

The dangers and benefits of emotion in 19th century american literature



The Dangers and Benefits of Emotion in 19th Century American Literature by, Katie Skalski November 8, 2004 Many of the popular texts found in 19th century American literature represent emotion, the effects of which can be perceived as both beneficial and dangerous to individuals and communities. In Lippard's *The Quaker City*, the characters' intense emotion help position the story as a cautionary tale. In contrast, Mitchell's *Reveries of a Bachelor* depicts a young hero who by employing emotion makes use of the fullest extent of his imagination and thus finally is ready to become an adult. Both texts present the effects of emotion and illustrate the 19th century concept of emotions as sources of both strength and weakness. Characters in *The Quaker City* are highly emotional, thus cautioning 19th century readers of the dangers in letting emotion influence one's actions. In one instance, Mary discovers a romance novel and tells Lorrimer she, "found the volume on the table, and was reading it" when he came in, naive to the fact that he placed the book there to tempt her (Lippard 384). Lorrimer planted the book to, "wake her animal nature into full action, and when her veins were all alive with fiery pulsations [and] when her heart grew animate with sensual life..., then she would sink helplessly into his arms..., and flutter to her ruin" (Lippard 385). In fact, the romance novel does cause Mary to imagine a true loving relationship between herself and Lorrimer, similar to the relationship described in the novel. However, once she experiences the sexual desire and imagined happiness the novel portrays, Mary becomes highly vulnerable to Lorrimer's trap. Blinded by her desire for an imagined perfection, Mary loses her ability to analyze situations and read people's actions. Finally, Mary realizes the danger she has put herself in and asks for help, crying "Oh, Lorrimer save me save me," hoping he might stop the dangerous emotions

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polluting her mind (Lippard 388). Instead, Lorrimer takes advantage of her weakness and rapes Mary, disgracing her before she is to be married. Clearly, the lesson in this story is that temptation, in all forms, is dangerous and should be avoided. Here, temptation bred intense emotion, which weakened Mary and imbued Lorrimer with greater power and determination than he might otherwise have had. Lippard suggests that a good woman maintains and controls her emotions, behavior that will keep her safer and more respected. Mary, although a victim, becomes a fallen woman after she is raped. For the rest of her life, Mary must face the consequences of releasing her emotions. She is forever shamed, and no man will marry her.

Bess, another character in Lippard's *The Quaker City*, similarly suffers from an excess of emotion. Seduced and taken advantage of in the past, Bess is resentful towards her acquaintances for their lack of pain and tries to cause them suffering so they may understand her plight. Bess, having experienced the same manipulation as Mary, knows what will happen to her, but does not warn her. Instead, Bess encourages Mary, helping to fix her hair and admiring her in the wedding dress. Bess may feel sympathetic towards Mary, but her pathological resentment overwhelms her, forcing her to lure Mary into Lorrimer's trap. Yet again, Lippard demonstrates how intense emotion can grab hold of an individual and control her life. Bess has the power to prevent Mary's rape, but her resentment of others' happiness instead causes her to fuel the danger. Yet another character in *The Quaker City*, Livingstone, similarly suffers from the effects of intense emotion. Livingstone discovers his wife Dora has had an extramarital affair and in his intense agony and anger enters a state of madness. Presented with these terrible stories of the negative effects of intense emotion, the book induces fear and doubt in its

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readers about the role of emotion in everyday life and the concept of happiness. Each character lives a high-class lifestyle and is a member of society. However, their social standing provides no refuge from the danger intense emotion brings. Thus, every individual, no matter his or her background and social standing, is susceptible to the dangers of emotion. In contrast to the warnings against emotions expressed in *The Quaker City*, Mitchell uses emotion in *Reveries of a Bachelor* to strengthen his characters. The main character purposely places himself into different situations and then enjoys experiencing all the emotions associated with each situation. For example, he imagines a woman whose, “ delicate susceptibility is like a frail flower, that quivers at every rough blast of heaven” (Mitchell 497). Next, he envisions himself married to that woman and feels all of the sensations linked with married life. In the context of the book, these musings and emotions are often accompanied by and evoked from smoke, fire, and cigars. Just as smoke curls and winds away from a fire, emotions float off of his ruminations and meld into his personality. Almost all of the bachelor’s reveries end with the death of his lover, a pattern that although morbid, prepares him psychologically for the worst case real life scenario. The bachelor’s reveries eventually lead him to a state of maturity where he finally feels ready to be married and have a family. The bachelor poses emotion against reality, showing that delving into one’s imagination and experiencing emotion can assist a person in growing. Unlike *The Quaker City*, the main character in *Reveries of a Bachelor* ruminates on imagined situations rather than acting on real situations. By preparing himself for anything that might come, he is ready for anything life will throw at him.

The bachelor has experienced all of his emotions through his ruminations, <https://assignbuster.com/the-dangers-and-benefits-of-emotion-in-19th-century-american-literature/>

and therefore is confident in his ability to control them and react appropriately to them. Unlike *The Quaker City*, Mitchell's *Reveries of a Bachelor* encourages the reader to feel, experience and seek out emotion for personal growth and a more fulfilling life. While *The Quaker City* is a cautionary tale of the negative effects emotion can have, *Reveries of a Bachelor* is an encouraging story, urging the reader to imagine and embrace all that life can bring. The difference between the two author's approaches is that Mitchell encourages reflecting on situations and corresponding emotions, Lippard encourages simply controlling and muting emotions. The two authors' approaches to the subject and concentration on the power of emotions demonstrates how the theme of emotions and their effects was highly dominant in 19th century literature. Although their views do differ, Mitchell encourages thought before action and Lippard encourages inaction. Perhaps Lippard could be convinced that Mitchell's concept of thinking through situations before acting on them, rather than simply reacting to life's occurrences, might be more beneficial.

Works Cited
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