

From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical Search

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It is the fate of those who toil at the lower employments of life, to be rather driven by the fear of evil, than attracted by the prospect of good [...] Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the paths through which Learning and Genius press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress.

Samuel Johnson: Preface to a *Dictionary of the English Language*.

It was observed by the compiler of a *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1827 that the word *sentiment*, though an ‘ancient’ word, found in Chaucer, might well be thought ‘modern’ since the earliest example given by Samuel Johnson is taken from Locke. Dr Johnson’s definitions of the word stress its intellectual components, and its relation to language.

<p>SAMUEL JOHNSON A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: IN WHICH THE WORDS ARE DEDUCED FROM THEIR ORIGINALS, AND ILLUSTRATED IN THEIR DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS BY EXAMPLES FROM THE BEST WRITERS. London, 1755 .</p>	<p>Sentiment</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thought; notion; opinion. ‘The consideration of the reason, why they are annexed to so many ideas, serving to give us due <i>sentiments</i> of wisdom and goodness of the sovereign Disposer of all things, may not be unsuitable to the main end of these enquiries.’ <i>Loc</i>. ‘Alike to council or th’ assembly came, With equal souls and <i>sentiments</i> the same’. <i>Pope</i>. 2. The sense considered distinctly from the language or things; a striking sentence in a composition.
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Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Sentiments are associated by Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, with abstract moral qualities such as wisdom and beneficence, with the processes of mind and with ideas, which are not regarded as purely mental or innate but derived from sense experience. The idea of the superfluity or excess of meaning which lies beyond linguistic expression, which forms Johnson's second definition, is also found in Locke. 'There are not words enough in any language', he notes in his 'Epistle to the Reader', 'to answer all the variety of ideas that enter into men's discourses and reasonings.' The definitions of *sentiment* given by Johnson emphasise rational thought, judgment and language and it is this intellectual element which dominates the lexicons of the early nineteenth century. Its derivatives during the nineteenth century extend and modify its meaning.

The word *sentimental* is defined in the 1799 *Complete and Universal Dictionary*. It is noted by its compiler James Barclay to be a word only recently introduced into the language. Associated with imaginative literature, *sentimental* is observed to have as yet no precise meaning. Its definition, as an 'affecting turn of thought' introduces an element of feeling. The word *sentimental* is included the 1812 dictionary based on Johnson, where it maintains the intellectual emphasis, giving the definition 'reflectful' or 'thoughtful'.

In the 1827 *Dictionary of the English Language* compiled from Johnson, *sentiment* is given a third meaning, that of 'sensibility' or 'feeling'. Thought and emotion are conflated in its definition of *sentimental* as 'quick, intellectual feeling'. *Sentimental* it is observed is a modern word and is used pejoratively, denoting affectation 'in a contemptuous sense'. The word *sentimentality* finds definition also in terms of affectation. The example, taken from Wharton's *History of the English People*, is condemnatory: 'She has even the false pity and sentimentality of many modern ladies'. An 1846 pocket *Dictionary of the English Language* combines some of these earlier definitions. While retaining Johnson's intellectual weighting in its definition of *sentiment*, in its explanation of *sentimentality* it introduces an element of feeling.

The 1864 *Comprehensive English Dictionary* attempts a detailed and definitive account of the word *sentiment* and its derivatives. In its primary definition of *sentiment*, the component elements of thought and emotion are placed into a causal relation: *sentiment* is

Marie Banfield, *From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical*

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

‘properly’ a thought ‘prompted by’ passion or feeling. Only secondly and in a ‘popular sense’, is it defined as a ‘thought, opinion or notion’. Thirdly, *sentiment* is referred to the sense or thought existing beyond the limits of words. Fourthly, *sentiment* is given an alternative meaning of sensibility or feeling. Finally the moral connotations of the word *sentiment* are noted in its application by phrenologists to describe a moral or affective faculty of the mind. *Sentimental* is defined in terms of thought, feeling and affectation. *Sentimentality*, as the affectation of ‘fine feeling’ or ‘exquisite sensibility’, involves the emotions and the perceptions. *Sentimentalism* and *sentimentalist* appear as derivatives which imply moral diminishment: the first as an affectation of ‘exquisite sensibility’ or ‘sickly’ mode of thinking; the second as one who affects fine feeling or exquisite *sentimentality*.

Produced in three volumes, at the end of the century, the encyclopaedic *Century Dictionary* follows the word *sentiment* and its variations from its rich and diverse meanings in Chaucer to its varied modern usage. Priority is given in its definitions to the use of the word *sentiment* by modern philosophers and psychologists to describe an emotional judgment rather than a rational opinion and the connection is made to literary and artistic expression, and to taste. *Sentiment* is seen to occupy a place between thought and feeling; more than emotion it is ‘thought penetrated and exalted by feeling’, and it is susceptible to the will. The derivatives of *sentiment* are extended; from *sentimental* comes *sentimentalism* and *sentimentalist* as well as *sentimentally*. The verb to *sentimentalize* is given in both an active and passive form, from which is derived the word *sentimentalizer* for a person given to sentimentalizing.

That Johnson’s influential definition of *sentiment* as thought, notion or opinion suffers necessary modifications in nineteenth century dictionaries is not surprising; even by the end of the eighteenth century his definitions were unable to convey the wealth and the complexity of the word as employed in the literature of the age. Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), to choose a paradigm example, a book which saw many editions in the nineteenth century, provides a rich sense of the diverse meanings and nuances associated with the words *sentiment* and *sentimental*, which implied emotional and sense experience as well as rational thought. The difficulties presented by the concept of *sentiment* to Johnson’s followers are made apparent in the table of dictionary definitions given below. It is clear that

Marie Banfield, *From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical*

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

the compilers of dictionaries follow precedence as much as popular usage and literary expression. More than one compiler acknowledges problems involved in defining *sentiment's* newly coined derivatives. The word *sentimental*, its meaning hovering between perception and feeling, appears to have presented particular difficulty. The word *sentimentality*, apparently coined early in the nineteenth century to suggest falseness of emotion or shallowness of judgment, seems to have been more readily fixed. The history of the word *sentiment* as revealed in its eighteenth and nineteenth century dictionary definitions, suggests a movement away from a predominantly rational or intellectual concept, involving mental states and moral judgments, to a term increasingly imbued with feeling, sensation or emotion that is linked to sensibility rather than distinct from it. It is made clear in the entries of the *Century Dictionary* that the history of the word *sentiment* offers a psychological as well as a linguistic narrative, part of a movement associated with Locke, away from a dualistic concept of body and mind, which holds thought and emotion separate, towards a monism directed by discoveries in physiology and psychology, which in the nineteenth century increasingly saw body and mind, thought, feeling and sensation as inextricably linked.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century definitions of *sentiment* and its derivatives

Source/Year	Word	Definition
A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ... Abstracted from the Folio Edition Samuel Johnson 2 vol. London, 1756	Sentiment	1. Thought; notion; opinion (Locke). 2. The sense considered distinctly from the language or things; a striking sentence in a composition.
A COMPLETE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE Thomas Sheridan 3rd Edition, enlarged by the Author, 2 vol. London 1790	Sentiment	Thought, notion, opinion; the sense considered distinctly from the language or things, a striking sentence in a composition.

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Source/Year	Word	Definition
A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE By Samuel Johnson L.L.D. 2 vol. Dublin: R Marchbank, 1798	Sentiment	<p>1. Thought; notion; opinion. ‘The consideration of the reason why they are annexed to so many ideas, serving to give us due <i>sentiments</i> of wisdom and goodness of the sovereign Disposer of all things, may not be unsuitable to the main end of these enquiries.’ <i>Locke</i></p> <p>‘Alike to council or th’ assembly came, With equal souls and <i>sentiments</i> the same’. <i>Pope</i></p> <p>2. The sense considered distinctly from the language or things; a striking sentence in a composition. ‘Those who could no longer defend the conduct of Cato, praised the <i>sentiments</i>.’ <i>Dennis</i>.</p>
A COMPLETE AND UNIVERSAL ENGLISH DICTIONARY By the Rev. James Barclay, Curate of Edmonton. London: G.G. & J Robinson, 1799	Sentiment	Thought, opinion or notion. Sense considered distinctly from language; a striking sentence in composition.
	Sentimental	A word lately introduced into common use, but without any precise meaning. Those who use it appear to understand by it, that affecting turn of thought which is peculiar to works of fancy, and where there is a display of the pathetic, as in graver scenes, of comedies, or of novels.
DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE Compiled from Dr. Johnson, with addition of words since familiarized to us (London: Peacocks and Bampton, 1812)	Sentiment	Thought, opinion, idea.
	Sentimental	Reflectful, thoughtful
COMPLETE AND UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY OF THE	Sentiment	Sense considered completely from language; affectation of vivid emotion; a thought exciting emotion

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Source/Year	Word	Definition
ENGLISH LANGUAGE Rev. James Barclay (Bungay: John and R ^t Childs, 1823)	Sentimental	Given to affectation of emotion, romantic, tendency to excite emotion
DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE From Dr Johnson With numerous corrections, and ... additions ... by H J Todd (3vol. 2nd edition, London 1827)	Sentiment	This word might be supposed to be of modern introduction into our language, in consequence of Dr Johnson's earliest example being from Locke: but it is ancient: "Lovers that can make of sentiment" Chaucer, Legend of Good Women verse 69. 1. Thought; notion; opinion (examples from Locke and Pope as above) 2. The sense considered distinctly from the language or things; a striking sentence in a composition (example from Dennis as above) 3. Sensibility; feeling 'He pretends to and recommends sentiment and liberality; but I know him to be artful, close, and malicious: in short a sentimental knave'. <i>Sheridan</i> , <i>School for Scandal</i> .
	Sentimental	[From sentiment] Abounding with sentiment; expressing quick, intellectual feeling; affecting sensibility, in a contemptuous sense. See third sense of sentiment. 'The French use the word naïve in such a sense as to be explainable by no English word, unless we will submit to restrain ourselves in the application of the word <i>sentimental</i> .' <i>Shenstone</i> Petrarch has described the perplexities of a lover's mind, and his struggles betwixt hope and despair, a subject most fertile of <i>sentimental</i> complaint, by a combination of contrarities; a species of wit highly relished by the Italians (<i>Warton</i> , History of the English People I.436) The word is modern.

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Source/Year	Word	Definition
	Sentimentality	[from sentimental] Affectation of fine feeling or exquisite sensibility. 'She has even the false pity and <i>sentimentality</i> of many modern ladies (<i>Warton</i> , <i>History</i> , I. 436)
DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE By Samuel Johnson L.L.D, (London: Ogle Robinson, 1828 1828)	Sentiment	1. Thought, notion or opinion (Quote from Locke and Pope as above) 2. The sense considered distinctly from the language of a things; or striking sentence in a composition (Quote from Dennis as above).
DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (pocket) Dr S Johnson (Chiswick, 1843)	Sentiment	Thought, notion, opinion
	Sentimental	Reflecting; thoughtful
DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (pocket) Dr S Johnson (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1846)	Sentiment	Thought, notion; opinion
	Sentimental	Abounding with sentiment; expressing quick intellectual feeling; affecting sensibility
DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE Alexander Reid, 7th edition (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1852)	Sentiment	A thought, a notion, an opinion; feeling or sensibility.
	Sentimental	Having or affecting feeling
	Sentimentality	Affectation of feeling

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Source/Year	Word	Definition
THE COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH DICTIONARY London: Blackie and Sons, 1864	Sentiment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Properly, a thought prompted by a passion or feeling 2. In a popular sense, thought; opinion; notion; judgment; the decision of the mind formed by deliberation or reasoning. 3. The sense, thought or opinion contained in words but considered as distinct from them 4. Sensibility, feeling 5. Among phrenologists, sentiments form a division of the moral or affective faculties of the mind, such as self esteem, benevolence, veneration, conscientiousness
	Sentimental	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abounding with sentiment or just opinions or reflections; abounding in sensibility; having a feeling 2. Exciting to sensibility, expressing quick intellectual feeling 3. Affecting sensibility
	Sentimentalism	Sentimentality, affectation of exquisite sensibility; a sickly or affected mode of thinking, whether exhibited in speaking or writing
	Sentimentalist	One who affects sentiment, fine feeling, or exquisite sentimentality
	Sentimentality	Affectation of fine feeling or exquisite sensibility
	A DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE Abridged by Editor from that of Dr S Johnson as edited by Robert Gordon Latham (London: Longmans Green, 1876)	Sentiment
Sentimental		Abounding with sentiment; a quick intellectual feeling affecting sensibility (in a contemptuous sense)
Sentimentalism		Affectation of sentiment
Sentimentalist		One who affects sentiment

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

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		6 In phren. The second division of the moral or affective faculties of the mind.
		7 Taste; quality
		8 Sentiment has a peculiar place between thought and feeling – in which it also approaches the meaning of principle. It is more than that feeling which is a sensation or emotion, by containing more of <i>thought</i> and by, and it has a large influence on the will: e.g. the sentiment of patriotism; the sentiment of honour. The thought in sentiment is often that of duty, and is penetrated and exalted by <i>feeling</i> .
	Sentimentalism	1 Swayed and apt to be swayed by sentiment; of a tender and susceptible heart; mawkishly tender or susceptible. 2 Containing a character by sentiment; appealing to the feelings rather than the reason.
	Sentimentalist	Tendency to be swayed by sentiment; affected sensibility or sentiment; mawkish susceptibility; especially the philosophy of Rousseau and others, which gave great weight to the impulses of the susceptible heart.
	Sentimentally	One who is guided by sentiment; a sentimental person; in a better sense, one who regards sentiment as more important than reason, or permits it to predominate over reason.
	Sentimentalize	The quality of being sentimental; affectation of fine or tender feeling or exquisite sensibility; sentimentalism.
	Sentimentalizer	(intrans.) To indulge in sentiment; talk sentiment; play the sentimentalist (trans) To render sentimental; give a sentimental character to. One who sentimentalizes.

Marie Banfield, From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical

Search

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Source/Year	Word	Definition
	Sentimentally	In a sentimental manner; as regards sentiment; toward or in reference to sentiment: as to be sentimentally inclined: to speak sentimentally.

Marie Banfield, *From Sentiment to Sentimentality: A Nineteenth-Century Lexicographical*

Search

19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007) www.19.bbk.ac.uk