A Sentimental Journey—Why Schmaltz Matters

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Cute little kittens and puppies on chocolate boxes, the poems inside tacky greeting cards and sappy tear-jerker films about cancer patients are all things that qualify as sappy, schmaltzy and sentimental. Consider for a moment the kind of response something that is sentimental is trying to elicit. I would imagine that the answer would be something gooey, like "Oh, that's so *lovely*!" However, what is interesting to me is that it would seem many people do not actually genuinely feel that way about many sappy, sentimental things and works. Instead, I think that the actual feelings of many people in response to sentimentality are something more like "Blech, how tacky!"—amusement or disdain. Indeed, I think that if anyone regularly found themselves in the throes of a Hallmark moment at the sight of chocolate box kittens, then this would be something of an embarrassment, and they would be unwilling to admit this to many people.

What this reveals to me is an obvious gap between what the sentimental work wants us to feel and what we do in fact feel. This gap is puzzling to me for reasons that become clear when we consider the gap between the desired and actual responses. The difference in response is not a difference in degree, but a qualitatively different kind of emotional response. It is not that chocolate box kittens or sappy movies are bad instances for what they are. Consider as a comparison a really tacky B-grade horror film. Although such a work intends us to be terrified, we would often fail to respond in this way and instead find it amusing or stupid. Our failure to respond in this case is because the work fails in some way. Our failure to respond to chocolate box kittens or a tearjerker movie is different. We don't fail to respond to them in the way intended by the work because there is something faulty about the work itself.

In this respect, sentimental art is quite unlike things like the cheap and tacky-B-grade horror films. With a B-grade horror flick, our failure is because the work itself is bad.

I am drawn to the issue of kitsch and sentimentality for this kind of reason—because, very often, sentimentality is greeted with disdain and dislike, instead of eliciting the response intended. My goal is to explain what sentimentality is. My discussion will explain how it is that we have this gap between what an item of kitsch aims to elicit as an emotional response and how we in fact respond. I will also argue that there are instances of works and fictions that we should resist, and that some sentimental works are among those that should be resisted.

Works of art or fiction that provoke a sentimental response have two essential components. One component is that the object of the response is idealised[1]. When a work of art or fiction is sentimental, it idealises the characters or events in the work in order to gain a sentimental response from the viewer. When something is idealised, the more appealing aspects of that object are embellished or exaggerated, and the mundane or less pleasant ones are ignored or played down.

An excellent example of such idealisations can be found in the sentimental classic, *Steel Magnolias*[2]. The central intrigue of the plot focuses on the illness and eventual death of the young, beautiful Shelby, played by Julia Roberts. Shelby is an idealised character, impossibly virtuous and outstanding in every way. She works as a paediatric nurse, she is wholesome and gorgeous, a loving wife to her promising lawyer husband and mother to their young child. Thus, when poor Shelby falls into a diabetic coma and eventually has her life support switched off, her death is made all the more tragic as the loss of someone idealised to seem so virtuous and undeserving is that much more devastating. Shedding tears over the death of Shelby in *Steel Magnolias* is a sentimental response as it is elicited by idealisations about how wonderful and undeserving Shelby is, and thus the tragedy her young death represents.

Idealisation is very important to sentimental response; but it is not the only component necessary for provoking a sentimental response in the viewer. The other crucial feature about sentimentality is that the response is one that is supposed to feel pleasant to experience,[3] and whether the response feels pleasant or not depends on the idealisation.

Whether the work in fact succeeds in provoking a sentimental response is another matter, but the intention in a sentimental work is that the idealisation provokes a certain kind of response, which is one that is pleasant to experience.

When we have a sentimental response to *Steel Magnolias*, the response we are intended to have is something along the lines of "Oh, how beautifully tragic!" This response feels pleasant because our attention is drawn to all of the beautiful, morally good aspects of Shelby, while the less savoury and more mundane ones are ignored. It's almost as if we're *only* thinking about the good qualities when we have the positive experience. However, we can imagine a less pleasant-feeling response if the audience were presented with a more realistic portrayal of Shelby's death through diabetic coma. In *Steel Magnolias*, we only see a beautiful, peaceful Shelby. We see none of the things that usually afflict a person in a coma, such as weeping bedsores or greasy hair. If the audience were presented with a realistic scene of Shelby's comatose state and eventual death, then any response to this death would not be at all pleasant to experience, and hence the movie would no longer be characterised as a sentimental one.

And so, works of fiction that aim to elicit an emotional response from their audience idealise the object of the sought emotion. Whenever we respond emotionally to an object, there is a cognitive element involved. I call this element an evaluation. Evaluations take the form of recognising that the object of your emotion is worthy of that response in some way. The more complex evaluations are something more like assessments. Emotions that have these kinds of evaluations are ones such as pride, admiration or shame.

When we have a sentimental response to a work, the work has encouraged an evaluation that recognises the idealised features about the characters or events. Where we respond in the way intended to *Steel Magnolias*, our response will be something like "Oh, it is just so beautifully tragic that someone as perfect and undeserving as Shelby had to die so young!"

Part of the problem with sentimental things, I believe, is this feature of idealisation. The process of idealising, whereby some features of the object are played up or embellished, and others are played down, amounts to a kind of simplified portrayal, something like an 'edited

highlights' version. When an object is simplified, we are not getting a full picture about that object. It is this not-entirely-realistic aspect of sentimentality that also provides a reason why there are some sentimental works we should resist. At this point, then, I will turn to a discussion of the notion of resisting a work of art or fiction.

Works assume we will be a certain kind of spectator. Consider the tradition of classic nude paintings. Nudes within this tradition are typically depicted as submissive, gracefully reclining in shyly suggestive poses. Portrayals of women such as that described above, as beautiful and submissive, are ones that unquestioningly presuppose an audience who will appreciate them as objects of sexual desire, for their pleasure. When we consider just about any nude from this tradition, this is obvious. Their poses and facial expressions are, without question, intended to be seen as sexually suggestive. However, not every spectator for a nude portrait is going to be one that appreciates a beautiful, submissive woman as an object of sexual desire. These works are surely begging for a heterosexual *male* spectator.

Taking a work such as a classic nude painting (which depicts women as beautiful and submissive) without question constitutes an implicit acceptance that there is nothing wrong with seeing women merely as beautiful, submissive objects of male desire. The most plausible reason as to why you may object to a work that assumes it is appropriate to see women as objects of sexual desire alone is that presumably you would find the endorsements of these kinds of implications in real life objectionable too.

Resisting is recognising that the work is asking you to make certain evaluations as a certain kind of spectator, and is also the recognition that you don't want to be that kind of spectator. Thus, you are choosing not to make the appraisals sought by the work, meaning you do not experience the emotional reaction sought by the work either. When we resist the appraisals or evaluations that a classic nude painting assumes we will make, we have not only recognised that the work is assuming we will be a certain kind of spectator, we are also choosing *not* to agree that it is appropriate to see women as solely objects of male desire. It is the making of the evaluation sought by the work that is being resisted, and thus the emotional reaction sought by the work is not experienced either.

Choosing not to agree with the evaluation sought by the work has an important effect. Where we resist making the appraisal sought by the work, we are also resisting the implications that this appraisal carries.

I am going to describe to you a clear candidate for resistance to help illustrate why it is important that some works are resisted. The work I have selected for this purpose is *Gone With The Wind*[4], made in 1939, focussing on the character of Prissy. Prissy is the African-American servant-girl of the Twelve Oaks household. Her character in the film is not supposed to be taken seriously. Prissy is designed to be amusing to the audience as she portrayed in a way that seeks to draw evaluations to the effect that she is ridiculous and stupid, and therefore contemptible. The portrayal of the character of Prissy has been widely criticised in recent times as racist, guilty of enforcing negative stereotypes.

An important thing about resisting is revealed when we make a comparison, first considering what it would be for a 1939 audience member to resist the character of Prissy in *Gone With The Wind*. The first thing the 1939 audience would have to do would be to recognise that *Gone With The Wind* is inviting its audience to make certain evaluations. In the case of *Gone With The Wind*, the appraisals of Prissy that the film seeks are to the effect that she is stupid and irrational, thus eliciting the response of contempt and amusement. To resist finding Prissy amusing or ridiculous in this case because you find the film's portrayal of her to be racist means that you are resisting because you find this portrayal of her to be morally unacceptable. The only reason, or at least the most plausible, for why you would find her portrayal morally unacceptable in the film, is because you would presumably endorse the kinds of appraisals sought by the portrayal as ones that would be objectionable in ordinary life too.

Compare now a present-day audience's reaction to the character of Prissy. What is interesting to me about Prissy is that I would argue that almost none of you, as members of a present-day audience to *Gone With The Wind,* would find Prissy amusing or ridiculous. If we were sitting next to somebody during a screening of *Gone With The Wind* and they laughed uproariously at Prissy, I would argue that most of us would find their reaction in the very least distasteful.

It's not just that we would fail to experience the emotional reaction to Prissy that *Gone With The Wind* seeks to elicit. Many of us would in

fact judge the work as morally inappropriate for its apparent endorsement of racist stereotypes.

Our resistance in this case seems to be somehow built-in. We don't consider a present-day audience member's lack of reaction to Prissy that is sought by the film to be a resistance in the same way we might consider that of the 1939 audience member. We would probably consider a 1939 audience member who resisted *Gone With The Wind* to be morally progressive, ahead of their time. But for today's audience, failing to find Prissy ridiculous happens more or less automatically. This kind of seemingly automatic resistance to works that are somewhat dated morally is an important effect of resisting.

It could be questioned at this point why should it matter whether we resist a work of art or fiction. Of course, I am not suggesting that a film that encourages racist evaluations about its characters is directly responsible for making racists out of its audience members, and thus responsible for racist opinions they may hold, or racist things they may do. The point of resisting a work is that you are refusing to accept that the evaluations are ones that should be made as they relate to things about the actual world that should not be tolerated.

Just as the racist appraisals sought of Prissy in *Gone With The Wind* are now no longer deemed acceptable, I argue that there are other works that also ask for appraisals we should resist. While resisting works that implicitly endorse sexist or racist attitudes may be obvious, I shall argue that what is perhaps less obvious, though no less pernicious, are some sentimental works, and these are also candidates for resistance.

In a sentimental work of fiction, the audience are invited to have emotional responses that are elicited through idealisations about characters and events in the work, for example in *Steel Magnolias*, where Shelby is portrayed as super-virtuous, super-beautiful and super-undeserving. I am going to argue that in some cases, we should resist sentimental works, and the reasons we should do so are to do with the nature of these essential idealisations.

An idealised object is one that encourages the spectator to see the object through rose-tinted spectacles, so to speak. However, there is a big difference between the edited highlights shown to us by the senti-

mental work and the real world. At the very least, these idealisations are potentially misleading. For instance, if we were to form beliefs about the nature of diabetic comas merely from watching films such as *Steel Magnolias*, clearly we would have an incorrect view of what it is like for someone to be in this state. Not only would our view be incorrect, it would be incorrect as to how unpleasant being in a state of diabetic coma actually is. If you had a deep desire sparked inside you to become a doctor based only on the many disease-of-the-week films you had enjoyed, you would expect beautiful, pristine patients and peaceful, gentle deaths. However, real life is simply not like this. Any nurse or doctor will tell you that patients come in a range of shapes and sizes, and many are far from morally perfect. Dying from diabetic coma or terminal illness is anything but peaceful or gentle, and patients in this state have a wide range of needs.

A more complex point that also arises here that concerns the role idealisation plays in the kind of response we experience. There appears to be a causal connection between the death of Shelby being so beautifully tragic and the fact that she is such a highly idealised character. Indeed, there is nothing objectionable about finding the death of someone from diabetes tragic. We would be inclined to think that someone who found such a death deeply amusing had some kind of character flaw. However, what makes Shelby's death beautifully tragic is not just the fact that dying from diabetes is sad. The fact that she is beautiful and perfect is doing some work here too, and I would argue that it is because of this idealisation that Shelby's death is so beautifully tragic. However, there is something wrong about the suggestion that it is all the more tragic when someone perfect and beautiful dies from diabetic coma. After all, mean and ugly people fall into diabetic comas too.

I am only making a simple suggestion, although there is a lot to say on the issue. The suggestion is that it is this causal connection that provides us with part of the reason why we do not always like sentimental things.

The spectator who resists a sentimental work is one who recognises the idealisations, and refuses to accept them for the kinds of reasons offered above. I propose that there are some instances of sentimental works of fiction that should be resisted in the same kind of way and for similar reasons as those such as *Gone With The Wind*.

The "Oh, how cute!" response to things like cute little kittens on chocolate boxes or the flood of tears we experience in watching Shelby's death are two kinds of sentimental response. But what is more surprising is that the kinds of movies that are designed to prompt sentimental response are not limited to tearjerkers such as *Steel Magnolias*. In the final section of my paper, I would like to argue that we can extend the realm of the sentimental genre to include not only the blatantly obvious cases such as cute kittens and sappy films, but also a category that might seem anathema to the sentimental: the majority of war films. I want to discuss today how many war films share in this same design feature of idealising the subject. If I am correct, then we should be prepared to see even gritty, realistic war movies as sentimental too.

War films seek a sentimental response from their audience through idealising various objects, events and characters in the work. Of course, the response will not be the "Oh, how beautifully tragic!" reactions we experience to sappy films. The response sought by sentimental war films is instead one that is pleasant to experience in a "heart-swelling" way, recognising the soldiers and events in the film to be noble and glorious. So, let us now consider how idealisations are used in war films in order to elicit the sentimental response even in these seemingly gruesome movies. To do so, I will use the example of the gritty war film *Saving Private Ryan*[5].

The film *Saving Private Ryan* is set in the Second World War, and follows a troupe of soldiers led by Tom Hanks' character Captain John Miller who are sent on a mission to rescue one Private Ryan, a soldier behind enemy lines. Private Ryan is the subject of the rescue mission as his brothers have all been killed, and the top generals are anxious that his mother be spared the grief of losing her final son.

The scene I have chosen to discuss is perhaps not the most obvious example of sentimentality to be found in *Saving Private Ryan*. However, I have selected this more challenging example for the purpose of revealing idealisations contained within the scene that contribute to producing a sentimental response.

The background to this scene is that the soldiers have stormed a German ambush, and captured a German whom they believe responsible for the death of their friend. Although the most of the soldiers

wanted to kill the German, he was set free, and this creates some resentment amongst the group. This leads one soldier, Private Reiben, to declare that he will desert the mission to save Private Ryan and return to the front line. Sergeant Horvath takes exception to this and pulls a gun on Private Reiben, resulting in a tense standoff between the two, with Private Reiben daring him to shoot. The other soldiers are alarmed and call on Captain James Miller for help.

Instead of leaping to action, Captain James Miller calmly turns to face Sergeant Horvath and Private Reiben, and begins to address the group.

There are some technical aspects to this scene that contribute to the sentimentality of the scene. For example, soft horn music begins to play as James Miller starts to speak. There are several camera close-ups of both Captain Miller and the other soldiers looking moved. Such features help to create an atmosphere that suggests deep thought and emotion.

The crucial idealisation in this scene, however, comes from the drawing of a contrast or opposition between the harsh reality of war and its idealised opposite, which is the peace of the home country. The address given by Captain John Miller is an instance of this. The speech is given in the spirit of a wistful longing for the peace and the values of a place far away from the grim battlefield. This distance is suggested constantly throughout the speech. For example, at one point James Miller comments "every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel." Another telling statement is his observation that he may be unable to tell his wife about the events of the day. The implication is that she will be unable to understand because the peace and safety of her environment at home are so far removed. A further implication is that James Miller at home is such a different person that he will be unable to face what happened at war, because it was so awful and thus so removed from home. At the end of his address, James Miller begins to set about the task of clearing up the radar site. The scene closes with the troupe, unified once more, working together against the backdrop of the setting sun.

As a result of highlighting the negative aspects of war, the implication is that home, as the exact opposite, has every possible positive quality. This is, of course, an idealisation. No home country is like that. Just as coma patients may be at times peaceful and beautiful,

but other times far from this, so too does the 'home country' idealised in war films have some positive aspects, but it will also have many that are less than perfect. But eliciting the evaluation that the home country is essentially perfect is crucial to the sentimental response in war films. It means that, as audience members, we view the soldiers as heroes and their cause as noble—they must be, look at how great the nation is for which they risk their lives. To have this view of the war as presented by the film is a pleasant experience, and thus an instance of sentimentality.

If I am right that sentimental works of art and fiction are misleading, then this why we should resist the emotions elicited by these kinds of sentimental war films. When we resist a sentimental film such as *Steel Magnolias*, we are recognising the idealisations made by the work and refusing to accept them. We should refuse to accept the kinds of idealisations offered to us by war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, as such films have the potential for giving their audiences an inaccurate depiction and conception of warfare.

Choosing not to agree in the case of sentimental war films is important. Where we resist making an appraisal that is based on idealisations presented in the work, we are also resisting the implications that this appraisal carries. It is the same thing we are doing when, in the *Gone With The Wind* case, we refuse to agree as making the appraisal of Prissy that is sought by the film would be making an appraisal that many of us would find morally unacceptable due to its racist undertones.

I am suggesting that the reasons for resisting a war film such as *Saving Private Ryan* are parallel to these other cases. The reason why we should resist some war films lies partly in what a war film tries to depict. War films are not about entirely fictional events at all. Instead, they typically aim to give a reconstruction of semi-actual events. And so, when people watch a war film, part of what many audiences believe they are getting is a realistic portrayal, and that the kinds of things shown actually happened. Moreover, if it is constitutive of war that it's bad, and it seems to me that it is, then films like *Saving Private Ryan* essentially change the nature of war.

Resistance is important in understanding the gap in response we experience in the case of kitschy, schmaltzy sentimental things. When we don't gush and cry over the death of Shelby, I argue that we are seeing

the idealisations such a work is using to provoke a response, and rejecting them, thus failing to have the pleasant-feeling response sought by sentimental works. Just as we may resist laughing at Prissy in *Gone With The Wind* because we are unwilling to accept the harmful racist stereotypes it endorses, I argue that sentimental war films should also be resisted on moral grounds.

NOTES

1 Ira Newman, "The Alleged Unwholesomeness of Sentimentality" in *Arguing About Art—Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, eds. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, second edition (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 320-328.
and Anthony Savile, "Sentimentality" in *Arguing About Art—Contemporary Philosophical Debates,* eds. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, second edition (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 312-332.
2 *Steel Magnolias*. 16 mm, 117 mins. Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, United States of America,1989.
3 Anthony Savile, "Sentimentality", p. 316.
4 *Gone With The Wind*. 70 mm, 238 mins. MGM Studios, United States of America, 1939.
5 *Saving Private Ryan*. 16 mm, 170 mins. DreamWorks SKG, United States of America, 1998.