

THE "SENSITIVE HEROINE" PHENOMENON: WHY TEARS BECAME WOMAN'S MAIN WEAPON IN SENTIMENTALIST LITERATURE

Murodxdjayeva Malika Alisher kizi

Teacher, The University of Economics and Pedagogy

Russian Language Department, Uzbekistan

malikamurodxdjayeva1797@gmail.com

+998700207360

Abstract: This article explores the depiction of female characters in 18th-century Sentimentalism. The author analyzes the evolution of the artistic ideal—shifting from the Classicist "heroine of duty" to the Sentimentalist "heroine of feeling." Particular attention is paid to the motif of tears as a semiotic sign, which underwent a re-evaluation during the Enlightenment: transforming from a symbol of weakness into an expression of moral superiority and a tool for psychological influence.

Keywords: Sentimentalism, 18th-century literature, sensibility, "feminine writing" phenomenon, semiotics of tears, gender identity, Age of Enlightenment, aesthetics of suffering, moral superiority, image of the heroine, N. M. Karamzin, S. Richardson, J.-J. Rousseau.

Introduction

By the mid-18th century, European culture saw a departure from the strict canons of Enlightenment rationalism toward emotional liberation. This movement, known as **Sentimentalism**, focused on the subjective inner world of the individual. Within this paradigm, the female image acquired central importance, and the outward manifestation of deep feelings (such as tears) began to be interpreted as a vital ethical and aesthetic ideal.

1. Shifting the Aesthetic Paradigm: From the Dictate of Logos to the Triumph of Pathos

The transition from the dominance of Classicism to the peak of Sentimentalism marked a fundamental shift in the understanding of human nature. In the Classicist tradition (P. Corneille, J. Racine), literature relied on the category of **Logos**—the triumph of reason, logic, and civic duty. In this hierarchy, the female character was often a functional element: the heroine remained in the shadow of a man's heroic choice, and her personal feelings were sacrificed to the interests of the empire or family honor. The woman in Classicism was static in her virtue, subordinated to rigid social regulations.

However, Sentimentalism performed a radical "anthropological turn," shifting the emphasis from external service to internal experience. Civic duty as the ultimate measure of personality was replaced by the category of **Pathos**—deep emotional experience. Now, the value of an individual, especially a woman, began to be measured not by her utility to society or the state, but by her capacity for compassion, empathy, and reflexive **sensibility**.

In this new system, tears and other physical displays of emotion were transformed into a specific "currency of sincerity." While the intellectual sphere and rhetoric (the word) were

viewed as spaces of potential lies, manipulation, and social hypocrisy, psychophysiological reactions—crying, trembling, sudden paleness, or fainting—were perceived as the irrefutable **determinant of truth**.

Tears became biological proof of a "pure heart": unlike carefully measured speech, they are beyond the control of cold, calculating reason. Thus, 18th-century literature legalized emotionality: bodily weakness (crying) began to be interpreted as the greatest strength of spirit, and the heroine who openly displayed her feelings gained a new form of agency and moral authority.

2. The Semiotics of Tears: Weapon or Weakness?

In the works of S. Richardson (*Pamela*), J.-J. Rousseau (*Julie, or the New Heloise*), and N. Karamzin (*Poor Liza*), the heroine's tears perform several strategic functions:

- **Moral Criterion:** The ability to shed tears separates the "sensitive" heroine from "callous" villains. Liza's tears in Karamzin's work are a marker of her natural purity, which stands above class prejudice.
- **Instrument of Power:** Lacking legal rights and physical strength, the woman uses emotional influence. Tears evoke guilt in the male recipient and awaken his "dormant virtue." This is a form of "soft power" that forces the tyrant to retreat.
- **Aesthetization of Suffering:** In Sentimentalism, tears are not ugly; they are beautiful. Melancholy becomes a fashionable category, turning suffering into an object of admiration.

3. Biological Determinism and the "Anthropology of Sensibility": The Physiology of "Fine Nerves"

The scientific foundation of Sentimentalism was based on 18th-century medical discoveries regarding the relationship between the human body and moral character. The works of British physician **Thomas Willis** and Swiss anatomist **Albrecht von Haller** were particularly influential. Their theories on the "irritability" and "sensibility" of nerve fibers suggested that moral perfection directly correlates with the delicacy and tenderness of one's physical organization.

The era's discourse maintained that the female body possessed a higher "conductivity" of emotions. It was believed that a woman's "nerve fibers" were more elastic and susceptible to external stimuli than the coarser fibers of a man. This physiological trait turned woman into a "living barometer" of ethics: she was the first to react to injustice, cruelty, or beauty.

Within this paradigm, female fainting or a flood of tears ceased to be viewed as a medical pathology or a sign of sickly infirmity. On the contrary, they achieved the status of the ultimate point of ethical tension. Fainting was interpreted as a "**spiritual collapse**": when a sensitive nature encountered the imperfection, cynicism, or vice of the surrounding world, her body literally could not withstand the cognitive and emotional resonance.

4. The Social Emancipation of Feeling: A Humanistic Breakthrough

Through the image of the "sensitive heroine," Sentimentalism carried out a social revolution, breaking the class monopoly on deep feelings. N. M. Karamzin's famous thesis, "**And peasant women know how to feel,**" became the manifesto of a new humanism: the value

of a person was now determined by "nobility of heart" rather than a title. In this system, tears became a universal meta-language erasing class boundaries. By equating the noblewoman and the peasant in their right to suffer, 18th-century literature proved that emotional fragility is a universal human code, not an elite privilege.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of the "sensitive heroine" in 18th-century literature is not evidence of infantility, but a complex mechanism representing a new ethic. Tears became the "main weapon" because they:

1. Established a woman's right to subjective agency.
2. Served as proof of moral legitimacy in conflicts with rational force.
3. Formed a new aesthetic canon where vulnerability was equated with spiritual strength.

This literary type laid the foundation for 19th-century psychologism, evolving from an external demonstration of feelings into a profound analysis of a woman's inner world.

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