

**The Limits of Sympathy**

*Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel*. Carolyn Betensky. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. 225 pp.

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<1>Carolyn Betensky's *Feeling for the Poor* is a forceful, often persuasive account of the ethical limitations of the social problem novel. While readers of these novels or of the excellent scholarship they have provoked will not be shocked to hear that these works do not advocate radical social change, *Feeling for the Poor* effectively delineates the narrative movements that shift attention from the economic to the affective register. In place of material inequities, Betensky argues, the novels concentrate on feeling, and particularly middle-class feeling. Taking its place among recent works such as Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy* (2000), this book analyzes the power relations implicit in sympathy, tracing the psychic satisfactions of indulging in beneficent feelings in the virtual world of fiction. *Feeling for the Poor* discounts the notion that reading cultivated a useful response to poverty. If social problem novels accomplished nothing else – and Betensky fears that they did not – they insisted on the fact that "reading . . . mattered in and of itself" (5).

<2>Using the idea of the "two nations" that lends Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) its subtitle, *Feeling for the Poor* demonstrates how, paradoxically, that model at once acknowledges and mutes economic distinctions. By constructing "repetition and symmetry across class divides" (12), the model of the two nations actually works to obscure the economic basis of class conflict. Focusing on the emotional costs of economic deprivation, this model then finds parallels in the stresses of bourgeois experience. Suffering levels the playing field, so to speak: collapsing different kinds of trauma endows middle-class characters with moral capital in spite of their privilege. One result of this model is that working-class characters become equally guilty of social strife. Blind to the humanity of the rich, they must be taught to pity their betters just as the bourgeoisie learn about the frustrations of the poor. In fact, Betensky convincingly argues that these parallels authorize a kind of aggression, a "backlash" against the poor and their importunate demands for public attention (60).

<3>Intricate readings of Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1840), Disraeli's *Sybil*, Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), and Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) lay out the machinery of the two nations model, while Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), and James's

*Princess Casamassima* (1886) complicate it with characters of multiple class identifications – third terms and ambiguous actors who disrupt simple oppositions. Betensky attends throughout to the devices that contribute to what she calls "bourgeois selving" (190), the process by which novels promise to enlarge and thereby gratify middle-class readers. Betensky identifies two key mechanisms by which novels privilege middle-class characters and uses them to great advantage. One is Bourdieu's concept of "the dominated member of the dominant class" (15), a middle-class character whose oppression by other elites exempts her from charges of oppression. With illuminating commentary on Mary Brotherton in *Michael Armstrong*, Egremont in *Sybil*, Margaret Hale in *North and South*, and both Felix and Esther in *Felix Holt*, Betensky demonstrates the strategic importance of this figure across the genre. As a foil for more complacent or oppressive middle-class characters, the dominated dominant develops and displays an impressive ethical subjectivity by taking an interest in the lives of the disadvantaged. Through these characters, the need to learn is figured as an end in itself, an ongoing project of self-improvement that endlessly defers actual action on behalf of the poor. And, doubly disadvantaged by working-class stereotypes and elite disdain, dominated dominants become objects of sympathy just like the impoverished victims on whom they bestow their compassion. Crucial in managing the novels' economies of suffering and sympathy, they offer a satisfying proxy for privileged readers.

<4>A second mechanism is the spectral working-class reader. Neither real nor implied in the conventional sense, this reading position is implicitly posited through working-class characters who learn to see bourgeois characters as honorable and warm-hearted rather than selfish and prejudiced. "Sybil, not Egremont, is the ideal reader of *Sybil*" (87) because it is Sybil who needs to change her assumptions about who is worthy and who is not. Such re-interpretations provide narcissistic pleasure to (real) middle-class readers, who can vicariously enjoy this accumulation of moral capital as the plot develops. Perhaps the most striking use of this figure comes in Betensky's interpretation of Hyacinth in *The Princess Casamassima*. With his ambiguous class identifications – economically disadvantaged, culturally aspiring, and politically confused – Hyacinth fulfills this role ironically. He is at once an ideal, adoring reader of his betters and the victim of his own idolatry. Surprisingly, Betensky's somewhat schematic framework provides a useful way into this unwieldy novel.

<5>Not all the readings are this rewarding. *Feeling for the Poor* founders a bit when it comes to *Felix Holt*. The two nations model does not work particularly well because the novel does not offer up clear binaries to be upheld or challenged. Insisting on the complex layering, the fluidity and capriciousness of felt identifications and socially-scripted identities, *Felix Holt* generally eludes Betensky's framework. With the nation of the poor represented by such socially ambiguous characters as Felix and Esther, one could argue that the two nations model is not only rather rigid but perhaps not fully relevant in spite of the novel's apparent foothold in the social problem genre. While it offers an illuminating interpretation of Margaret Hale as the dominated dominant, *Feeling for the Poor* also struggles with the ultimate thrust of *North and South*. Hungry for displacements and analogies, the book winds up juggling an inconclusive array of related incidents, characters, and motifs. One senses that the novel's imputed inability to drive its many symmetries to a conclusion lies less in its own desire to sow "global confusion" about "blame and responsibility" (124) and more in the limitations of the model itself.

<6>*Feeling for the Poor* closes with a problematic afterword about the dangers of reading as a substitute for action in the real world. Though Betensky makes a strong case that social problem novels served the psychic needs of bourgeois readers, must we automatically conclude that readers experienced "their own new understanding and feeling, *only* – with the result that bourgeois knowledge and emotional response substitute for further action" (190)? Betensky vacillates about this claim, sometimes acknowledging that we cannot know whether reading leads to activism but more often insisting that reading actually forestalls taking action in the real world. Perceptively noting the dangers of disavowing readers' narcissistic pleasure in order to idealize the effects of reading, she assumes that this disavowal is the norm for novels, readers, and scholars. Drawing on Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), which surveys empirical studies about whether reading really does make us better people (the returns are still very much out, which will surprise no one who works in an English department), Betensky is not only marking out a theoretical position but also making claims about actual readers. Nevertheless, this is a question that cannot be answered in the terms in which it is posed. While novels may model responses for readers, they do not necessarily determine readers' imaginative investments, much less condition their behaviors in the world. Attempting to make a historical claim through a strictly literary analysis, the afterword remains provocative but unconvincing.

<7>There is another, shadow argument lurking at the edges of *Feeling for the Poor* that might have addressed this final claim more effectively. In the introduction and at moments in other chapters, Betensky gestures toward a psychoanalytic framework, briefly mentioning transference, displacement, introjection, projection, and object relations theory. A deep use of these terms might explain how the narcissistic pleasures Betensky so effectively analyzes could actually *disable* further responses, how the psychodynamics of bourgeois identity-construction could *require* the erasure of economic injustice. In other words, propositions about reading effects might profitably engage a theoretical model about what goes on in the subconscious rather than (or along with) what goes on in narrative. Though psychoanalysis has taken a back seat to cultural studies in Victorian scholarship, brilliant work by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Anne McClintock, Dianne Sadoff, and John Kucich suggests what a formidable contribution it can make. Of course, one should not ask for a different book from the one the author has written, but the argument that *Feeling for the Poor* asserts, but doesn't actually make, suggests that there is another book waiting to be written about the psychodynamics of class relations.

<8>Still, *Feeling for the Poor* adds significantly to our understanding of narrative and class, power and affect. Its illuminating readings argue for the salience of less canonical novels and make familiar novels fresh, and it sets the stage for further assessments of the work done by Victorian fiction.