



Introduction;Crying Over;Little Nell

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Do you ever find yourself coming over all sentimental? And if you do, do you like it, or do you feel embarrassed by your sentimental proclivities? Is sentimentality a pleasurable indulgence, a minor vice, or a lapse of aesthetic and moral taste? That Victorian culture is steeped in sentimentality is axiomatic. Its cast of pathetic children, fallen women, faithful animals, lachrymose deathbeds, hopeless sunsets and false dawns, fated quests, angelic mothers and innocents betrayed – to name only the most obvious topoi of literary and visual sentimentality – is familiar to the point of parody. (Or perhaps, thinking of Wilde's witticism on the death of Little Nell, it is beyond parody already.) The taste for Victorian culture's sentimentality, like the taste for Victorian culture more generally, has waxed and waned, yet whereas a fascination for kitsch or a delight in melodrama's excesses can sit happily with serious scholarly interests, it has rarely been respectable to stand up for sentimentality. Sentimentality is excessive feeling evoked by unworthy objects; it is falsely idealising; it simplifies and sanitises; it is vulgar; it leads to cynicism; it is feeling on the cheap; it's predictable; it's meretricious. In short, it's an emotional and aesthetic blot on the landscape.

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