

Sensation Fiction handout by Jessica Weibly and Breeya Sutton

What defines a sensation novel?

- Sensation novels were considered to be part of a “fad genre” during the 1860s.
- They were written to be exciting, shocking and moving.
- The characteristics of sensation novels include melodramatic content, subjects such as crime and sex, suspense, emphasis on secrets and huge popularity.

Who read sensation fiction?

- The main audience of sensation fiction consisted of women, working class readers and middle class readers.
- Sensation fiction was popular among people who did not have access to books prior to the mass production of novels.
 - Prior to the industrial revolution many people were either illiterate or could not afford to buy books.
 - The introduction of libraries created easier access to books.
 - There was also an introduction to railway bookstalls that provided novels for travelers to enjoy.
 - Novels were being published in periodicals, which made them available more frequently and at cheaper prices.

Main categories and subjects of sensation fiction

- Bigamous marriages
- Misdirected letters
- Romantic triangles
- Heroines placed in physical danger
- Drugs, potions and/or poisons
- Characters adopting disguises
- Trained coincidences
- Aristocratic villains

Why was sensation fiction so popular?

- It was low in cost.
- It provided exciting stories for travelers and housewives.
- It gave readers a peek into the world they could not access because of social class standings.
 - It made them realize that they had to put their pants on one leg at a time like the rest.
- The most mediocre writers could build a reader base.
- It was characterized to shock, excite, and move audiences.
- It was melodramatic, and focused on crime and sex.
- It was the “Guilty Pleasure” of the Victorian Era.

Sensation fiction and politics

- Sensation novels often had a significant part in the debates that concerned changes in society. Some novels expressed support towards reform. Some novels expressed arguments against parts of society that were thought to need reform.
- Examples of political changes in society that had an influence on sensation fiction
 - Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857
 - First women’s suffrage bill to parliament- 1869
 - Married Women’s Property Acts- 1870 and 1882

Examples of sensation novels that had controversial topics

- Le Fanu's *Carmilla*
 - A novel that includes the topic of same-sex attraction
- Collin's *The Evil Genius*
 - A novel that supported child custody and divorce rights for women
- Reade's *Hard Cash*
 - A novel that critiques and criticizes the abuses of asylums and prisons
- Collin's *Woman in White*
 - A mystery novel that also approaches the topic of asylums

How did critics respond to sensation fiction?

- Critics were not very accepting of the fad genre, and one even referred to it as “a disease spreading in all directions” (Cvetkovich 13).
- Critics saw it as a mystery. They couldn't understand how literature with such poor aesthetic qualities could become so popular.
- As soon as sensation novels became popular in 18th century England there was an issue over whether they should fall into the respectable category of high culture. This debate followed into the 19th century, and near the end of the 19th century novels were split into two categories: high culture and pop-culture (which has remained and continued into the 21st century).
- Critics found that novels had political effects and felt that they were a threat to society.
 - Sensation novels included topics that related to class tensions, adultery and murder.
 - Even though critics felt threatened by the political effects of novels, they chose to focus on aesthetics in their criticism (the lack of aesthetics as well as aesthetic flaws).
- Critics were concerned that mass publication would have a negative effect on the quality of literature
 - They were afraid that sensation novels were invading the market and replacing the superior, more aesthetically valuable literature.
 - They saw sensation novels as a challenge to high culture, and they desired to see the more superior novels reach the same popularity as sensation novels.
 - To critics, this was considered to be a “moral mission.”
 - While sensation novels were entertaining the public, critics held the opinion that these novels were actually corrupting the public
 - Critics were also angered by the fact that industries seemed to care about economic gain over anything else, and they blamed this for the lack of artistic and aesthetic value in literature.

Works Cited

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