

Critical Essay – Anne Plumptre’s *The Rector’s Son*

Anne Plumptre’s second novel, *The Rector’s Son*, was published in 1798, during an era in which there was a distinct rise in the popularity of Gothic fiction exemplified by works such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, published in the previous year. Despite this emergence of a new genre, there was still a gap in the literary market occupied by the novels of sensibility, which had prevailed throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. This form of the novel, which depicted the character’s often extreme feelings, was best illustrated by texts such as Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) and Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791).

The cult of sensibility first began to emerge in the 1740s with the publication of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel, *Pamela*. From then it developed into a prominent genre and was also taken up by other European writers. An example of which would be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which was immensely popular and immediately translated and published in England where it met similar acclaim. James Raven describes sensibility within novels as, ‘[...] embodied by the reactions of heroes and heroines to circumstances designed to evoke fine feelings¹.’

Sensibility was rooted in philosophical ideas about human nature and theories of man’s innate goodness. The key to novels of sentiment was the affect of its contents on its readers, for example its ability to evoke feelings of sympathy towards the characters depicted. Later in the century, sensibility became more ambivalent morally as it was seen to cause people to act irrationally and there was a danger surrounding characters that portrayed excessive sensibility. During the eighteenth century, novels were seen to

¹ Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling (eds.), *The English novel, 1770–1829: a bibliographical survey of prose fiction published in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 31

directly influence those who read them and consequently sensibility was further attacked by the other possible effects it might have on its readers. Janet Todd explores this idea and states that, 'Beyond the fear of sensibility's emasculating effect on men, there continued widespread anxiety at the social result of fictional sensibility on women.'²Todd is referring to the idea that women were seen as being particularly at risk from the stimulus of reading, as they were seen to have weaker minds than men and were therefore more susceptible to outside influences.

The pathos created by novels of sentiment was aimed to provoke a physical response in its reader, often in the form of tears³. It was thought to be a mark of virtue within a chosen reader as to whether they were both emotionally and physically affected by the events in the novel.

A summary of *The Rector's Son* plot is as follows:-

The novel is told from the perspective of a third person narrator and begins with a description of the poor livelihood of many parish rectors at that time, focusing specifically on one, Mr Meadows, the rector of a small Welsh parish. Mr Meadow's youngest son Charles receives patronage from a wealthy gentleman called Mr Blandford and he is brought up alongside Blandford's own two children and niece, Amelia. Charles first displays signs of extreme sensibility when his beloved patron is unfortunately killed after falling from his horse, shortly after Charles has reached twenty one. Mr Blandford's own son, Fredrick, returns from college to arrange his father's funeral. Unfortunately Fredrick has been influenced by a scheming tutor, Mr Dawkins, and he informs Charles that he is no longer welcome in the family and will

² Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, (London: Methuen and Co, Ltd, 1986), p. 134

³ Todd, p. 2

not receive the living promised to him by his late father, due to his will being incomplete at the time of his untimely death.

Charles pays his last respects to his former patron by carrying out a midnight vigil over his body. Amelia discovers him in the tomb and they reveal their love for one another. However, ashamed of his now lowly situation, Charles refuses to marry her until he has made his fortune and therefore decides to travel to India.

While in India, Charles and his friend Colonel Rainsford discover a young Hindu woman, Indamora, living in a cave. They discover she was left for dead by her family after falling into a violent fever. They decide to look after her in Calcutta and later save her sister Zelinda from the traditional Sati ritual after her aging husband has died. The friendship between Indamora and Charles grows stronger, despite the latter's declaration of his relationship with Amelia in England. Indamora explains that in India men can have more than one wife and therefore their relationship is not adulterous. Their intimate bond continues and Indamora soon gives birth to a daughter, but dies soon after her birth. Shortly after this Charles hears news that Amelia is to be married and therefore decides to sail for England immediately.

During Charles' stay in India, Amelia is pursued by Mr Dawkins, and he attempts to remove Charles permanently from her affections by spreading rumours of his apparent debauchery and licentious behaviour while abroad. He also secretly intercepts the letters of correspondence between the two lovers, leading Amelia to believe his lies, encouraging her to forget her sweetheart. Dawkins then discovers, however, that Amelia was secretly married to Charles before he left for India, which ruins his plans for matrimony. He hears word of Charles imminent return to England and decides it will be safer to remove himself to India.

Volume two opens with Charles' and Rainsford's arrival in England, an event which is marred by Amelia's refusal to see him. His extreme feelings of sensibility are once more revealed when he puts a pistol to his head upon the arrival of this bad news. He is prevented from shooting himself but does fall into a life threatening delirium. Rainsford meanwhile attempts to resolve the problems between the former and Amelia, himself. Charles slowly recovers only to stab himself in the chest, after seeing Amelia at church. Because of this he is immediately returned to India with his daughter in the hope that he will recover. Amelia realises the extent of Charles' feelings for her still and is determined to return them only to discover he and Rainsford has already left for India once more.

Rainsford later returns to England with Charles' daughter and reveals that when he left India Charles was dying. Amelia immediately agrees to care for her step-daughter but is then required to return with Rainsford to India in order to resolve a claim made by another man on Charles's fortune. They take with them a young family friend called Cecilia who, while staying with Rainsford and his wife Anna, immediately becomes a coquette when immersed in the British society resident in Calcutta. She plays with the emotions of many men before finally marrying a young British officer who is known for wanting to marry her in order to gain a large fortune. Meanwhile, Amelia makes enquiries into Charles' death and is visited by Dawkins who immediately resumes his advances towards her.

Volume three opens with investigations still continuing into Charles' death. Cecilia continues her coquettish behaviour, despite now being married and is soon disliked by the society which she inhabits. Anna attempts to prevent further embarrassment in public by cancelling a ball she has planned. However, this only serves to enrage Cecilia who, determined on revenge, sends Rainsford a fake love letter which is opened by his

unsuspecting wife. Cecilia is suddenly shocked by the trouble she has caused and is severely affected by it mentally. After much confusion the matter is resolved and Cecilia, restored to full health, understands her inappropriate behaviour.

The odious Dawkins threatens Amelia and her daughter with violence if she does not return his affections but it is soon discovered that he helped organise Charles' disappearance and supposed death. He attempts to shoot himself but only succeeds in wounding himself. However, after confessing everything he dies from his injuries. Charles is revealed to have been sold into slavery but having escaped he lived like a hermit in a secluded valley after being misinformed that Amelia and Rainsford were now married. He is soon reunited with his wife and both them and the Rainsford's return to England to live out the rest of their lives⁴.

Sensibility within the Text: -

The plots of novels of sensibility tended to vary because of its longevity as a genre throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. However, Todd observes that in most examples the plot was centred around a sudden reversal⁵. In Plumtre's text, the reversal takes the form of the death of Mr Blandford, that causes Charles to be disowned by the patron's son and consequently he is forced to travel to India to make his fortune. Plumtre's hero Charles clearly displays extreme sensibility and emotionalism throughout the text as he is violently affected by events. For example while in church and he catches sight of his lover Amelia, who he believes to be indifferent to his feelings:

⁴ Plumtre, Anne. *The Rector's Son*, in three volumes; by Anne Plumtre, Vol. 3. London, 1798. 3 vols. Based on information from English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>> [Accessed 5th May 2007]

⁵ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, (London: Methuen and Co, Ltd, 1986), p. 4

But as he turned round to make his way towards the door, his eyes accidentally glanced into a pew towards which his back had been hitherto turned, when, - oh fatal moment for such an encounter! – whose should they meet but those of Amelia herself. This was too much; his brain was instantly on fire! And before it was possible for anyone to be aware what he was about, he drew a knife from his pocket, and, darting a wild and furious look at her, plunged it into his breast, exclaiming, ‘Traitor, this is your deed!’⁶

This is an example of an extreme reaction to the feelings of sensibility that many characters displayed. Charles’ actions echo Goethe’s *Werther*, as he is so distraught at the rejection of his feelings by Amelia he attempts to end his own life. John Mullan explores the difference in the display of sensibility between males and females and states that the male equivalent of the sentimental hysteria was known as hypochondria⁷.

Representations of India:-

It is clear that novels based in India were not a new concept and it is not surprising considering the vast expansion of the British empire, in that country, during the eighteenth-century. This colonisation was a result of the Seven Years War from 1756-1763, in which Britain secured new colonies in Canada, India and the Caribbean which in turn boosted trade⁸. In 1787 an anonymous novel entitled *The Disinterested Nabob, A novel interspersed with genuine descriptions of India, its Manners and Customs* was published by G.G. J. and J. Robinson of Paternoster Row. Nabob was a term used to describe officials of the East India Company⁹. *The Critical Review* describes its portrayal of India as new and genuine, suggesting that it was one of the first novels to depict such settings. However, *The Monthly Review* contradicts this by suggesting the author has obtained his descriptions from Jemima Kindersley’s *Letters from the Island*

⁶ Plumptre, vol. 2. p. 69

⁷ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 208

⁸ Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18th Century*, (London: Penguin Group Ltd., 1990), p. 206

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 36

of *Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indies*, written ten years previously¹⁰. Both examples from the twenty years prior to Plumptre own publication suggest that she was not innovative in her desire to illustrate India within her novel. Despite this, subsequent to Plumptre's novel, an acquaintance of hers, Sydney Lady Morgan published, *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* in 1811, suggesting that the concept of life in the colonies had continued to ignite the imagination of other writers at the time¹¹.

The representation of India within Plumptre's text is what makes the novel distinctive. The depiction of India by British writers during the eighteenth-century is an area which can be explored extensively. Importantly Plumptre incorporates the traditional Sati ritual into her story and earlier accounts of Indian culture by British writers made the claim that Sati was introduced because of the libidinous disposition of the women there, who would often poison their present husbands, in favour of a lover¹². Chatterjee similarly suggests that Sati was solid proof to British audiences that the Hindu faith was barbaric and as a consequence India was in desperate need of a firm, humane and civilised intervention in the form of the British conquest and administration¹³.

Nandini Bhattacharya argues that there was a clear difference in the way that British male and female writers depicted the Indian people. Bhattacharya goes onto state that female writers described the female subaltern in a certain way, primarily in terms of her physical attributes, her form and outlines, her facial features and bodily gestures, her

¹⁰ Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling (eds.), *The English novel, 1770–1829: a bibliographical survey of prose fiction published in the British Isles*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 392

¹¹ Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling, p. 351

¹² Nandini Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), p. 32

¹³ Amal Chatterjee, *Representations of India 1740-1840*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), p.111

clothing, make up and ornaments and so forth¹⁴. This is clearly a technique employed by Plumptre herself, as is evident in the following description of Indamora:

Indamora had just completed her fourteenth year; an age when beauty is arrived at its meridian in those eastern countries. Her complexion, though darker than that of the generality of Europeans, was remarkably fair for a native of Hindostan; she had full eyes, soft, animated, and expressive, with fine, long, dark eye-lashes, and never were sweetness and simplicity more strongly portrayed on any countenance than upon hers. Her figure was tall and graceful, and shewn to particular advantage by the negligence of her dress, which was a loose robe of muslin tied around her waist, her throat and arms being quite bare¹⁵.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there was change in the attitudes towards representations of trade in literary works due to the increase in evidence that money gained from trade practises was often illicitly obtained¹⁶. Chatterjee explains how as a result of this moral decline, the stereotypical trader became a weak character and was replaced instead by the honourable soldier as exemplified by Charles Meadows in Plumptre's novel. This idea can also be identified in Mariana Starke's play, *The Widow of Malabar* (1791) in which military cadets are the romantic heroes. The play was also the first to create a theatrical representation of Sati on the stage¹⁷. Interestingly one of Plumptre's Indian heroine's shares the same name as Starke's heroine so it is possible that she was influenced by the play before writing her own novel¹⁸.

The Monthly Review was first published in 1749 and was the first major review journal at that time, it was followed closely by *The Critical Review*, established by Tobias Smollet. These were the two central reviews throughout the eighteenth century and any rivals that did appear were often short lived¹⁹. *The Rector's Son*, only received average reviews at the time of its publication, with both *The Critical Review* and *The*

¹⁴ Bhattacharya, p. 139

¹⁵ Plumptre, Vol. 1. p. 144

¹⁶ Chatterjee, p. 35

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 40

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 115

¹⁹ Antonia Forster, *Index to Book Reviews, 1749-1774*, (Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 3

Monthly Review criticising the events depicted as improbable. Despite this it was praised for its exotic setting in India, as well as, ‘The lessons from which youthful readers may gather instructions²⁰.’ The lessons referred to may be making an allusion to the character of the young Cecilia whose inexperience within society leads her to become a coquette. Her mental health is soon affected by her mischievous actions and as a consequence she becomes delirious, imagining that she has killed her own husband:

This phrenzy continued to increase, till by the next morning she grew so outrageous, and made so desperate an attempt on her own life, as to render confinement necessary. She uttered a thousand incoherent expressions relative to her husband and Rainsford, whom she affirmed had killed each other, nor would she be persuaded that Macdonnel was really that husband still alive, but insisted that he was some fiend come to torment her²¹.

The depiction of Cecilia serves as a warning to other young people, upon entering society for the first time and suggests the appropriate way to behave. Samuel Johnson examines characterisation within novels, in an essay from the *Rambler* in 1750, in which he praises characters such as the protagonist in Richardson’s *Pamela* who is the embodiment of virtue and chastity. He calls for characters to be both moral and natural in their depiction and emphasises the moral responsibility of the novel in educating its readers²². Consequently Johnson would not have approved of the illustration by Plumptre of Charles Meadows adulterous behaviour while in India. However by the end of the century, a novel’s moral shortcomings were not as important and reviews tended to judge a novel by the techniques that the author employs instead.

It is also possible to identify within Plumptre’s text, the aesthetic interest shown by Radcliffe in her popular novels. The latter’s characters often had a tendency to gaze at scenes of nature, which coincided with ideas of the picturesque prevalent at that time.

²⁰ Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling, p. 757 - I was unable to obtain the full reviews of the novel and therefore have referred to the comments included in the aforementioned text.

²¹ Plumptre, Vol. 3. p. 35

²² Ioan Miles Williams, *Novel and romance, 1700-1800: A Documentary Record*, (London: Routledge, 1970). p. 145

An example of this within *The Rector's Son* would be the scene in which Charles discovers the tranquil valley that he later inhabits:

Indeed, not even slavery itself, or, what was yet more terrible to him, the extinction of all his lately renewed hopes of possessing Amelia, could render him quite insensible to the sublime magnificence of the scene as it broke gradually on his view. [...] He for a moment forgot his situation, and was lost to every idea but that of the grandeur of the objects before him²³.

Radcliffe was well known for the detailed descriptions of nature within her novels so it was possible that Plumptre was trying to adopt the same techniques.

Plumptre was relatively successful as an author during her life time and was known to have taken a keen interest in politics as well as being a supporter of Napoleon which marked her out from many others in Britain during that era. *The Rector's Son* should be noted for its distinctive setting within India as well as Plumptre's ability to intertwine many elements of the sentimental genre within its other exotic components. Deborah McLeod suggests that Plumptre also illustrates her interesting and innovative ability to explore gender roles through a reversal of gender stereotypes and conventions within all her novels. An example of this would be Amelia's strength of character and mental composure compared with what McLeod describes as Charles', 'Overly emotional- indeed, almost hysterical- personality²⁴.'

Despite not receiving very positive reviews of *The Rector's Son*, the obituary following Plumptre's eventual death in 1818, which appears in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of the same year, describes Plumptre as, 'The author of many ingenious writings and [she] was particularly skilled in German literature²⁵.' Thereby suggesting that she did receive recognition for the unique subject on which her novels tended to

²³ Plumptre, vol. 3. p. 237

²⁴ Deborah McLeod, 'Introduction', in *Something New-By Anne Plumptre*, ed. by Deborah McLeod, (Canada: Broadview Literary Texts, 1996), pp. vii-xxii, p. xiii

²⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 2, (London, 1818), p. 571

focus, most significantly *Something New; or, Adventures at Campbell-House* (1801)
which centered on the life of an unconventional, ugly heroine.

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