

# Book 7, Episode 8: Sentimentality

## SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

*(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)*

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:10

Hello and welcome to Witch, Please a fortnightly podcast about the Harry Potter world. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:17

And I'm Hannah McGregor. And in honor of today's conversation about sentimentality, I want to talk about some of the things we're sentimental about in the sorting chat.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:28

You know what, Hannah, I saw this in the script and I immediately was like, I've never felt sentimental about anything. *(Hannah laughs)* So I really need to go first, because I'm having a real moment of like, I don't think I've ever had a feeling and that's obviously untrue, because I'm a Pisces, and I keep literally everything.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:44

You're a human sentiment.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:45

I know. It's embarrassing. Anyway, I want you to go first. Lead the way, please.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:50

I mean, I just want to start naming things you're sentimental about like, like the sound of Samwise Gamgee saying, po-ta-toes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:01

*(laughs)* Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew.

*(Soundbite of Samwise Gamgee saying “Po-ta-toes. Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew.”)*

**Hannah McGregor** 01:07

You love that little hobbit and his potatoes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:09

I do. I love all Hobbits.

**Hannah McGregor** 01:11

I think you have a very sentimental relationship to particularly the Fellowship of the Ring movie.

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:17

I think that that is accurate. Yes, yes. That is a very good example. I certainly don't think it's a capital G good movie. But I love it.

**Hannah McGregor** 01:26

Do you love something about the object itself? Or do you like the way it makes you feel? Or are those indivisible?

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:32

For me and that movie, they're indivisible. I think that the sweeping shots of the Shire. I think that the fact that it's, you know, we kind of open with a party. And then it gets sad. The fact that it's silly, and I think maybe also like, what a big deal it was when it first came out when I was young, too. Yeah, it's definitely one of those things where I put it on not to watch the movie, but to make jokes through the entirety of the movie with the people who I love. So is that sentimental? Is that?

**Hannah McGregor** 02:13

I think it is. I think things that we have a relationship to where a big part of what we love about them is the way they make us feel

and the way they connect us to community. I think that is sentimental attachment.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:24

That's really sweet.

**Hannah McGregor** 02:25

My top sentimental property is Les Miserables. I know every word to that fucking musical. It is etched into my heart eternally. My mum took me and saw it on, I think the first Canadian Tour because it would have been in the late 80s. I was four.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:26

You were so little.

**Hannah McGregor** 02:27

I was so little. And she loved to tell me the story about like, I was so obsessed as a child with how sad it was, like it really appealed to me how super sad it was. I liked that feeling. Apparently, I really liked to describe the plot to other people. So it would be like, then she has to sell her hair. And then she dies. *(both laugh)* I was so into it. And to this day, I get this very particular pleasure from how sad it makes me.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:27

Wow. Speaking of things that we love being sad about, my sweet one year old baby is at home sick and he's in another room. But every now and again, we're gonna hear him screaming either because he's sick or because he's having fun. It's not always easy to tell the difference. *(both laugh)*

**Hannah McGregor** 03:50

It's difficult to decipher the screams but you know what, that's also really appropriate to sentimentality. Am I suffering or am I having fun? You know? It's like that good, bad feeling.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:01

I feel like that maybe, you know, one of the things that we've been conditioned to feel as women, you know, feeling good about feeling sad.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:11

Ooh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Really like the deeply gendered nature of like, feeling good about feeling deeply. Oh, Marcelle. Oh, there's such an interesting history to that. I want to talk about it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:23

Oh, okay. Well, maybe we should move on to the next segment so that we can get closer to this conversation. Okay.

*(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)*

Before we get too caught up in our feelings, let's remember our primary responsibility as scholars, the emotionless study of thinkers who came before us. It's time for revision.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:58

So sentimentality is one of those topics that connects to so many others that I kind of feel like this revision could contain every previous episode we've done, but I'm gonna just focus in on a few key ones, several of which date all the way back to season one, because there were some of the really foundational ideas we laid down in this podcast. So first off, we've talked about race and the construction of otherness in a few different ways, starting, I think, with our episode on Orientalism, and in that episode, we pointed out that the Orient, quote unquote, is a discursive construction. That is, it is an idea made out of discourse, discourse being language that creates knowledge.

So it's a discursive construction that supports an ideology, namely, the fundamental difference between the Orient and the West.

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:56

The Occident!

**Hannah McGregor** 05:57

The Occident! *(both laugh)* You know, according to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, the Orient is constructed as everything that the West or the Occident is not. So, the West is progressive, civilized and rational. So the sort of ideological construction of the Orient is as this place that's sort of rooted in an eternal mystical past full of sort of mysterious, barbaric customs. So, these Orientalist discourses are in part used as justifications for Imperialism. So if the Orient is inherently uncivilized, then it becomes the duty of the West to civilize it through imperial expansion. So we can see how that's like an ideology that's doing real political work.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:45

Oh, yeah, there are economic incentives to civilizing the Orient.

**Hannah McGregor** 06:50

There sure are.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:51

Well, we also talked about the discursive construction of the other in our episode on animal studies. We looked at biological racism as the pseudo scientific division of the world into racial categories, and the attribution of traits to races based on claims of biological difference. So the category of the animal, we argued, is an ideological category constructed to define that which is not human, not like us. And that ideology has been used to reinforce racism, by linking people of color to animals. So if the animal is wild, and the human is civilized, then people who quote unquote, need civilizing, like Black and Indigenous people, they lie somewhere in between the animal and the human. So goes the ideology.

**Hannah McGregor** 07:51

So goes the ideology. So again, we can see the sort of construction of a version of otherness that is based on what I am not, that then allows me to justify my power over others.

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:04

Exactly.

**Hannah McGregor** 08:05

The last topic I want to refresh us on is books.

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:09

Boooooooks?

**Hannah McGregor** 08:10

Specifically, the idea that books and reading are morally improving. So we've argued a few times now that the conspicuous consumption of books as objects is more about class performance than anything else. And we have also, I think, more implicitly than explicitly challenged the idea that reading is always inherently an activity that improves you or that makes you better.

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:36

Yeah, we should talk about that some time.

**Hannah McGregor** 08:37

We should talk about that sometime. *(whispering)* We're gonna talk about it in this episode. *(back to normal voice)* But you know, we're, I think, implicitly challenging that all the time by demonstrating how many different ways there are to approach a text. And how much texts are linked to discourse, which is linked to ideology, which means that you can read lots of things that are actually very bad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:00

Like not morally improving but morally, deproving...disproving? *(laughs)* Deconstructing?

**Hannah McGregor** 09:11

Dis-improving? Well, there's no opposite of improving. So...

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:15

Only one way forward. Progress!

**Hannah McGregor** 09:18

Another thing that we've sort of, I think, implicitly gotten at is how useless a hierarchy of good and bad culture is. We touched on this in our episode about life writing, for example, where we talked about the sort of hierarchies of like, here's literature that's a legitimate object of study. And here's literature that doesn't really count, you shouldn't think about it. So the idea that some books are improving, creates or contributes to a hierarchy of good and bad culture that is at its core, classist.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:47

Okay, well, I have a pop quiz for you, Hannah. What do pseudoscience, biological racism and reading have to do with each other?

**Hannah McGregor** 09:59

Marcelle, let's find out together.

*(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)*

Get ready to transform your emotional attachments into theory about those emotional attachments in transfiguration class.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:19

Oh, I'm so excited!

**Hannah McGregor** 10:24

We are going to be focusing today on sentimentality and how, particularly the sentimental framing of reading as morally improving continues to inform how we think about books, which

will eventually get us back to Harry Potter, but we have to start in the 18th century.

**Marcelle Kosman 10:41**

Oh, goody. I love the 18th century, so reconstructive.

**Hannah McGregor 10:47**

*(laughs)* So we're gonna spend a second there. As I point out, sentimentality started off as an 18th century philosophical intervention that was, in many ways, pushing back against the enlightenment and rationality. So the idea that like, we are purely rational creatures, and then these, like French philosophers came along, and were like, what, what about love?

*(Soundbite of romantic accordion music plays in the background)*

**Marcelle Kosman 11:14**

*(laughs)* I'm sorry but this is gonna be a hard episode to record.

**Hannah McGregor 11:17**

That is my impression of Jacques Rousseau. You have to start with a cigarette smoking sound. *(with a French accent)* But what about love? *(back to normal voice)* Apologies to all French listeners.

**Marcelle Kosman 11:32**

They know. *(laughs)*

**Hannah McGregor 11:33**

They know what they did. So sentimental culture is about attention to feeling, really. And what we get sort of emerging out of sentimental philosophy is all of these representations of sentimental culture that tends to be feminized. So, really interested in women and how feelings-y women are. And emotional and quite earnest, earnest emotional feelings for ladies. So one of the tricky things about sentimentality, sort of when we talk about, like, you know, having a sentimental relationship to



something is that it can be both a way of reading, but also it's a genre of text. So we can read a thing sentimentally. You can have a sentimental relationship to something that itself is actually not sentimental, in and of itself.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:31

Oh, I see. I see. I see. Right. So like, there are genres of literature thanks to the French, (***Marcelle makes the sound of blowing out cigarette smoke***) that are sentimental. But that genre of literature is not required for a person like you or me to have a sentimental attachment to something else.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:51

Yes. And you also can read sentimental literature as a critical objective study in a pretty unsentimental way.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:00  
(***with French accent***) No.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:02

I know. Rousseau would be outraged. So there are novels that are examples of the sentimental novel, like *Little Women* is a sentimental novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a sentimental novel. And we can read those unsentimentally and many critics do, because they are sort of thinking about how they function rather than generating an emotional attachment to them. So it's useful to distinguish between like, what are the things I have a sentimental attachment to and what are the things that were written as part of sentimental culture? It's useful to distinguish while simultaneously recognizing that those things have a shared history.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:45  
Oh, okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:49

And that is part of the history that we're going to unpack a little bit today. There has been, in recent years, a sort of move on the part

of feminist literary critics in particular to try to recover sentimental literature, and in some ways, sentimental reading itself. Because-

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:09

Are you going to tell me that there's been some kind of critical disparagement of women's emotions when it comes to reading?

**Hannah McGregor** 14:17

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. When you read people talking about what's bad about sentimentality, it tends to slip-slide into misogyny pretty quickly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:26

I believe you.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:27

Yeah, right? It's unserious. It's embarrassing. It's muckish. It's saccharin. Right? Tear jerkers, Chicklit. Like all of these ways that we talk about, I mean, the disgust that our culture has for romance novels like this is all rooted in this sort of cultural disdain for sentimentality. And so, it's not surprising that feminists have turned around and been like, no, actually we need to, we need to recognize the like, you know, legitimacy of these art forms and also as is often the case with like, a white feminist attempt at recovery, we maybe need to think twice before we tip too far in the other direction and be like sentimentality is feminist. Which is why it's useful to understand the history of sentimental culture.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:21

Hey, Hannah.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:22

Yes, Marcelle?

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:23

Always historicize.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:25

Always historicize. Mm hmm. So excited to use that stinger again.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:34

That's for you, coach.

***(Soundbite of Coach singing "Historicize, Historicize, it's always time to historicize.")***

**Hannah McGregor** 15:39

So I'm going to draw primarily on a book I absolutely love by Kyla Schuller called the *Bio Politics of Feelings: Race, Sex and Science in the 19th century*, which is maybe starting to give you a sense of why we talked about 19th century biological racism in revision. It's a really great book. It's a very dense book. We could talk about it in a lot of different ways. But I want to focus in on what she has to say about the role of sentimentality, and the invention of race and sex.

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:15

Oh, okay. Well, this is very good. I'm excited.

**Hannah McGregor** 16:19

So, Schuller's particularly interested in this pseudo scientific concept from the 19th century that we mostly don't have any more, called impressibility.

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:30

Oh, I know what that is. That's when the vampire baby (***Hannah laughs***) and the werewolf contender for the mother's love meet for the first time.

***(Soundbite from Breaking Dawn Part 2 of Jacob explaining how it feels to imprint on Renesmee)***

**Hannah McGregor** 16:51

You know, sometimes it feels like everybody has a sexy baby.

**Marcelle Kosman 17:24**  
(laughs) And I'm just a monster.

**(Soundbite of Taylor Swift singing "Sometimes I feel like everybody is a sexy baby and I'm a monster on the hill")**

**Hannah McGregor 17:29**

Okay, you are talking about imprintability. We're talking about impressibility. Impressibility is the degree to which you can be impressed upon.

**Marcelle Kosman 17:46**  
Oh.

**Hannah McGregor 17:47**

So how malleable you are basically as a person, and it's linked in the 19th century to humans capacity to evolve or change.

**Marcelle Kosman 17:58**

Oh, this feels like it's gonna get real icky.

**Hannah McGregor 18:01**

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. 100% sorry, this is just straight up 19th century racism. 19th century scientific racism. So according to the theories of the time, white people were distinguished by our heightened impressibility. Which made white people uniquely capable of developing civilization. So racialized people also had some impressibility as children, but once they grew up, lost it, which was a belief that was used to justify the systemic abduction of racialized children from their families.

It was very explicit we are going to take you while you are still impressionable, and civilizeable, because if you are allowed to mature with your family in your community, you will lose your malleability and become locked in that identity, an identity that is inherently uncivilized and un-civilizeable.

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:04

This term itself evolves into impressionable, doesn't it? Or does that have a different history? I'm just thinking of the way that like early 20th century moral panics about children's literature were anxious about the impressionability of children and I'm wondering if it's related.

**Hannah McGregor** 19:25

They're connected for sure. Because impressibility, while it is sort of this good thing that is attached to whiteness, also has this risk, which is basically that impressionability. That idea that if you're impressible, you are permeable or vulnerable to outside forces operating on you. And so there's always sort of this danger that comes with impressibility of being excessively impressible. And so you know, you're gonna get too influenced by something, too sort of carried away by some contact.

I think anxiety about impressibility is often latent in narratives about white people sort of, quote unquote, going savage. There's always this possibility that you'll get influenced by outside forces, right, and we need compressibility to have civilization. But there's this risk that comes with too much impressibility. And so Schuller argues that there are two concepts that emerged in the 19th century to manage this problem of excess compressibility. And they are sex difference and sentimentalism.

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:42

So are you telling me-

**Hannah McGregor** 20:45

That race precedes sex? Yes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:48

Woah.

**Hannah McGregor** 20:49

Which is a really, really key intervention. Because if we understand that the sort of categories, these stable biological categories of sex difference come after the ideological creation of stable identifiable categories of race difference, that becomes really key for white women seeking feminist solidarity across racial divides. Because we have to understand that our womanhood is not only historically not the same as the womanhood of women of color.

And in fact, that our womanhood was, in some ways created, well was in many ways created directly to support white supremacy. Again, this is sort of Schuller's articulation, she basically says that race was a construct that was meant to support the development of civilization, where sex difference was about the stabilization of civilization. So whiteness as impressible allows us to civilize because we can advance, but sex difference takes that civilization and makes it stable.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:07

Okay, how does it make it stable? Does it divide the responsibilities of maintenance between the two sexes?

**Hannah McGregor** 22:17

Exactly, it puts the burden of excess impressibility onto women, so that men can be and these are Schuller's words, relieved of the, quote, "burdens of embodiment."

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:30

Burdens of embodiment is going to be the title of my memoir.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:36

*(laughs)* Yep. Fact. So it becomes white women's responsibility, our sort of duty to civilization to take on the heightened impressibility so that men are freed up for the important work of, you know-

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:51

Colonizing and civilizing?

**Hannah McGregor** 22:53

Yeah, exactly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:54

So is this, like, The White Man's Burden is when the white man has to go to these other countries and quote, unquote, civilize them? So then the white woman's burden is the embodied burden of managing the feelings?

**Hannah McGregor** 23:12

Yes. And all of the things related to managing the feelings like raising the children, and managing the household. And so now we've got this idea that there are these white women who are necessary to the progress of civilization, but are also so dangerously impressible. And so we get this emerging set of techniques to manage white women's excess impossibility.

So we get emerging discourses in the 19th century of the idea of good taste, new ideas of the proper management of domestic interiors, the rise of temperance movements, and the rise of diet culture, all of which are about taking the way that women are too much, too emotional, too impressible, too embodied, and creating the sort of set of techniques that will allow white women to manage ourselves and by turn to sort of manage our children, manage our households, and keep impressibility in check.

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:24

So, as well as techniques, can we also think of these things as commodities? Like, if we are saying that good taste is a thing then it is good and right to acquire these kinds of things, but you don't want to acquire these kinds of things because they are in poor taste?

**Hannah McGregor** 24:47

Yeah, yeah. I mean, it is about, you know, for example, as we start to get in the 19th century, this very sort of stabilized like, men are in the public sphere. Women are in the private sphere, which is one of those sort of significantly more recent divides that people often recognize, because prior to the industrial revolution, women also had a huge amount of work to do outside of the household. And so, you know, as women become responsible for the domestic interiors, for example, there's a capitalist, like a market incentive to target women for the consumption of, you know, the things that will go inside your household.

But then you watch the way that that becomes about, you know, you don't want excess consumption. So it's always this, like women are responsible for keeping a nice home. But if a woman likes shopping too much, shame on her. Women are responsible for providing nourishing meals for their families and children. But if a woman likes food, too much shame on her. Women are responsible for the biological reproduction of the white race. But if women like sex, too much shame on her. So you need to be responsible for all of these things. But you need to be managing them correctly, without giving into your sort of impulses towards excess.

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:18

So can women.... I don't know, read too much?

**Hannah McGregor** 26:24

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, we for sure get a lot of anxiety, particularly earlier than this, more in the 18th century, there's a lot of anxiety about women reading novels, in particular, because there's a sense that we will get over excited by the fiction and abandon our household duties.

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:43

To finish the books or to go on a pirate voyage?

**Hannah McGregor** 26:46



I think, to go on a pirate voyage. (*Marcelle laughs*) But in the 19th century, we got this sort of rise of sentimental literature for women. Sentimental culture being another sort of part of those techniques to help manage white women's "too muchness" and our responsibilities. So sentimental novels, in particular, become sort of one of many technologies of teaching white women how to white woman properly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:20

Okay, so white women are full of feelings. They've got all these feelings to manage. And they need to learn how to do that properly. And so let's introduce some books that will give them a place where it's appropriate to have feelings. Those books will also educate the readers on how to feel and then when they're over nobody will want to go on a pirate voyage.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:45

Exactly. What they'll want to do is continue dutifully contributing to society.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:50

No. (*Marcelle makes a throw up noise and Hannah laughs*) Sorry, I just threw up a little bit. Okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:56

So the big example of like, when people sort of look for a sentimental novel, they tend to go to Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is a novel that people have often linked to the abolition of slavery. Very explicitly, Stowe was using the conventions of sentimental literature to attempt to humanize African Americans. Like she was an abolitionist. That's what she was attempting to do. So it's very, it's very tempting, you know, from a literary historical perspective to be like, Okay, here's this novel that this woman wrote with the goal of abolition, and it was a runaway bestseller.

It outsold literally every other English language book except the Bible. Like it was massively successful. There's even this apocryphal story that Stowe met Abraham Lincoln. And he said, Are you the little lady who started this big war? That's my Abraham Lincoln impression, and it is spot on.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:03

Spot on. No way to prove it's not.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:07

Yeah, yeah. And there's also no way to prove he said that, but also no way to prove he didn't say it, but he probably didn't say it. We very clearly see her using the tropes of sentimental literature to contribute to abolition as a political project. Specifically by trying to get readers to empathize with the enslaved characters by depicting those characters as also capable of feeling.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:38

It sounds though, like, suggesting that Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is responsible for the abolition of slavery in America is a way of like marginalizing all of the abolition and anti slavery work of African Americans?

**Hannah McGregor** 30:01

Yes. It's an outrageous narrative that suggests that abolition wasn't fought for by Black people.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:10

Yeah. Like, if her novel was really popular, it might be because people were already on board.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:19

Yes. I mean, you've keyed in right there to the really insidious thing about these kinds of narratives, which is that they really want to claim that political change happens when white ladies feel sad about something.

**Marcelle Kosman 30:34**

Oh, okay. Okay.

**Hannah McGregor 30:37**

And that actually continues to be an idea that we're pretty invested into this day. So we can see in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a lot of the sort of familiar tropes of the sentimental novel, so humanizing others through the terms of white civility, particularly, sentimental novels tend to focus on love for children. Because that's, like, you know, sort of the purest form of love which-

**Marcelle Kosman 31:02**

Oh, it's universal.

**Hannah McGregor 31:03**

Yeah, and this tendency to sort of represent the emotional maturing of protagonists from being excessively impressible to being appropriately self managed. That's a really key part of these novels. They're sort of educational capacity. So think about in *Little Women*, when Marmee has the girls give their Christmas breakfast away to a poor and foreign family. Do you remember this?

**Marcelle Kosman 31:29**

No, I read *Little Women* when I was a little woman, and...

**Hannah McGregor 31:35**

*(laughs)* It's a really key part of their moral education by Marmee is that they've got this lovely Christmas breakfast that they've really sort of been looking forward to. And then she's like, oh, there's this poor family. Let's give them our Christmas breakfast. And then all the girls are like, Yeah, let's and then they feel really, really good about themselves.

31:55

***(Soundbite from Little Women, when Marmee says:***

***“Not far from here lives a poor young woman, Mrs. Humble. her five children are in one bed to keep from freezing and there's nothing to eat. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?”***

**Marcelle Kosman 32:07**

And then Beth dies.

**Hannah McGregor 32:08**

Which is also a good thing for a sentimental heroine to do. Or that scene in *Emma*, the Austen novel where, okay, listeners, come with me. Marcelle has never read a book.

**Marcelle Kosman 32:18**

*(laughs)* I've never read a book. I hate women. I never read women authors.

**Hannah McGregor 32:22**

But Emma is also like a woman who has been taught how to like, manage herself appropriately primarily, in this case, by a man who she will then end up marrying because that's the sentimental trope is that you marry a man who helps you manage your feelings.

**Marcelle Kosman 32:41**

I hate this.

**Hannah McGregor 32:42**

So she learns how to be a good lady of the manor by realizing that she shouldn't have been mean to Miss Bates and that actually her job is to be kind and generous to Miss Bates because Miss Bates is poor. And that realizing that her job is to be kind to the poor is like the moment when Mr. Knightley is like, yeah, now you're ready for marriage. You were nice to a poor person. You are now officially marriageable.

**Marcelle Kosman 33:08**

Okay, I don't want to jump ahead too much or anything. But I'm really looking forward to when we have a shared text, like a shared cultural text that we can use to talk about sentimentality, because I'm just like, This sounds cuckoo bananas.

**Hannah McGregor** 33:23

Yeah, absolutely. So the desire to say that sentimental novels contribute to political change has a lot to do with the desire that white women have to believe that we can change things by feeling strongly about them. And that is an understanding of literature that lots of scholars, particularly Black scholars have pushed back against, I think sort of most iconically, as James Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's protest novel", where he talks about the claims of sentimental novels to, you know, change things. And basically says that they have almost nothing to do with actual political transformation, that what they're actually about is a moral panic around the virtue of white women. So his argument is that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* actually isn't about abolition for the sake of African American people, for the sake of enslaved people. It's about abolition, for the sake of the moral purity of white women, which is that white women are implicated in slavery, and we must end slavery, because we must continue to be the moral guides of the nation.

So, this leads us to this really central question when we think about sentimental literature, which is the question of what literature does. So is it educational? Is it improving? And I'm not talking about nonfiction which literally can be educational, like I'm talking about fiction. What does reading a story do? You know, we can see in *Little Women*, for example, this impulse to show the moral improvement of our characters to like, represent their maturity, and it's got this didactic drive to it. But it also has a pretty weird, gay subversive subtext because Louisa May Alcott was a raging lesbian, but then that's for another day.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:32

Ah, darn.

**Hannah McGregor 33:33**

Yeah, sorry. But, you know, it does leave us with this question about why it is that we're attached to the idea that reading stories makes us better? Particularly, you know, reading literature makes us more empathetic, you know, that thing, that thing we love to claim?

**Marcelle Kosman 35:49**

I know, I know, I do. It's just that it's just that before you tell me why it's wrong. I did argue, in my dissertation, proto feminist texts that these white ladies were circulating, helped to foster and reproduce white supremacy. And so if it doesn't work in the other way, does it work in the way that I claimed that it did? Are you telling me that my dissertation was wrong?

**Hannah McGregor 36:17**

I genuinely don't know. I really don't know. Like, I don't have an answer to the question of what literature does. I actually don't think any of us do, but I certainly think that any straightforward reading novels makes you more empathetic, like your dissertation demonstrates that that's a spurious spurious claim.

**Marcelle Kosman 36:41**

Spurious. Spurious Snape.

***(Soundbite from The Mysterious Ticking Noise: "Snape, Snape, Severus Snape, Snape, Snape, Severus Snape.")***

**Hannah McGregor 36:53**

So my favorite contemporary example of this is this great 2020 article by Lauren Michelle Jackson, titled "What is an anti racist reading list for?" and it was a response to how in the wake of that rising attention to Black Lives Matter protests, all of these anti racist reading lists started going around, many of which contained literature like fiction by Black authors. And she points out in the

article, that anti racist reading lists often positioned Black literature as somehow educational or improving for white readers. Encouraging readers to treat those novels not as like these complex literary artifacts, but as sort of anthropological views into the lives and histories of Black people.

**Marcelle Kosman** 37:45

Right. Like, it's not a great children's book, because it's a great children's book that does the things that we want great children's books to do. It's a great children's book, because it will teach my white children to be empathetic towards Black people.

**Hannah McGregor** 37:58

Mhm. And so there's this tendency in that sentimental understanding of literature to treat literature as though it within itself has the power to change people, for better or for worse. And my suspicion is that in your dissertation, you didn't suggest that a person sitting alone in a totally contextless bubble would read one of these books and be like, I should contribute to white supremacy.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:25

Correct.

**Hannah McGregor** 38:26

Like probably it's sort of part of this larger cultural context and the way in which they're reading and the other texts that these texts are aligned with, like, the idea that like insert, book, output, empathy, is not how anything works.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:39

You know, we had this conversation, I think, in our last episode about evolution, right, and how it's descriptive. It's not prescriptive. And so reading trends are probably also very similar. They're probably descriptive of the things that we are culturally invested in. And not necessarily all of a sudden everybody's on



board with anti racism because one person suggested a really good reading list.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:09

Yeah. And there is an implication that if reading makes you more empathetic, that better read people should be more empathetic. Who reads the most fiction historically? People with leisure time, people with access to personal libraries, people who have access to literacies. It's a very classed argument, for sure. But also look at the cultures that have historically had the highest literacy rates and the highest levels of leisure reading and tell me that those are the most empathetic cultures.

Convince me that really makes you empathetic when publishing is inherently and intrinsically interwoven into the project of colonization, like, I don't think so. I don't think so. It doesn't hold water. Interestingly, for the purposes of our podcast, one of the most frequently cited series that are used to indicate that reading makes you more empathetic, less racist, et cetera, is Harry Potter.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:22

I feel like I knew that. And I chose to forget it. Because it's, it can't be right.

**Hannah McGregor** 40:28

It can't be right. And let's talk, Marcelle, about why it can't be right in our next segment.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:34

What a good idea. Let's do that.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***

Well, now that we're done understanding sentimentality, let's put all that thinking stuff aside and get back to our feelings in OWL'S.

***(Soundbite of an owl hooting plays)***

**Hannah McGregor** 40:59



So there's two, I think, two different, obvious ways that we can come at talking about sentimentality and Harry Potter. We can talk about the general sort of cultural role that Harry Potter as a series has as an improving text, because it certainly has sort of that sentimental cultural function, that we could in many ways compare to say, an *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And/or we can talk about the sentimental tropes in the series itself.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:29

Well, I think we should definitely talk about the sentimental tropes in book seven, because I think we should come back to this conversation about its function as a sentimental series, or a series for which people have a sentimental attachment in the appendix season.

**Hannah McGregor** 41:51

Oh, yes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:52

So now we do micro. Later, we can do macro.

**Hannah McGregor** 41:55

Oh, you're so smart.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:56

Thank you. I almost failed economics.

**Hannah McGregor** 42:00

*(laughs)* But you know what micro and macro means and that is what matters. So at its heart this series as a whole is about the emotional maturation of its protagonist. So let's talk about what emotional maturity looks like in this, our seventh book. What are the characteristics of our emotionally mature protagonists?

**Marcelle Kosman** 42:25

Okay, well, I'm gonna suggest something for all three. And then you tell me if you agree or disagree. Harry starts off the book

unsure how he's going to survive this battle against Voldemort, comes to terms with the fact that he won't, and that is what his emotional journey is, coming to accept his own mortality. So that's my guess for Harry. For Ron-

**Hannah McGregor** 42:57

You guessed! I don't have answers written down. So sorry?

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:04

What? For Ron, I think it is his coming to terms with the fact that he's not the fucking center of the universe, even though he want- No, I'm just joking. He's a little brother. He, of course, doesn't think he's the center of the universe. But for him, it seems like it's a process of coming to terms with the fact that things aren't gonna get easier for him. I think that they're as easy as they're gonna get. And if he's uncomfortable, that's just life, brah.

And then for Hermione, I think it's the moment when she kisses Ron. I think it's like she goes through all this stuff. And for her, the book is telling us her emotional maturity is when she actually makes a choice, and chooses Ron, with a kiss. That's what I think is happening.

**Hannah McGregor** 44:01

I kind of want to start with Hermione, because, you know, she is our sort of primary female character who we are watching become emotionally mature. And we see she kisses Ron, when he expresses concern for the house elves at the Battle of Hogwarts. So her ability to be with Ron is contingent on him having successfully learned the moral lesson she's been trying to teach him, so it's like her sort of final outcome as a character is someone successfully teaches men to be better.

**Marcelle Kosman** 44:46

It's a real beauty in the beast narrative, isn't it? Like I know Ron isn't as bad as the beast but it is like if you just try hard enough. If

you're just good hard enough. If you're just beautiful hard enough, you can change him, which is a lie.

**Hannah McGregor** 45:01

Except within the tropes of sentimentality. It's the opposite of a lie. It's the whole idea.

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:06

The whole point.

**Hannah McGregor** 45:07

That's the whole point. So it's interesting to think about, like, what is Hermione's emotional arc in this book, like, where does she start off? And where does she end up?

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:21

She's already so mature, right? Like she's already leaps and bounds ahead of our other two. And she struggles through the hard times with a significant amount of like, not optimism, but like, stick. Oh, God, I stick to it-iv-ness? *(laughs)* Like, she does it, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 45:47

That's a word like unputdownable, that I'm just like, hmhhhmm?

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:53

Yes, this book was unputdownable.

**Hannah McGregor** 45:55

Language is descriptive, not prescriptive, Hannah.

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:59

That's right, Hannah. If it's not in the dictionary, the answer is yet. Yeah. So she already starts out extremely mature. She's already like, she's willing to do the hard stuff. She really doesn't complain. She keeps working. She keeps trying to find solutions. So for Hermione, the only big change is when she kisses Ron.

**Hannah McGregor 46:25**

Yeah, I'm thinking this through out loud as we were talking about this. And I do think that one education Hermione gets in this book is domestic management. She hasn't had to do that in any of the previous books because it's managed by Hogwarts. But in this book, she has to become a wife. Right? She becomes responsible for the literal management of the home. She is the one who brought the tent, and the clothes and the books. She is the one who sets up the tent and casts the spells. She's the one who finds the food and does the cooking. Like what we watch Hermione learn to do in this book is become a wife.

**Marcelle Kosman 47:06**

I'm so mad about that.

**Hannah McGregor 47:11**

It's occurred to me before but it's such a fucking bummer.

**Marcelle Kosman 47:13**

Because they don't start camping until they have to leave Grimmauld Place, right? And it starts out kind of shitty at Grimmauld Place. But then they're nice to Kreacher and then Kreacher starts cooking for them. And then she has to learn how to be a wife. I am so mad.

**Hannah McGregor 47:37**

And like the culmination of that is, you know, we see a little bit of her learning how to emotionally manage Harry.

**Marcelle Kosman 47:46**

Oh, she's the one who notices, right, that they all get mad when they're wearing the locket. It's Hermione who does that?

**Hannah McGregor 47:53**

Yeah. She's always responsible for emotional management. Her emotional management of Ron is more important, because it is leading towards their marriage. And I really think that like that

moment where she finally kisses him, having realized that she has improved him in the way that she wanted to improve him is her sort of climax as a character.

**Marcelle Kosman 48:19**

That's the only climax she's gonna get. *(Hannah laughs and Marcelle joins in)* I'm sorry, I just made myself lightheaded with that sick burn about Ron's attentiveness, as a lover.

**Hannah McGregor 48:41**

Ron's ability to make his wife come. *(both laugh)*

**Marcelle Kosman 48:47**

So that's Hermione.

**Hannah McGregor 48:49**

That's a profoundly sentimental storyline. It's interesting to look at our two male protagonists and think about what their responsibilities are. Because I do think that we see other forms of emotional self regulation being really, really key to what they are learning through this book in particular. So, you know, Ron's big thing is like, getting over his jealousy of Harry. Right? Like, he leaves and he comes back, he gets overwhelmed by his feelings of never getting to be the hero, never getting to be the main character. And then he has to get over that and come back and recognize, you know, his role. And then Harry's is ultimately his management of his fear. And to some degree of his faith. Like his willingness to sort of really put his faith in Dumbledore.

**Marcelle Kosman 49:50**

Right. Right. Right, right. Because he's so upset for so much of this book, that Dumbledore didn't tell him more.

**Hannah McGregor 49:59**

So there is an element of learning to trust there. And in that, you know, that key scene where he goes off to die. It is about him now being ready to be afraid and do it anyway.

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:15

And to do it without Dumbledore, right? Because Dumbledore doesn't come out of that Resurrection Stone.

**Hannah McGregor** 50:22

No, Dumbledore does not come out of that Resurrection Stone, his mom does. So learning to be a man in this series is learning to some degree how to control your emotions. And learning to be a woman is learning how to control men's emotions.

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:44

Yes, because we had a very similar conversation about book five. Right? We talked about how book five is a Bildungsroman, because it starts off with Uncle Vernon calling him a boy over and over and over again. And it ends with Harry walking away knowing that he is a marked man or whatever. And so it's sort of like, okay, so he may be a man in book five literarily. But in this one, he has to be a man emotionally. Because he doesn't have Dumbledore anymore to guide him, he has to guide himself.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:30

Yeah, precisely. The other aspect of this book that I think is worth thinking about in terms of sentimentality, beyond this, like, how the emotional maturation of our characters is mapped against these sort of very gendered notions of how feeling should function is thinking about impressibility and whiteness, because I think it's really interesting to watch how wizards are depicted as going through this process of transformation. But all of our sort of non-human magical creatures are represented as contingent to exist in a kind of stasis. So, Harry is and sentimentality sort of helps me understand, I think for myself, an aspect of this book that's always bothered me, which is why it is important that Harry is not racist towards the goblins, but also the goblins suck.

And so like, how do we reconcile this that it's like, oh, it's a sign. How we reconcile it is that he is showing that he is a good

manager of civilization, through his capacity for, you know, empathy and kindness towards all. He has an appropriate approach to managing wizarding civilization. Right? Which is the approach he's learned from Dumbledore, which is tolerance, really. And he's praised for that. He's praised explicitly by Griphook, like, yes, you treat us well. So a really key part of that is watching Harry grow up, and watching him become responsible and watching him become mature. But Griphook can't change. Right? He cannot transform by virtue of his relationship with Harry, from a goblin who doesn't trust wizards to a goblin who does trust wizards. He has to remain static.

**Marcelle Kosman** 53:42

So one of the things similarly, that I've also really struggled with in this novel. I know that they can't tell Griphook what they need the sword for, but I've never been able to wrap my head around why Harry can't be more honest about when he can give Griphook the sword, you know, like, I don't understand narratively. I understand structurally what the point of his duplicity is because they need to be betrayed. And they need to solve the problem without the sword and the sword needs to reappear later. But I don't understand narratively why Harry can't be like, yes, you can have the sword. I need it for a little while longer. But I will get it to you. And you can trust me because I buried the elf.

**Hannah McGregor** 54:39

Yeah, yeah, I feel like what we see Harry learning and this is probably worth a whole episode in and of itself. But what we see Harry learning through this book and through the series as a whole is how to balance exactly this kind of like he can't be too empathetic. Hermione is too empathetic towards the house elves and it's depicted consistently as silly as excessive. Hagrid is too empathetic towards Grub and towards dragons. And it's silly, he misunderstands, you know, he's not able to properly manage others, like capital O others. But, you know, Voldemort is also



inappropriately handling others because genocide is also not a good solution for civilization, right?

This sort of sentimental notion of white civility is not a genocide. And it's not genocidal in that sense, in the sense of like, you wipe out difference, right? I mean, it's genocidal in the sense that, for example, the abduction of Indigenous children from their communities is a genocidal impulse, but it is invested in the management of others, such that they ideally contribute to white civilization without ever being fully incorporated into it, because they can't be. So the paternalistic logic of colonialism, that says, like, you have a responsibility to care for the people you have colonized. The White Man's Burden, as you cited earlier, is very much I think, what we see Harry learning is his responsibility towards non human magical creatures, that you have to be nice to them. But you can't excessively invest in an emotional attachment to them, because that is too much. It's unrealistic. It's a sign of over impressibility. Right? So Hermione is a woman, she's too impressible, she gets overwhelmed by her feelings about house elves and that leads her to do silly things.

**Marcelle Kosman** 57:12

Voldemort is deeply feminized. And gets overly angry about difference.

**Hannah McGregor** 57:22

But Harry is striking just the right middle ground of not being too emotional about these creatures, but still managing them appropriately. And so that's why we need to see him managing Griphook and being betrayed by him. It's why we need to see him learning how to manage Kreature without ever being shown going to the sort of excesses that Hermione does. It's why it's important that he, you know, doesn't think that Grawp should be hurt, but also doesn't think that Grawp should be treated as a person.

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:04



Yeah, don't hurt Grawp, but also send him away to the caves where we can't see him.

**Hannah McGregor 58:11**

That, I think, is also like a fundamentally sentimental trope.

**Marcelle Kosman 58:16**

Hmm. So would you say that the story that we learn about how Regulus Black died is a sentimental? I mean, as I'm saying it out loud. I'm like, What a ridiculous question, Marcelle, of course. But is it? Is it a sentimental narrative?

**Hannah McGregor 58:39**

It's got a *real Uncle Tom's Cabin* flavor to it. It's like, what if we find out that this literally enslaved character, who we have been shown is bad. And we shouldn't like him. He's bad. He's not human. He's not to be trusted. And then we're given the story that's like, no, actually, he feels deeply. And we're like, oh, he feels, well, that changes things. If he's capable of deep feelings. Well, now, we have to take him seriously to some degree. I mean, he's still gonna serve us, obviously. He's still just gonna make us dinner still, but like, but we can give him a locket.

So you can see why on the one hand, this might be a book series that people are like, Oh, it encourages children to understand the difference is okay. And that when you start to dig a little bit deeper into the sort of the sentimental tropes and the kind of education that sentimental texts are invested in, that what's been taught, is maybe something not quite as tidally positive as empathy.

**Marcelle Kosman 59:59**

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that is happening for me right now as we're having this conversation is devastation by OWL's, is thinking about all of the kinds of having these sort of visceral flashbacks of all of these impulses that I had as a child in reading books where I wanted, like I was, I'm realizing how deeply I was learning the techniques of sentimentality, and how weaponizable

they are. Children are manipulators, that's what they do, it's how they survive.

It's not a criticism, it is literally how they survive, they need to manipulate you into giving them what they want. Otherwise, they will die in a forest. So learning how to manipulate not just to get your basic needs, but to get somebody to acquiesce to your will. Like emotional manipulation is very real, and is something that you can mimic from, you know, what you see, or what you read.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:01:22

And it's one of those things where it's like, the ends justify the means. If you're emotionally manipulating people in a way that improves them that's good.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:30

Yeah, yeah. Or that, like gets you what you want, so that you can then do the positive thing for everybody, that it's okay. And so I'm thinking about, like, the kind of impulse that I have, like with Kreacher, like, Well, why don't we just give him a present? If you just give him up? If he would love master Regulus' locket. What if you just gave it to him? And then he'd be happy. And then he'd make you dinner. And then it would be fine. And then you'd all get along really well. So the logic being like, then everybody is happy. Not justice is then served, you know?

**Hannah McGregor** 1:02:07

Yeah. And then we stay safe and then sit like, what's most comfortable about the continued happiness of the house elves is that they are central to the continued well being of wizarding children. And we see that very literally with Kreacher, right? That we need to make him happy so that the children can be fed. That's true on a larger scale at Hogwarts. And again, this is where it is so obvious the degree to which the house elves are standing in for enslaved people that the house elves are positioned as very, very happy to do what they're doing.

But potentially a little dangerous if you don't keep them happy. Right? There's this risk, they've got this power. That makes them a potential risk. And the answer is not to like liberate them all and give them total autonomy and then face the consequences is if with that autonomy, they turn around and are like, fuck you. That's not the answer. The answer is to be nice to them.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:03:06

Just show your appreciation.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:03:08

Yeah, mourn them, right? Recognize their humanity by mourning their death, which again, is very sentimental. The best thing that Dobby could have done is die.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:03:20

Don't you dare!

**Hannah McGregor** 1:03:21

Sorry, narratively, it's the best thing he could have done so that we can see our protagonists grieving him and Harry's grief over Dobby's death is what then makes Griphook trust him.

*(Soundbite from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, in which Dobby is dying and says: Dobby is happy to be his friend...)*

**Hannah McGregor** 1:03:44

Dobby is done dirty by this book series is what I'm saying. Justice for Dobby

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:03:49

Speaking of Dobby is done dirty. Did you guys hear about the memorial on the Welsh beach for him? There are concerns about pollution because of all of the painted rocks and socks and stuff that people deposit to this absolutely, heart wrenchingly beautiful touching tribute to a cultural touchstone on par with *Anne of*

*Green Gables* is actually contributing to the environmental degradation of the area in which it is placed.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:04:25

What a good metaphor for the cultural impact of Harry Potter in general, huh?

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:04:29

MHmm.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***

Thank you, witches, for joining us for another episode of *Witch, Please*. If you want to hang out with us even more, we're on Twitter and Instagram at @ohwitchplease. And if you want to hang out with us EVEN MORE than that you should go to [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](https://patreon.com/ohwitchplease), where you can get all kinds of amazing perks like exclusive merch, supper fun movie watchalongs, absolutely hilarious blooper reels, and literally so much more.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:05:12

And if you enjoyed hearing me ruin your fun by talking about sentimentality, then maybe you would also like to read my book, *A Sentimental Education*, which is now available as an audio book everywhere you get your audio books, read by me, edited by me, produced by me, mixed by me, who let me do that? Truly wild. Anyway, if you listen very carefully, you can hear some trucks beeping in the background. It's a masterpiece. Much like my book, *Witch, Please* is produced in partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University Press and unlike my book, distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes at [ohwitchplease.ca](https://ohwitchplease.ca), along with transcripts! Special thanks AS ALWAYS to our team-player of a producer, Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! 🤪 ***(Soundbite of a sports whistle)***, to our *Witch, Please* apprentice Zoe Mix

***(Soundbite of record rewinding)***, and to our sound engineer Erik Magnus! ***(Soundbite of chimes)***

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:06:17

Thanks team. At the end of every episode, we shout out everyone who left us a five star review on Apple podcasts. So you've got to review us if you want to hear me have the time of my life. Thank you this week to:

R Silky, Orpheus, Werewolf500, Honzita, sonybambam, and JudithAndCats

**Hannah McGregor** 1:06:47

We'll be back next episode to continue our discussion of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. But until then, later Witches!

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***