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Cry Like You Mean It:  
Sensibility and Class in William Wordsworth's  
"Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams  
Weep at a Tale of Distress"

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The eighteenth-century literature of sensibility reflects a significant change in the way members of British society came to view one another. As a way of highlighting the interconnectedness of human beings, the upper echelons of British society placed great emphasis upon the expression of one's feelings and emotions. However, the highly theatricalised methods of conveying sympathy for one's fellow beings were more markers of class than ways of ensuring true concern for others. While middle- to upper-class individuals established certain protocols regarding the expression of sympathy, such as fainting or shedding a ready tear for another human being in distress, this body language was primarily a means of ensuring social conformity and meeting cultural

expectations. The new empirical evidence of human physiology, which confirmed the material link between the body and the mind, helped to illustrate the connections among society's members, although the aesthetics of pain that developed indicated the emotional detachment of the upper classes from the suffering (Bruhm 4-5, Abrams 327). In turn, the artists of the time, many of whom had the economic means to contemplate their pain in artistic expression, used their corporeal torment as a type of creative muse more than a means of creating connections with other members of society.

William Wordsworth may be counted among those privileged writers who sought to find and explore sympathy with others through the creation of his art. In his 1787 "Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress," Wordsworth effectively reads the text of the human body in distress, and the means by which he does so is indicative of the sympathetic trend that was popularized during the eighteenth century. Through the imagined observation of a body in sympathetic response, Wordsworth invokes several of the major aspects of eighteenth-century sensibility: its luxurious excesses, the advancements in medicine that confirmed the connection of the body and mind, and the class-conscious aesthetics of pain. Through a close reading of Wordsworth's first published sonnet, one may view the age of sensibility's obsession with the experience, observation, and avoidance of pain, as well as the chasm that existed between the theoretical idea of sensibility and sympathy as it was practiced among the upper classes in eighteenth-century Britain.

The age of sensibility responded to the stoicism of the seventeenth century through the staging of sophisticated exhibitions of sympathy. The "fascination" of the Romantics with physical pain (1), as suggested by Steven Bruhm, is a result of the

eighteenth century's aesthetic of sensibility: "the way we respond to physical distress, both in ourselves and others" (2). This new interest in social sensitivity was in part a humanitarian reaction to major cultural injustices of the time, like the slave trade, but it was also about creating community. As Abrams notes, "Emphasis on the human capability for sympathy and wishing others well...helped to develop social consciousness and a sense of communal responsibility" (327). Sensibility was also viewed as a reaction to Hobbes's radical individualism, which asserted that people exist in a state of selfishness, since displaying concern for the well-being of another was hoped to suggest the intrinsic kindness of people (Bruhm 2). However, despite the good intentions of the moralistic tracts that appeared in support of the natural propensity of people to respond and behave sympathetically, these actions were not necessarily self-sacrificing, since people had the opportunity to achieve a higher social status according to how well they performed when regarding misfortune (Abrams 327). These beliefs contributed to the formation of the eighteenth century's so-called "cult of sensibility." The term "cult," while it harbours connotations that might be potentially misleading for the purposes of this paper, is nonetheless useful for a reading of sensibility based upon the context of class in the eighteenth century. The use of the word "cult" implies inclusion through the exclusion of others, which is illustrative of those who were financially able to react to tales of woe with carefully wrought tears and affected sniffles.

As a result of the performative nature of eighteenth-century society, with its stress on how one appeared to others, one's outward modes of sympathy, rather than actual "moral actions," became "a sign both of polite breeding and a virtuous heart" (Abrams 327). The new focus on sensibility enabled the upper-class individual to

develop a “hair-trigger responsiveness to another person’s distresses and joys” (327). This range of highly sensitive emotions permitted the upper classes to provide a compassionate response without actually acting in a moral way. Rather, displays of sensibility in the eighteenth century served as “an index to a person’s gentility—that is, to one’s upper class status” (327). One’s outward sympathy for the plight of another, then, was not a means of offering true concern for one’s fellow beings, but was rather a means of self-improvement, available only to those with the status to facilitate it.

The speaker of Wordsworth’s poem physically enacts the process of sensibility: to sympathetically reach out to those in situations of distress. The first two words of the poem, “She wept” (1), describe Miss Williams’s combined emotional and physical response to the unspecified “tale of distress” referred to in the title (14). Miss Williams’s sympathetic response is demonstrative of the stress placed upon the importance of identifying with other human beings. Furthermore, these two words may also be read as an allusion to the Gospel of John, chapter 11 verse 35: “Jesus wept.” In this narrative, Jesus does not cry out of sadness for the dead Lazarus, but out of sympathy for his surviving loved ones: “When Jesus therefore saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled (John 11.33). Thus, here readers see the humanity of Christ, displayed by His open show of empathy for Lazarus’ kin. Jesus’ ready sympathy at the plight of another human being may be linked with Adam Smith’s idea of how the imagination allows humans to experience empathy. Using embodied language, Smith argues, “By the imagination we place ourselves in [another’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in the same measure with him, and thence

form some idea of his sensations” (9). Whereas the biblical example emphasizes the self’s spiritual participation in the act of empathy, Smith’s description draws attention directly to the body. However, one may also keep in mind the Christian belief that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God. The combination of the body and spirit, in this sense, illustrates the combination of the physiological and the emotional that sensibility came to adopt. Furthermore, one may reason that Wordsworth’s inclusion of this line was to remind readers of the morality implicit in feeling for one’s fellow man or woman.

The social changes that were ushered in during the age of sensibility provided ample opportunity for the propagation of the new “cult of sensibility” among the upper classes. Increasing rates of literacy among women are one such example. G.J. Barker-Benfield relates that “Among the culture’s roots [was] the sharp increase in women’s literacy during the seventeenth century” (xviii). This fact is reinforced in Wordsworth’s sonnet, since the speaker is sympathizing with a woman who is experiencing a sympathetic response to a narrative about distress. Furthermore, this era also saw a “dramatic acceleration of women’s publishing” (xix). As Barker-Benfield sums up, “Women’s increasing literacy and their writing novels would be fundamental to the creation of the culture of sensibility” (xix). While the fiction of sensibility enjoyed popularity among its readers, its focus differed from what one would expect. That is, this genre was largely designed to teach its readers to appear sensitive. As Janet Todd suggests, the literature of sensibility “prided itself more on making its readers weep and in teaching them when and how much to weep” (4). Thus, sensibility is part of the performance of class. For instance, Edmund Burke contends that when pain is adequately regarded and considered, one is able to create an “elevation of the mind” that ought to be

the main focus of one's "studies" (35). In this sense, the consideration of others' pain is not an exercise in sympathy, but one of intellectual and even aesthetic development, which can in turn be viewed as a class marker. Rather than helping to close the gap among individuals in eighteenth-century culture, sensibility instead served as a means of separating those who wept from those who were likely too miserable to do so.

The speaker in Wordsworth's poem communicates the performative role assigned to middle- and upper-class women, a role that was rooted in patriarchy and supported by "science." The poem's speaker professes the inherent value of the emotional display of Miss Helen Maria Williams: "That tear proclaims – in thee each virtue dwells" (9). Here, Wordsworth implies that a person's ability to discharge a tear in reaction to a sad tale assertively announces that he or she has a moral nature. Certainly, showing sympathy for the plight of another human being is the first step towards helping others, but Wordsworth offers no information that would lead readers to believe that Miss Williams would actually do anything to aid a non-fictional unfortunate person in need. Instead, her tear is sufficient confirmation of the strength of her virtue; it demonstrates her capacity simply to produce the proper physical response. This idea is echoed in eighteenth-century science regarding female sensibility. As Barker-Benfield describes, medical researchers such as Bernard Mandeville contributed to the idea that women were inherently weaker and naturally more sympathetic than men (26). Mandeville, author of *A Treatise of Hypochondriack and Hysterick Passions* (1711), was one of a line of researchers and doctors who took special interest in "diseases of the nerves" (6). As Barker-Benfield explains, "In Mandeville's view, women's 'spirits' were inherently less than men's and their nerves were thinner, more delicate, and softer. The effects permeated women's

constitutions; women's vaunted 'delicacy' reflected the weakness of their nervous systems, also termed 'delicate'" (26). Such so-called medical breakthroughs contributed to the concept "that all women had more delicate nerves and, therefore, greater sensibility than men" (27). What began as a kind of myth was eventually accepted as fact by the general population—a fact that cemented preconceived beliefs concerning inherent differences between women and men. Nonetheless, this idea was held in good faith by such empirical philosophers as David Hume, who wrote that women "have more delicate passions than men" (qtd. in Barker-Benfield 27). These widely accepted beliefs fuelled and strengthened the notion that sensibility was a natural trait in women, and the finer the nerves, the more delicate and refined the lady. Furthermore, as G.S. Rousseau confirms, disorders identified as "nervous" were "internalised by persons of fashion as visible emblems of refinement and delicacy" (155). Thus, Miss Williams's most desirable female qualities are embodied by her single tear, which is apparently the kind of concrete, material evidence expected in the specular arena of sensibility.

The medicine of the eighteenth century, though it enabled society to adopt a more desirable and democratic view of humanity, did not seem to lessen the distance between those in pain and those who witnessed it, but rather appeared to provide the fortunate with a further means of separating themselves from the downtrodden. Robert Whytt was one of the eighteenth century's most celebrated physicians to explain the subjective experience of the body in pain (Bruhm 11). His research allowed him to deduce that "every sensible part of the body has a sympathy with the whole" (qtd. in Bruhm 12). Whytt's findings were then able to explain why it is that the systems of the human body labour interdependently with each other, and are not simply a collection of isolated parts.

As Bruhm explains it, Whytt's studies ultimately overturned "the hierarchically structured image of the body as a Cartesian system of mechanistic reflexes, and replaced it with the image of the body as an interconnected, feeling entity" (12). This scientific pronouncement understandably had a resounding effect on how individual members of society were observed. As R.F. Brissenden suggests, Whytt's findings on the interdependency of human physiology would have a profound effect on how people related to one another (42-43). The innate interdependency of all living things would, ideally, bridge the gaps in a society so rigidly held in place by cultural and social hierarchies.

Wordsworth's sonnet demonstrates this connection between the brain and the body, as well as the connection between the individual and society. The speaker of the poem claims that "—Life's purple tide began to flow" when he witnesses the weeping Helen Maria Williams (1). A sense of immediacy is created by the long dash, a caesura that mirrors the speaker's own momentary astonishment, the apprehension of Williams's pain, and the moment just before his own blood begins to flow in reaction to it. As Todd indicates, such "quickness to display compassion for suffering" defined the era of sensibility (7). This immediate response to the sorrow of another human being also supports Whytt's findings on the behaviour of the human nervous system. Additionally, as G.S. Rousseau argues, such an automatic physical response "implies that every response to a moral crisis is physiologically grounded, fated, and determined in the *a priori* sense" (155). That is, one's response to another's distress is not only psychological, but a finely tuned kind of physical reflex. Moreover, the movement implied by the terms "flow" and "tide" promotes the idea of movement that was

popularized during the age of sensibility. Empathy for other human beings was directly linked to the idea that sensations, like messages transmitted along the nervous system, could be translated from one body to another. The rhythmic movement inherent in the comings and goings of the ocean is thus linked with the waves of empathy: natural, powerful, and constant.

Furthermore, the “streams” which coursed through “every thrilling vein” promote the suggestion of the sympathetic quality of the body and of the body politic (2). In the late seventeenth century, the term “thrill” was used to refer to “A subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion or excitement...producing a slight shudder or tingling through the body; a penetrating influx of feeling or emotion” (OED online). A thrill, then, when used to articulate the workings of the human nervous system, would describe the emotion that resonates in a human being upon seeing the plight of another. More importantly, to illustrate the connection between the individual and society, “thrill” is associated with a shudder or vibration. Through a vibration, the vein communicates its discontent with its surrounding body parts, which each receive and sympathize with this response. By analogy, the body politic, being composed of interdependent components, should feel the sting of the plight of its weaker members, and wish to correct any harm inflicted upon them. The fact that the speaker’s “pulse beat slow” is demonstrative of the sympathy that separate yet interconnected human beings can show for their fellow men or women (3). The speaker’s physiological response implies that humans are capable of empathy at both individual and interpersonal levels of organization.

This concept of shared experience stems largely from Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As Smith reasons, “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there

are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (9). The collective human experience, therefore, is not based on individual experience, but upon humans’ compulsion to look out for their fellow beings. Furthermore, Smith states that “As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (9). In this key passage, Smith emphasizes that human beings are fundamentally cut off from others. As a consequence of this division, people relate to each other through acts of imagination that project the self into the position of the other. We understand others through the imagination. While Smith undoubtedly intended this concept to be used for the betterment of humanity, it also promised a tasteful experience for the higher ranks of society. The power of the imagination was not only used to empathize with other human beings, but harnessed for the developing aesthetics of pain.

However, the practice of social commonality, as encouraged by philosophers and social reformers, fell rather short of its mark, as the eighteenth century came to experience a problematic “aesthetic pleasure in someone else’s pain” (Bruhm 3). Those individuals, such as Burke, who recognized and delighted in the aesthetics of pain, also understood the importance of keeping a certain distance between themselves and the suffering. This measured emotional distance was kept to maintain the pleasure of the spectacle. Burke admits that “danger or pain,” when experienced with an appropriate detachment, are “delightful” (14). Burke’s admission of the pleasure in pain correlates with the idea that according to eighteenth-century ideals, “sympathy with another’s grief,

unlike personal grief, [was] a pleasurable emotion, hence to be sought as a value in itself” (Abrams 327). However, Burke acknowledges that when perils “press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible” (14). Thus, Burke recognizes that regarding another’s pain may quickly turn from being pleasurable to painful, and is cautious in constructing an emotional gate. Furthermore, achieving aesthetic delight in imaginary pain provides a further remove from the dangers of encountering “real” pain. This emotional safeguarding is not a genuine feeling of sympathy, but is instead a measured attempt to delight in the pain of others while keeping oneself emotionally distant. The emotional detachment necessary to delight in another’s pain results not in an empathetic response, but in a disconnected reading of a suffering body.

The speaker of Wordsworth’s sonnet participates in the aestheticization of pain, as Wordsworth uses embodied diction and rhetorical devices to conjure a feeling of elevated taste—a refined aesthetic that allows the speaker to find pleasure in pain. In accordance with Burke’s aesthetics of pain, Wordsworth will later claim that when “images and feelings have an undue proportion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds” (“Preface” 580). Since, as Bruhm puts it, “Imagination must mediate pain in order to bring it into the realm of identifiable experience,” Wordsworth communicates the perceived suffering of Miss Williams by evoking images that complement this pain (Bruhm 57). Wordsworth describes his experience oxymoronically as “dear delicious pain,” which reflects the positive aesthetic value the speaker associates with the experience of suffering (4). Though pain is the most isolating of human experiences, Wordsworth channels the physical discomfort of another in order to aesthetically profit from it. The fact that the

pain he experiences is “delicious” recalls that there is a sense of taste involved in the experience of this encounter with suffering. Denise Gigante affirms that during the age of sensibility, “taste was in many ways a middle-class affair targeted to producing ‘tasteful subjects’” (7). In Wordsworth’s case, the subject of the distraught Miss Williams, a fellow poet, provides ample opportunity for sharpening his aesthetic taste, as her imagined distress enables the speaker to practice his aesthetic sensibilities. The imagined experience of the speaker further contributes to the idea of the sympathetic body. As Gigante suggests, the age of the “Man of Feeling” resulted in a “connection between sensibility and taste that includes the entire organism in aesthetic experience” (12). This all-encompassing aesthetic experience is evident in Wordsworth’s poem, as the speaker’s body undergoes a multisensory response to Miss Williams’s imagined pain. The speaker’s “full heart was swelled” in empathetic reaction to Miss Williams’s emotions (4), the organ of feeling full to the brim with vicarious emotion. Coupled with the speaker’s “swimming eyes” and veins pulsing with feeling, the speaker is overcome with the power of imagined pain (3). The overwhelming physiological response is a clear indicator of the intensity of the pleasure associated with the aestheticized experience of pain. As Christopher Nagle states, “This paradoxical and consistently reiterated trope of pleasure-in-pain is perhaps the signal marker of Sensibility, its most characteristic sign of excess” (63). The speaker’s physiological response thereby fulfills one of sensibility’s most basic requirements. Furthermore, the choice of “dear” to describe his suffering adds to the concept that the speaker’s pain is the result of an aesthetic experience rather than one of true suffering. The speaker appears to locate the value of any tale of distress not in the story *per se*, but in the emotional and aesthetic response it might stimulate.

The speaker's physical separation from his object of sympathy supports the idea that the pained body needs to be considered at a safe distance. Like Burke, Wordsworth is ensuring that the world does not press too close for comfort by maintaining a safe distance between himself and the world of suffering. While the poem is entitled "A Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress," Wordsworth is working from sheer imagination, since at the time of the poem's composition, Wordsworth had yet to meet Williams (Nagle 63). The speaker is actually twice removed from the original source of the sympathetic response: he is observing Williams's reaction to a "fictionalized situation in a written text—as the poem specifies, 'a Tale of Distress'" (64). In this light, it may be argued that Wordsworth is using this response poem as a tool to educate his readers in the appropriate response to a narrative of abject misery (64). Recognizing the inherent value in staging sympathetic responses, Wordsworth uses this sonnet to concretize the ideals of the age of sensibility. As Bruhm suggests, "the imagination was a space where one could safely contemplate one's community with the pained body, all the while affirming one's distance from that body" (91). Thus, Wordsworth took advantage of the powers of the imagination to develop intimations of sympathy, without actually needing to place himself too close to the pained body. Although the source of the response is remote, the response itself is immediate and close to home. Despite, or perhaps because of, the aesthetic distance between the witness and his object, the sonnet's speaker seems to relish the bodily effects of the sympathetic response. Wordsworth's alliterative phrase, "Life left my loaded heart," effectively forces the reader to slow down and recognize the physiological changes that sympathizing with Miss Williams provokes in the speaker (5). This exaggerated line aestheticizes the

activity of a dying heart as it pumps its final litres of blood for the body, and it rather hyperbolically suggests that being a witness to suffering can be an experience powerful enough to momentarily suspend one's own life.

This life-and-death dynamic also demonstrates how class structures influenced artistic conceptions of moments of tribulation, and how the performative response to suffering may be motivated more so by class and aesthetic expectations than by genuine sympathy. When the sonnet's speaker claims that "Dear was the pause of life, and dear the sigh / That called the wanderer home, and home to rest" (7-8), he introduces the notion that experiencing and pondering the plight of others requires leisure. The fact that the speaker is able to "pause" to contemplate Williams's tears implies his elevated social situation; an individual whose life was spent in pursuit of the basics of human life would not likely have time for such contemplative acts. Furthermore, the "sigh" produced by the speaker to signal the metaphorical return to life is not indicative of any actual pain, but merely one's decadent consideration of it. The personified "life" that escapes the speaker in his initial reaction returns with the sigh, a physiological response to perceived suffering that metaphorically breathes life back into his lungs. This "dear sigh" is another class-inflected feature of the speaker's performative deliberation of the detached aesthetics of human suffering. The term "dear"—in both its emotional and its economic senses—suggests that the speaker cherishes and highly values his own emotional response. As Sir Leslie Stephen succinctly puts it in *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, sensibility is "the name of the mood in which we make a luxury of grief" (qtd. in Todd 7). Wordsworth's poem is therefore representative of such an atmosphere, since the speaker has the time and means to consider the misfortune of others as an aesthetic

indulgence. Moreover, this idea that the artist finds pleasure in someone else's pain is emphasized by the speaker's repetition of the modifier "dear": the initial "delicious pain" of the witness is "dear," as are the pause of life that pain provokes and the sigh that reanimates the metaphorically dying body. Notably, the emphasis is placed squarely on the speaker's suffering rather than on the suffering he witnesses; both Miss Williams's sympathetic pain and the fictional distress to which she is reacting are ultimately of less interest to the speaker than his own physiological responses.

The sonnet does return to Miss Williams in the final six lines, as the speaker searches for an appropriate analogy to explain the significance of Williams's tears as external physiological evidence of the depths of her internal virtue:

That tear proclaims—in thee each virtue dwells,  
 And bright will shine in misery's midnight hour;  
 As the soft star of dewy evening tells  
 What radiant fires were drown'd by days' malignant power,  
 That only wait the darkness of the night  
 To cheer the wandering wretch with hospitable light. (9-14)

The speaker of the poem suggests that those with the means to stoke the "radiant fires" (12) for those poor wretches in need "wait the darkness of the night" in order to more fully experience the joys to be found in darkness (13). That is, as a dark sky accentuates the light of the stars, sympathy requires another's suffering in order to be recognizable, so Williams's reaction is most noticeable set against a backdrop of another's pain and suffering; the worse the suffering, the brighter the virtue in sympathy for it. Moreover, the "radiant fires" of the stars connote a kind of heavenly warmth and compassion,

thereby giving the sympathizer an aura of the angelic. The object to which empathy is directed—the “wretch” who wanders the earth (12)—is thus not equal to the sympathizing subject, but enables others to display their own elevated powers of fellow feeling. By choosing an image that reinforces that distance between those who have the time and luxury to perceive pain and display the light of sympathy and those who actually experience the rawness, or darkness, of life—an image that suggests that one person’s virtue is dependent upon another person’s pain—Wordsworth implicates class in the social dynamics of pain and sympathy.

The significance of pain in the development of art has been stressed by several of Romanticism’s most distinguished writers, including Wordsworth, though it can be argued that the artistic communication of their suffering is not an act for the betterment of society, but a performance that highlights the class distinctions between many artists and the general population. The “scientifically worked out” ideas regarding the anatomies of writers contribute to the notion that artists were inherently more sensitive than other members of society (Rousseau 152). G.S. Rousseau relates that, just as physiological differences were found between men and women, or between the fashionable and the poor, “the greater one’s nervous sensibility, the more one is capable of delicate writing” (152). Thus, artists were encouraged to fulfill the delicate role that would provide them the artistic space to produce sensitive writing. As Bruhm argues, “Sympathy is fraught, then, with the possibility that another’s feeling might be nothing but our own self-interested construction” (15). Since sympathy depends upon the subjective experience of the imagination, there is no guarantee that one’s own agenda will not affect one’s perception of another’s pain.

Similarly, in the expression of sympathy for one's own pain, the same logic applies—in relating one's physical discomfort, it would be nearly impossible to separate one's ego from one's artistic expression of suffering. Therefore, it can be argued that the artist, in rendering him or herself as an object of extreme suffering, does not intend to include him or herself among the masses, but instead presents him or herself as an object to be admired, or at least observed. This reflects what Bruhm claims to be “a general bourgeois interest”: a construction of the self that is “*part of but separated from* the larger society” (27, emphasis Bruhm's). Under the subterfuge of contributing to the shared experience of pain, these artists have also prescribed to the middle-class ideal of being just a little bit better than everyone around them. Wordsworth's “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” written many years after the sonnet to Miss Williams, clearly depicts the refinement and elevation of the poet; for Wordsworth, the poet is a figure “endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (577). Though he comes to believe that “Low and rustic life” best demonstrates the “essential passions,” he has no qualms asserting that artists are best suited to interpreting human nature because they have more sensitive temperaments (574). As Virginia Woolf will note in “A Room of One's Own,” the major players of the Romantic period, with the exception of John Keats, came from well-to-do families, which suggests that “Intellectual freedom depends upon material things” (778). The intellectual liberty some artists of the eighteenth century enjoyed permitted them to take the time and effort to contemplate their pain as well as the pain of others. The Romantic poets, by being able to participate in the aestheticization of pain, marked themselves as being of a higher

social order than less fortunate individuals who suffered silently and were without the means to improve their situation.

Viewed as a kind of literary healer of the Romantic period, William Wordsworth sought to care for society by facilitating sympathy and compassion for the suffering and the sick through poetry. However, his bourgeois identity may be viewed as an obstruction to a genuine representation of care for the well being of others, an issue that becomes pronounced in some of the criticism around the *Lyrical Ballads* and their depiction of “humble and rustic” life. Because sensibility emphasizes the performative value of emotion, the sincerity of Wordsworth’s concern—or anyone’s, for that matter—can be questioned. Written at the beginning of Wordsworth’s poetic career, “A Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress” invokes several of the major ideas about social sympathy and the building of community through fellow feeling at the same time as it evinces the potentially problematic issue of class and privilege. During the eighteenth century, the idea of one’s social status remained a driving force behind the elaborate manifestations of feeling. The upper classes appeared to view outward emotion as part of a constructed performance meant to impress one’s peers and affirm one’s social standing. The scientific advances of the time, which arguably proved the interdependence of members of society through an analogy to the interconnectedness of the components of the human body, also served as a catalyst for the development of the aesthetics of pain. The Romantic poets, who participated in and who were partially responsible for encouraging the era’s fascination with the concept of pain, arguably used their own pain more as a means of ensuring creative production than as a way of truly identifying with human beings who actually experience the rawness of life. The age of sensibility, defined

by the outward display of sympathy for others, was thus more about solidifying class distinctions than finding ways to recognize the commonalities of humanity. William Wordsworth's first published sonnet, then, represents both the era of sensibility's attempts to create a sympathetic community through literature, as well as the rigid class distinctions that influenced empathetic response.

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