiction. On the other, this thesis proposes that the voices of their child narrators serve, at some level, to *obscure* the novels' participation in the sentimental political tradition, allowing them to evade the damning label "sentimental". In *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the information and the social messages that the novel imparts are all delivered by the child narrator Scout who, by virtue of her tender years and humorous delivery, successfully avoids any accusations of the moral didacticism (Johnson; Sullivan) usually affiliated with traditional sentimental fiction. In *The Kite Runner,* Amir's portrayal as a fallen child (Miles 207; Wyatt), whose actions we deplore, helps dodge any readerly concerns about emotional manipulation. *Mr Pip,* meanwhile, successfully avoids accusations of sensationalism and didacticism often accredited to historical political fiction that aims at readerly influence (Dekoven 138; Krull 695-697) because of Matilda's limited, uneducated, childish point of view. And Darling, the narrator of *We Need New Names*, is too direct and churlish to be suspected of petitioning for pity (Hewlett; Sanai) despite her circumstances which epitomise her status as a "wounded child".

In advancing this twofold argument over the following five chapters, I intervene in two key bodies of literature. The first and most significant of these is literature on the long tradition of sentimental political fiction popularly read for pleasure as well as for insight. Nineteenth-century women's novels recognised as socially influential in the age they were written like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) (Tompkins xi) and Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850) (Nelson 11), for example, have become devalued over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for their excessive use of emotion, resulting in their

dismissal under the sign of the “sentimental” (Dillon 496; Jefferson 519 - 520; Tanner 128). Nina Baym was one of the first contemporary literary critics to identify and give credence to sentimental political fiction since its debasement. Her study, however, which focusses purely on women’s fiction, situates the mode as existing between 1820 to 1870 and, though many subsequent novels would fit well into her criteria, does not recognise fiction that continues the domestic sentimental tradition. Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins, who famously sit on different sides of the fence when it comes to sentimental political fiction, also limit the mode to the antebellum period. Though they see the effects of these novels from different perspectives, both Douglas and Tompkins accede to a view that, far from just being harmless melodramatic pap, sentimental political fiction had readerly influence. As I will show, like their Victorian predecessors, the novels of my archive have also been recognised as having socio-political impact and, as such, contrary to the narrow chronological boundaries outlined by scholars like Baym, Douglas and Tompkins, they belong in the sentimental mode.

The second body of work in which I will intervene is the literature on representations of children in sentimental political fiction. This body of work generally concludes that, for children to be effective sentimental reformers, they must be innocent and worthy; that to be powerful social influences, children must be portrayed as powerless. Writing in detail about little Eva’s death scene from Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Tompkins, for example, notes how, because Eva is such a good child, her redemptive effect on others is made stronger in death (129). Tompkins’ work bolsters the assumption, which this thesis will strongly contest, that a child’s social effectiveness lies in its purity and

innocence. Besides the depiction of children as ‘good’, literature on children in fiction also centres on the idea that children are helpless and vulnerable. Joe Sutliff Sanders, for example, in her discussion on orphan girls in turn of the century narratives, points out how their lack of real power to control their worlds elicits sympathy and because of this, they wield power, despite, and actually because of their vulnerability(42). Claudia Nelson furthers this argument stating that, in nineteenth-century fiction and non-fiction that exploited the helplessness of children to promote social change, “the dependent child”(5) became “reform’s most effective agents” (66). In the present day, however, scenes like little Eva’s sad demise that moved so many nineteenth-century hearts to reconsider their views on slavery, leaves readers squirming under the weight of sentiment that the exploitation of her innocence and vulnerability evokes. In fact, because we have grown wary of sentimental manipulation, descriptions designed to focus on children’s helplessness are more likely to be despised for their manipulative effect. Therefore, though indebted to observations on the reformative action engendered by the image of a “dependent child” (Nelson 5), this thesis subverts this view. More specifically, it claims that by entrusting the child with the task of directing the narration, the novelists of my archive invest children with agency and power that is not apparently reliant on the intervention of adults. It further claims that, in doing so, these novels avoid accusations of “sentimentality,” and are thus more effectively, if more covertly, able to carry out the cultural and emotional work of sentimental political fiction.

In advancing this argument about the work of the child narrator within contemporary sentimental political fiction, I draw on a range of theoretical frameworks to construct a unique methodology. First, to delineate my account

of the various models of childhood on which each novel constructs their child narrator, I turn to work associated with the rich, interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. Recent work by Alison James and Alan Prout acknowledges the changing nature of our conception of childhood, highlighting the "problematic" (1) nature of their field, while Chris Jenks insists—against a uniform, and romanticising vision of childhood—on its embedded and historically variable nature (122). James and Jenks, meanwhile, examine how our romantic vision of children as innocent has become the benchmark, and that any deviance from this image results in an anxiety about the state of society, which may explain why we hold so tightly to the vision of the pure child. Finally, Hugh Cunningham points out the difference between children as individual human beings and our concept of childhood. He seeks to clear up the misconception that children are only children if they fit into our very constricting ideals of childhood (2) and his argument allows for an alternative construction as, children, for Cunningham, are not only innocent and vulnerable (though he stops short at actually defining one). This suggestion of a more complex conception of childhood fits well with the more realistic view of children that emerges when attention is paid to the function of the child narrator in contemporary fiction. As I will show, it is the naughty child, the fallen child and sometimes the downright vulgar child who is able to breach our defences against sentimentality.

Second, to interpret the effects of the child narrator on readerly experience and judgment, I draw on the emerging interdisciplinary body of work known as affect theory. Although I do not directly refer to many affect theorists, my attention to affect and emotion at the level of tone and reader response is

inspired by the body of work on affect and emotion that has emerged over the past two decades. At the heart of affect theory is an effort to understand how we are touched, moved and mobilised under changing political and social regimes, with an attentiveness, as Melissa Gregg puts it, to both the body's "potential" to be changed and its "capacity to affect" change in other bodies (2). Particularly important for my work is Sianne Ngai's account of affective tone. Ngai supplies a critical vocabulary for describing how affect is baked into the text itself in the form of "attitudes" or "orientations" (43). This approach will help me read certain readerly or authorly moods and affects off the surface of both my primary texts (the novels) and my secondary texts. More specifically, it will help me ground speculations about the way in which, for example, when a child narrator speaks with a humorous tone we are distracted into overlooking the seriousness of the message they impart.

In applying these frameworks, the primary method I employ is close textual analysis of the novels in my archive. The focus of my close reading is the representation of the child as narrator, which reveals how the novels have managed to carry out their sentimental function while appearing unsentimental. Examination of the language and syntax voiced by the child narrators as they present their unique viewpoints, for example, reveal hidden messages about the social and political milieu that the novels expose. The same applies to the authors' use of imagery and motifs to describe the child narrator that discreetly reveal political messages. The analysis of the novels also attends closely to characterisation and narrative techniques. A significant revelation that surfaced while closely examining the texts is the authors' tendency to thematise the idea

that children are more effective political messengers than their adult counterparts.

In the spirit of affect theory, which focuses on the role of affect in the reception and evaluation of literary and other texts, I have also examined and drawn conclusions from the published critical and readerly reception of my chosen novels, focusing, in particular, on popular reviews. These sources provide evidence of the novels' influence on readers and their emotional engagement with the texts. This method helped discern the affective results of the novels on the audiences that they aspire to reach and, though anecdotal, provided a gauge to monitor the efficacy of the child narrator's ability to disguise sentimentality.

My thesis will unfold across five chapters, with Chapter One providing perspective on why the device of the child narrator is necessary as it reviews the history of sentimentality and its fall from grace. It tracks the changing reception of sentimentality in general and traditional sentimental political fiction in particular, showing how the latter has come to be accused of whipping up false feeling to heighten receptivity to social messages. As it shows, on the one hand, critics have exhorted all rational readers to exercise reason and to beware sentimentality's manipulative agency, while on the other, moral sentiment theorists have defended it as a legitimate tool to motivate social and political action. It will also show how, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, excessive emotion has been culturally devalued and dismissed under the sign of the "sentimental" and how, for contemporary audiences under the influence of modernism, the dialectic has been further complicated by an antipathy to literature that seeks to sensationalise subjective domestic stories for didactic

purposes. Ultimately, it will highlight the need for the device of the child narrator to sidestep the usual aspersions of sentimentality accompanying literature that aims to influence societal change.

What follows are four further chapters, one for each of the novels in my archive. Each chapter highlights one of the novels' participation in a particular element of sentimental political fiction, from didacticism and subjectivity to emotional manipulation through sensationalism and the exploitation of the wounded child, before going on to underscore how the child narrator—mediated through a particular paradigm of childhood, from the Christian to the Romantic tradition—enables the novel to evade the taint of sentimentality often associated with this sentimental function. Chapter Two reveals how Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who represents an image of the child as humorously naïve and unschooled, imparts knowledge and instructs on social inequality without seeming didactic. Because we see children as needing education rather than as educators, we learn with her rather than feeling as though we are being lectured. In Chapter Three, on *The Kite Runner*, I frame the child narrator Amir through the lens of the "fallen child" . It is as a result of this framing, I argue, that Amir helps the novel achieve its sentimental aim—to help to connect westerners with Afghani people, usually seen as the enemy—without attracting accusations of emotional manipulation. Chapter Four examines *Mr Pip* where Matilda challenges the model that identifies childhood with a lack of political power. Instead, her narrative performs a combative function as she fights back against those who tried to cover up the atrocities that she and her fellow villagers experienced. In the process, I contend, she not only helps chronicle history, but helps the novel evade the accusations of the

sensationalism, subjectivity and didacticism often levelled at the historical novel (Dekoven 138; Krull 695-697). Lastly, Chapter Five on *We Need New Names* showcases how a de-romanticised child narrator in the form of Darling can escape accusations of sentimentality, despite her status as a "wounded child". The chapter shows how the helpless victims of society can be de-objectified when given a voice to narrate their own story and at the same time expose the social wrongs that cause their circumstances, without seeming to descend into mawkish pity gathering.

When Joseph Conrad wrote that his "task … by the power of the written word, [is]to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see" (preface), he confirmed what every lover of fiction knows—words affect our sensibilities and arouse response by inspiring, informing and inciting consciousness. If, through literature, we can "hear" the story of 'the other', then might we not sympathise? If we can "see" life from another's perspective, then might we not understand their plight? And if we can be induced to "feel", then might we not be affected? History shows us, however, that fiction aspiring to these heights often suffers the same fate as Icarus and is burnt by the very emotions it encourages. Though the novels in my archive, like the novels of nineteenth-century women's fiction, do have a purposeful agenda—to make readers care about the world's socio-political problems—they are not held under the same suspicion of manipulative agency. Instead, this thesis reveals how each novel utilises an alternative view of childhood to allay our suspicion of sentimental manipulation and drop our guard, allowing the cultural work of sentimental fiction to continue.

Chapter 1: A Sentimental Perspective.

> You may sparkle and dazzle, but you are fit only to throw people out of their orbits. Now and then, there's a gleam of something like reason in your writings, but for the most part they are unmitigated trash – false in sentiment – un-rhetorical in expression.
>
> — Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall,* 166

To appreciate the success of the child narrator in circumventing derisory accusations of sentimentality, we need to first understand why a covert approach to sentimentality in fiction is necessary. Why is it that sentimental political fiction, which engages our emotions and moves us, also makes us feel uncomfortable? In everyday life, our sentimental attachments to objects and persons enhance their perceived worth; syllogistic arguments and cold hard reason fail to override the sentimental significance of a family photograph album or a carefully preserved lock of hair from a child's first haircut, for example. Ascribe the label sentimental to fiction, however, and the value plummets. Because of the pervasive clouds of confusion that this topic generates, this chapter makes no claims to clarify or explain our ambivalence, instead it aims to orientate this thesis' intervention within sentimental political fiction's unsettled history. It will map its brief highs, in the guise of eighteenth-century moral sentimentalism whose proponents promoted sentiment as a means of affording moral instruction, and its more pervasive lows, like the damning association with nineteenth-century women's fiction that blatantly

exploited sentimentality to elicit emotional response. It will also discuss how, in the twentieth century, the rise of modernism heightened the intensity of anti-sentimentalism, waging a particularly vicious defamatory attack and firmly establishing the pejorative bias which, to this day, taints our associations with sentimentality. Indeed, as I will show, while feminist and postmodernist critics have largely succeeded in salvaging the reputation of sentimental fiction in academic circles, in the popular domain, sentimentality remains contaminated by connotations of excessive manipulation of false feeling. Mapping these mercurial attitudes to sentimentality, then, this chapter will prove the expedience of enlisting a more subtle messenger in the deceptively disenfranchised form of the child narrator so that the political work of fiction can continue despite our chariness to sentimentality.

The repudiation of sentimentality has its roots in a longstanding tendency in Western philosophical and artistic tradition to devalue emotion in favour of reason. This bias can be traced back to the classical philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Plato saw emotional poetry as outside the bounds of rational thought, claiming that tragedy and comedy manipulate feelings for no reasonable purpose. He recognised “the excitement of poetry” but warned against its effects saying, “we delight in giving way to sympathy,” and while we might think “that the pleasure is a gain,” Plato saw this unreasonable abandon as feckless (Book X). Aristotle’s stance was more ambivalent, however, as, while wary of unbridled emotional manipulation, he believed emotional response elicited by poetry to be cathartic, helping us to deal with and understand everyday emotions. For Aristotle, emotions like “pity or fear” (461) experienced through exposure to artistic representation promote intellectual response inspiring

thought and cognition and “learning or inferring” (458). As philosopher Peter Levine puts it, according to Aristotle, “Moral reasoning cannot occur unless we feel” (59). Believing that we reason with the data given to us by our immediate visceral emotions, he exhorted orators to “make use of the emotions” (143). However, balance was the key: emotion unschooled by reason translates into sentiment, which, for Aristotle, could inhibit sensible decision making. In his eyes, it was mainly women who are prone to be led by their emotions at the expense of reason, as men are “naturally finer beings” (35)—a misogynistic judgement of women’s emotional instability that may have influenced the longstanding assumption that emotional response is unmanly. Despite Aristotle’s defence of emotion, then, he still stresses the importance of a rational interpretation of our emotions and highlights that emotion, untempered by reason, should be dismissed as excessive and therefore, what later critics would call, “sentimental”.

The dialogue over reason and sentiment was taken up in the eighteenth century in England by two conflicting schools of thought, namely the moral rationalists and the moral sentimentalists. Despite pursuing a common purpose and belief in the reality and desirability of moral virtue, for the rationalists, reason alone dictates our moral responses, whereas, for sentimentalists, moral distinctions are identified by emotion. Rationalists declared that all morality was based on reason and we should disregard feelings. William Wollaston, for example, preached that “since [our] nature is not purely rational” our irrational side, or emotions, “will mislead [us]” (*British Moralists* vol. II, 372). John Locke, meanwhile, used mathematics as his benchmark to observe that “moral principles require reasoning and discourse” and that, just as some geometric

truths are not obvious, so universal moral truths need to be learned and understood as “they are not innate” (*B. M.* vol. II, 326 - 327). Thus, for the rationalists, morality is not instinctive and must be driven by reason and not by our emotions. Therefore, sentimental literature, which promotes emotional response, could even be considered immoral as, by rousing emotion, it obscures reason.

Moral sentimentalists, on the other hand, promoted sentiment as a directive for morality, believing in feeling and not reason as the basis for moral decision-making. David Hume, who was heavily influential in the movement, famously sanctioned passion over reason when he wrote, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (415). They also shared a belief that humanity is basically social and connected by “fellow feeling” (Smith 13) and that, unlike the rationalists, we all have an innate sense of what is beneficial for society and it is this sense, when it is functioning morally, which promotes positive feelings that motivate us to ethical action (Shaftesbury 248). For sentimentalists, morality results from a virtuous sensitivity to the feelings of others and to be sentimentally moved is a precursor for social action. Adam Smith went so far as to contend that, literature which inspires imagination is a means of conceptualising the plight of ‘the other’ “by representing to us what would be our own if we were in his case” (9). Thus, for Smith, contrary to the moral rationalists, literature that could make the reader feel for another’s plight was an effective moral and political tool.

This championing of sentimentality as a means of moral influence was taken up in a slightly different way by later Romantic philosophers like Friedrich

von Schiller. Schiller believed in the political power of aesthetics to cultivate good moral citizens and, like the moral sentimentalists, he also advocated for a calculated hortatory education through aesthetics, championing “the spiritual merits of art” (*Aesthetic Education* letter 2). He stated that “The path to the head must be opened by the heart. The training of sensibility is therefore the more pressing need of our age” (*AE* Letter 9). Based on his conviction that ‘‘beauty alone can confer upon [man] a social character” and that “taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual’’ (*AE* Letter 27), he proposed that educating people to be more aesthetically minded can bring about social change. Schiller elevated the efficacy of sentimental poetry in this cause above all others in his treatise *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,* praising the poetry of Ariosto (part 1). Thus, Schiller exalted sentimental works which enable emotional identification for their worthy promotion of appropriate moral response, seeing sentimental literature as purposeful and political.

Eighteenth-century “novels of sensibility” embodied Schiller and Smith’s belief that literature which targets the emotions can work towards moral and political transformation. Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771) and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), for example, were based on the premise that man is inherently good and our feelings are a powerful guide to morality. Nineteenth-century sentimental women’s fiction also celebrates the effects of feeling and novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna openly professed a desire to transform society, both morally and spiritually, through sentimentality (Carrere 34; Lenard 3; Nelson 66). In her concluding chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

(1852), Stowe wrote that she wanted her readers to learn to "*feel right"* and then extend their circle of "sympathetic influence" (XLV 463) to change the hearts of others, and she embraced a didactic reformation of society through sentimental literature.

Historically, it appears that sentimental political fiction did in fact have the socio-political influence often ascribed it by defenders of sentimentality. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* for example, was the first American novel to sell over a million copies (Tompkins 124) and many believe that it went a long way towards influencing an ethical response to the anti-slavery message it voiced. When it was first published, freed slave Frederick Douglass, a black abolitionist campaigner and journalist wrote:

> We are well sure that the touching portraiture she has given of "poor Uncle Tom," will, of itself, enlist the kindly sympathies, of numbers, in behalf of the oppressed African race, and will raise up a host of enemies against the fearful system of slavery ("Douglass' Notice of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*").

Abraham Lincoln is also said to have credited the novel with starting the American civil war which ended in the abolition of the slave trade (Noble 297). Sentimental writing found its niche in nineteenth-century women's fiction and the proliferation of novels that were written at the time testify to its popularity. Other examples of politically influential sentimental novels are Sedgewick's *Linwood* (1835), which explored the politically charged notion of Republicanism in America, and Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841), which exposed the conditions of factory workers during the industrial age in Britain.

However, even in epochs where some thinkers and philosophers were rehabilitating sentimentality, there has always been a strong strand of popular anti-sentimentality in Western culture. At the same time that moral sentiment theorists and romantics believed proportionate sentiment to be honourable, aesthetic philosopher and empiricist Lord Henry Home Kames, for example, debunked what he judged "unnatural" sentiments claiming they are "pure rant and extravagance" (342). In fact, prudential use of sentiment in literature became a common call. Readers were urged to vigilance and eighteenth-century women took up the charge against sentiment as vociferously as men. Conservative religious writer Hannah More warned against a stirring of passions as a threat to women's virtue (Pinch 2), and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft deplored sentiment as an enslaving force for women, causing them to be "blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (26). Even Adam Smith, though a proponent of sentimental moral education, raised the issue of "suitableness or unsuitableness in the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it" (18). In other words, if we judge the cause of sentiment to be out of proportion with our own sense of propriety, then "we necessarily disapprove of them, as extravagant" (19). In the nineteenth-century, canonical writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain disparaged sentimental fiction as 'a woman's thing'. Hawthorne famously complained that "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash" (73-76) and Twain linked sentiment with feminine weakness (8565). Thus, criticism levelled against unschooled exuberant sentimentality in fiction indicates that, despite its

popularity and perceived social advantages, eighteenth and nineteenth-century sentimental political fiction did much to sully the reputation of the sentimental, which became popularly seen as indulgent.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the modernist movement took up the fight against sentimentality. Excesses of sentiment in fiction were seen as dishonest and criticised for cheapening sympathetic response and for encouraging readers to wallow in sad deathbed scenes and tales of personal hardship merely for the pleasure of feeling emotion. Proto-modernists like Henry James and Oscar Wilde vociferously protested its evils. Wilde combatively claiming that, "A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of emotion without paying for it" (*De Profundis* 501), while James declared that "nothing is more trivial than that intellectual temper, which for ever dissolved in the melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition" (221-222). James' tirade was directed, not against "honest" emotion, "which is in strict accordance with human life" (221), but rather against the licentious and purposeful procurement of tear-jerking emotion employed by sentimental novelists like Rebecca Harding-Davis, whose book, *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868), prompted his tirade. James also links sentimentalism with the consumerism of mass-culture when he says how "debasing" it is for writers who "become an agent between the supply and demand of the commodity" (222). African American writer, James Baldwin, vehemently attacked Stowe's sentimentalism, saying:

> Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty...the wet eyes of the sentimentalist

> betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mark of cruelty." (14)

For Baldwin, Stowe's novel was not a political force for good, but rather a harmful wallowing in emotion. D.H Lawrence in his posthumously published letters expanded on the modernist abhorrence of profligate sentiment. Writing of the defiling effect sentiment has on raw passion he stated, "the instinct is swamped and extinguished in sentiment" (265). For Lawrence, instinctive feeling, akin to James' "honest" emotion, is ruined by self-conscious sentiment.

Although modernist attempts to distinguish between real emotion and mere sentimentality did not result in a clear-cut paradigm, there were similarities in their beliefs. Michael Bell, in his exposé on sentimentality, goes as far as to say that their "attack on sentimentality was one of the few threads uniting the internal variety of modernisms" (160). For early modernists, a dissatisfaction with the perceived inauthenticity of traditional sentimentality and its associations with mass-culture resulted in Ezra Pound's call to "make it new". Pound expressed the modernist desire to communicate emotion in a more oblique, less realistic way, saying "I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 87). Pound also voiced the modernist dislike of "emotional slither" (*Literary Essays* 12) but concluded that "Only emotion endures" (*LE*14), which indicates that it is not emotion itself from which he and fellow modernists shrink, but rather it is manipulative, mawkish sentimentalism. T.S. Eliot's objective correlative describes modernism's pressing need to be objective, about emotion where he states that to express "emotion in the form of art" one must find "a set of

objects" by which "the emotion is immediately evoked" (*The Sacred Wood* 7), thereby advocating for a less direct, less personal and subjective mode of expression. Modernists also stressed form as another indirect means of expressing emotion in literature. Virginia Woolf, for example, stated that a novel is "a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye" resulting in "the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it". Therefore, modernists saw the kind of direct and subjective emotional writing that categorised nineteenth-century sentimental political fiction as inappropriate and, despite modernism's infamous diversity, they upheld a united front when it came to the common enemy of bourgeois sentimentality.

The academic debate about sentimentality has continued into the postmodern era where the battle for acceptance of sentimentality in fiction is still being fought. Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins are often quoted as being at opposite ends of the debate. Using Stowe's account of little Eva's death scene as an example, Douglas sees Stowe's description, and subsequent readers' sentimental response, as self-indulgent. She perceives a strong link between Stowe's heroine and consumerism, contending that the high-modernist versus mass-culture divide began with nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Douglas criticises sentimental fiction's focus on the everyday, which made it accessible to the general public and therefore not high-brow enough to be considered literary, remarking on "the exaltation of the average which is the trademark of mass-culture" (4). Douglas remains firmly invested in maintaining the boundary imposed by modernists between "high" and "low" literature. Victorian fiction can, in her view, be easily classified into good or bad literature. To her mind, Stowe belonged to the latter group which focussed on sentimental domestic, feminine

subjects, while authors like Hawthorne and Thoreau “turned their sights principally on values and scenes that operated as alternatives to cultural norms” (5) and therefore their work was seen as good. Thus, for Douglas, fiction that embraces sentimentality for political ends is inferior.

Jane Tompkins, on the other hand, contradicts the popular and modernist resistance to sentimental political fiction. While remaining non-committal on the literary standing of nineteenth-century women’s fiction, Tompkins has made a valiant attempt at ratifying the mode by focussing on the “cultural work” that sentimentality performed. Tompkins’ approach is to view sentimental texts “as agents of cultural formation rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal” (xvii). Thus, she does not ask us to decide whether or not they are “good” literature, but rather to value their effect, which she believes is intentional saying, “These novelists ha[d] designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think in a particular way” (xi). According to Tompkins, we cannot judge a text written in the mid nineteenth century by contemporary standards and she requires a return to the historical context in which they were written and received. For example, according to Tompkins, contemporary critics who see the sentimentality of heart-wrenching death-bed scenes as defective fail to understand the prevailing belief of Stowe’s time that Christ-like sacrifice has “the power to work in and change the world” (130). Tompkins upholds that nineteenth-century women’s fiction is worthy of study because of its sentimental political impact, though she remains ambivalent about its literary merit.

There has, however, also been a recent move towards questioning the judgments made by modernist aesthetics about good and bad literature with

some academics proposing critical acceptance of fiction usually outlawed for sentimentality. Many contemporary feminist critics have paved the way to a less schizophrenic enjoyment of novels which pull on our heart strings and advocate for a revision of the literary canon to include sentimental political fiction. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, offers "reparative" reading as an antidote for critique, which she terms "paranoid" reading. "Paranoid" reading and, what Paul Ricoeur termed the "Hermeneutics of suspicion", pre-empts textual problems by anticipating them in advance so there are "no bad surprises" (*Touching Feeling* 130). Advocating a shift away from a reductive approach fuelled by a fear of getting it wrong, Sedgwick leans towards affect, open to whatever delights a text might offer. Rita Felski also calls for a revival of literary appreciation of traditionally non-canonical texts by making a case for the uses of literature. Floating the notion of "emphatic experience" (20), which she defines as individual appreciation for literature unfettered by concerns over "high versus low art" (20), stating, "There is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love" (22). For Felski, a text's capacity to move us lies in the application of four intrinsic uses of literature which she defines as recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock and the resulting connection with the characters and situations described, affirms, rather than debases, the value of sentimental fiction.

Other contemporary scholars have re-embraced the enlightenment era and advocate for Smith's and Schiller's ideal of embracing sentimentality to influence morality. Philosopher Charles Taylor believes that sentiment becomes "the touchstone of the morally good" as it functions in "determining good and bad" (284). For Taylor, sentiment can be corrected by reason when it deviates,

but the insight it yields cannot be substituted for by reason. This way of thinking is part of a wider turn to neo-Aristotelean attitudes advocating emotion's relation to political life, known as virtue ethics. Following this school of thought, ethical philosopher Martha Nussbaum has earnestly proposed a programme of educative reading in schools "to foster an informed and compassionate vision of the different" (*Cultivating Humanity* 89), confirming her belief that literature plays a vital role in promoting good citizenship. Robert Solomon, who writes so emotively about the value of sentimental literature is also a proponent (44). Like the moral sentimentalists, these scholars recognise the power of sentimentality and see social connectedness empowered by fiction as a necessary moral compass to determine right and wrong. This contests the modernist view of man in isolation, unaffected by society, exemplified by American modernist author Thomas Wolfe when he wrote that "solitariness is by no means a rare condition…but the inescapable, central fact of human existence" (467). Thus, for some contemporary thinkers, like the moral sentimentalists, sentimentality has the potential to forge connections through "fellow feeling" (Smith 13) and thus play a vital part in social and political reform.

However, the argument against sentimentality in fiction is still being fought on the grounds that its profligate use is ineffectual. Despite the fact that scholars like Nussbaum see sentimental political fiction as an effective motivator of social and political change, there are many present-day dissenters who remain sceptical about the use of sentimentality to impact meaningfully on society. Lauren Berlant, for example, perceives identification with characters elicited through emotional response as fallacious as, in her view, it negates the hurdles of geographical distance and racial difference. For Berlant, besides

ethno-geographical obstacles, the privatising and personalising of suffering in sentimental political fiction precludes political discussion about the true cause of the suffering and actually prevents action. She calls this "the politico-aesthetic tradition of sentimentality" ("Poor Eliza" 638) and believes that:

> Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures." (P.E. 641)

In other words, rewriting politics as feelings undermines the issues at stake and results in a moral stasis. Echoing both Wilde's and Baldwin's views, Berlant believes we are so caught up in the emotion that we become incapable of looking beyond the embodied pain and suffering and identifying the social problems which need to be changed, becoming incapable of meaningful action. In a similar vein, Michael Tanner's objection to sentimentality is that it "doesn't lead anywhere" (130). He favours "emotional generosity" as, for him, sentimentality causes people to "avoid following up their responses with *appropriate* actions" (140). Literature, from Berlant's and Tanner's perspective, does have the power to influence, but only when it is not sentimental.

The work done by feminist contemporary scholars to recuperate sentimental political fiction's literary worth is also hindered by enduring misogyny. Many anti-sentimentalists, in the manner of Aristotle, see women as overly swayed by emotion, and cast sentimental political fiction as an extension of this susceptibility. Only recently, Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul, when

interviewed, called women's writing "feminine tosh", declaring that no female author was his equal because of women's "sentimentality, the narrow view of the world" (Fallon). Accusations of 'girlie sentiment' are still used as an insult, implying weakness and a contravening of the Anglo stiff upper lip and the American WASP mentality (Strandberg 60). Popular author of the Flavia de Luce mysteries, Alan Bradley, goes to great lengths to distance his young female protagonist from sentimentality in order to verify her stability. She voices her scorn by saying that sentiment gets "in the way of simple logic" equating it with "False feelings" (9). Science fiction writer Sheri S. Tepper also associates a lack of sentiment with strength and pragmatism in her novel *The Gate to Women's Country* with the words "No sentimentality, no romance, no false hope, no self-petting lies, merely that which is!" (9). In other words, sentiment is fake and if women want to be seen as strong they must eschew it.

Criticism of sentimentality means that we are still afraid to romantically embrace sentimental political fiction lest we look foolish. As English aesthetician R.G. Collingwood wrote in his critique of Eliot's "The Waste Land", "No one gives; no one will risk himself by sympathizing …The only emotion left us is fear: fear of emotion itself, fear of death by drowning in it, fear in a handful of dust (335). The enduring modernist bias persists, and sentimental political fiction is too fraught with negative connotations to be freely embraced. It has not yet shed its affiliation with kitsch, which twenty-first century author Milan Kundera defines in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!

> The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
>
> It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch (251)

Like Oscar Wilde before him, Kundera condemns sentimentality's self-indulgence, its propensity in fiction to gratify the reader rather than the cause it purports to advance. Modernism, which as a movement strove to set itself apart from mass culture, has, ironically, influenced the mainstream to disregard sentimental political fiction as "low art" and judge it as inferior literature. Its assault on popular fiction in general, and in particular the sentimental mode, has resulted in what Andreas Huyssen calls "the anxiety of contamination" which "has remained amazingly resilient over the decades" (vii). The modernist influential aversion to sentimental fiction is summed up by I. A. Richards who states, "so many readers are afraid of free expansive emotion, even when the situation warrants it… It leads them…to suspect and avoid situations that may awaken strong and simple feeling" (269). So, it seems that the anti-sentimentalist campaign was so successful that its effects are hard to overcome (Perkins 257), in fact, as Tanner observes, "charges of it are made very much more frequently nowadays" (128), suggesting that our aversion to sentiment is stronger now than ever.

The recuperatory work done to ameliorate our lingering distaste for sentimentality might one day overcome derision and negate the need for devices of deception like the child narrator. However, for the moment, anti-sentimentality is still alive and well and we remain indebted to their ameliorative service. Sentimentality is known by different names, some call it kitsch, others melodrama, but, whatever its label, it appears that when fiction fails to maintain

emotional and cultural distance or does not require intellectual gymnastics, then it earns the appellation sentimental. However, we still seek illumination from fiction and writers still turn to novels to deliver their message. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe and her contemporaries who sought to enlighten readers socially and politically, present day sentimental political fiction still has “designs” (Tompkins xi) on the reader and there are countless readers who testify to the positive effects of reading emotionally engaging literature. Where there is demand, there must be supply, and thus, the child must continue to labour to obscure sentimentality so that fiction can impart knowledge, connect people, chronicle history and expose social wrongs without being dismissed as kitsch.

Chapter 2. *To Kill a Mockingbird:* Imparter of Knowledge.

> Folks don't like to have somebody around knowin' more than they do. It aggravates 'em. You're not gonna change any of them by talkin' right, they have to want to learn. (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 130)

There are countless testimonies affirming the educative effects of novels, like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that seek to "impart knowledge"—that is, to influence opinion on political and social injustice (Flood; Randall; Weber 233). Indeed, many scholars agree that one of the functions of fiction is to teach and that, consequently, one of the reasons we read is to learn (Felski 77; Gaut 141; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* 6). Harper Lee herself affirmed the edifying function of reading in a letter to Oprah Winfrey, saying, "I prefer to search library stacks because when I work to learn something, I remember it". However, although many scholars concur that "instruction is an important literary value" (Repp 271), for many readers overt didacticism is off-putting, part of a constellation of qualities that tend to invoke the appellation "sentimental" (Newcomer 215; Repp 272). The eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers of overtly exhortative sentimental political fiction have been severely criticised by contemporary readers for their openly didactic agendas (Repp 272; Woodworth 38). Jane West, for example, is accused of writing "'thinly disguised conduct books with obvious lessons" (Ty 87), and it is said of Maria Edgeworth that she failed to make her plots interesting enough to disguise her novels' didactic intent (Lee, Sun 34). In addition to taking exception to overt sermonising, critics have also railed against the sentimental strategies routinely employed by eighteenth and nineteenth-century moralist novelists to manipulate readers' emotions into

changing their moral stance—strategies whose omnipresence within didactic fiction has served to link didacticism and sentimentality more generally (Havens 14, 26; Lee, Sun 35; Repp 272; Ty 10; Van Sant 5). Yet while *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes on the traditionally sentimental function of imparting knowledge and influencing readers' moral stance, Lee's novel has escaped disparagement for didacticism, and, by association, sentimentality.

How, then, has Lee managed to avoid the fate of novelists like West and Edgeworth, by making her readers—as Calpurnia puts it in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—"*want* to learn" (130, my italics)? If this thesis argues that the child narrator has served the purpose of dissimulating the sentimental functions of much twentieth-century fiction, this chapter will bear this argument out in relation to one element of sentimental political fiction in particular—namely, its pedagogical or educational role. It will argue that the naïveté we ascribe to the child in Western culture means that, by making Scout the narrator of the novel, Lee disguises the educational logic of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in ways that have made it palatable to both popular and academic audiences and that have helped it elude the label "sentimental". This chapter will advance this argument as follows. First it will briefly prove the novel's association with didactic fiction before discussing the critical reception, both for and against, of traditional fiction that aims to impart knowledge. It will then show the success of the child narrator in avoiding accusations of sentimentalism usually ascribed to such fiction by comparing the favourable reviews of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* narrated by the childish Scout, to Lee's less well received novel *Go Set a Watchman,* narrated by an adult Scout. Next it will discuss how Lee's portrayal of the child narrator as "unschooled" and guileless enables her to achieve this obscuration of the

sentimental function of the novel, and provide a series of close textual analyses illustrating how exactly this works. It will further contend that alongside this analogy, Lee also reflexively thematises the idea that youthful innocence, unclouded by experience, has more direct access to the truth and therefore the ability to learn.

Lee's widely read novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* tells the story of a young girl, Scout Finch, growing up in the fictional Alabama town of Maycomb in the 1930's and tackles the traditionally sentimental task of imparting knowledge. The novel is a narrative of the South and as such instructs on difficult topics like racism, classism and sexism. The experiences of life force the young protagonist Scout and her brother Jem into a state of knowing and Lee uses their experiences to impart moral lessons to the reader. The children gain harsh knowledge about their world when Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white girl, is unfairly found guilty despite his defence by their lawyerly father Atticus Finch. The didacticism of their experiential learning is reinforced by moral lessons preached by Atticus, the voice of experience, as he lectures Scout about empathy saying, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view… until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (35) and he lectures Jem about the Radley's right to privacy, telling him that 'What Mr Radley did was his own business" (55). As we follow Scout and Jem's move from innocence to experience, the didacticism of the novel is undeniable for, as they learn lessons in life, so too do we. In a *New York Times* article, Sona Patel quotes reviews from contemporary readers who use words like, "taught", "formed", "lesson" and "wisdom" to describe their response to the novel and, as E.W. wrote in *The Economist* "The novel remains a testament to

the ways fiction can expose a society's sins, alter consciousness, and advance the gradual work of social change". Thus, *To Kill a Mockingbird* allies closely with didactic sentimental political fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Though didactic fiction has enjoyed an ambivalent critical reception over the years, there have been some periods of history when moralistic teaching through fiction has been openly embraced. The enlightenment era actively promoted fiction that instructed on moral behaviour (Schiller AE Letter 2; Smith 9) and the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a period when many critics actually denigrated novels that did *not* promote a moral message. John Wilson Croker summed this up in *Quarterly Review* saying, "A novel which is not in some degree a lesson either of morals or conduct, is, we think, a production which the world might be quite as well without "(qtd in Munday 212). This idea has persisted into the present day for many contemporary critics like philosopher Martha Nussbaum who contends that the novel must necessarily be an art form that is both "morally serious yet popularly engaging" (*Poetic Justice* 6). Cognitive theorist Berys Gaut agrees that literature is made more estimable when it teaches us something (141) and literary theorist Rita Felski confirms that there exists "a widespread intuition that works of art reveal something about the way things are" (77). Thus, many scholars acknowledge that we come to learn about the world and its people while enjoying literature.

However, the fictional function of imparting knowledge is not celebrated universally amongst academics and it has struggled to shake off its links with the much-maligned sentimental moralist tradition. Oscar Wilde, writing at the end of the Victorian era, was at pains to distance his work from the didactic

fiction of the day and in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he wrote, “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an un-pardonable mannerism of style”. Edgar Allen Poe famously referred to “the heresy of The Didactic” (11), in his essay “The Poetic Principle”, where, like Wilde, he proposed that a true artist should eschew ethical instruction and write with only aesthetics in mind. Modernist Virginia Woolf was so against didacticism that she criticised not only fiction, but also openly exhortative academic discourse claiming that all writing “must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture” (212). For many critics, the distaste for instructive literature has endured (Lee, Sun 34; Ty 87), despite the efforts of those like Nussbaum who argue otherwise. Charles Repp contends that this is because “heavy-handed…instruction suggests its author is intellectually arrogant, dogmatic, or prejudiced, giving the reader reason to distrust the lessons it seeks to convey” (285). In other words, overt didacticism impedes rather than promotes the acceptance of knowledge imparted.

Yet, despite the fact that *To Kill a Mockingbird* involves the sentimental function of imparting knowledge and deals with powerful political issues, it was remarkably well received by critics. Daniel D’Addario’s review observed the risk involved in writing about contentious issues like racial prejudice saying that “a faint catechistic flavor may have been inevitable. But it is faint indeed; novelist Lee’s prose has an edge that cuts through cant”. So effective is Lee’s nuanced approach in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Richard Sullivan of *The Chicago Review* went so far as to deny that Lee had an agenda at all, saying “This is in no way a sociological novel. It underlines no cause. It answers no

questions. It offers no solutions. It proposes no programs. It is simply an excellent piece of storytelling". In *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Lee committed wholeheartedly to the story of the Finch family and their Maycomb neighbours. In fact, the first half of the book is almost exclusively given over to their provenance and the minutiae of their lives. Lee said in a radio interview given just after *To Kill a Mockingbird's* release that she "would like to be the chronicler of … small town middle-class southern life. There is something universal in it. There's something decent to be said for it and there's something to lament when it goes, in its passing." (Qtd in PBS article). Despite her domesticated and personal narrative—another link to eighteenth and nineteenth-century sentimental fiction—reviewers do not accuse Lee of sentimentality. In fact, in *The Daily Telegraph* Peter Green stated that *To Kill a Mockingbird "*was neither sentimentalised nor played for clever laughs".

In contrast to the reception of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Lee's early draft of the novel released in 2015 under the title *Go Set a Watchman*, was not as well received and reviewers pull no punches in their common reproachful assessment. *Time Magazine's* D'Addario says that, *"Go Set a Watchman* is alienating from the very start" and *The Guardian's* Robert McCrum damns with faint praise saying it "has a certain promise, but not much more" seeing Lee's prose as "raw, partisan and often clunky". Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker* accuses it of relying on "prosy debates about contemporary politics" and Gaby Wood of *The Telegraph* refers to it as "barely a novel at all" complaining that "It contains several passages of undigested shouting, the kind a student might write in a political pamphlet". Thus, Lee is taken to task for overt didacticism as she barrages the reader with rhetoric. Like *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the novel sits

clearly within the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth-century “sentimental moralist novels”, however, in *Go Set a Watchman,* Lee’s blind determination to impart knowledge becomes the focus and results in the book being neither aesthetically pleasing nor enjoyable.

The overt didactic nature of *Go Set a Watchman* also highlights the sentimentality of the novel. Wood confirms this, accusing Lee of trying to disguise her “more radical” political agenda by “bookend[ing], rather half-heartedly, with sentimental scenes designed to obscure”. The narrator, an adult Jean-Louise Finch, lectures us like a parent to a child; we block our ears to the message and the novel becomes less an imparter of knowledge than an impediment to learning. Switching from third person narration to self-conscious internal monologues, the grown-up Scout awkwardly questions her family’s beliefs, asking: “Why doesn’t their flesh creep? How can they devoutly believe everything they hear in church and then say the things they do and listen to the things they hear without throwing up?” (*GSAW* 118). The debate she has with her father Atticus about whether African Americans are capable of equal citizenship descends circuitously into abstract political patter and individual people are taken out of the equation as she refers to “helping the negroes” (167) as a faceless collective. When she reminds Atticus that “they’re entitled to the same opportunities anyone else has” (169), it becomes an ‘us and them’ argument and perpetuates the divisive society she attempts to oppose. The voice of the experienced Jean-Louise who descends on Maycomb touting her liberal New York *‘s*traight talk’ is too blatantly hortatory, practicing no restraint, and therefore cannot avoid derogatory accusations of didacticism. As Calpurnia, one of Scout’s mentors in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Finch’s

African American housekeeper, so wisely teaches, “It’s not necessary to tell all you know” (*TKAM* 130).

The question must be asked, then, how did Lee avoid the same accusations of overt didacticism and sentimentality for *To Kill a Mockingbird,* her revised version of the novel? Legend has it that when Lee first submitted the early draft, later published as *Go Set a watchman,* her editor, Tay Hohoff, “persuaded [her] to write [the] novel from the point of view of the young Scout” (Gardiner). The original manuscript was told from the perspective of a grown-up Scout, an opinionated 25-year-old returning home to Alabama from New York, appalled by the racist attitudes of her home town. Because of the contentious nature of the content, combined with the fact that it was written and set at the height of The Civil Rights Movement by an author who was not only white and female, but from the southern state of Alabama, Hohoff believed that the novel would be too adversarial, its lessons too hard to digest. In her wisdom, Hohoff recognised that the powerful political knowledge Lee imparts—confronting the reader with discomforting issues like racial inequality, rape and the evils of a discriminatory justice system—could be more subtly conveyed by a naïve child narrator—through the voice of the loveable, tomboy Scout Finch—and the novel was rewritten as Lee’s Pulitzer prize winning best-seller *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In contrast to her adult correlate, what special qualifications does the childish Jean Louise Finch employ to impart knowledge without seeming didactic? The answer is tied to the fact that the Western tradition has tended to imagine the child as innocent and guileless, one who is yet to be educated, not one who educates. As Susan Honeyman points out, “In the West adults have

generally insisted that childhood is innocent…, irrational and unschooled" (3) and we accept that, as is the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* a child does not know-it-all and is open to erudition. Scout herself voices this assumption saying, "everybody's gotta learn, nobody's born knowin'" (231). Thus, our western view of children as "unschooled" makes the education she receives during the course of the story acceptable and authentic and, although we are learning at the same time, we are not aware that we are also being schooled and do not feel patronised. Scout, who is about to turn six at the start of the novel, and by the end is almost nine, states that, because of what they have gone through, she feels "very old" as she muses that "there wasn't much else for [her and Jem] to learn, except possibly algebra" (283-284). The voyage of discovery is framed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a narrative arc where Scout and Jem move from innocence to experience; from ignorance to knowledge. They live the learning, moving forward to a state of understanding as the novel progresses, thus they do not pontificate from a position of moral superiority. It is acceptable for Scout not to know, and because we are engaged by her story, it becomes acceptable for us to learn from her epiphany. Thus, for generations of Americans and millions of readers around the world, the message which *To Kill a Mockingbird* delivers can be read, heard and enjoyed without offense.

Scout's gentle and humorous narrative flows into and over and under the harsh socio-political messages that underpin the novel and dissimulates the sentimentality of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* aim to impart knowledge. The narration is openly a mixture of the immediate: Scout's childish consciousness slowly awakening to events around her, and the retrospective: a percolation of these events by an adult co-narrator. Her guileless questions, while amusing, serve to

cut straight to the point uncovering truth and Lee, as adult co-narrator, cleverly includes those that advance her message. Scout interrogates Calpurnia asking why she changes her way of speaking when she is among her fellow coloured folks “when [she] know[s] it’s not right” (129) and her ingenuous interrogation of the men in the mob wanting to lynch Tom Robinson cuts through their blind anger and exposes their humanity. Scout’s growing perception and her learning that results from her naïve questioning is placed at the aesthetic centre of the novel, as R.A. Dave observes, “What happens to the artist’s consciousness is more important than the actual happening itself” (37), it takes precedence over plot. Reviewer Robert McCrum says that “Lee executes a narrative sleight of hand of genius”, referring to the fact that Lee harnesses Scout’s naiveté to disguise the underlying adult perspective. As we are bewitched by Scout’s amusing attempts to make sense of her world, so Lee’s direction becomes less noticeably overt and, complicit with the adult narrator who encourages us to laugh at her exploits, we are less aware that we are learning with Scout.

The child narrator also serves to temper the didacticism of the moral teaching dispensed by her father Atticus, which could otherwise be perceived as sentimental and be difficult to stomach. As already shown, he is free with his opinions, delivering them from a vantage of moral authority. He even lectures his own brother Jack about how to treat children, telling him that “When a child asks you something answer him…But don’t make a production of it…they can spot an evasion quicker than adults” (93). This moral authority is due, not only to the fact that he is a respected lawyer and descendent of an esteemed Southern family, but also by virtue of the observation from those who know him that, “Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets” (Lee

52), and therefore has integrity. His moral rectitude allies him with “good” heroes in the sentimental political tradition, but, as a result of the dissimulation of sentimentality achieved by the use of the child narrator, Lee gets away with allowing him to share his wisdom. As Claudia Johnson points out, he is seen by some as a saint and the lessons he imparts are among the most quoted passages from the novel. As a single parent Atticus is Scout’s moral touchstone, and even though she says she only finds him “satisfactory” (12), her actions indicate she admires and loves him. The scenes where she finds comfort in his lap “show” us their warm relationship and seeing Atticus from the perspective of Scout’s love for him, we accept his lectures just as she does and “we [hear] every word [he] said” (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 285). Thus, Atticus remains firmly in people’s affections and his messages are remembered because we see him through the eyes of the child narrator.

The genius of Lee’s use of the child narrator is that Scout, unlike her father, is far from saintly and her “innocence” falls well short of the beatific pure “innocence” of the romantic image of childhood. This ruse successfully distances her from other sentimental political heroines like Little Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and helps cloak the sentimentality of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She cusses and tests Uncle Jack’s patience when she “asked him to ‘pass the damn ham please’” (84). She solves conflict at school and home with her fists, and Aunt Alexandra notes that she “was born good but had grown progressively worse every year” (87). Scout is no virtuously angelic sentimental heroine, instead, she comes far closer to James R Kincaid’s description of “the naughty child” (246). Lee’s rendition of “the naughty child” is also distilled from the many voices of Maycomb society and, exhibiting influence from those other

than the saintly Atticus, Scout bears the mark of the fallen people *To Kill a Mockingbird* seeks to instruct. As an intelligent and curious little girl, she picks up and cogitates on, not only Atticus' wisdom, but the words of the townsfolk around her, which make her partisan with their sin. It is Scout, for example, who utters one of the most shockingly racist comments in the novel. When her friend Dill is crying over the treatment the defendant, Tom Robinson, receives in court, Scout says, "Well, Dill, after all he's just a Negro" (203). With these words Lee cunningly achieves two things. First, she shows how innocence can be corrupted as Scout, just a young girl, repeats the rhetoric of the average dyed in the wool white supremacist. Second, Lee again shows us that Scout is not a saint, but a product of her Southern upbringing and, because of this, instead of alienating those readers who have struggled with their own racist thoughts and actions, the child narrator helps *To Kill a Mockingbird* to avoid accusations of patronising moralistic didacticism and the traditionally sentimental objective of imparting knowledge is more subtly achieved. Scout, like the readers Lee hoped to teach, starts out prejudiced and grows towards tolerance. The growth which Scout experiences in the novel is that by the end she "think[s] there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (231), and the aim of the novel is that the reader will think the same.

As readers we learn from the child narrator's moral growth as she consciously makes a decision to question the "knowledge" she has acquired from the townsfolk. Scout's narration gives insight into the town's judgemental views as she wrestles with her conscience, from her humble position as one of these "folks". The "knowledge" Scout has acquired from the town and has assimilated into her discourse tells her that she should feel guilty about talking

to a fallen man like Dolphus Raymond. Raymond suffers a self-imposed exile from the rest of the town because of his dissident relationship with a coloured woman. Despite her socially enforced "feeling that [she] shouldn't be [there] listening to this sinful man who had mixed children" (205), her actions counter these thoughts and she is drawn to the man. Her childlike instinct, of which Raymond himself speaks, leads her to find him "fascinating" and she overrides the town's voice. Scout's indoctrination into the racial protocol of the South is not yet so firmly entrenched that she cannot look beyond Raymond's "sin" to the man. Scout also "shows" her rejection of the racist dogma she has learnt and sometimes spouts when she takes such delight in visiting Calpurnia's church. Her actions show that she sees nothing wrong with interacting across the colour bar when she asks Atticus if she may visit Calpurnia's home. It is Aunt Alexandra, not Scout, who "tells" us the established Southern creed as she explodes with "You may *not*" (139) as whites do not visit with Negroes. Thus, Scout hears the bigoted discourse of the town, but her childish instinct, coupled with the teaching she receives from Atticus on tolerance, overrides this doctrine and she demonstrates her lack of judgemental attitude through her actions. She stands as a sort of synecdoche for the readers Lee hoped to educate and as she learns, so do we.

Thus, instead of advancing moral education through didactic preaching, the child narrator models the lessons she imparts through her actions. Another lesson that she teaches is that it is possible to change people's actions by treating them as human beings, rather than judging them for their appearance and the rhetoric they spout. Because Scout is a child, her lack of guile is seen as authentic and we can learn from her childish perspective in the scene

outside the Maycomb jail where Tom Robinson is in danger of being lynched by a mob from old Sarum. Despite their evil intent, from Scout's viewpoint, the mob are just men. "In the midst of this strange assembly", Scout looks beyond the men's "sullen" faces and the "hats pulled firmly down over their ears"—their attempts at disguise—and "sought once more for a familiar face" (156). Calling out, "Hey, Mr Cunningham" when she finds one, she personalises the mob. Scout reminds Mr Cunningham of his humanity as she reminds him of their relationship, naming his son Walter with whom Scout goes to school, and enquiring if the legal problems Atticus had helped him with were resolved. Her childish attempts at neighbourly conversation disarm the man and Mr Cunningham "squat[s] down" to look her in the eye giving the instruction to the rest of the mob to "clear out" (158). Mr Cunningham steps down from his tainted adult vantage point to take in the view from Scout's level. When he does so, he is no longer able to objectivise, and he looks at the person who is looking at him. Unable to hide behind the anonymity of the group, he is forced to back down. Because we see the scene through the child narrator's eyes, the mob, made up of "folk", is no longer a frightening force and because Scout does not treat them as such, they lose their power. It is not Atticus' voice of experience and attempts at reason that disperses the mob, neither is it Jem's brave defiance of his father to stand in unity with him, nor is it the newspaper editor's rifle aimed at the mob from the vantage of his office. As Atticus later tells us "it took an eight-year-old child to bring 'em to their senses … That proves something – that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they're still human" (161). The lesson of relationship over judgement is at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and responds to those critics who saw the

novel as "not go[ing] far enough" (Gist 249) and "reimagin[ing] Southern history…as something far more benign than its reality" (Ako-Adjei 185). The child narrator demonstrates what so many positive testimonies of the novel's transformative effect prove—that addressing hatred and prejudice with more of the same will not change hearts.

Thus, not only does Lee employ a child narrator to ameliorate the sentimentality of her didactic message, but within the narrative of *To Kill a Mockingbird* she also thematises the idea that a child's unbiased perspective can teach adults about prejudice without lecturing them. When Jem hears of Tom Robinson's guilty verdict, his youthful idealism is shattered by the result meted out by the court. When attempting to comfort him, Atticus says "If you had been on the jury, son, and eleven other boys like you, Tom would be a free man…So far nothing has interfered with your reasoning process" (224). Jem, whose trust was invested in justice, could see plainly and rationally that Tom, as an innocent man, should go free and he rails against the unfairness. He has not yet learned the hard lesson that justice has nothing to do with fairness and everything to do with the interests of the people who hold power and administer the law. He has yet to learn how the subjective bias of racism can muddy the waters and obscure reason. The reader can take Atticus' comment one of two ways, we can either see it as indicative of a hopeful future, one where young boys with a clear vision will grow into young men who remain reasonable and stand against unfairness, or we can see it as a warning that, as young idealists grow older, they too become tainted by experience and innocence is lost. Either way, Lee's message is clear, young eyes see reason untainted by rhetoric.

Lee investigates this theme further through Dolphus Raymond who, like Atticus, explicitly identifies the advantage of seeing things through the eyes of a child, but questions whether innocence is possible as experience intervenes. To avoid interference from the town-folk for his relationship with a coloured woman, he hides behind the lie that he is a drunk and cannot help himself. When he confesses his subterfuge to the children, Scout asks, in her usual unabashed manner, why he "entrusted [them] with his deepest secret". His answer is unequivocal, replying, "Because you're children and you can understand it". He also goes on to elaborate, explaining that their "instinct" is not yet clouded by the world which teaches us to accept and not to "Cry about the hell white people give coloured folks, without even stopping to think that they're people too" (205). Scout's friend Dill had been moved to tears after witnessing the belittling of Tom Robinson in the courtroom by the prosecutor. He rails against the injustice saying, "it just makes [him] sick" (203). Raymond's observation—that an "innocent" child can see, as plain as day, that black men are not equal under the law and that this is unfair—might seem akin to nineteenth-century romanticism in its reification of childhood innocence were it not that *To Kill a Mockingbird's* portrayal of childhood as less than innocent pre-empts the inevitability of disillusionment and makes Raymond's observations more pragmatic than sentimental. As he says, "Let him get a little older and he won't get sick and cry. Maybe things'll strike him as being – not quite right say, but he won't cry" (205). Experience will dry their tears as they get older and they will no longer weep when injustice is done. Thus, unlike "sentimental moralist novels", *To Kill a Mockingbird* does not preach that the imparting and

acquiring of knowledge is unequivocally hopeful. Instead it teaches that once you have acquired knowledge you can no longer be the same.

Lee's confirmation of the effectiveness of narration through the "unschooled" eyes of a child is further thematised by her setting *To Kill a Mockingbird* in an earlier historical setting, a more youthful time when the Southern states of America were more unaware and "innocent" of knowledge. The decade in which Lee wrote both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, was fraught with political and social anxiety. Television made sure that all Americans knew of the unrest and "The Civil Rights Movement" was an unavoidable reality. Her original manuscript, later to be published as *Go Set a Watchman,* is set in the 1950's and the burden Lee felt for the social problems of the age weighs heavily on the reader as they are confronted head on by her questioning of the status quo amidst an anxious background of unrest. In a further stroke of genius, Lee's visionary editor encouraged her to set her revised novel in an ostensibly less political and more "unschooled" era than the 1950's and return to her past—to the 1930's when knowledge of the problems inherent in the bigoted laws of the land could be denied. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in a time when the Jim Crow "separate but equal" policy was not yet openly challenged in the small-town Alabama of Lee's childhood, in a time when white Southern inhabitants could choose to remain blissfully oblivious to the unjust regime under which they lived. It is in this setting of the figurative childhood of the American South that the story unfolds, uncomplicated by the contemporary politics of the mid-twentieth-century.

To Kill a Mockingbird's return to a less politically aware time, a time when people could bury their heads in the sand and say, "I did not know", works

alongside the child narrator to conceal the sentimentality of the novel's didactic intent. The novel was not seen at the time as overtly political and the subterfuge bore dividends as reviews from the Southern press praised *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a story of every day Southern life*. The Mobile Register* spoke of how it was successful in "chronicling little bits of ordinary life, and saying sympathetically…that—small towns everywhere, North and South, are made up of many ordinary people". Wayne Flynt, a close friend of Lee, told PBS in an interview that *To Kill a Mockingbird* had a subtle take on "the innocence of childhood and about the corruption of most of the institutions that were important like the church, the courts, the school." Lee ran the risk of alienating her Southern readers if she openly maligned and challenged these institutions. Instead, at the time of its release, her fellow Southerners read *To Kill a Mockingbird* nostalgically as a chronicle of a time thirty years in the past, a time before their way of life was so openly threatened by change.

The success of Lee's choice to follow Hohoff's advice and utilise the child narrator has been affirmed by reviewers, both when it was first released and more recently in the wake of the release of *Go Set a Watchman.* Many early reviewers single out the choice of child narrator as a reason for the novel's success. Sullivan, who lauded the book as "a first novel of … rare excellence", calls the narrator Scout "a pistol of a little girl" and describes the point of view as "cunningly restricted to that of a perceptive, independent child, who doesn't always understand fully what's happening, but who conveys completely, by implication, the weight and burden of the story". George McMichael of the *San Francisco Chronicle* affirmed Lee's choice of narrative point of view as the best thing about the novel, saying "Best of all, Harper Lee has wisely and effectively

employed the piercing accuracy of a child's unalloyed vision of the adult world, to display the workings of a tragedy-laden region". Both Sullivan and McMichael endorse the artful effectiveness of Lee's narrative choice, acknowledging how she manages to disguise the informative content of the novel through Scout's unschooled voice, while not trivialising the gravity of the subject matter. The publication of *Go Set a Watchman* reawakened interest in the older novel, spawning new accolades for *To Kill a Mockingbird* which also focus on the choice of Scout as narrator—a decision which, according to *the New York time's* Michiko Kakutani, was "crucial" to the success of the novel. Scout's "pistol" like narration finds its mark, and like her father Atticus, whom the children discover was called "one shot Finch" (103) by those who remember his youthful shooting prowess, her words are accurate and straight to the point.

Nearly sixty years on since it was first published, testimonials vouching for the educative power of *To Kill a Mockingbird* continue to be voiced, confirming this chapter's assertion of the novel's didactic purpose. Barack Obama quoted Atticus Finch, when speaking out against racism and bigotry in his Farewell Address to the Nation, saying "'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view … until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'" Alice Randall, author and professor of African-American and Diaspora studies at Vanderbilt University, teaches the novel yearly. For Randall, its relevance lies in the fact that "it explains to readers who don't understand it why black people are afraid of the criminal justice system, because we have not gotten, historically, justice in that system." She agrees with those who feel it relays an important message, saying, "I think it is an elemental book…because it dares speak the truth that the problem in the South

is not the problem with black people, it's the problem with white people, and it's coming from a white author's perspective". Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has survived the critics—the voices of experience who have said that the message was not strong enough—precisely because she chose to soften the blow and created a novel that engages readers, while still imparting moral knowledge. Contained within the pages of the story is Lee's own testimony to the power of the child narrator with her youthful perspective and the power of "showing" through actions, rather than "telling" with words.

Chapter 3. *The Kite Runner*: Connector of People

> I see the unique ability fiction has to connect people, and I see how universal some human experiences are (Hosseini, Charney interview).

Believing that fiction facilitates an identification with the world of 'the other' that is both desirable and transformative, many theorists have celebrated its ability to build a bridge, connecting disparate cultures and social divides (Felski 40-43; Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* 26; Ricoeur 158). Reviewers and readers of Khaled Hosseini's 2002 bestseller *The Kite Runner*—the first ever novel published in English by an Afghan writer—also saw the novel's perceived capacity to connect Western readers with the people of Afghanistan as valuable (Aubry; Guthmann; Miles). At the time of its post 9/11 release, for Americans and those sympathetic to their cause, Afghans were the enemy, and the media of the Western world was saturated with anti-Afghanistan rhetoric. Reception of the novel indicates that, somehow, Hosseini's study of everyday life in Kabul prior to, and during, Taliban rule overcame negative preconceptions by involving the reader in the world of "the other" and humanising the people who live there. As Tim Aubry's study of the novel's reader reviews shows, many claim that the novel helped reframe Afghans from a faceless foe to real people (26). Much like "social problem novels" of the nineteenth-century that worked to encourage readerly connection with fictional characters to help overcome political and social divides, *The Kite Runner* reminds us that we all share common bonds and traits and are all human.

However, nineteenth-century novels that focussed on humanising "the other" in a positive way to inspire connection have earned the label

"sentimental". "Social problem" novels like Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), for example, portrayed poor factory workers in a favourable moral light compared to the wealthier factory owners, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1854) moved away from depicting slaves "as savage beasts"—a method devised to incite fears of a rebellious slave uprising—to characterisation as fellow citizens (Roth 100-109). By sentimentalising the socially disadvantaged characters, novelists aimed to inspire middle class readers to be more open to the moralistic messages of acceptance that the texts aimed to teach. This mode has come under attack by critics like Richard Simpson who questioned, not only the morality of Dickens' message, but disparaged the sentimentality behind his attempts at creating characters with which readers could forge an emotional connection, saying that *Hard times* is "a mere dull melodrama, in which character is caricature, sentiment tinsel, and moral (if any) unsound" (qtd in Collins 319). For novelist James Baldwin, Stowe's sentimentalising of the character of the slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did nothing to advance true connection as her depictions of the good slaves, George and Eliza, were "as white as she could make them" and when it came to Tom, he was made acceptable only because of his "humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh" (16-17). Thus, he believed her characterisation stripped the slaves of their true personalities and culture, making any perceived connection "improbable" (14). Like its nineteenth-century counterparts, *The Kite Runner* aims to "connect with [readers] in a personal way, no matter what their own upbringing and background" (Guthmann) and therefore risks being relegated to middlebrow status on grounds of sentimentality.

Why is it, then, that, despite engaging readerly emotion in the service of connecting people cross-culturally, *The Kite Runner* has found its way into academic course reading lists at many universities and managed to rise above accusations of "sentimentality" (Edwards 1)? As part of this thesis' broader exploration of the role of the child narrator in disguising the sentimental elements of twentieth and twenty-first-century political fiction, this chapter explores how the child narrator enables the novel to elude the accusation of sentimentality often ascribed to novels that work to generate empathy and promote connection with characters to conquer cultural and social divides. The previous chapter showed how the child narrator can overcome the critics' aversion to didacticism in art and this chapter, in turn, will demonstrate how our diminutive storyteller deceptively obscures the sentimentality of his connective function, for which some critics feel an equal distaste.

The argument will proceed as follows. First, this chapter will briefly explore the critical and philosophical antipathy to novels that encourage emotional connection with fictional characters. It will then show—by means of reviews and plot examination— that *The Kite Runner* bears a strong resemblance to nineteenth-century fictions in this vein. Despite this affinity, I will reveal that popular and critical reception of the novel indicates that the novel has managed to avoid relegation to "sentimental" status. This chapter will also show how Hosseini's casting of his child narrator as a "fallen child" helps obviate any suspicions of being manipulated into empathetic response and connection with the Afghan people whom, as Westerners, we have been primed to hate. It will argue that part of the novel's capacity to invite connection, while resisting aspersions of sentimentality, is because the identificatory connection is with a

flawed, ambivalent figure—the morally defunct Amir—rather than the pitiable innocent victim, Hassan. This chapter will also argue that because the novel's sentimental leanings are obscured by the sinful child narrator, the way is paved for transformation of the Western reader as they connect with Amir, and Afghans more generally, as fellow sinners.

There has long been strong opposition, on the grounds of sentimentality, to novels that aim to cultivate engagement with characters through emotional connection. Proponents of the modernist ideal of objective art, for example, believe that any emotional connection is purely sentimental, and that true art should not pursue such a response. The paradigm for this ideal was summed up by T.S. Eliot when he wrote that good readers "should have no emotions" (Tradition, para.14) and that "bad criticism… is that which is nothing but an expression of emotion (Para. 18). Clive Bell, an art critic who influenced great modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, cautioned that "the emotion that [art] suggests is false" (21) and therefore readers should not trust any connections formed through sentiment. This censoring of sentimental connection resulted in modernist authors like Woolf eschewing what she called the "subjective", calling it "sentimental trash" (Vol. 2 26). Modernist author Thomas Wolfe's statement that "solitariness" is a "central fact of human existence" (467) confirms that, not only did modernists question the veracity of emotional connection forged through sentiment, but also the *ability* of humans to connect. According to Marxist philosopher György Lukács modernist ideals imply that "man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself" (397). A distaste for "sentimental" techniques that solicit emotional connection has persisted and because, as contemporary critic Anthony Mellors

observes, modernism “is still a powerful force in aesthetic practice and cultural ideals today” (285), the belief in “the division between human significance and a chaotic universe” (285) endures, resulting in a lingering suspicion of fiction that proposes to unite society by human endeavour.

Underpinning this suspicion of the “sentimentality” of novels that aim to connect people emotionally are questions about the relationship between the solicitation of emotional connection and the promotion of change. French thinkers Emmanuel Levinas and Louis Althusser, for example, have asked whether it is, indeed, possible for readers to connect with and be transformed by fictive works. For Levinas, “writing does not lead to the truth of being…it leads to the errancy of being” (“T. P. V.” 141) as there is always a chasm “between seeing and saying” (“T. P. V.” 148). Therefore, connection, or recognition, is always mis-recognition which actually results in an “evasion” of “responsibility” (“Reality” 132) and no real transformation of the reader will occur. Althusser also sees any exterior identification of the self as mis-recognition as, in his view, even when we recognise someone as a “unique subject” (263) and come to connect with them, we can only really achieve an “ideological recognition” (263). The act of recognition necessitates the transformation of the “someone” into a “subject” and as such they are removed from us and we cannot meaningfully connect. We can never really know their reality, no matter how closely we study them and, in the case of fiction, no matter how much we read of their lives (263). Thus, much of the bias against connection with art is encouraged by academics who see connection with “the other” as impossible and therefore view any attempt at facilitating emotional attachment to fictional characters as sentimental.

Like Levinas and Althusser, many contemporary thinkers also specifically question the ability of sentimental political fiction to forge cross-cultural connections that result in meaningful transformation. Lauren Berlant and David Damrosch, although for different reasons, agree that emotionally charged literature is ineffective in this endeavour and, as such, the feeling it induces equates with sentimentality. Berlant believes that recognition of difference doesn't lead to change in the behaviour of the reading subject and can indeed shore up the subject's identity precisely in and through the other's difference. For Berlant, feeling the pain does not result in change because we are too invested in upholding an ideal of national identity which does not accede to individual differences. She sees the result of connection with art as not completely passive but rather an excuse to keep "the other" at bay and maintain the national hegemony. Fences, rather than bridges ("The Subject", 53-54). Damrosch, on the other hand, is concerned that readers lack the ability to read texts from a foreign perspective in a way that is beneficial to societal connection. He believes that when we read literature from other cultures we may only view it through the lens of our Western sensibilities and therefore our response will be purely sentimental and not transformative (10, 57). Both theorists would question the claims of connection and consequent social transformation made by readers of *The Kite Runner*, thereby relegating the novel's sentimental function to that of purposeless manipulation.

At the level of plot, Hosseini's focus on "human nature" (Orwell) allies it closely with those nineteenth-century novels maligned for their sentimentality. The tale is essentially one of two brothers: one morally upstanding and the other not, one legitimate and acknowledged, the other not. Interestingly, while

the title of the novel designates the illegitimate Hassan as the true hero, as he is the kite runner, Hosseini chooses to tell the tale from the perspective of Amir, a privileged young boy growing up in the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul who betrays his friend, brother and servant—Hassan. The background of the story is one of political upheaval, as the monarchy falls, the Sovietdevelpments intervene, and Amir and his father are forced to evacuate to Pakistan, eventually making it to the United States. However, these events, so exotic and foreign to the average Western reader, merely form a backdrop to Amir's narrative as he shares with the reader the intimate details of his life with his father, whom Amir affectionately calls 'Baba', and his closest friend, Hassan. Neither boy knows the nature of their true relationship and, as both are motherless, they grow up in the male dominated world of their father, a rich and powerful merchant and Hassan's adoptive father, the household servant, Ali. Hassan is Hazara, a member of the despised serving class, and Amir is Pashtun and therefore seen as socially superior. Their relationship, though close, is defined by this hierarchy. Amir's desire to win his father's approval drives him to acts of jealousy and betrayal towards Hassan, while Hassan remains loyal and constant. Reviewer Aamer Hussein of *The Independent,* admires the novel which helps readers learn about Afghanistan because "the documentary elements don't overwhelm the personal", however, it is this representation of a world that Westerners know little about from such an intimate and humanising perspective that puts it at risk of being written off as "mere dull melodrama".

By testifying to the power of *The Kite Runner* to overcome cultural prejudice and forge connections between Western readers and the Afghan

people, readers and reviewers confirm the novel's affiliation with traditional "social problem" novels with a similar purpose. Reviewers responded to both its exoticism and its perceived universalism, claiming connection with the Afghan people through both our similarities and differences as humans. Loyal Miles of *The Indiana Review*, for example, wrote "It is this examination of self in the context of culture and history that makes Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* a compelling debut". Examples from Aubry's study of reader reviews from *Amazon* bear this out. According to Amazon user "Stephanie Henry", the book "proves that human emotions such as love, loss, betrayal, and hope are timeless and can be found anywhere, regardless of class or culture"(29) and a reviewer named "Elspeth" said she "was afraid it would be about people I could not in any way relate to…but if you are a human…you will find the themes in this book are universal" (29-30). Hosseini himself is humbled by the reaction, saying "[He is] honoured when readers tell [him] that this book has helped make Afghanistan a real place for them" (Foreword). Public reaction to the novel shows that it has helped many Westerners see the Afghan people as human beings and performed the traditionally sentimental function of establishing connection across cultural divides. Despite this, however, there are many critics who are prepared to elevate *The Kite Runner* to a position beyond the status of just a popular sentimental work of fiction and take it more seriously. Stella Algoo-Baksh, observes that *The Kite Runner* is "a rewarding addition to readings in Postcolonial or Cultural Studies courses at the university level" and *New York Times* reviewer Edward Wyatt notes that "the book has also been adopted for courses at Penn State, the University of Northern Colorado, the University of Iowa and James Madison University".

The most effective ruse Hosseini employs to achieve distance between *The Kite Runner* and its sentimentally perceived nineteenth-century counterparts is his fallen version of the child narrator. Instead of modelling the child narrator on the innocent, romantic view of childhood so embraced by nineteenth-century sentimental political fiction, Hosseini taps into the Judaeo-Christian idea of the sinful child. This device is best explained by tracing the history of our Western construct of childhood which has been torn between a belief in Jean Jacques Rousseau's more sentimental, romantic view of childhood innocence and the puritan doctrine on original sin. Rousseau's views on the blamelessness of children are expressed in *Emile* where he wrote, "Coming from the hand of the Author of all things, everything is good; in the hands of man, everything degenerates" (11). In other words, God makes all children good; man meddles with them and they become evil. His views were highly influential in the writings of Romantics like William Wordsworth. On the other hand, while Western readers may like to hold onto a romantic view of childhood innocence, an aversion to sentimentality and a strong heritage of Judaeo-Christian ideology predisposes identification with the puritan view of the child as fallen being. The Bible states in Proverbs 22:15 that "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away" (NIV). Many Christian theologians, including English Puritan minister John Robinson, have interpreted this to mean that, far from being naturally pure and innocent, a child is born into this world carrying the burden of original sin and needs to be taught how to be good (330). Although Islamic teachings do not preach original sin, they do believe it is natural for us to sin (Fernea 6;11), thus, both Christians and

Muslims reading the novel would not find Hosseini's sinful depiction of the child narrator difficult to accept.

Certainly, Hosseini could have chosen to unfold the events through the eyes of an angelic child and nestled in more closely with novels like *Hard Times* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Hassan is trustworthy, as Amir tells us, he is someone who "mean[s] every word they say" (51). Hassan is humble, constantly taking Amir's jibes and continuing to serve him lovingly. Hassan is courageous; it is he who, armed with his slingshot, frequently saves the boys from the same tormentors who raped him. In fact, he is a more heroic character in every way and Amir knows that his father thinks this too as he overhears Baba remonstrating that it is always "Hassan [who] steps in and fends off" the bullies who plague Amir. The irony of the rape scene is that it is Hassan's bravery that leads to him being physically violated when he stands up to the bullies and, determined to loyally defend the honour of Amir's kiting victory, refuses to hand over the kite. Thus, if the worthy Hassan were our narrator and hero, we would be overwhelmed by pity for the unfairness of his plight. Representations of children as innocent and blameless, as Sophie Bell points out, instead of motivating transformation, result in a focus on feelings for the suffering child that averts action (100-101). Little Eva's father in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, who stood by and watched her death was reduced to "but a hollowed shell over a heart that was a dark and silent sepulchre" (313). He is so caught up in his personal grief for her loss, that, despite his promises to Eva to transform, he epitomises Ann Douglas' view of sentiment as a "failed political consciousness" (254). If the narrator of *The Kite Runner* was an innocent child, then, the manipulative sentimentality would be impossible to disguise, and the

novel, like nineteenth-century “social problem novels”, would receive criticism for caricaturing worthy characters to manipulate emotional response.

Hosseini, however, adopts a fallen, rather than a romantically innocent image of the child for his child narrator. Indeed, Unlike Scout, Harper Lee’s charming little rogue, Amir is not a ‘naughty, but nice’ child and the model of the “fallen child” that animates Hosseini’s depiction of Amir in *The Kite Runner* is cowardly, deceitful and elitist. Because of his betrayal of Hassan, the moral hero of the novel, we struggle to like him. J. F. Spiegel, from *The Vienna Review*, calls Amir “utterly loathsome” saying that readers “shudder to recognise their own empathy”, noting that Amir provides “a much-needed deviation from typical narratives of heroism and goodness”. He is no little Eva, brimming with angelic virtue and Amir’s unrighteousness does not rest on just one sin. Hosseini builds up a picture of entitlement and cruelty in Amir’s behaviour towards the ever-patient Hassan that culminates in the lie he tells his father to frame his devoted servant for the theft of his birthday present. According to Baba, “when you tell a lie, you steal someone’s right to the truth, when you cheat you steal the right to fairness” (17). Although Baba is not portrayed as a religious man, his doctrine sits well with Islamic teachings (Fernea 118). Thus, Amir steals “fairness” from his friend and the right to the truth” from his father. Amir’s lie has terrible consequences as Hassan and his father, knowing Baba’s aversion to theft, are forced to leave the household and are thus robbed of their home and reputation.

Hosseini’s depiction of Amir as fallen is clever and multi-layered, helping to establish the deceptively unsentimental impression he leaves and definitively distancing him from the innocent characters of nineteenth-century sentimental

“social problem novels”. While outwardly professing affection for Hassan, Amir practices a deceitful one-upmanship. The scene where he tricks Hassan into believing he is giving him a compliment while instead he is playing on Hassan’s illiteracy by calling him an “imbecile” (27) is particularly duplicitous. Amir’s “favorite part of reading to Hassan was when we came across a big word that [Hassan] didn’t know” (27). Amir grins as he mocks Hassan by pretending that “imbecile’ means “smart, intelligent” (27) and Hosseini juxtaposes this devilish smirk with Hassan’s open “smiling face” (27). Further entrenching our dislike, Amir excuses his one-upmanship of Hassan by virtue of Hassan’s ethnicity. Amir tells us that as an Hazara, Hassan’s illiteracy “had been decided the minute he had been born” (26), pardoning his blatant elitism on traditional and cultural grounds. Amir’s acceptance of Hassan’s status as a mere servant, “after all, what use did a servant have for the written word” does not endear him to the reader, and his initial inability to face his wrongs leads him to further iniquity. When Hassan is in danger of being raped, Amir chooses to cower around the corner rather than intervene. Not only does this scene expose Amir’s weak nature, but also seems to confirm his innate racism as his excuse for his actions is “[Hassan] was just a Hazara” (73). It must be noted, however, that Hosseini uses this otherwise damning statement to introduce a note of ambivalence to Amir’s morality when he follows with the question “wasn’t he?” (73). It is clear that Amir questions his own moral code and as readers we question whether he is, indeed, irredeemable and whether this glimmer of uncertainty might still lead to moral growth.

Before ~~we~~ can fully entertain the idea of moral growth, however, *The Kite Runner* takes the child narrator’s characterisation as a fallen child to an

extreme level in Amir's solipsistic narration of the rape scene. What would otherwise be an explosively sentimental tableau were it to fully explore the feelings of the victimised Hassan, is reduced to a self-focussed account from the emotionally immature viewpoint of Amir. A close look at the rape scene reveals a setting, littered with detritus, highlighting Amir's choice that he has to make as he fixates on two items lying among the garbage. One is the kite, symbolising "the key to Baba's heart" (67), and the other, representing Hassan's helplessness, is "Hassan's brown corduroy pants"70) ripped from him and discarded by the rapist Assef. Amir chooses the kite as he "turned away" (72). Turning away is what he continues to do to appease his conscience and from that moment on the text holds numerous references to Amir's not looking at Hassan, afraid of what he would "see if [he] did look in his eyes" (73). Amir's narration of the scene foregrounds his egotistical self-centredness while at the same time providing insight into Amir's interior conflict motivated by his need for acknowledgment from his strong and much-admired father. Amir's yearning for his father's praise is his driving force, his Achille's heel and, just as Amir turned away from the spectacle of the victimised Hassan, so too do we as plot becomes secondary to the child narrator's interiority expressing his inner struggle. Even after the rape has been perpetrated, Amir's focus is the kite, which he even took the time to "scan…for any rips" (73). Amir's identity as the dreamer and the poet, detestable to Baba who longs for him to prefer soccer and more 'manly' pursuits, is confirmed in his unwillingness to give up his "grand entrance, a hero, prized trophy in [his] bloodied hands" which would cause Baba to "walk up to [him], embrace him, acknowledge his worthiness". As readers we can only concur with Baba's observation overheard by Amir that

“there is something missing in that boy” (21). Winning the kite race and returning with the proof is Amir’s chance to receive praise and acceptance and he selfishly will do anything to get it. His actions confirm his dissimilarity from innocent nineteenth-century heroines like Sissy Jupe whose moral fortitude is held up as an example (*Hard Times)* and further disassociates the novel from the sentimental mode.

The Kite Runner achieves the ultimate exposition of the child narrator’s fallen nature by symbolically contrasting Amir with Hassan whom Hosseini represents as the innocent sacrificial lamb. Amir justifies his non-intervention in Hassan’s rape by suggesting that Hassan’s sacrifice served a higher cause. He autocratically and selfishly reasons, as if it was his decision to make, that “Maybe Hassan was the price [he] had to pay, the lamb [he] had to slay, to win Baba” (73). When he returns home with the kite, he has the blood of Hassan, the sacrificial lamb, on his hands. When Amir catches a glimpse of Hassan’s face as he is raped, Amir sees “the look of the lamb” (71) and, immediately after Amir notes the martyrdom on Hassan’s face, Hosseini switches, in italics, to a flashback memory of the ceremony of Eid-e-Qorban where a sheep is slaughtered to commemorate the prophet Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his own son to Allah. For Christian and for Muslim, the lamb is a symbol of sacrifice and of purity. For Christians, Jesus is the innocent lamb that was slain to take away our sins, and for Muslim, the innocent sacrifice of a lamb is a reminder of the Qur’anic story of Ibrahim, who “almost sacrificed his own son for God” (71). Hassan is thus cast in the role of the romantically innocent child, in contrast with Amir’s fallen nature. Hosseini carefully builds up a picture of a sinful and

entitled child who makes selfish decisions and as readers, because we do not like him, we do not feel manipulated into sentimental feelings for him.

It is apparent that *The Kite Runner's* fallen version of the child narrator serves to obscure the sentimentality of the novel's function to connect people, but how, then, is this function realised when the hero is so objectionable? The answer lies in the fact that, unlike little Eva's distraught father, our understanding of his plight is not motivated by pity, but by the fact that we can all identify more easily with the imperfect than the ideal. According to Christian creed, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 NIV) and so we feel an affinity with Amir, because of and not only despite his iniquity. Although unnerved by Amir's sin, Aubry's reviewer study shows that readers "take from the book a reactivated belief that their own flaws and weaknesses are defining features of their humanity and thus deserving of forgiveness" (31). We identify with his weakness on a human level, despite his abominable actions, because we are all aware that we are not perfect. Thus, the child narrator in *The Kite Runner* has a double role to play: he obscures the sentimentality of the novel's connective function and at the same time actually facilitates this function.

Our acceptance of Amir is also linked to the fact that as a child narrator he is a young sinner and can therefore grow out of his sinful ways and the belief in the possibility of rehabilitation also serves to facilitate the connective function of the novel. Linked to both the Judaeo-Christian and the Muslim view of childish sinfulness is the idea that moral growth can occur. Christians believe that children need "God's grace, and men's endeavour" (Robinson 330) to overcome the sinful nature they are born with and Muslims trust that those who

genuinely seek atonement—kafara—can receive forgiveness—ghufran (Fernea 10). For Muslims, as for Christians, the ideal is a moving away from evil towards goodness which comes from maturity. Karen Sanchez-Eppler, who writes on how literature influences social change says, “children’s imperfect or unfinished socialization can serve as a mark of freedom and a source of power” (16). She believes that those children in literature who are not perfect are powerful vehicles for social change and we do not hold their imperfection against them as they are only children. Much of the subtlety behind the reader’s readiness to connect with the child narrator is that we can understand what it is like to carry guilt for misdemeanours perpetrated when we were too young and self-centred to make good decisions and we also acknowledge the possibility of moral growth.

Another way in which *The Kite Runner’s* choice of child narrator helps to serve the novel’s sentimental function more directly is that, no matter what their cultural background, we still think we can understand and connect with children, because we were all children once. Although, like Developmental Psychologist Tim Morris, many believe that “Childhood is a form of Otherness” (9), this “Otherness” is easily overlooked because, as adults, we already recognise that children, even children within our own circle, are different; already primed to their “Otherness”, we feel connected to them. Although the human child is different to the human adult, we believe that as we have all had experience of being a child, we know what it is like. As American Studies Professor Jay Mechling explains, “The white, male folklorist recognizes that he will never really know what it means to be a black woman, but we all think we know what it means to be a child” (91). Thus, when it comes to connecting with *The Kite*

Runner's child narrator, the first hurdle of difference is already overcome; connection occurs at the basic level of identifying with the child we once were, and any other foreignness or prejudice becomes less of a barrier.

Remarkably, the only section of the novel critics fixated on as sentimental is the section not narrated by a child, which serves as the best evidence of the effectiveness of the child narrator to obscure the sentimentality of *The Kite Runner's* purpose. Sarah A. Smith of *The Guardian* pointed out how "What starts out as a fiercely moral but subtly told story becomes an unconvincing melodrama, more concerned with packing in the action than with fictional integrity". The change occurs, she believes "in the final third of the book"—the third narrated by the adult Amir. According to Aubry, many reviewers of the novel reacted similarly, seeing the "array of tactics" Hosseini employs in this section as "manipulative" (31). In this section, where he travels to Afghanistan to free Hassan's son finally freeing himself from his guilt, the adult Amir insists on narrating an explanation of events for us. He laboriously tells us that the expedition is expressly for the purpose of atonement unambiguously iterating—"I was afraid that I'd let the waters carry me away from what I had to do. From Hassan. From the past that had come calling. And from this one last chance at redemption" (213-214). Rahmin Khan, Baba's old friend also explicitly instructs Amir and the reader when he writes, "And that, I believe, is what true redemption is, Amir jan, when guilt leads to good" (214). Smith also describes the section as having "a series of cringe-making coincidences that bring the story full circle". The coincidences start with the revelation that the Taliban child abuser from whom Amir rescues Hassan's son, Sohrab, is the very same Assef who sodomised Hassan, and culminates in the remarkable circumstance of

Sohrab felling the evil Assef with his slingshot, fulfilling his father's threat made years ago. Thus, compared to the "child's fresh perspective" (Hussein), *The Kite Runner's* adult narrator falls short. Still, these failings only reinforce the work done by the child narrator in much of the book to disguise the sentimentality of its personal and emotive connective function.

The fallen child narrator disguises the novel's traditionally sentimental aim of encouraging meaningful connection and a socio-political change of heart; because he is not faultless, he unties bonds that might hold *The Kite Runner* to account for its sentimental political agenda and allows the novel to be perceived as literary fiction rather than as just a popular novel. We do not feel emotionally manipulated into empathy because our narrator is ostensibly so unlikable, thus suspicion of sentiment is allayed, and the novel can be left to complete its work of connecting cultures. The complexity of the West's relationship with the Middle-East is represented by the convoluted relationships and situations enacted between the pages of Hosseini's novel and it is these personal stories that allow us to connect with the people of Afghanistan despite what we see on the news. The doubts raised about whether empathy through fiction can make a difference are overcome because, as Westerners of Judaeo Christian heritage, we are primed to believe that the lost can be saved. By presenting us with the sinful Amir, our sentiment does not get in the way and the novel reminds us that people are people and that we are all fallen and need help, not hatred. Hosseini presents us with a country in need of repentance rather than retribution and Amir's sinfulness encourages transformation of our feelings towards the enemy as our heart breaks not for him, but for the Afghan situation.

Chapter 4. *Mr Pip*: Chronicler of History

> I do not know what you are supposed to do with memories likes these. It feels wrong to want to forget. Perhaps this is why we write these things down, so we can move on (Jones*, Mr Pip* 179).

The idea that fiction is important and functional is woven into the very texture of Lloyd Jones' *Mr Pip*. Heralded as a study in "the power and formative influence of literature" (Reid), the novel could be described as a story about a story, within a story that chronicles history. Set in war-torn Bougainville in the early 1990's during the blockade when Papua New Guinea screened off the island from the rest of the world*, Mr Pip* was published in 2006, after the blanket was lifted and the horrors experienced by the isolated island inhabitants came to light. Twining into the warp and weft of both the fictional story of the island's characters and the historical story of Bougainville is Charles Dickens' story of the orphan Pip—*Great Expectations*—a device through which Jones overtly entertains the idea of the functionality of stories. For Mr Watts, the last white man on the island tasked with overseeing the school in the wake of the evacuation of the existing staff, the story is useful as an educative tool to engage his young students; for Matilda, his most attentive pupil, the story is useful as a means of escape from the horrors of the war fought by the interim PNG government soldiers and the local rebel forces; and, while attempting to loosen the hold that Pip's story has on her daughter, Matilda's very pious mother, Dolores, confirms her belief that stories are useful in general, saying that "Stories have a job to do. They can't just lie around like lazybone dogs.

They have to teach you something" (74). Indeed, if reviews of the novel are anything to go by, *Mr Pip* fulfilled Dolores' educative requirement. As well as serving to chronicle the sensational and shocking events of the Bougainville conflict, readers have celebrated its didactic, edifying effects (Burleigh; Goldsworthy)—effects reminiscent of nineteenth-century historical fiction by authors like Sir Walter Scott.

Yet the didactic intent of Scott's historical novels, which he aimed to realise by sensationalising historical events to subjectively influence the reader into political partisanship, has been labelled sentimental (Baker 443-446; Woolf 58), while Jones' novel has not had to withstand such accusations (Laing; Byrt). Even though *Mr Pip* is recognised for its edifying intent, which Jones achieves by chronicling horrific events that shock the reader into taking the side of the marginalised of this world, it has managed to slip under the radar of the sentiment police. As in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Kite Runner,* the reason for this oversight lies, I contend, in the unlikely decision that Jones made to tell the story through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old indigenous girl called Matilda and this chapter will explore the implications of that decision. Unlike the majority of critique written about *Mr Pip,* this chapter will not focus on Jones' remediation of Dickens' novel or his writing back to literature (Colomba 275; Taylor 95; Walker 230). Rather, in keeping with the main argument of this thesis—that the child narrator has served to fend off allegations of saccharine sentiment—this chapter focusses on the way *Mr Pip* eludes the accusations of sentimentalism that might otherwise attach themselves to a novel that chronicles a sensational time in history and aims to influence reader's beliefs, confirming the power of the child narrator to overcome the charges of

didacticism, sensationalism and subjectivity traditionally levelled against historical novels. The particular skillset that the child brings to this task is that "The position of childhood is typically constructed as prelapsarian, relatively preverbal, outside empowered discourse, unsophisticated, unknowing, irrational" (Honeyman 4). In other words, we do not expect a child to understand the politics involved; we do not expect a child to be able to explain the situation in words; and we do not expect a child to rationalise, take sides or instruct on what is right or wrong, thus we do not feel that objectivity has been compromised and we do not feel that our sentiments are being manipulated to feel what they feel.

The argument will unfold as follows. After a brief look at the critical reception of the novel confirming its escape from “sentimentality attribution” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology,* 145), this chapter will give a short account of the origins of historical novels; the problems encountered by subjective fictional representation of historical events; and the ethical hurdles surrounding the genre, which literary critics and historians alike have questioned. Then, through close attention to the text itself, it will explore the efficacy of Matilda, Jones’ child narrator, to overcome didacticism, sensationalism and subjectivism and enable fiction to function effectively as a chronicler of history without accruing aspersive accusations of sentiment. This chapter will also show how *Mr Pip* highlights the power of the child narrator to disguise sentiment by comparing the child narrator’s storytelling to that of an adult’s, highlighting her uncomplicated and unsentimental frankness, which ultimately proves an effective weapon against forgetting. *Mr Pip* also thematises the effectiveness of a child narrator by countering the romantic view of childhood as powerless and

in need of protection, presenting us with an alternative view suggesting the potential of children as active reformers and political antagonists.

The reception of the novel shows that, despite the fact that *Mr Pip* narrates traumatically sentimental scenes chronicling a sensational time in history to didactic end, it has not been reviewed as sentimental. In fact, far from being discounted by critics, the novel has been recognised for its literary merit and was shortlisted for the Booker prize. Jones also received the 2007 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award and the 2007 Montana Medal for fiction. Reviewer Anthony Byrt of *The New Statesman* confirmed the novel's lack of sensationalism saying, though he includes "some harrowing scenes, Jones avoids being overly sentimental". A review of *Mr Pip* written by historian Anthony Regan, an expert on the origins of the Bougainville conflict, also affirms Jones' lack of romanticism in the novel's account, but feels that "Jones fails to convey…the complexity and horror of the reality of this multidimensional civil war"(400), adding that, "those seeking to understand Bougainville and the conflict better would be well advised to lower their expectations of *Mr Pip"* (401). To be fair, Jones never claimed the novel to be an explication of events. In fact, in an interview, Jones stated, "Mister Pip isn't an attempt to explain the conflict or the secessionist movement" (Bookgroup). As a journalist, Jones openly professes his belief in "the persuasiveness of the voice" (Random House) and he does not deny writing the novel, not just to chronicle the history of what happened in Bougainville, but to motivate readers to care about "the status of the orphan and the migrant" (Rintoul), thus his aim is more sentimental than rigorously factual. And yet, *Mr Pip,* despite its political

intention to motivate feeling for the disenfranchised people of Bougainville, has managed to avoid accusations of sentimentality.

While so-called “women’s fiction”, like Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), is often touted as politically motivated (Wexler 15), it was not the only body of work that actively sought to change hearts and minds through sentiment. Walter Scott, who has been credited with creating “the classical form of the historical novel” (Baker 443), also utilised classic sentimental plots sensationalising history’s spectacular moments to didactically influence cultural subjectivity among his fellow Scots. His success in this regard is uncontested as he is often referred to as the man who ‘invented’ Scotland, however, contemporary readers might find his lack of objectivity offensive. He was not only a Scottish patriot, but also a Briton, loyal to the cause and Scott’s letters testify to his overwhelming happiness over Britain’s defeat of the French at Waterloo, saying how he could not contain “the thousand sentiments which arose in the mind from witnessing such a splendid scene” (96). Scott felt no need to muzzle his own social and political loyalties in his novels saying, “I have myself long ceased to write in a work, the political sentiments of which do by no means correspond with mine” (156). He unashamedly subjectively chronicled historical spectacles to influence readers into aligning with his beliefs. As Samuel Baker writes, “Scott portrays a Stoic virtuous enough to be sentimental” (446). Convinced of his own and Britain’s moral correctness, Scott wrote novels that adhered closely to the teachings of Adam Smith’s Moral Sentimentalists and he brazenly practised didacticism in his novels seeking to influence political sentiments through his writings. Thus, the traditional historical

novel took a hortatory partisan moral stance, while utilising sensational descriptions of valour and hardship to invoke sentiment.

The form of historical fiction epitomised by Scott with its leanings towards didacticism, sensationalism, and the subjective portrayal of external events, has been increasingly dismissed as sentimental in the twentieth century. The reasons for this turn were threefold. First, for many, after the horrors of the First World War, jingoistic fervour dissolved under pressure of questions about right and wrong, and, as belief in partisan principles declined, so too did the acceptance of moral instruction in fiction. For ardent modernists, the attempt to retell life realistically for political effect was also anathema. Certain Modernist scholars, like art critic Clive Bell, believed that art and politics should not mix as "he who contemplates a work of art inhabit[s] a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life" (27). In other words, the reader should not be confronted by reality as art should be appreciated for its own sake, not for any other agenda. Second, even before the First World War, under the influence of the Futurist movement and modernists like Ezra Pound with his call to "make it new", nostalgic dwelling on the past became an abomination. Amongst modernists who were advocating for a new, more scientific way of writing, there was a growing aversion to novels that told sensational stories of the past, appealing to sentiment and glorifying emotional response to the extraneous. Third, a certain sector of modernists, like Virginia Woolf, became interested in the partial and situated nature of perception, moving towards a focus on the interiority of individual consciousness and began to criticise Scott's writings because of their focus on external events. While admiring him as an author, Woolf felt that his characters

“suffer from a serious disability; it is only when they speak that they are alive; they never think; as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it” (“The Antiquary” 58). A less direct model of writing about significant moments in history became more intellectually acceptable and Marianne Dekoven cites Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* as exemplary of the more oblique modernist approach to historical writing. As Dekoven says:

> The complex, powerful techniques of figuration available to modernist fiction writers allowed them simultaneously to turn History in Modernist Fiction away from the devastating facts of modern History… and at the same time to render those facts with greater power than direct representation would give. (150-151)

If we look to painting for an example, Picasso’s *Guernica*, an image representing the killing of civilians in the Spanish civil war, tells of a moment in history while leaving realism behind through enigmatic refracted representation.

For many, then, the uncompromising certainty of the traditional historical novel epitomised a sentimentalised way of thinking that needed to be “made new”. Times had changed from the days when writer Joseph Strutt prefaced the publication of his historical drama *Queenhoo Hall* with the words:

> The chief purpose of the work is to make it the medium of conveying much useful instruction imperceptibly to the minds of such readers as are disgusted at the dryness usually concomitant with the labours of the antiquary. (4)

Critics are now very much aware that ‘the facts’ of history are contestable and dependent on viewpoint and bias, making “useful instruction” more questionable (Wesseling 70). Because literature has the power to influence our feelings and engage our sentiments, many academics have also asked questions about the ethics of fictionalising the darker moments of world history and whether it is principled to tell stories about atrocities. Literary critic Cathy Caruth believes that realistic accounts of historical atrocities fail to communicate the full picture of an event and will always fall short, commenting on “the possibility of knowing history…as a deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past”* (27). She sees an indirect modernist approach as more ethical, interpreting filmmaker Alain Resnais’ refusal to make a documentary about Hiroshima as implying that even the direct archival footage he collected could not fully relay the enormity of the atrocity. Jones himself said in an interview with Geraldine Bedell that “the past is at best a fading photograph”. Outside the literary sphere, physician Judith Herman, who writes on narrative as therapy for victims, believes that “Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context, rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (19). Thus, any attempt at retelling atrocities is bound to focus on the sensationalist aspects therefore defying accurate representation and glorifying sentimentality.

However, in a literary environment that increasingly practices “a confusing yet often pleasurable schizophrenia” (Halpern 51), while simultaneously shying away from any hint of the sentimental, there remains a thirst for entertaining fiction that chronicles stories of historical significance and fulfils a demand for both education and sensational effect. As literary critic Susan Kossew points

out, “In times of global ‘crisis’…the natural question that arises is what literature can do in such a climate” (280). Before the reputational decline of sentimental literature, Strutt observed that people like to read novels that “represent to them a lively & pleasing representation of the manners & amusements of our forefathers, under the form most likely to attract their notice” (4) and things have not changed that much today. There are some scholars, like Paul Ricoeur who actually endorse fiction as a means of providing information on the past. He supports the narration of the "tremendum horrendum whose cause also deserves to be pleaded” saying that "the role of fiction in this memory of the horrible is…to address itself to events whose explicit uniqueness is of importance" (187). Literature, in Ricoeur’s eyes, has a duty to relay our social and political history. He believes that “What is surprising is this interlacing of fiction and history in no way undercuts the project of standing-for belonging to history, but instead helps to realize it" (186). For Ricoeur, narrating history, no matter how harsh the subject matter, does not diminish the importance or the veracity of the actual event, but rather gives it life.

Whether or not Jones was consciously aware of these arguments for and against historical fiction—he has, by choosing to engage a child narrator as his storyteller, achieved the illusion of indirectness favoured by those academics more wary than Ricoeur of fiction’s ability to narrate history without moral instruction, subjectivity and sensationalism (Reid). Our western view of childhood dictates that children are unschooled, irrational and innocent of the ways of adults and the machinations of politics. Being unschooled, usually viewed as a disadvantage of childhood, becomes as much of an asset for the child narrator of *Mr Pip* as it did for Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As Susan

Honeyman states, "Literacy has produced rationalist adults. We are trained to impose linearity and analytical framing on our perceptions" (3). In contrast to an “adult rationalist's tendency to categorize, explain, and pin truths" (3), the use of the child narrator brings freedom from didacticism. Innocent of matters of state and the politics of power, the child narrator does not have to instruct on right and wrong or take a moral stance. Children are also seen as frank, observing and relaying what they see without guile or interpretation. The child narrator’s frankness allows for a simplicity of observation unmodified by personal perceptions and imposed beliefs, resulting in what appears to be an objective relaying of experience. This apparent objectivity also translates into candour of expression that denies sensationalism, even when narrating horrors that, for adults, would remain unspeakable.

As the child narrator speaks with the frankness which we associate with children, distance from the traditionally sentimental historical novel—as exemplified by Scott—is achieved by means of her unsensational delivery. Matilda narrates the horrors as a child would, directly and with no prevarication, painting an almost amusing picture of the rebels as they fell, “arms and legs kicking in the air” (10). When her mother is brutally raped and then murdered by the redskins, her telling of the event mimics the brutality of the atrocity in its bluntness. “They took my mum to the edge of the jungle…and there they chopped her up and threw her to the pigs” (179), she says with an unnatural calm. Jones drives home the lack of sensation when Matilda says that when “recalling these events [she does] not feel anything” (179). It is her apparent lack of emotion which disguises the sentiment and allows the reader to choose their reaction, as, when the horrors are relayed in Matilda’s straightforward

lexicon, the reader is not overtly instructed in how they should feel. We also excuse the lack of feeling because she is a child and we accept that children are blunt. Thus, the lack of drama and sensationalism lets the reader take in the scene without feeling manipulated and Jones' use of childish narration skilfully masks the sentimentalism of such sad and shocking scenes with its straightforward simplicity.

The child narrator's ability to mask any manipulative sentimentality is further highlighted when Jones compares her forthright recalling of memories to the adult's more sensational reconstruction of events. Mr Watts' request that the children retrieve "fragments" of the novel when the book is destroyed mirrors the new way in which the adult villagers now tell time: by counting back to significant events of the recent past like "the day the redskins stood over [them] while [they] torched their homes" or "back to their baby's death from malaria" (128). As Matilda tells us, "some would be forever stuck on that day" which is exactly what experts tell us is the effect of trauma. The adult's experiences would, as trauma Physician Judith Herman contends, encode their memories "in the form of vivid sensations and images" (19) making them sentimentalise their recall of events, "stuck" in that moment. It is important to note that Matilda separates herself from those who suffered such tragic loss by referring to them as "Others less fortunate" (128). She does not get "stuck", and, remaining separate from these losses by virtue of her age and subsequent lack of responsibility, she is able to recall the memories and tell the story without sensationalism. Unlike the adults, whose memories start and end with a traumatic event, the child narrator begins her story in the time of "waiting",

before the atrocities become a reality and thus she chronicles a more complete and apparently less sentimental account of events.

This does not mean that *Mr Pip's* child narrator educates us with an accurate, perfectly objective version of events as because Matilda is unschooled, and her understanding is limited, her attempts to interpret and make sense of things that happen around her fall short of accuracy. Unlike Scott, however, her subjectivity is not due to a belief that his "political sentiments" (156) were correct, but rather because of her limited perspective. In this way, the child narrator undermines the assured subjectivity of traditional historical fiction that aimed to influence the reader, while at the same time artfully avoiding any claims to objectivity in the novel. As a young, unsophisticated, island girl, Matilda embodies our vision of the nescient child and Jones portrays her as intelligent, but uneducated in the ways of the world. When Mr Watts tells the children that they will be meeting Mr Dickens the next day, she and all the other pupils think they are going to meet an actual white man, one who might, as her mother suggests, fix the generator. Matilda's natural acumen immediately sets her wondering "Who was Mr Dickens? And why, in a village population of less than sixty, had we not met him before?" (16), but of course her naive mistake due to a lack of formal education becomes a source of gentle amusement for the reader. Her lack of schooling also causes her to conflate Pip, the narrator of *Great Expectations,* with Mr Watts. When he starts reading the, to us, well-known lines "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip" (18), she believes he is talking about himself. Matilda openly admits her lack of knowledge saying, "There was a lot of stuff I didn't understand", but, here again, Jones shows us her natural intellect as she

ponders “what marshes were; and what were wittles and leg irons” (21). She attempts to work things out by comparing these strange words from a strange time and a strange place to those she knows from her own life in order to make some sense of them, just as she compares her life to Pip’s, finding comfort in the comparison. Thus, Jones presents us with the story of the atrocity in the voice of an uneducated young girl who, though she tries to interpret her world, cannot possibly understand the politics involved and therefore cannot possibly influence the reader with her subjective account. Unlike Scott, whose moral certainty led him to enforce his interpretation of history, the child narrator imparts her own homespun and tentative representation and thus pre-empts accusations of sentimental subjectivity that might otherwise be levelled against fiction that aims to provide an account of history.

As well as portraying the child narrator’s tenuous grasp on the events unfolding before her eyes, Matilda’s chronicling of the crisis from her unschooled perspective serves to cloak *Mr Pip’s* didacticism which further helps the novel to evade the taint of sentimentality. We are not instructed on how to interpret the events, instead, Reid sees her “deadpan reporting of civil war atrocities” as a “vehicle”, allowing the novel leeway to pose questions about what happened. Unlike traditional historical fiction, no explanation is given and so we are left to decide who is at fault and answer the questions to which Reid refers as we see fit. When Mr Watts first tells the children that they will only truly know Mr Dickens when they have finished reading the book, Matilda says, “This was difficult information to bring home” (19). This difficulty is displayed throughout the novel as Matilda’s narration of momentous events, remains unexplicated and often incomplete. Thus, any suspicion of being didactically

instructed by her narration is averted because of her own lack of understanding. When Matilda hears that the PNG helicopters that they see flying overhead throw “captured rebels out the open door”, she observes that, as a child, she only ever hears part of the story as “whenever us kids strayed into range our mums and dads would stop talking”. Thus, though the children knew “there was some fresh atrocity, the details [they] did not yet know about” (10). Her fragmented knowledge is what is relayed to us, so we are always aware that the full picture remains undisclosed and Jones subtly distances *Mr Pip* from traditional sentimental historical fiction that didactically instructed the reader on what was important and claimed to teach an uncontested reality.

More than simply showcasing the efficacy of the child narrator, *Mr Pip* reflects on that force by contrasting the difference between a child narrator and an adult narrator in ways that endorse the former’s less sensationalist, obstructively subjective, and didactic approach. On the surface, Mr Watts might seem the better choice as narrator since he is a natural storyteller, transfixing his audience with his tales. However, there are moments in the novel when he crosses the boundaries of sentiment and his expert raconteuring, juxtaposed with Matilda’s simple childish perspective serves to endorse Jones’ choice. Mr Watts’ tendency towards sensationalism first becomes clear when he is introduced to us— “let the whimsy-phobe beware” (Maslin)—wearing a clown’s nose and pushing his wife Grace around on a cart. This was a spectacle from which the locals “looked away” (2) for, as Matilda says, in her usual blunt manner, “They would rather stare at a colony of ants moving over a rotting pawpaw” (2). Later we find out that his whimsy and sensationalist leanings are in character as he was involved in amateur dramatics before coming to the

island. He is, therefore, not averse to showmanship and when he says things like, “A person entranced by a book simply forgets to breathe…For me, Matilda, *Great Expectations* is such a book. It gave me permission to change my life” (134), we can imagine the aging thespian being carried away by his own feelings, and, in an effort to influence others to feel the same, sentimentally sensationalising the history he chronicles as he woos his audience who find themselves “seduced” by his words.

These words also affirm his belief in the power of stories to sentimentally influence the listener and it also soon becomes clear that, like Scott, Mr Watts’ storytelling is highly subjective. However, unlike the child narrator’s inexpert subjective interpretation of events, because Mr Watts comes from a vantage of educated adult authority, it is difficult to work out what is fact and what is fiction. Mr Watts’ Sheherazadeian story with which, night after night, he regales the villagers and the rebels is not only full of this whimsy but is also filtered and changed according to Mr Watts’ perspective and interpretation. Matilda alone realises that “This wasn’t Mr Watts’ story [they] were hearing at all…It was a made up story to which we’d all contributed” (163), a story woven together out of the threads of his and the villagers lives. As Matilda says:

> Around the rambo’s campfire, the world Mr watts revealed to us was not from the island, or from Australia or New Zealand, or even from nineteenth-century England. No. Mr Watts and Grace had created an entirely new space which they called the spare room. (153)

It was entertaining for the audience, even the drunken rebels, who “stood as if they might not stay (but they always did)” (148), but, Mr Watt’s ambiguous story

is told from his subjective point of view and therefore presents the islanders with his own personal spin on history.

Unlike the child narrator, Mr Watts also succumbs to didacticism. As an adult, Matilda realises that even the version of *Great Expectations* that Mr Watts read to them was an abridged version which he felt would “make it easier on [their] young ears” despite the fact that he earlier insisted “you couldn’t muck around with Dickens” (196). For Mr Watts, his didactic intentions for the children come before his scruples about authenticity and he patronisingly and hypocritically reads them a simplified version so that he can be sure they will understand the novel. Unlike Matilda, he also explains what he says, further displaying his didactic tendencies. When he lets slip during his tale that “white is a feeling”, Matilda, despite her own lack of elucidation says, “Words written or spoken aloud have to be explained” and Mr Watts obliges saying “We feel white around black people” (156). Thus, *Mr Pip* highlights the didacticism of an adult’s narration as opposed to the child narrator’s frank and unknowing relaying of events.

Not only does *Mr Pip* utilise a child narrator to disguise the sentimentally charged attributes of sensationalism, didacticism and subjectivity often ascribed to the historical novel, it also validates the agency of the child narrator by thematising the idea that children are not helpless sentimental objects. *Mr Pip* negates the sentimentally charged notion of childhood as passive and in need of protection (Rousseau 100), and embraces a new, unsentimental model that acknowledges children’s capacity to act. Historian James Marten points out that our past model, which still prevails, sees children as "without Political power" (53) and as being "officially non-combatants" (59). This sentimental

understanding of children results in literary and media exploitation of the traumatised child to encourage affective response from protective adults eager to save and help. As Lauren Berlant points out, if a victim:

> can be infantilized, pictured as young, as small, as feminine or feminized, as starving, as bleeding and diseased, and as a (virtual) slave, the righteous indignation around procuring his survival resounds everywhere. (52).

However, the idea that children are helpless and lacking agency has been questioned by many academics in recent years (James and Jenks, “Public Perceptions of Childhood Criminality”). Comparative literature expert Jane Thrailkill makes the obvious observation that a powerless representation of the wounded child equates with “sensationalism” (133) and *Mr Pip* eschews this code in favour of a child narrator in possession of political agency in her own right. In keeping with the old idea of the polite Victorian child who ‘should be seen and not heard’, to try and keep Matilda safe when the redskins are taking Dolores away to be slaughtered, Dolores instructs, “Don’t speak, Matilda. Do not say anything” (178). At the time, Matilda listens and “pretend[s] that [her] voice was [her] secret” (178). However, as the child narrator, she finds her voice and tells the story for all to hear. Because *Mr Pip* gives Matilda an operative role, it breaks from the sentimentalised idea of children as helpless victims and allows *Mr Pip* to actively oppose the authorities’ desire to leave her people’s story buried in obscurity.

This unsentimental view of children as capable of action is further thematised as *Mr Pip* chronicles the incidence of village children enlisting as

soldiers to fight the rebel cause. Anthropologist David M. Rosen's book on child soldiering raises the subject of a child's capacity for action suggesting that children are not just victims. In his view, children pulled into conflict are desperate *not* to be victims and the proliferation of child soldiers is "driven by a combination of necessity, honor, and moral duty" (55). When writing about Jewish children who fought for their lives under Nazi oppression he says, "if they were almost certain to die, they wanted to die under circumstances of their own choosing" (55). The boys who melt into the jungle to join the rebels seem to be as intoxicated by the excitement of wielding a weapon as they are by the "jungle juice" (138) they imbibe to mitigate their fear. Their weapons, representing their determination to stand up and do something rather than remain victims, are contrasted with their childlike attention to Mr Watts' story as "the boys sat there, with their mouth and ears open to catch every word" (141 - 142). Though *Mr Pip* thematises the idea of childish agency, Jones does not endorse child soldiering. Stories are shown to be more powerful than their guns when they lose themselves in Mr Watts' tale and "Their weapons rest on the ground in front of their bare feet like useless relics" (142). By employing a child narrator to tell the story of the Bougainville villagers in a novel that has been read by thousands, *Mr Pip* shows that the power of stories trumps the might of violence.

Stories of atrocities must to be told, and as Ricouer so provocatively writes, "either one counts the cadavers, or one tells the story of the victims" (188). The problem is often that we do not want to listen or, as trauma expert Judith Herman says, we do not believe the storyteller (8). Psychiatrist Leo Etlinger, whose special interest is Nazi concentration camp survivors, says that

“War and victims are something a community wants to forget; a veil of oblivion is drawn over everything painful and unpleasant” (159). Despite our aversion to the “tremendum horrendum” (Ricoeur 187), Jones found a way to tell a story that no-one thought they wanted to hear. He also found a way to tell the story without appearing to lecture us and without sensationalising the story to influence how we feel about either the perpetrators or the victims. By engaging a pragmatic young girl to tell the tale without hype, sensation or judgement, we are presented with a chronicle of barbarity and deprivation without feeling manipulated into sentimental pity.

Chapter 5. *We Need New Names*: Exposer of Social Wrongs

> But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain. (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 285)

Sentimental political fiction's agenda in the guise of nineteenth-century "social conscience" novels was to enlighten the privileged on the living conditions of more disadvantaged members of society (Lenard 46). Aside from "moralistic 'sermons'" and "deathbed scenes" (Lenard 4), these novels used sentimentalised orphaned and crippled children to draw attention to the harsh circumstances of the poor and the needy. Central to many nineteenth-century sentimental political novels, then, from Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* (1822) to Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850) was the use of the figure of the "wounded child" as emblem of social wrongs. These novels became known as effective activators of social conscience on behalf of the children they immortalised and the causes they exposed (Lenard 46; Nelson 10; Sutliff Sanders 42). Charles Dickens also participated in the tradition, sentimentally depicting the "wounded child" in the form of the orphan in *Oliver Twist* (1837) and the physically deformed little crippled boy in *A Christmas Carol* (184). Yet, while hugely popular in their day, the sentimentality of these pity-invoking tales and their exploitation of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society to expose society's shortcomings is likely to register with contemporary audiences as manipulative and mawkish. Like the sentimental

functions of imparting knowledge; connecting divided people; or chronicling history, tear-jerking reporting on oppressed children—reporting that, as Claudia Nelson has pointed out, helped boost sales of popular periodicals in the latter part of the nineteenth-century (66-67)—is now viewed with suspicion. Oscar Wilde, referring to the serialised novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in a letter to his friend Ada Leverson, mocked Dickens' sentimental writing saying that "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing" (*Oxford Dict. of Quot*.147). Wilde's words clearly show that the feelings evoked by pitiable exposure of children's suffering are not always the feelings they were designed to encourage.

What recourse do we have, then, to tell the stories of vulnerable people affected by poverty and political injustice if the world has grown deaf to sentimental recitals of children's woe? What "art" can novelists employ to gain and keep our attention when writing sentimental political fiction to expose social wrongs? As previous chapters have shown, many twentieth and twenty-first century novels have successfully forestalled "sentimentality attribution" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology,* 145) by employing a child narrator. By mediating their narratives through the alternately humorous, naive, fallible, unschooled or straight-talking voice of the child, the authors of *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Kite Runner,* and *Mr Pip* avoid the taint of sentimentality while nevertheless performing many of the traditional functions of nineteenth-century sentimental political fiction.

This chapter will tease out a similar argument around NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel, *We Need New Names,* a post-colonial diasporic story of two parts about a young girl called Darling who leaves behind her friends, family and

cultural heritage for a supposedly better life in the United States. As I will show, like many of its now disgraced predecessors, *We Need New Names* participates in the sentimental tradition of employing the services of the "wounded child" as emblem to expose social wrongs—specifically the economic and political upheaval of post-colonial Zimbabwe. However, *We Need New Names* is distinct from its predecessors in that it succeeds in drawing attention to the effects of global inequalities on "the weak and unfortunate" (J.M.S Tompkins 93) while avoiding the taint of sentimentality. At play here, I will argue, is the fact that, in its endeavour to expose social wrongs, more than simply depicting the effects on "wounded children", it elevates one of these children to the status of narrator. By thus de-objectifying and individualising the "wounded" child the novel obscures this figure's participation in a longstanding sentimental tradition in which they come to figure social ills. Bulawayo also achieves this obscuration by drawing on an alternative cultural history of childhood to the romantic tradition, distancing the wounded children in the novel from their historical counterparts who openly pursue our pity. As I will show, unlike Wordsworth's pure and innocent image of the child who, despite life's afflictions "still is Nature's Priest" (72), the child narrator and her friends are depicted as pre-social, unfettered by society's rules, and self-centred at heart, removing them as far away from Dickens' "Dear gentle, patient, noble Nell" (599) as possible. Thus, Bulawayo's clear-eyed, cynical child narrator effectively achieves a double coup: she not only obscures the strong sentimental political functions of this novel by taking charge of the narration, but because she is a child, and as such we find it difficult to ignore her, she gets away with straight-talking and sometimes offensive reporting, thus effectively

facilitating the exposure of social wrongs. *We Need New Names,* then, advocates for the plight of suffering people without the accompanying feeling of being manipulated usually attributed to novels of this genre and exposes a message about political and social wrongs that has not been written off as "weak-minded pap" (Tompkins 124). Thus, *We Need New Names,* stands as an example of fiction that, by changing the role of the 'wounded child" from pitiable emblem of social wrongs to forthright exposer, ensures that we do not take exception to the sentimentality of its function.

The argument will unfold as follows. I will start with a description of the historical, emblematic use of the "wounded child" in literature designed to expose social wrongs. Following this, I will briefly discuss how sentimental stories of the "wounded child", based on a Westernised romantic image of children as vulnerable, innocent victims, helped contribute to a protectionist attitude to children, which I will then show how this attitude served to motivate the formulation of the United Nations Declaration of Children's Rights which, because it is universalised from a Western world perspective, serves to perpetuate the concept of childhood as innocent and vulnerable maintaining a sentimental view of children, particularly those "wounded" by a fallen society. Following this will come a brief description of the findings of scholars like Lauren Berlant, Susan Sontag and Philip Fisher, who criticise the sentimental objectification of children for social intervention, not only on ethical grounds, but also because they do not see the device as effective in driving meaningful change. Next, I will show how elements of the novel centre it firmly in the tradition of sentimental political fiction that uses the emblem of the "wounded child" to expose social wrongs, before taking a look at the critical reception of

the novel to bear out my claim that *We Need New Names* is not seen as sentimental. Finally, I will show how, by employing the “wounded child” as a narrator rather than simply an object of narration, Bulawayo disguises her participation in the sentimental tradition of using the “wounded child” as emblem to expose social wrongs and, because of this dissimulation, achieves her expositional goal without being accused of sentimentality.

The image of the “wounded child” as a cue to sentiment has a long history in fiction aiming for social transformation. Orphan girl novels like Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World* (1850) and factory novels like Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood* (1841) aimed at exposing the wrongs perpetrated against children in the early nineteenth-century industrial age with an eye to encouraging reform and motivating action for society as a whole. Influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau’s romantic view that children are “without knowledge, strength, or wisdom” and therefore need our protection because they are “entirely at [our] mercy” (100), these novels’ descriptions of the “wounded child” were aimed at stirring readers’ sympathies. A factory reformer in Tonna’s novel exposes this purpose saying, “I hope it may please God, before long, to rouse the feelings of our fellow countrymen on behalf of the poor children in these mills. If that was done, we should soon see a change for the better"(326). The exploitation of children to drive reform was not limited to fictional texts and the sentimental portrayal of the “wounded child” also became a highly marketable device in the hands of the mass-media. According to Claudia Nelson, reporting on the suffering of children to inspire social reform in both literary and mass-media contexts increased in the 1890’s. Yet, while the appropriation of children for social purposes was accepted on the grounds that it resulted in good being

done for the children who needed help, these stories also ensured sales of periodicals (Nelson 66-67). This, then, was the beginning of a literary tradition that objectified oppressed children as powerless victims of their harsh circumstances for commercial as much as for reformist purposes, resulting in widespread scepticism of the sentimental use of children as emblem of social wrongs.

Whatever its ethical hazards, according to Philip Fisher, fiction oriented around the image of the "wounded child" did serve to drive the move towards a comprehensive set of human rights for children. As Fisher points out, "the greatest achievement of sentimentality was the part that it played in creating full human reality for children" (99). In the West, we believe implicitly in the rights of the child to protection, education, food and shelter—a belief codified in The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child instituted in 1924. These beliefs hinge on a conception of children as vulnerable and therefore in need of assistance that derives, in part, from the labour of sentimental political fiction. The DRC puts forward a singular, universal vision of children's needs that has been consigned cross-culturally so that, at least in theory, all the world's children can enjoy equal protection.

Yet, the move to protect children, as embodied in fiction that depicts the "wounded child" to expose social problems, has been criticised as sentimental because of its universalism. The problem, as Jenks argues, is "the misguided and tacit assumption of a uniformity of childhood" (123). While acknowledging the good intentions of those involved, Jo Boyden, social development consultant for disadvantaged youth, also challenges this assumption saying, the evidence shows that "some of the measures for child welfare—advocated

often on humanitarian grounds—have the effect of…increasing [children's] social and economic disadvantage" (213). As sociologists Alison James and Alan Prout observe, "The 'world's children' united 'our' children and 'their' children only to reveal the vast differences between them" (1). Considering the advanced world's limited understanding of the developing world's problems, is a one-size-fits-all solution for our children viable? The imposition of a common solution to a diverse problem is at best idealistic and simplistic and, in some cases, as Boyden indicates, has had the alarming effect of making things worse. For many theorists, then, the cultural and economic divide needs to be taken into consideration (James and Prout 1; Jenks 123) and, for this to happen, an understanding of individual differences is paramount.

In addition to the problem of universalism, there are many scholars who see the emblematic use of the "wounded child" to advance reform as exploitation on the basis that it strips them of their identity. Lauren Berlant highlights the liberties taken with the privacy of the powerless pointing out that, while for the average Westerner our "identity is private property" (50), the right to privacy does not extend to the marginalised, and thus "the exploited child" (52) becomes the ubiquitous emblem of reform. Susan Sontag's ideas regarding the exploitation of the "wounded child" in the graphic images of atrocities used to shock people into cognisance of social wrongs are also relevant here, and easily transferable to literature. She too stresses the loss of individual identity in our use of the "wounded child" figure, noting that in the Balkan conflict, "the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village" were used by both Serb and Croat propogandists. As she cynically observes, "alter the caption and the children's deaths can be used and reused"

(10). Fisher similarly notes that sentimental political novels objectify “children, slaves, and the old as central characters” (94) to stand in for the social topic they address. In this reading, the character of the “wounded child”, is no more than an emblem for the societal wrong the novel exposes, stripped of their interiority. Thus, if we take these theorists’ ideas into account, we can conclude that sentimental political fiction’s obsession with the emblem of the “wounded child” denies the humanity and identity of the individual and that, in doing so, it may fall short of the political goals that the exploiters of their images and stories hope to realise.

In its depiction of wounded children as emblems of social ills, Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* fits snugly into the genre of pathetic tales of paediatric woe so maligned by critics of sentiment. As impoverished victims of a flawed political regime—children ousted from their homes and living in a squatter camp with no running water, very little food to eat, and no recourse to medical care—they are perfect candidates to take on the task of representing the social and economic upheaval of Zimbabwe. Bulawayo’s wounded children are both “displaced and at-risk” and as Nelson says, any writer “who [can] show the effects of such wrongs on children [can] link outrage to sentiment” (65-66), making them ostensibly ideal sentimental objects of reform. Darling’s father is dying of AIDS after leaving Zimbabwe to seek employment in South Africa; Chipo, only eleven, is pregnant by her grandfather; Sbho hopes to escape poverty through prostituting her beauty; Stina does not even know his age as he has no birth-certificate and Bastard and Godknows, angry with their lot, are criminals in the making. Indeed, rather than denying the children’s role as representatives of the problems in Zimbabwe, *We Need New Names* actually

incorporates the idea within the narrative. When the aid organisation which Darling calls “these NGO people” (52) comes to dispense charity to the people of Paradise they take photographs of the ragged and dirty children. The reader knows they are destined to become part of the ubiquitous images of the “wounded child” screened into our living rooms to expose the poverty and hunger and advertise for support.

When Darling moves to America, *We Need New Names* continues its participation in the sentimental tradition of using the “wounded child” as an emblem for social wrongs. Darling becomes the emblematic representation of the effects of displacement on refugees exposing that what seems to be a solution—leaving home and family to escape political upheaval— is really just another social wrong. For the “wounded child”, despite the physical comfort in which she now lives with her aunt, Fostalina, it is a place defined by what it is not, a place where:

> you will not see any men seated under a blooming jacaranda playing draughts. Bastard and Stina and Godknows and Chipo and Sbho—will not be calling [her] off to Budapest. You will not even hear a vendor singing her wares, and you will not see anyone playing country-game or chasing after flying ants. (147)

Instead of friends calling her out to play, all Darling can see from her window is the cold snow, which she likens to “clean teeth” (148) because of its white sterility, in stark contrast to “the flowers? The grass? The stones? The Leaves? The Litter?” (148), the rich messiness of home. As in Zimbabwe, Darling is not the only “wounded child” in America and second-generation Africans, like TK,

the son of Aunt Fostalina's partner, do not even speak or understand their own mother tongue. *We Need New Names* suggests that when assimilated into their new homes, displaced wounded children run the risk of losing their indigenous perspective and thus will no longer have the language to report their story. Though in the first half of the book the "wounded child" is used as an emblem to represent the trauma of living in an unstable country, Darling remembers that life with fondness as she fantasises about what she would be doing "if [she] were at home" (153). The reason she stays in America is purely so she will not be hungry again. Her preference for her old life is illustrated by the utterance "I will stand being in America, dealing with the snow, there is food to eat here" (153).

Yet despite its political subject matter and its focus on the effects of social problems on children, *We Need New Names* has not been received as a novel that practises sentimental exploitation by making the "wounded child" an emblem of social wrongs. In fact, an examination of its critical reception reveals that no reviewers have pointed an accusatory finger at the novel for sentimental reasons. According to Heather Hewlett, "Bulawayo fully captures the daily texture of characters' lives without adult judgment or pity" and Leyla Sanai says, "Bulawayo refuses to play the pity card". Author Uzodinma Iweala even implied a modernist flavour when he noted that "Bulawayo's portrayal of Zimbabwe is notable not for its descriptions of Paradise and Budapest but for those of Darling's interior landscape". Added to this, the list of awards garnered by Bulawayo for the novel is impressive: its first chapter, originally published as a short story, won the Caine Prize for African Literature in 2011 and the novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the *Guardian* First Book Award and

the Barnes & Noble Discover Award. In 2013 it won the inaugural Etisalat Prize for Literature and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize Award for first Fiction and in 2014, the Hemingway Foundation Award for Debut Fiction, clearly marking it as a literary success.

How does the author achieve this feat? As I have indicated above, this chapter contends that while deploying the figure of the "wounded child" as emblem of the effects of political upheaval on the people of her native Zimbabwe Bulawayo evades "sentimentality attribution" by enlisting the "wounded child" not just as narrative object, but as narrator. The effect of this is to transform the "wounded child" from image to individual, enabling *We Need New Names* to showcase the interiority of Darling's thoughts and perceptions rather than merely descriptions of her exterior circumstances. In turn, this allows the novel to afford her a unique personality that obscures her affinity with the objectified wounded children of yore. Indeed, we are not even told the name of the country in which she lives, and details are limited to snapshot experiences described from the perspective of their impact on the child narrator. The exposition of the extreme poverty that defines the children's existence is not overt; rather it is shown to us through Darling's unique observations about the world outside that contrast sharply with her life in the squatter camp ironically named "Paradise". When she is out with the gang and they pass the new fancy stadium, she describes it as having "glimmering benches [they will] never sit on" (2); the wealthy neighbouring suburb they raid for guavas to fill their empty bellies is nick-named Budapest because, according to Darling, "it is like being in a different country altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live" (4); and the corporeal marks of her harsh

existence are exposed in her description of a wealthy adult woman's "clean, pretty feet, like a baby's" (6) that are so different from her own, despite the fact that she is the child.

Part of the smokescreen obscuring *We Need New Names'* kinship with novels that pricked the tears of Victorian readers is Darling's crude and convincing streetwise parlance that contributes to the development of her unique identity and sets her further apart from the innocent and vulnerable version of the "wounded child". Her thoughts are often crass and uncomfortably confronting—at odds with our universal romantic image of childhood as innocent and helpless. As reviewer Susy Wyss claims, "Despite her name, Darling is neither a sweet nor an endearing child. She is rough, tough and at times even cruel, shaped by circumstances that are unfathomable to most Americans". When Bastard mocks her planned move to America, she expresses her desire to" slap him, butt him on his big forehead…slam [her] fist into his mouth and make him spit teeth" (15). Wyss identifies something that, for a sentimental novel hoping to engage the sympathy of the reader, should be a disaster, saying, "while we want to care for Darling because she is a child, we are repelled by some of the things she says". Brought up in, what she describes as "a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart" (49), Darling speaks in a vernacular that is often coarse and scatological. For example, a central motif in the novel is Darling's reference to her home and country as "kaka", which in Southern Africa is a euphemism for excrement. Yet, though sometimes boorish and rude, the naivety of her comments reminds us of her youth and we do not take offence, rather, our attention is directed to the circumstances in which she lives.

We Need New Names' further develops the child narrator's unromanticised personality cloaking the novel's sentimentality through Darling's narration of her and the gang's anti-social behaviour. Rebelliously flouting the image of the innocent sentimental heroine, Darling and her fellow "wounded children"—Bastard, Godknows, Stina, Sbho and Chipo—take charge of the streets surrounding their impoverished squatter camp, taking the filth and the squalor of the place with them. Roaming the streets after stealing fruit off the trees in the suburban gardens they:

> just walk nicely like Budapest is now our country too, like we built it even, eating guavas and spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty. We stop at the corner of AU street for Chipo to vomit…her vomit looks like urine, only thicker. We leave it there uncovered. (11)

Darling's focus on leaving their mark "uncovered" highlights the novel's intentional insurrection against the sentimental image of childhood. The insurgency is further exemplified in her account of their visit to the construction site for a new shopping mall funded by Chinese businessmen, which they will never have enough money to shop in. Darling makes the objectional and xenophobic observation that the "fat Chinese man" who oversees the venture, which the children call Shanghai, sounds like "he ching-chongs" (45) and when the children's request for gifts is denied Godknows threatens to "come at night and defecate all over? Or steal things?" (47).

The aberrant behaviour and vulgar language that characterise Darling and the other wounded children in the novel do more than de-sentimentalise the child narrator's identity, they also serve as a vehicle for exposing the novel's

message of social wrongs. When Darling refers to her country as “kaka” for example *We Need New Names* draws attention to external social and political wrongs that have shaped her and her fellow “wounded children”, without actually discussing them. More importantly, her scatological language challenges social norms, mocking authority and showing the reader that even a child can see how bad things are for the disenfranchised people of Zimbabwe. When they leave the Chinese construction site, Darling tells us that their voices are raised in dissent against this capitalistic intrusion into a country more in need of “A school? Flats? A clinic?” (46), “[they] are booing and yelling” (47). The sad thing is that the “noisy machines” (47) drown out their protest. It is only through Darling’s narration of the incident that we hear their dissenting voices “telling [the Chinese] to leave [their] country and go and build wherever they come from, that [they] don’t need their kaka mall, that [the Chinese] are not even [their] friends” (47). In a country where the currency is so devalued that her grandmother’s suitcase of money which she keeps under her bed is worth less than nothing, what use is a shopping mall? Thus, Bulawayo invests Darling with a political voice; she is not just an emblem of social problems, but a narrator exposing how the state’s policies have resulted in a neglected and powerless populace.

Because it is narrated by a child, *We Need New Names* is also able to achieve the purpose of exposing social wrongs under the ostensibly apolitical and unsentimental cover of Darling’s games with her friends. Childhood scholars Allison James and Adrian James, point out that play is traditionally seen as a way for children to learn (91). Ironically, in Bulawayo’s novel, it is the reader who learns about the world’s unfairness under the guise of Darling’s

cognoscenti narration of their childish games that mimic the adult world. When playing country- game, for example Darling notes, “everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia…these are the country- countries” (49). As she says, “Nobody wants to be the rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq… not even this one we live in–who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (49). Darling’s narration of the games she plays with her friends exposes the contrast between herself and other children in more affluent, stable countries and the reason for the social wrongs she and her fellow children experience—some countries are more important, more desirable, and more deserving of the label country because they function properly, economically and politically, for their citizens. On the other hand, her country, and others in a state of turmoil, do not and are therefore not real countries.

Far from diluting the message, the horrific results of social wrongs juxtaposed with childish games lend impact to the exposure. Darling’s friend Chipo, for example, is pregnant and in the sentimental tradition of fictional fallen women, like Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple (1794),* she is not married. So traumatic is the situation for this preteen child, as, unlike her historical counterparts, the father of her unborn child is also her own grandfather, she loses the ability to speak. Darling tells a story about a girl called Nosizi, who “is dead now, from giving birth. It kills like that” (78), which explains their fear that Chipo might die in childbirth. This fear drives the girls of the gang to try and help Chipo by “getting rid of [her] stomach” (78). The sensational nature of the scenario is masked by the fact that Darling, from her childish perspective,

narrates her experience of the attempted abortion as a game. The intervention becomes embroiled in playful fantasies of television shows like ER, which Sbho saw once when visiting Harare, and the fantasy fortunately comes to an abrupt end when an adult appears on the scene and curtails any real action. Through the eyes of the child narrator, what is really a very poignant and pathetic scene, takes on a prosaic matter-of-factness that obscures its sentimentality and, though the subjects of incest, child abuse, and the lack of medical care resulting from poverty are never directly broached, these social wrongs are exposed.

The child narrator's' blunt and often humorously delivered narration of these games as playful imitations of the adult world, allows for exposure of dangerously political social wrongs in a way that not only circumvents accusations of sentimentality, but also censorship. The most disquieting example of this is her retelling of their vivid re-enactment of Bornfree's death who was killed for opposing the existing political regime. The full force of the fantasy emerges as she reports how Godknows enacts "the lorry that brought the armed men who came for Bornfree" (140) as they all become "animals wanting blood"(140) and as Chipo "has become Bornfree's mother…a possessed snake, screaming and screaming (142). The agency of the chid narrator to voice the story is contrasted with the impotency of the adults as the graves become "the people of Paradise who are standing there doing nothing" (142). The adults' eyes are full of "rage" (143), but they "don't make any sounds" (143). As Darling says, rage "does not count. It is a big terrible dog with no teeth" (143). On the other hand, when a BBC reporter interrupts their game asking, "What kind of game is that?" (143), Bastard replies, "Can't you

see this is for real" (143), which flags the effectiveness of Darling's narration. The wages of exposing social wrongs in a censored political environment like Zimbabwe is death, but, under cover of the apparently innocent dissimulation of play, *We Need New Names* is licenced to speak out.

The extraordinary capacity of the child narrator to expose social wrongs through her games and her childish vernacular is best illustrated through contrast with the verbal impotence of the adult slumdwellers. As a child, she can address the social wrongs that afflict her nation—the direct cause of her woundedness—as her youthfulness prevents her from being seen as political. *We Need New Names* makes frequent reference to the adult's silence as they hold back out of fear. No passage in the novel shows this forced silence more clearly than when Darling describes voting day. The children "are quiet" as they will the adults to speak up and be effective. As Darling puts it, "we want them to open their mouths and speak…but they are just silent…like something crept upon them while they were sleeping and cut out their tongues" (68). According to Darling, before President Mugabe's administration turned the victory over colonialism, into the defeat of democracy, the adults used to "talk-talk…about elections and democracy and new country" (68), but now they have no voice. The chilling reality of a despotic regime is that if the adults do talk, they risk their lives. Bornfree, named for the euphoric joy felt when the country achieved its independence from white colonial rule, becomes politically active, speaking up for change and he is taken away to be permanently silenced. The warning does not go unheard and as Darling observes, "that made the adults stop talking about change" (135). Instead "the adults just returned quietly to their shacks to see if they could still bend low" (135). Despite his name, Bornfree's

friend and fellow campaigner, Messenger, cannot speak either and Darling likens his mouth to “a terrible wound” (135), reiterating the image of the cut-out tongues. Thus, in the tradition of sentimental political fiction, if social wrongs are to be exposed, the burden falls on the “wounded child”—the difference here, however, is that it is the child that exposes the wrongs, rather than being the one exposed as a symbol.

Although some critics have censured Bulawayo for representing her homeland in a negative light (Ndlovu 133; Sibanda 75) the novel exposes that the social problems experienced by those who escape to a “better life” are also unfavourable. Away from the very real danger of Zimbabwe’s controlling political regime Darling should feel free to be more openly vocal, but instead, by muting Darling’s voice after her move to the United States, Bulawayo shows the social isolation felt by a refugee forced to leave her country. Despite the censorship in Zimbabwe, Darling’s voice when she is among her friends at home in Africa is strong and vibrant, but now, speaking for all her fellow migrants Darling says, “Because we were not using our languages we said things we did not mean; what we really meant remained folded inside” (140). This new-found reticence is due to the fact that they feel out of place and different. The novel exposes this feeling of displacement as she says,” I felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes in my language, in my head, everything” (165). Such is her isolation that she stops writing to her friends back home, embarrassed by the fact that her life in America is not “the one [she] had dreamed of back in Paradise” (188) and when she speaks on the phone to her mother there are long pauses because she is “not sure what’s the right thing to say” (204). Darling’s voice in the second half of the novel is censored by her

sense of alienation and *We Need New Names* exposes how refugees exchange one sort of marginalisation for another. The failure of politicians and philanthropists to make their home country a habitable place has resulted in them becoming displaced in an alien world.

When in America, the child narrator also exposes the social problems resulting from Western society's addiction to virtual experiences. Unlike Zimbabwe, children in America do not play games in the street with friends, instead they shut themselves up in their rooms playing with a computer. When Darling approaches TK as a possible friend he rejects her advances in favour of his virtual computer world. Darling, of course, questions him asking, "What kind of game do you play by yourself?" (153). Thus, the child narrator exposes an image of social alienation in which real people have been replaced by avatars. Bulawayo's social commentary continues when Darling makes friends with two girls from school who share a common bond of displacement. The three girls' 'game' becomes rushing home every day from school to stream pornography. Their childishness is shown when they turn down the sound to parody the voices of the actors as they pretend to climax. Bulawayo juxtaposes adult themes with childish imagination, a comparison which serves to highlight the social wrongs the "wounded child" represents. Instead of real human sexual relations, what Darling and her new friends' witness is fake as is any virtual representation of human experience. Unlike the innocent children depicted in the romantic vision of childhood, Darling is no stranger to copulation, sharing as she did a one roomed shack with her parents and later with her mother and her lover. The social wrong that motivates Bulawayo's reporting then is not a prudish concern for childhood sexual purity, but rather an exposure of the

ersatz experience of a society obsessed with an impossible version of life viewed through a screen.

Thus, *We Need New Names* successfully uses the emblem of the "wounded child" to expose social wrongs, both in Bulawayo's native Zimbabwe and in her adopted home in the United States, without magnetising accusations of sentimentality. Bulawayo's own words successfully sum up her motivation for her novel which ironically has its genesis in some photographs of a child taken during one of Zimbabwe's worst times. As she puts it in an interview with the *Guardian*:

> My protagonist, Darling, was inspired by a photograph of this kid sitting on the rubble that was his bulldozed home after the Zimbabwean government carried out Operation Murambatsvina, a clean-up campaign in 2005 that saw some people in informal settlements lose their homes. As I looked at image after haunting image, I became obsessed with where the people would go, what their stories were, and how these stories would develop – and more importantly what would happen to the kid in the first picture I saw. The writing project essentially became about finding out. The country was the backdrop, and of course it was at a time when it was unravelling due to failure of leadership. Still, I was also inspired by what children can stand for, by their innocence, their resilience, humanity and humour, and what they tell us about our world. I think this is where *We Need New Names* gets it pulse.

As an expatriate Zimbabwean she could identify strongly with the very photographs that most of us would only glance at, and thus, set out to give the

emblems in the images an identity. She also obscured their sentimental force as objects of pity by giving them feisty personalities that make them interesting and funny individuals, but not necessarily loveable. In so doing she reminds us that it is not only the nice children that deserve saving and also that the effort of saving, if done effectively, requires getting to know the children as individuals. In her critique of the plight of the refugee on foreign soil she also suggests that the solution to the social wrongs caused by political upheaval should lie in effective help to heal those wrongs at source. *We Need New Names,* while using the emblem of the "wounded child" to expose the devastating social wrongs that poverty can bring also shows us that wounded children are still children playing childish games and having fun and therefore should not be reduced to nameless objects. Neither should we assume that poverty equates with unhappiness, nor, for that matter, that plenty equals happiness, as Bulawayo foregrounds the importance of relationships over physical comfort. By employing the services of a child narrator, who engages us with her uncensored directness and lack of "political correctness" saying what adults would not dare, Bulawayo succeeds in exposing the social wrongs of our world without accruing accusations of sentimentality.

Coda

The focus of this thesis is to uncover how the child narrator serves to enable fiction to carry out traditionally sentimental political tasks without the taint of sentimentality. It has established that the discomfort and suspicion ascribed to fiction that aims to impart knowledge; connect people; chronicle history and expose social wrongs is ameliorated when we employ a child narrator. It has also demonstrated that this is achieved because we view children as unschooled, naïve and forthright and therefore above suspicion of manipulative tactics, thereby masking the sentimentality of the political message they deliver. In addition, this thesis, by proposing an alternative view of childhood to the traditional romantic image as innocent, pure and vulnerable, suggests that the success of these novels to advance their cause lies in the fact when children are individualised and given the power to speak, rather than be spoken about, they become highly effective agents of reform without the taint of sentimentality.

In the process, it has raised questions about the moral and ethical responsibilities of the reader when faced with the apparent guilelessness of the child narrator. When assessing the culpability of minors for criminal offences, New Zealand law adopts the rule of doli incapax, which enables flexibility when it comes to criminal liability for children. The “Crimes Act” states that:

> No person shall be convicted of an offence by reason of any act done or omitted by him or her when under the age of 10 years…No person shall be convicted of any offence … when over the age of 10 years but under the age of 14 years, unless he or she knew either that the act or omission was wrong or that it was contrary to law. (38)

There is, therefore, recourse for a plea of diminished responsibility when sentencing a child, and the same mandate seems to apply to the child narrator in fiction as we do not judge them as harshly, forgiving any didacticism or subjectivism because we see them as honest and plainspoken. Furthermore, practicing a philosophy of diminished responsibility for child narrators, we, as the reader, are also subject to diminished responsibility. In judging a character or situation voiced through the mouths of babes it is excusable to take a less cynical view, because our narrator is a child and therefore entitled to see things from a more black and white perspective. Just as in law, a judge has recourse to doli incapax, so too are we entitled to judge more leniently when a novel is narrated by a child. Thus, the child narrator helps novels mediate social and political issues more broadly promoting consciousness at a level that can be enabling and productive.

Yet, while this thesis has emphasised the positive repercussions of the use of the child narrator to surreptitiously influence our social and political perceptions, it must also be acknowledged that their influence might not always be beneficial. To be sentimentally moved opens the possibility of being led by our emotions in an irrational and irresponsible direction. If we are less conscious of this mobilisation of sentiment, because the motivator is a child, then a child can broach issues, which, for an adult, remain in the realm of the unspeakable. Yet, if we view these effects through the lens of narrative ethics it also seems that these affordances may not always be productive as the politics expressed could rest on a deeply problematic moral simplicity. Highlighting our responsibilities as readers and writers, the work of Wayne C. Booth and Ross Chambers explores the consequences of the narrative act itself, and the costs

incurred in exchanging person for character and representing others while acknowledging the “power” of fiction to elicit emotion. Their work would provide an interesting perspective for further study on the obvious paradox of a diminished culpability for child narrators, which is that if we practice clemency as readers, our benevolence might be misplaced as the child as sentimental messenger can just as easily function as sentimental deceptor.

Another significant finding that surfaced during my research relates to our perception of childhood. Close reading of the novels in my archive revealed that the way the child narrator is portrayed appears to have developed over time. It became clear that the reliance of the child narrator on the adult characters in the novel is inversely proportionate with the age of the novel. In other words, the more contemporary the novel, the more the child narrator stands on their own two feet, the older the novel, the more the child narrator engages with and receives support from adults. For example, in the oldest novel in my archive, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* published in 1960, Scout’s narration is a complex mix of child and adult. The adult narrator’s voice props up the child narrator’s naïve patter and helps to interpret her observations for the reader. In *The Kite Runner*, published in 2003, over forty years later, the child narrator is noticeably more in control, although there is evidence of adult interpretation in the form of flashbacks, and he hands over the entire job to the adult version of himself in the third part of the book. A similar surrendering of responsibility occurs in the second part of *Mr Pip,* published in 2006, but in the first part of the novel the child narrator is fully in charge of the narration. It is in *We Need New Names*, the newest novel under discussion, published in 2013, that the child narrator carries the burden of narration on her own without any apparent adult

intervention. Further study of the changes in the use of the child narrator in fiction, if linked to the evolving field of childhood studies could provide an interesting perspective on the politics of contemporary childhood—our aspirations, perhaps, towards a more autonomous state for children in the midst of an increasing protectionism in practice. James and Prout describe the study of childhood per se as a field "in which the traditional confidence and certainty about childhood and children's social status are being radically undermined" (1), while, as Jenks contends, "childhood remains an essentially protectionist experience" (122). So, is the noticeable trend—to allow the child narrator more independence—just an ideal that is reflected in fiction, a desire to move away from the more romantic view of children as innocent and vulnerable, to one that sees children as more self-sufficient and actively involved in their own destinies?

Lastly this research has raised the questions: what devices, other than the child narrator, might also be employed to ameliorate sentimentality and in what capacity could the child narrator, and indeed any other devices, be used other than in fiction to carry out their clandestine task? This line of questioning could have significant consequences for charity and non-profit organisations that need to find other avenues and methods to reach out to people and elicit support while avoiding accusations of sentimental manipulation. After all, the lessons we learn from sentimental political fiction need not be limited to the traditional sentimental functions explicitly outlined in this thesis.

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