



The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture

Lauren Berlant

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The Female Complaint is part of Lauren Berlant's groundbreaking “national sentimentality” project charting the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space of attachment and identification. In this book, Berlant chronicles the origins and conventions of the first mass-cultural “intimate public” in the United States, a “women’s culture” distinguished by a view that women inevitably have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate and revelatory. As Berlant explains, “women’s” books, films, and television shows enact a fantasy that a woman’s life is not just her own, but an experience understood by other women, no matter how dissimilar they are. The commodified genres of intimacy, such as “chick lit,” circulate among strangers, enabling insider self-help talk to flourish in an intimate public. Sentimentality and complaint are central to this commercial convention of critique; their relation to the political realm is ambivalent, as politics seems both to threaten sentimental values and to provide certain opportunities for their extension. Pairing literary criticism and historical analysis, Berlant explores the territory of this intimate public sphere through close readings of U.S. women’s literary works and their stage and film adaptations. Her interpretation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its literary descendants reaches from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, touching on Shirley Temple, James Baldwin, and *The Bridges of Madison County* along the way. Berlant illuminates different permutations of the women’s intimate public through her readings of Edna Ferber’s *Show Boat*; Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*; Olive Higgins Prouty’s feminist melodrama *Now, Voyager*; Dorothy Parker’s poetry, prose, and Academy Award-winning screenplay for *A Star Is Born*; the Fay Weldon novel and Roseanne Barr film *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*; and the queer, avant-garde film *Showboat 1988—The Remake*. *The Female Complaint* is a major contribution from a leading Americanist.

The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture Details

Date : Published March 17th 2008 by Duke University Press Books (first published 2008)

ISBN : 9780822342021

Author : Lauren Berlant

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Theory, Feminism, Nonfiction, Womens



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Kristin Canfield says

Oh boy, where to begin? Berlant achieves that amazing meta-critical task of outlining how the female complaint requires a self recognition of disappointment and longing that makes the reader recognize both in her own life. An emotional, engaging, and long read.

Jesse Field says

From the *Preface*

...the autobiographical isn't the personal. This nonintuitive phrase is a major pre-supposition of The Female Complaint. In the contemporary consumer public, and in the *longue durée* that I'm tracking, all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy. (5-6, my underlining)

What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging -- partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live. So if, from a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a space of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made. (6-7)

In "What is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari argue that one's identification with any material marked by a "minor" voice performs one's attachment to being generic, marked out as having collective qualities that are apprehensible in individuals. They also suggest that there are no simply personal voices for the minoritized author: the singular materials of a specific life are readable only as particulars that are exemplary not of the individual's life but of that *kind* of life. So consumption of "women's culture" would be, in this view, which is also my view, a way of experiencing one's own story as part of something social, even if one's singular relation to that belonging is extremely limited, episodic, ambivalent, rejecting, or mediated by random encounters with relevantly marked texts. (8)

In "this book I call women's culture "juxtapolitical" because, like most mass-mediated nondominant communities, that of feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and recalibration as achievement enough. (9)

From the "Introduction"

Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking... (9) One might say it's a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment. (14)

"Women's culture" is one of many flourishing intimate publics in the United States. An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires. When this kind of "culture of circulation" takes hold, participants in the intimate public feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions. Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails: varieties of suffering and fantasies of transcendence; longing for reciprocity with other humans and the world; irrational and rational attachments to the way things are; special styles of ferocity and refusal; and a creative will to survive that attends to every day situations while imagining conditions of flourishing within and beyond them. (18)

Jesi says

A super good and often super depressing read. I will say that it was EXTREMELY interesting to read this book while simultaneously immersing myself in One Direction fandom. Here are some extremely scattered thoughts on that experience.

Women's online fandom does offer a million examples that confirm Berlant's theories about women's mass culture, but I think it also provides a million more examples that, to my mind at least, seriously challenge her insights. Maybe it's just my particular corner of the Internet, but the way girls and women experience/consume/engage with mass cultural forms strikes me as a lot queerer and a lot less naive than this book suggests.

Fandom definitely constitutes an "intimate public" by Berlant's definition -- that is, being a fan involves identifying with other people's (real or imagined) emotional experiences, which in turn gives you a warm fuzzy sense of intimacy and belonging. Fandom is also definitely based in/centered around certain mainstream fantasies of (heteronormative) romance and love, which is true even when you're shipping queer pairings. And I would also agree that fandoms are largely "juxtapolitical" publics, in that they usually don't directly engage with formal politics (whatever that means). So, I can see how all of those things are problems, because as a grad student I've been trained to be a good little paranoid reader. But... in my own experience, the practice of engaging in fandom, of being a practicing fan, is really a lot messier, more ambivalent, and way more wonderful than that reductive description.

I won't wade in too deep here but I really do think that fandom, as a queer aesthetic and practice, can disclose and facilitate new forms of kinship, new ways of arranging your life, new experiences of intimacy and identity. And I also think that being a fan can be life-affirming without being self-confirming, if that makes sense. (Does it? Who knows.) Like ultimately, my engagement with fan culture helps me to imagine alternatives to a sort of white-bread liberal humanism just as effectively, if not more so, than someone like Foucault or Deleuze or whomever. Ugh I don't know, I have SO MANY more thoughts but I need more time to process them.

tl;dr I found this book very impressive, but it also made me realize that maybe the "vast sweeping theory of everything" model of criticism is not the kind of work I want to do anymore.

Aleighbdavis says

Mind-blowingly good.

Cat says

I found this scholarly book enormously frustrating, largely because of the force and vigor of Berlant's argument. She makes a persuasive case for middlebrow women's culture as a space in which frustration with the status quo (capitalism and its discontents) gets articulated, bargained with, and recast into (variously) utopian aspiration (the possibility for revolution never present, the hope for reform--inadequate in Berlant's view--always there), repeated despair, cliché, or identity imprisonment. (Or some combination of several of these!) Berlant acknowledges a side of identity that I agree is important: the possibility that identity performance can be imitation and salve rather than innovation and salvation.

Berlant is interested in genres of "female complaint," ruptures in melodramatic or conventional texts that indicate the insufficiency of feminine types and heteronormative narratives to encompass a satisfactory version of identity. Appropriately, her form of literary criticism also enacts complaint. Most of the chapters center around political failures that are aestheticized. So the thrust of these chapters is often very depressing. Which should not be a complaint (he!) in and of itself but is for me. I'm not satisfied at winding up with the conclusion that sentimentalism is unsatisfactory. I think that I represent one of the feminists that Berlant refutes in her introduction -- someone who perhaps overly optimistically looks for self-expression, political outrage, and play in even the most conventional of narratives.

Berlant's arguments are forceful, and I did like her argument about Parker's love poetry of failure as a way of

dramatizing the dissonance between the promise of heteronormativity as cultural belonging and the reality of unsatisfactory feminine stereotyping in the modern period. She also had some great writing in this chapter, my personal fave being this line: "[Parker:] takes consolation by playing around with the forms that bind: ironic formalism is the normativity of the middlebrow author, who can have her sex and hate it too."

Great chapter on Show Boat, the culture of publicity, and the intersection of feminine ideals and racial nostalgia. I suppose I enjoyed individual formal analyses and fruitful comparisons more than I liked the dominating argument, a juggernaut of cultural disappointment and displeasure. (Ironically, Berlant focuses on the vitality of pleasure in the narratives that women create to make sense of their conventional feminine identity.)

Maxine says

Useful and interesting in many ways—but the book suffers from a bad case of verbifying nouns and other academic gobbledegook. Every chapter had five or six great insights, but the rest of the work was too thick with jargon to make heads or tails of.

Bianca says

Holy shit, this woman is brilliant.

Robert Wood says

The Female Complaint is a really useful book if you are looking at melodramatic structure, whether in literature or everyday life. The text looks at the conventions of the first structure of mass culture, and the way that it is meant to construct a mode of critique that avoids the political. Instead, the genre creates a sense of intimacy by erasing the structures of power that are implicit within such a critique, and creates a sort of sentimental community that always fails even as you embrace it.

Astoria says

Fascinating, deeply insightful passages. A lot of jargon-laden, long sentences make it hard to wade through at times.

ralowe says

the chapter about dorothy parker made me cry in dolores park. okay i almost cried. i got pretty damn close. i'd say that the dorothy parker chapter is the heart of the book that the obesity chapter was in cruel optimism. i fucking love lauren berlant! i want to be lauren berlant. her scholarship is unbelievable. the idea here is that gender, the nation, race, in short nothing less than the social order is reproduced through the women's

cultural industry's technologies of sentimentality and melodrama. these technologies play on limerence (my favorite new word!!) which can be described here in berlant's project as the atomic scene of the social where attachment and detachment happens. sentimental narratives work on attachment in this manipulative way where women remain incomplete without a significant other and the obligatory romance and the domestic scene, etc. lauren's anger around the conditions for the personhood of women lead her to direct action, she says, watching these movies. i didn't know that they were trying to do a stage version of uncle tom's cabin in the king and i. limerence is the sense that one is entitled to a reciprocal social, and this can fork towards wanting romance or wanting social transformation. it is this multivalence which causes her to resist roundly renouncing the sentimental form, realizing that it does provide the most nourishing thing in a world full of poison and disappointment. i am eagerly awaiting lauren's next book on flat affect and boredom. as for my own limerence issues, i'm still waiting for her to accept my friend request on facebook...

Mills College Library says

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Tom says

Intriguing approach to feminist criticism, but not exactly my cup of tea. Her presuppositions about genre being composed of rigid laws that can only be fulfilled in the moment of being broken (the same as Derrida's in his essay "The Law of Genre") are problematic. Nonetheless, her readings of texts are thought-provoking.

Disclaimer: I only read about half of the book (for class).

Heather says

As usual, Berlant's prose seemed unnecessarily dense, and detracted from what would have otherwise been a more fluid, enjoyable reading of a subject in which I am very interested.
