

# Introduction: The Cultural Work of American Fiction

JANE TOMPKINS (1985)

This book is the beginning of an attempt to move the study of American literature away from the small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion for the last thirty years and into a more varied and fruitful area of investigation. It involves, in its most ambitious form, a redefinition of literature and literary study, for it sees literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order. In this view, novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment. I believe that the works of fiction that this book examines were written not so that they could be enshrined in any literary hall of fame, but in order to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience. These novelists have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way.

Consequently this book focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on works whose obvious impact on their readers has made them suspect from a modernist point of view, which tends to classify work that affects people's lives, or tries to, as merely sensational or propagandistic. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perhaps the most famous work of American fiction, has not until very recently drawn the attention of modern critics; Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, second only to Stowe's novel in its popular and critical success in the nineteenth century, has since dropped from sight completely; *The Last of the Mohicans*, also a best-seller in its own time, has retained critical visibility, but, like the novels by Warner

and Stowe, has come to be thought of as more fit for children than for adults. Broderick Brown's novels, not at all popular when Brown was alive, subsequently gained a certain critical reputation but always with the proviso that they contained glaring artistic defects. In fact, what all of these texts share, from the perspective of modern criticism, is a certain set of defects that excludes them from the ranks of the great masterpieces: an absence of finely delineated characters, a lack of verisimilitude in the story line, an excessive reliance on plot, and a certain sensationalism in the events portrayed. None is thought to have a distinguished prose style or to reflect a concern with the unities and economies of formal construction that modern criticism seeks in great works of art. One purpose of this book is to ask why these works, many of which did not seem at all deficient to their original audiences, have come to seem deficient in the way I have just described. Another is to question the perspective from which these deficiencies spring to mind.

That perspective comes under fire in the opening chapter, which prepares the way for a consideration of non-canonical texts by investigating the processes through which canonical texts achieve their classic status. Using Hawthorne's reputation as a case in point, it argues that the reputation of a classic author arises not from the "intrinsic merit" of his or her work, but rather from the complex of circumstances that make texts visible initially and then maintain them in their preeminent position. When classic texts are seen not as the ineffable products of genius but as the bearers of a set of national, social, economic, institutional, and professional interests, then their domination of the critical scene seems less the result of their indisputable excellence than the product of historical contingencies. Through a close description of the reasons why Hawthorne's work has continued to compel our admiration, I attempt to loosen the hold his texts have exercised over American criticism, and thus to make possible the consideration of other texts, which the current canon has blotted from view.

In order to understand these neglected texts, that is, to see them, insofar as possible, as they were seen in the moment of their emergence, not as degraded attempts to pander to the prejudices

of the multitude, but as providing men and women with a means of ordering the world they inhabited, one has to have a grasp of the cultural realities that made these novels meaningful. Thus, rather than asking how a given text handled the questions which have recently concerned modern critics—questions about the self, the body, the possibilities of knowledge, the limits of language—I have discussed the works of Brown, Cooper, Stowe, and Warner in relation to the religious beliefs, social practices, and economic and political circumstances that produced them. History is invoked here not, as in previous historical criticism, as a backdrop against which one can admire the artist's skill in transforming the raw materials of reality into art, but as the only way of accounting for the enormous impact of works whose force escapes the modern reader, unless he or she makes the effort to recapture the world view they sprang from and which they helped to shape. It is on this basis, that of a new kind of historical criticism, that I advance the claim that my approach yields more fruitful results than some more narrowly "literary" critical modes. Because I want to understand what gave these novels force for their initial readers, it seemed important to recreate, as sympathetically as possible, the context from which they sprang and the specific problems to which they were addressed. I have therefore not criticized the social and political attitudes that motivated these writers, but have tried instead to inhabit and make available to a modern audience the viewpoint from which their politics made sense.

This is not to say that my own attitude toward these texts is neutral or disinterested. Any reconstruction of "context" is as much determined by the attitudes and values of the interpreter as is the explication of literary works; my reading of the historical materials as well as the textual analyses I offer grow directly from the circumstances, interests, and aims that have constituted me as a literary critic. If I have from time to time accused other critics of a "presentist" bias, the same charge can be levelled against my own assumptions, which are of course no more free than theirs from the constraints of a particular historical situation. My claim is not that I am more neutral or disinterested than others, but rather that the readings I offer here provide a more satisfactory

way of understanding the texts in question than the current critical consensus has.

To be specific about the interests that have motivated me: what lies behind this study is a growing awareness, on my part, of the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within the academy, and with that, a sense of the social implications of this exclusionary practice. Because I am a woman in a field dominated by male scholars, I have been particularly sensitive to the absence of women's writing from the standard American literature curriculum. I chose to discuss two works of domestic, or "sentimental," fiction because I wanted to demonstrate the power and ambition of novels written by women, and specifically by women whose work twentieth-century criticism has repeatedly denigrated.

Reading the scattered criticism of popular domestic novels led me to recognize—though I am certainly not the first to have done so—that the *popularity* of novels by women has been held against them almost as much as their preoccupation with "trivial" feminine concerns. And this led to the observation, again not original with me, that popular fiction, in general, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, has been rigorously excluded from the ranks of "serious" literary works. That exclusion seems to me especially noteworthy in American literature, since the rhetoric of American criticism habitually invokes democratic values as a hallmark of greatness in American authors. When Melville calls upon that "great democratic God" and celebrates "meanest mariners, renegades, and castaways," it is cause for critical acclaim, but when the common man steps out of *Moby-Dick* or *Song of Myself* and walks into a bookstore, his taste in literature, or, as is more likely, hers, is held up to scorn. Because I think it is morally and politically objectionable, and intellectually obtuse, to have contempt for literary works that appeal to millions of people simply because they are popular, I chose to discuss three works of popular fiction in order to demonstrate the value of these texts: to explore the way that literature has power in the world, to see how it connects with the beliefs and attitudes of large masses of readers so as to impress or move them deeply.

I chose the texts I did because I wanted to find a way of opening

up the canon not only to popular works and to works by women, but also to texts that are not usually thought to conform to a definition of imaginative literature—for example, the advice books, tract society reports, and hagiographic biographies discussed in the chapter on Susan Warner. These forms of non-fictional discourse, when set side by side with contemporary fiction, can be seen to construct the real world in the image of a set of ideals and beliefs in exactly the same way that novels and stories do. So much so that in certain instances, unless one already knows which is fiction and which fact, it is impossible to tell the difference. Finally, I have included chapters on two novels by Charles Brockden Brown because I wanted to show that texts already in the canon, which modern critics have considered artistically weak or defective, assume a quite different shape and significance when considered in light of the cultural "work" they were designed to do.

The critical perspective that has brought into focus the issues outlined here stems from the theoretical writings of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers: Levi-Strauss, Derrida, and Foucault; Stanley Fish, Edward Said, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. My debt to these writers is so pervasive that I have not, with one or two exceptions, cited their work at any particular point. But the way of thinking about literature that informs the book as a whole, as well as the kinds of arguments offered in individual chapters, springs directly from my study of their work. The perspective this work affords has not only determined many of the aims and values embodied here, but has also suggested some of the tactics that I have used in interpreting the texts under discussion.

Because I was trying to understand what gave these novels traction in their original setting (i.e., what made them popular, not what made them "art"), I have looked for continuities rather than ruptures, for the strands that connected a novel to other similar texts, rather than for the way in which the text might have been unique. I have not tried to emphasize the individuality or genius of the authors in question, to isolate the sensibility, modes of perception, or formal techniques that differentiate them from other authors or from one another. Rather I have seen them, in Fou-

cault's phrase, as "nodes within a network," expressing what lay in the minds of many or most of their contemporaries. Therefore I do not argue for the value of these texts on the grounds of their *difference* from other texts, as is normally done in literary criticism, showing how they avoid the pieties of the age and shun what is stereotyped or clichéd. My aim rather has been to show what a text had *in common* with other texts. For a novel's impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form. The text that becomes exceptional in the sense of reaching an exceptionally large audience does so not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what is most widely shared.

My own embrace of the conventional led me to value everything that criticism had taught me to despise: the stereotyped character, the sensational plot, the trite expression. As I began to see the power of the copy as opposed to the original, I searched not for the individual but for the type. I saw that the presence of stereotyped characters, rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition. Stereotypes are the instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories; they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form. As the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value, stereotyped characters are *essential* to popularly successful narrative. Figures like Stowe's little Eva, Cooper's Magua, and Warner's Eileen Montgomery operate as a cultural shorthand, and because of their multilayered-representative function are the carriers of strong emotional associations. Their familiarity and typicality, rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation.

The more I thought about the structure of these novels, the more I came to see the solving or balancing of such equations as the purpose that rationalizes their often repetitive and improbable

plots. The problems these plots delineate—problems concerning the relations among people of different sexes, races, social classes, ethnic groups, economic levels—require a narrative structure different from the plots of modern psychological novels, a structure that makes them seem sensational and contrived in comparison with texts like *The Ambassadors* or *The Scarlet Letter*. But the endlessly repeated rescue scenes in *Arthur Mervyn* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, the separation of families in *Uncle Tom*, and the Job-like trials of faith in *The Wide, Wide World*, while violating what seem to be self-evident norms of probability and formal economy, serve as a means of stating and proposing solutions for social and political predicaments. The benevolent rescuers of *Arthur Mervyn* and the sacrificial mothers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* act out scenarios that teach readers what kinds of behavior to emulate or shun; because the function of these scenarios is heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic, they do not attempt to transcribe in detail a parabola of events as they "actually happen" in society; rather, they provide a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place. When read in the light of its original purpose, the design of a novel like *Wieland* is no less functional than that of *The Scarlet Letter*.

In arguing for the positive value of stereotyped characters and sensational, formulaic plots, I have self-consciously reversed the negative judgments that critics have passed on these features of popular fiction by re-describing them from the perspective of an altered conception of what literature is. When literary texts are conceived as agents of cultural formation rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal, what counts as a "good" character or a logical sequence of events changes accordingly. When one sets aside modernist demands—for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy—and attends to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions, an entirely new story begins to unfold, and one's sense of the formal exigencies of narrative alters accordingly, producing a different conception of what constitutes successful char-

acters and plots. The text succeeds or fails on the basis of its "fit" with the features of its immediate context, on the degree to which it provokes the desired response, and not in relation to unchanging formal, psychological, or philosophical standards of complexity, or truth, or correctness.

Thus, the novel's literary style, no less than its characters and plot, will seem forceful and expressive to the degree that it adopts an idiom to which a contemporary audience can respond. When little Eva says to Topsy, "'O, Topsy, poor child, *I love you*' . . . with a sudden burst of feeling, and laying her little thin, white hand on Topsy's shoulder; 'I love you because you haven't any father, or mother, or friends:—because you've been a poor, abused child! I love you, and I want you to be good,' " her style may seem saccharine or merely pathetic to us. But her language had power to move hundreds of thousands of readers in the nineteenth century because they believed in the spiritual elevation of a simple childlike idiom, in the spiritual efficacy of "sudden burst[s] of feeling," and in the efficacy of what is spiritual in general. And so when Eva ends her speech to Topsy by saying "it's only a little while I shall be with you," the comparison evoked between the doll-like Eva and the son of God does not seem absurd or contrived to Stowe's readers—it is not comparing great things with small, but affirming the potential of every person, man, woman, or child, to live and die as Christ did. Within the context of evangelical Christianity, one might say of Stowe what R. P. Blackmur said of Melville—that she habitually used words greatly.

This last point broaches, in summary fashion, an issue that goes to the heart of the present project, namely, the relationship between aesthetic value and the text's historical existence. Reconstituting the notion of value in literary works is an aim which all of these essays share. People who have read one or more of them in various forms, or heard me lecture over the last few years, almost invariably ask whether the works I am discussing are really literary or not—are they, someone always asks, really any *good*? This question, which raises theoretical issues central to my

project, is the subject of the final chapter. I have postponed this discussion until the end, since any argument for changing the criteria by which we judge literary texts must depend not only on abstract reasons but on a discussion of individual cases as well.