

**Institution: Birkbeck, University of London**

**Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature**

**Title of case study:** Rethinking sentimentality in Victorian literature, art and culture: the imaginative impact of feelings in public and private life

### 1. Summary of the impact

Birkbeck's Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies (CNCS) has pioneered a reassessment of Victorian sentimentality, prompting the rethinking of a maligned cultural phenomenon. Its major impacts include contributions to understanding Dickens's life and writings, exemplified by the success of Dickens Day and Slater's publications; and two recent exhibitions. 'Victorian Sentimentality' (commissioned by Tate Britain, 2012) and 'Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People in the Nineteenth Century' (with the support of RNIB and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013), illustrate how CNCS has played an influential role in re-shaping public understanding and reception of Victorian literary and visual culture.

### 2. Underpinning research

The task of rethinking sentimentality emerged originally from Dickens studies for which Birkbeck has long had a strong reputation through the work of a succession of prominent scholars working within CNCS, including Barbara Hardy, Isobel Armstrong, Steven Connor, Sally Ledger and Michael Slater, and continuing currently with Nicola Bown, David McAllister and Heather Tilley. Professor Emeritus Michael Slater, who made a widely recognised contribution to the understanding of Dickens's life and writing (eg Ref 1), was a pioneer of the attempt to rethink the standard dismissal of Dickens as sentimental, beginning with his groundbreaking *Dickens and Women* (1983). Dickens's legacy in relation to sentimentality has been an important theme for the annual Dickens Day (which brings together academics and a wide range of enthusiasts, including members of the Dickens Fellowship), where the focus in 2010 was 'Mr Popular Sentiment: Dickens and Feeling'; and in CNCS's cutting edge online open access journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (established in 2005) which has had two issues devoted to 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality' (2007) and 'Dickens and Feeling' (2012). (Impact 1)

The issue of Victorian sentimentality was central to the work of the late Sally Ledger (while she was at Birkbeck) on Dickens and melodrama (Ref 2, for example), and further developed by Nicola Bown (at Birkbeck since 2001) whose previous research on Victorian fairies identified sentimentality as a key element for reinterpreting Victorian culture. While meshing closely with Birkbeck's tradition of Dickens scholarship, Bown's research brought a strong focus on interrelationships between literature and art history as it traced a path from the Victorian fascination with fairies, through a reappraisal of Dickens's sentimentality, towards a wider investigation of the role of sentimentality in a variety of literary and artistic contexts (Ref 3). In looking beyond the cliché of Victorian sentimentality to how emotion shaped Victorian views of the self and society, Bown's research complemented Isobel Armstrong's influential contributions to understanding emotion in Victorian literature and cultural practice (Ref 4). Subsequent CNCS scholars, including Carolyn Burdett, Hilary Fraser and Heather Tilley (at Birkbeck as a postgraduate student, 2005-2009; as a Research Fellow 2010-2012; and as an academic staff member since 01/07/2013), have developed and extended the reassessment of the role of sentiment and sentimentality in Victorian culture, variously investigating the sentimental impulse to social action and the role of sentimentality in critical and historical judgements of the period, and fostering multi- and interdisciplinary connections between literature, art history, aesthetic theory, cultural materialism and history of science. This work was synthesised in symposium on Victorian Sentimentality

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organised by Bown in 2006 and 19's special issue 2007 on 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality' (Ref 5) which she edited, and subsequently led to Tate Britain commissioning Bown to co-curate a Focus Display. (Impact 2)

Other aspects of Victorian Sentimentalism are covered in a 'New Agenda' on 'Sentimentalities' edited by Burdett for the *Journal of Victorian Culture* (Ref 6) which includes an article by Heather Tilley who studied under Professor Hilary Fraser and has explored constructions of visual disability in literature (Ref 7). Her research into the importance of visuality in forming sympathetic and sentimental feeling, and the understanding of culture's role in constructions of disability is the theme of her exhibition, *Touching the Book*. (Impact 3)

### 3. References to the research

1. Slater, M. *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* (Yale UP, 2009)
2. Ledger, S. "[Don't be so melodramatic!](#)" *Dickens and the affective mode*. 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Vol 4, 2007)
3. Nicola Bown, '[Tender Beauty: Victorian Painting and the Problem of Sentimentality](#)', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol 16 (2), 21-225 (2011). (Nominated for the NAVSA Donald Gray Prize for outstanding work in Victorian Studies.)
4. Isobel Armstrong and Emma Mason, Introduction: '[Feeling: an indefinite dull region of the spirit?](#)' *Textual Practice* (2008 Vol 22:1)
5. Nicola Bown, '[Crying over Little Nell](#)', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Vol 4, 2007): introduction to special issue, Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality.
6. Carolyn Burdett, '[Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?](#)' special section, 'New Agenda: Sentimentalities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol 16 (2) (2011), 259-274.
7. Heather Tilley, "[The Sentimental Touch: Dickens's Old Curiosity Shop and the Feeling Reader](#)". *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol 16(2), 226-241 (2011)

### Grants

2012-13 Leverhulme Research Fellowship (£33,535) awarded to Burdett to write her monograph, *Coining Empathy*

Post-doctoral fellowship, 01/07/2013 to 15/11/2015 'Victorian Touch, Tactile Media and the Gendered Body, 1830-92' (£125,746) awarded to Tilley (she held the grant at Newcastle University from 01/09/2012 and it was transferred when she returned to Birkbeck on 01/07/2013)

### 4. Details of the impact

The impact of research on Victorian sentimentality developed at CNCS is represented by a series of outcomes and their contribution to cultural life, relating to the life and work of Charles Dickens and the Victorian period. The active approach of CNCS scholars to public engagement is exemplified by the ever popular Dickens Day and close association with the Dickens Fellowship. . As well as involving the wider public, this work has led to two public exhibitions: Bown's collaboration with Tate Britain on the co-curated exhibition 'Victorian Sentimentality' (May-Dec 2012) and Tilley's exhibition in collaboration with RNIB on the Victorian 'tactile imagination'.

#### 1) Dickens and feeling

Professor Slater has been in the forefront of reevaluating Dickens' life and work and the success of his books including the 700 page *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing*, with English language sales of over 15,000, and numerous enthusiastic reviews, indicates the impact of its publication (Source 6). Alongside this is the development of Dickens Day, an annual event in central London, set up in the 1980s by Michael Slater, which continues to foster collaboration between Birkbeck scholars, The Dickens Fellowship and the Dickens Museum in Bloomsbury, and to engage Dickens enthusiasts amongst the wider public. It promotes public understanding and

debates about Dickens' legacy. Attended by increasing audiences since 2005 (from 50 to 120 – 50% non-academic) with the development of a varied public programme, it is particularly popular amongst the Dickens Fellowship: 'The one externally organised event that the membership particularly looks forward to is the annual Dickens Day at London University.' The 2010 conference 'Mr Popular Sentiment: Dickens and Feeling' 'was particularly memorable. The day explored, amongst other aspects, how Dickens could be so clear eyed and humorous about the over-sentimentality of other artists, and yet on occasion outdo them in that respect. It also examined why sentimentality was so prevalent in much of the art of the Victorian period, and has such a bad press now. I clearly recall a strong case being made in favour of the sentimental.' (Source 1)

Further evidence of the public influence of CNCS scholars in relation to this issue was reflected in speaking invitations to Fraser, Bown and Burdett during the Dickens Centenary 'Big Read' events in 2012 on *Oliver Twist* and they are regularly invited to do Christmas readings at the Dickens Museum.

## 2) 'Victorian Sentimentality' at Tate Britain

Bown co-curated a full-room 'Focus Display' on *Victorian Sentimentality* (May-December 2012) as a consequence of the conference she organised (2006), and subsequent issue of 19 (2007) she edited, on 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality'. Her close association with the museum sector was reflected in the inclusion of an article by curator Sonia Solicari (drawing on the latter's work for the Victorian and Albert Museum's *A Show of Emotion: Victorian Sentiment in Prints and Drawings*, 2006-7) and was further developed in subsequent conversations with Tate Britain. Through the exhibition, sponsored by BP, Bown showcased insights from her work within CNCS, making a significant contribution to cultural capital and a recognised intervention in public discourse. The selection of paintings from the Tate collection, many of which had not been on display for many decades because they had fallen so resolutely out of fashion, asked 'Why has sentimentality come to seem so unforgivable?' and tracked the ways in which 'being sentimental' developed a pejorative meaning in the course of the nineteenth century, having been so valued in the eighteenth. The exhibition was complemented by a public panel discussion during Birkbeck Arts Week (May 2012) attended by approximately 55 people. As Serena Trowbridge wrote in her review of the exhibition, 'The exhibition ... contained some Victorian giants, and was also immensely thought-provoking. ... Of course, these "sentimental" paintings are rarely avant-garde; they tend to be well-executed but not particularly striking in artistic merit. But they were phenomenally popular, and perhaps our resistance to engaging with sentiment needs to be fully reassessed.' (Source 7)

According to the Tate curator commissioning the exhibition, it 'was commissioned as an In-Focus: a type of display which allows a curator (internal or external) the opportunity to present new research and thinking about an aspect of the Tate collection. The display presented an ideal opportunity to draw attention to neglected works in the collection while offering new ways of viewing familiar pictures such as Fildes' *The Doctor* and Millais' *The Order of Release*. ... Each picture was accompanied by an interpretative text (written by Bown) which used relevant contextual information to pose questions about the work and the ways in which critics and artists have approached it in the past. By inviting viewers to engage with the paintings and sculptures on display we hoped they would then reflect on the feelings and responses stirred by the content and formal qualities of the works themselves.' It 'was one of the best attended displays of 2012, attracting a large number of visitors (including school parties and tourists) at a time when few works from the historic part of the collection were on view.' For the Tate, 'the display also presented an opportunity for Tate's conservation department to examine and treat a number of works that had not been exhibited for many years such as MacCallum's *Silvery Moments*' (Source 2). It thus gave support to Tate Britain's new policy to give dedicated space to items from the

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archives rarely if ever on public show, and to explore and illustrate new research, within its current multi-phase transformation. It also generated interest among other curators: the Whitney in New York subsequently asked Bown for the contextual panels written for the Tate show. (Source 8)

**3) The Victorian 'tactile imagination'**

Dr Heather Tilley's research has led to an exhibition, 'Touching the Book: Embossed Literature for Blind People in the Nineteenth Century', launched in Birkbeck's Forum for the Arts, on July 18, 2013, and an allied two-day symposium 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination', with papers by Bown, Nead and Fraser, of the CNCS, and Solicari, Director of Guildhall Art Gallery, attended by 120 participants including museum professionals. As explored in the exhibition, blind people were often figures of sentimentality in the Victorian visual economy. Significantly supported by the RNIB and the Wellcome Trust, the exhibition was largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund which awarded it £8200 from their 'Sharing Heritage' strand (Sources 3, 4 & 9). The exhibition displayed materials loaned by the Wellcome Library and RNIB: examples include the first classbooks printed for blind people in the 1820s-40, examples of embossed bibles printed in a variety of raised types from the 1830s-40s; and early secular reading material: 'Three works, which would have otherwise been sitting in our stores, have been given a new lease of life and are helping to communicate this interesting and important topic to a wider audience' (Source 4). The RNIB Heritage Services Manager writes: 'Dr Tilley's thorough research has resulted in an important and unique resource reflecting the historical development of reading formats for blind and partially sighted people in their correct social and cultural context. Additionally, the decision from the outset to adopt an accessible and approachable framework has successfully brought this diverse range of materials to life for both public and specialist audiences, and is in our opinion to be commended both in terms of its scope and vision.' (Source 3)

Further reflecting the significance of this work, Tilley was invited to curate a forthcoming display of prints and photographs at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), 'Facing Blindness: Visual Impairment in the Nineteenth Century', November 2013-July 2014, titled 'Facing Blindness: Visual Impairment in the Nineteenth Century' (Source 5). NPG has also commissioned her to give a public lecture (December 2013) and a gallery tour to blind and partially-sighted gallery visitors (January 2014).

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

## Testimonials

1. Joint Honorary General Secretary (factual statement)
2. Lead Curator, British Art to 1900, Tate Britain: commissioned Nicola Bown to co-curate the In-Focus exhibition at Tate Britain (factual statement)
3. RNIB Heritage Manager (factual statement)
4. Library Exhibition Liaison, Wellcome Library (factual statement)
5. Curator, C19<sup>th</sup> Portraits and Head of Research Programmes, National Portrait Gallery (factual statement)

## Other sources

6. Reviews of Slater's book include [Robert Douglas-Fairhurst](#) in *The Telegraph*; [Dinah Birch](#) in *The Independent*; [Sam Leith](#) in *The Spectator*; and [Rosemarie Bodenheimer](#) in the *London Review of Books*. Yale University Press (London) will corroborate sales figures.
7. [Culture and Anarchy blog](#) response to Tate 'Victorian Sentimentality' exhibition:
8. Email from Whitney Museum, provided on request
9. HLF offer letter, provided on request