

Modeling the Sentimental Novel

Carrie Johnston

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5644-416X>

Wake Forest University

Artifact type: Assignment

Developed for: Lower-level undergraduate seminar

Audience: Non-majors in English literature/writing intensive course

Time required: One 75-minute class session + outside writing assignment

Method and tool: Topic modeling with HathiTrust Research Center analytics tools

Description:

This topic modeling assignment was developed to augment one of the major methodologies that I teach in my undergraduate English seminar courses: generic analysis. In this particular course, *Handmaids and Heroines in American Literature*, I introduce students to a variety of genres using a single, representative text for each genre. I outline the generic conventions and make a case for the expectations readers bring to each genre, and then ask students to analyze the text based on the parameters I have provided.

One of the course's learning outcomes is to assess the potential of literature to construct or resist social, economic, and cultural norms. We begin with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, using traditional generic analysis and close reading to understand how Jacobs's arguments about the American legal system, slavery, religion, family, and gender roles are conveyed through her engagement with the generic conventions of the sentimental novel. Through Jacobs, students learn that engaging with a genre can include resisting its dominant themes; in the case of the sentimental novel, these themes include the doctrine of separate spheres and republican motherhood.

While sentimental novels largely reinforce 19th-century gender norms, I want my students to explore the genre beyond Jacobs's engagement with it—and of my definition of the genre. This digital assignment allows students to explore the sentimental novel's genre using topic modeling, furthering their understanding of the ways that literature can construct and resist gender norms. In the exercise, students are surprised to find topics (themes) emerging from a preselected dataset of 50 sentimental novels that provide evidence that this genre could be both conservative and progressive. Ultimately, this assignment generates a more nuanced understanding of literary history and authors' responses to dominant tropes and master narratives.

This is an exploratory activity, which can be conducted in the span of one 75-minute class period. Students are required to set up a HathiTrust Research Center (HTRC) account before class, but no other preparation is required.

Some logistical considerations/recommendations:

- You can conduct this activity if your institution is not a HathiTrust partner institution, as anyone with a .edu email address can sign up for a HTRC account.
- Check in with the HTRC (htrc-help@hathitrust.org) to make sure there is no scheduled maintenance downtime on the day you plan on running this assignment.

- Having your entire class simultaneously run the HTRC topic modeling algorithm may bog down the HTRC servers. One solution is to have the class conduct this activity in groups of 3-4.
- Remind students of the HathiTrust Research Center password requirements (they must be 15 characters long, have at least one upper- and lowercase letter and a special character).

It is possible to add a research component to this assignment by asking students to create their own dataset using the HathiTrust Digital Library (hathitrust.org) instead of creating the dataset for them. This would require more work for students outside of class, as well as additional class discussions and instruction on selection criteria used to generate the dataset.

Supporting materials:

Assignment

Modeling the Sentimental Novel
 ENG 150: Handmaids and Heroines in American Literature
 Wake Forest University, Fall 2018

Close reading Harriet Jacobs's text

In our close readings of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we learned how Jacobs worked within the genre of the sentimental novel even though her life story did not neatly fit within the confines of the genre. Still, Jacobs used this genre to communicate with her intended audience, who surely would have read a sentimental novel or two, and to show them that living out these sentimental narratives was a product of white privilege. As editor Jennifer Fleischner explains, "what [Jacobs] could *not* write was a black woman's version of the popular sentimental novel, which followed the heroine from childhood through courtship to marriage, because a black woman's life did not follow that sentimental track... Instead, she argued forcefully that slave women should not be judged by the moral standards of white society because they were not free to act according to that society's—or their own—moral values" (3).

Distant reading sentimental novels through topic modeling

In today's exercise, we will think about the moral values that were conveyed in *Incidents* and compare them to major themes of the 19th-century sentimental novel. To determine these themes, we will use a method called topic modeling and apply it to a group of 46 sentimental novels published throughout the 19th century.

Topic modeling uses an algorithm designed to discover what words have a high probability of co-occurring with other words across a set of documents. The algorithm doesn't read the documents as humans do, but rather sees the words as numbers. How many times does a certain word occur, and how often does this word appear in proximity to another? In measuring the text through these quantitative means, the algorithm will provide us with groups of words that are likely to comprise a specific topic—or theme—within the texts.

In-class exercise: topic modeling

- Login to HathiTrust Analytics: <https://analytics.hathitrust.org/>
- Click on Algorithms
- Choose InPho Topic Model Explorer
- Choose workset: SentimentalNovel@johnstc
- Name the job and click Submit

Analysis

- With your group, decide on a theme for each topic
- Discuss how this theme either aligns with or departs from the themes of Jacobs's *Incidents*
 - For at least two of the themes, close read a passage from *Incidents* that illustrates how Jacobs's narrative aligns with or departs from the themes of the sentimental novel genre

Writing assignment

- Take a screenshot of your topics and save it to your desktop
- Choose one of the topics to write about in a 250-300 word response
- In your response, first describe the topic: What are some of the words in the topic list, and what theme did you identify for those words?
- Next, make a claim about how this topic aligns with or departs from the major themes in *Incidents*
- Then, close read one passage from *Incidents* to support your claims about how the sentimental novel theme you identified aligns with or departs from themes in *Incidents*