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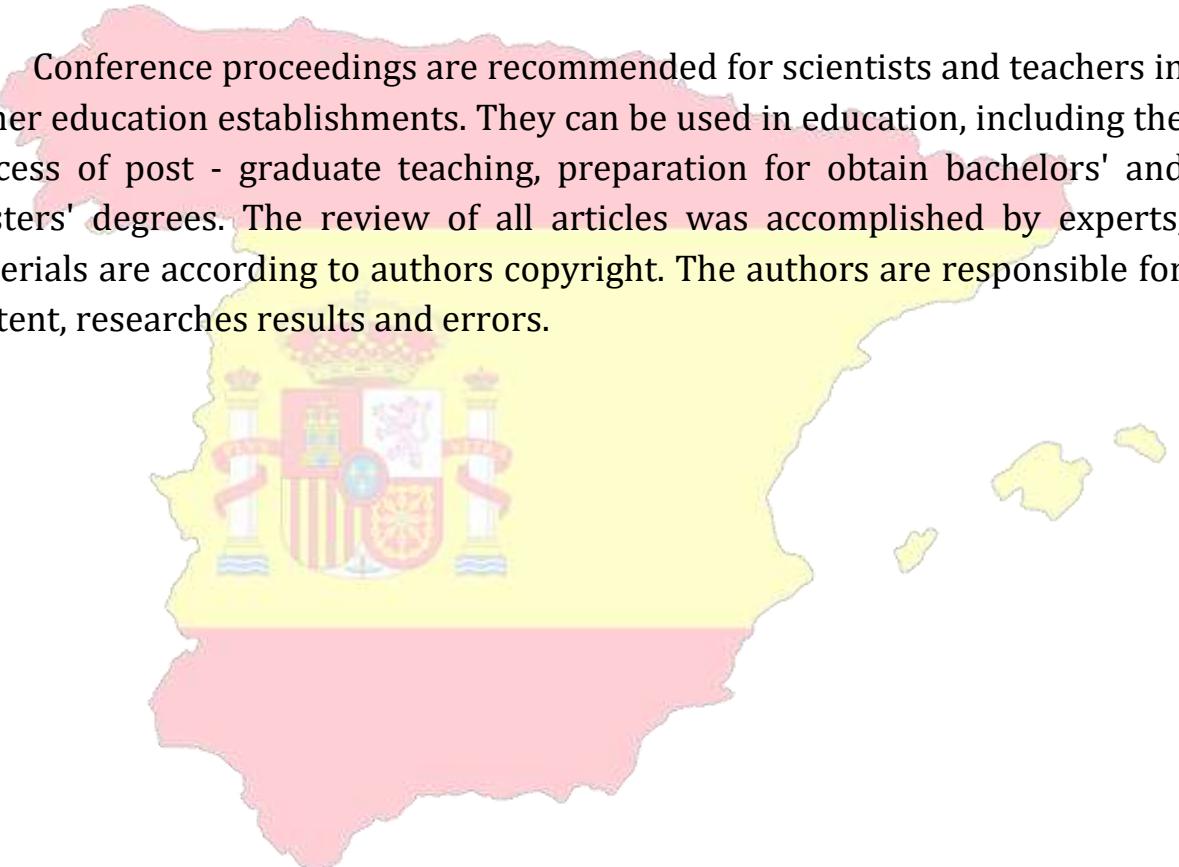


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Sentimentalism in the 18th Century: Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne

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Abstract. This paper examines the development of Sentimentalism in 18th-century English literature through the works of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne. Sentimentalism emerged as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, emphasizing emotional sensitivity, sympathy, and moral virtue as central aspects of human experience. Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels, particularly *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, established the psychological depth and moral seriousness of the sentimental tradition by revealing characters' inner conflicts and emotional struggles. Laurence Sterne, in contrast, combined sentiment with humour and narrative experimentation in works such as *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, highlighting the beauty of everyday emotional experiences while gently satirizing exaggerated sensibility. By comparing the two authors, the study demonstrates how their distinct approaches contributed to the development of the sentimental novel and influenced later European and Romantic literature. The paper concludes that Sentimentalism played a crucial role in expanding the literary representation of emotion and laying the foundation for modern psychological fiction.

Key Words: Sentimentalism; 18th-century literature; Samuel Richardson; Laurence Sterne; epistolary novel; psychological realism; sensibility; emotion; moral virtue; *A Sentimental Journey*; *Tristram Shandy*.

The 18th century in England was a period of significant cultural and intellectual transformation. While the Enlightenment emphasized reason, logic, and scientific progress, another important trend — Sentimentalism — emerged as a reaction to excessive rationality. Sentimentalism placed emotion, sympathy, and moral sensitivity at the center of human experience. Two important literary figures who profoundly shaped this movement were **Samuel Richardson** and **Laurence Sterne**. Their works introduced new ways of exploring psychological depth, human compassion, and the moral power of feeling.

Sentimentalism arose partly as a response to the cold intellectualism of the time. Thinkers like David Hume and Adam Smith had argued that sympathy was a natural human instinct. This idea influenced writers who believed literature should touch the heart, awaken compassion, and show the emotional foundations of virtue.

The main features of sentimental literature included the exploration of inner feelings, the representation of moral dilemmas, an emphasis on sympathy, and detailed depictions of emotional experiences. Writers often used first-person narration or epistolary forms to create an intimate connection between the reader and the characters. Sentimentalism turned attention away from heroic events

toward ordinary people whose personal experiences, sufferings, and moral choices carried universal meaning.

Samuel Richardson and the Birth of the Psychological Novel

Samuel Richardson is considered one of the founders of the sentimental novel. His works introduced detailed emotional introspection and moral sensitivity into English fiction. Before Richardson, novels tended to focus on external events or humorous episodes. He shifted attention to the **inner life** of characters.

One of Richardson's major contributions was his use of the epistolary form. In novels such as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, the story unfolds through letters written by the characters. This narrative technique allowed readers to delve directly into the characters' thoughts, emotions, and moral struggles. Their fears, hopes, dilemmas, and reflections become vivid and immediate.

In *Pamela*, Richardson demonstrates how emotional honesty and moral virtue can empower a socially vulnerable young woman. The heroine's purity and sincerity help her overcome the attempts to manipulate her. Through her emotional resilience, Richardson argues that virtue can triumph even in difficult circumstances.

In *Clarissa*, he takes sentimental exploration to a deeper level. Clarissa's tragic story reveals the psychological suffering caused by family pressure, social expectations, and moral injustice. Her letters are full of emotional turmoil, moral reasoning, and spiritual reflection. Richardson's novel shows how society can destroy a virtuous person when it ignores compassion and humanity. His portrayal of psychological complexity influenced later generations of writers across Europe.

Laurence Sterne: Emotion, Irony, and Narrative Experimentation

Laurence Sterne approached Sentimentalism from a different angle. While Richardson's stories were serious and morally instructive, Sterne introduced humour, irony, and experimental techniques.

His famous novel *Tristram Shandy* breaks almost every traditional rule of storytelling. Instead of a straightforward narrative, the book uses digressions, playful commentary, and unconventional structures. Yet, beneath the humour, the novel contains deeply emotional scenes. Sterne's characters — especially Uncle Toby — exemplify pure kindness, innocence, and sincere sympathy. Sterne shows that emotional sensitivity can be gentle, natural, and even humorous.

In *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne focuses on small, tender moments of human connection. The narrator, Yorick, travels through France and becomes emotionally affected by the people he meets. Instead of dramatic events, the novel highlights everyday gestures of kindness, compassion for strangers, and spontaneous feelings. Sterne suggests that a person's moral worth is revealed not through grand actions but through the ability to feel deeply and respond lovingly to others.

Unlike Richardson, Sterne often satirized exaggerated or artificial displays of emotion. His balance of sentiment and humour prevented sentimental literature

from becoming overly dramatic, offering a more realistic and lively approach to human sensitivity.

Richardson and Sterne: Two Faces of Sentimentalism

Although both authors contributed significantly to Sentimentalism, their approaches were distinct. Richardson focused on moral seriousness, psychological depth, and the emotional suffering of his characters. His novels highlight the challenges individuals face when confronted with moral dilemmas or social injustice. Sterne, meanwhile, celebrated spontaneous emotion, everyday experiences, and gentle humour. While Richardson used sentiment to teach moral lessons, Sterne used it to explore the joy, warmth, and humanity found in ordinary life.

Despite these differences, both writers expanded the possibilities of the novel. They demonstrated that literature could explore the emotional aspects of the human condition, creating stories that touch readers' hearts while offering insight into the universal experiences of love, suffering, and compassion.

Sentimentalism in the 18th century played a crucial role in transforming English literature. By shifting attention from reason to emotion, sentimental writers challenged the dominant intellectual worldview of their time and emphasized the importance of sympathy, kindness, and moral sensitivity. Samuel Richardson laid the foundations of the sentimental novel through his detailed psychological portrayals and morally serious epistolary narratives. Laurence Sterne enriched the movement by combining emotional sincerity with humour, stylistic innovation, and a celebration of simple human connections.

Together, they shaped a literary movement that influenced not only English fiction but also the broader European tradition. Sentimentalism opened the door to Romanticism and helped establish the foundations of modern psychological realism. It demonstrated that literature becomes truly powerful when it reflects the full depth of human emotion and the moral complexities of everyday life.

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