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# Sentimentalism and Celebrity Culture

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## *Mae West as Novelist*

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ANNE-MARIE EVANS

In 1934, Mae West was such an icon of American popular culture that she inspired one of Salvador Dali's most famous artworks, *Face of Mae West Which Mae Be Used as an Apartment*. The very title of Dali's picture and his pun on "Mae" reveals a clear understanding of West's dual status as both actress and celebrity product. The picture is remarkable, as Dali translates West's famous features into a domestic space and deconstructs the artificiality of "Mae West"; her lips are revealed as a sofa, and her nose is transformed into a mantelpiece for a clock. As Emily Wortis Leider has noted, "Mae West's image is literally where she lives" (346). Dali's implication is that West's image is not just where she lives, but where everyone lives, demonstrating the sheer profundity of her public persona in the 1930s. Dali's interest in West as a metaphor for celebrity and the production of public image quite literally illustrates her prominent role as both an actress and a carefully constructed cultural product.

West is remembered primarily today as a curvaceous blonde with a highly provocative sense of humor. The dominant female sex symbol of America in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, West's status as a cultural icon has long since eclipsed her accomplishments as an author. As well as being a successful actress, she was also a playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and comedienne who insisted on maintaining absolute creative control over her work. This essay places West's fiction, specifically her 1932 novel *She Done Him Wrong*, within a framework of sentimental literature. It explores how sentimental

writing actually informs the structure of West's novel and suggests that this is a new way of reading and re-evaluating her work. West's manipulation of her public image also informs part of this discussion as the "Mae West" brand was painstakingly assembled and her writing played an instrumental part in her creation of a public self. West writes about criminals, prostitutes, drug addicts, and hard-bitten policemen, a world away from the classic sentimental literature of the nineteenth century that traditionally explored the politics of feeling as a potential way of gaining female autonomy. West's fiction presents the reader with decidedly unsentimental heroines who nevertheless exist in worlds where sentimental ethics still seem to have a role to play.

The determination with which West developed from a performer to a successful author highlights her tenacity in a patriarchal environment. Mae West was born Mary Jane West in Brooklyn in 1893 and left school at the age of seven (Hamilton 6). She was routinely vague about her age and family background, even denying the existence of her early 1911 marriage to fellow vaudevillian Frank Wallace until the story broke in 1935 (Hamilton 14). West enjoyed a steady career in vaudeville throughout her teens that allowed her to tour the United States extensively and gain valuable stage experience as a singer and comedienne. Influenced by the new sounds of jazz, West introduced her famous "shimmy" dance into her act around 1917 before breaking onto Broadway and from there into the film industry (Louvish 73). Once she became an established presence on the Broadway scene West swiftly recognized the value of producing her own material and writing became a crucial part of her career management.

The evolution of West's *Diamond Lil* production showcases West's skills as a writer, producer, and entrepreneur. Her play, partly based on an earlier work by Mark Linder, premiered on April 9, 1928, and was West's fourth playwriting credit after her earlier works *Sex* (1926), *The Drag* (1927), and *The Wicked Age* (1927). In 1932 she turned *Diamond Lil* into a novel; the film version, starring West and a rising young actor named Cary Grant, was released in 1933. On screen, *Diamond Lil* was given the grittier title of *She Done Him Wrong* and "Lil" was renamed "Lou." By writing, re-writing and adapting her own material for the stage and page, West remained in artistic control. As Faye Hammill suggests, West "repeatedly identified writing as central to all her activity" (79).

West was writing to further her own acting career; she was not a screenwriter like other women in Hollywood such as Anita Loos, who penned the novel and screen versions of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925 and 1953, respectively) without starring in either. West was writing specifically for Mae West, searching for scripts or ideas that would allow her to play the kinds of roles in

which she knew the public wanted to see her. In her 1959 autobiography, *Goodness Had Nothing to Do with It*, West claims, “I became a writer by the accident of needing material and having no place to get it” (*Goodness* 72). By producing her own material that she could also star in, West found a sure-fire way to evade becoming a pawn of the all-powerful Hollywood studios.<sup>1</sup> By playing the sexy blonde on stage and screen and embracing the role of writer and creator off-screen she managed her career with remarkable success. Never one to underestimate the importance of appearance, and knowing that many would value her looks over her brains, West was adept at manipulating her public image: “West deliberately played on the discrepancy between her feminine, sexy appearance and her intellectual abilities” (Hammill 79). The role of “writer” therefore became yet another career position that she was able to carve out for herself with demonstrable success.<sup>2</sup>

West’s novels, of which she wrote several, are not usually considered in conjunction with the sentimental novel. Sentimental fiction is a complex genre, and the stalwarts of the tradition—female suffering, friendship and sacrifice—are merely the hallmarks of a rich and nuanced engagement with a range of social issues. Cindy Weinstein defines some of the key features of the genre as including “a focus on day-to-day activities in the domestic sphere, a concentration on relationships, and a profound interest in the emotional lives of women” (Weinstein 209). Broadly speaking, all of these features are displayed and explored in *She Done Him Wrong*, and West essentially utilizes the structure of the sentimental novel and usurps it to promote her own purposes and self-image. This essay considers West’s text in terms of three of the central concerns of the sentimental novel: relationships between women; the exploration of female sexuality; and the Christian framework that informed so many popular works of sentimental literature such as Susan Warner’s bestselling *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). By using these concepts as a template, this essay explores how West engages (and disengages) with sentimentalism.

*She Done Him Wrong* allowed West to rewrite her earlier Broadway triumph *Diamond Lil* for a public that was always ready to read material by and about Mae West. Set in the rough and tawdry Bowery area of New York during the 1890s, the novel tells the story of Lil, a former prostitute who is now the mistress of the small-time criminal and dance hall owner Gus Jordan. As her name implies, Lil’s love of diamonds inspires her far more than her desire for any particular man. As the text progresses, Lil’s interaction with the handsome Captain Cummings of the Salvation Army prompts her to reflect on her obsession with material goods and leads to a gradual moral and spiritual awakening. Cummings, meanwhile, turns out to be an undercover policeman known only as “the Hawk,” intent on fighting corruption in the New York underworld.

Lil's growing attraction to the handsome Captain, and her growing interest in saving her soul, propels the second half of the novel, and Diamond Lil eventually gets her man (indeed, it is hard to imagine a West heroine *not* getting her man at the end of the story), although the revelation of Cummings's true identity compromises Lil's developing sense of an ethical self.

As the title suggests, *She Done Him Wrong* is primarily a novel about Diamond Lil's relationships with various men, but thinking about the relationships between women in the novel offers a useful way of exploring West's work in the light of sentimentalism. Sally Glynn, the young pregnant girl who makes the mistake of wandering into Jordan's dance hall, known locally as "Suicide Hall," is clearly in need of a friend. As a character she is the stock type of the "fallen woman" figure that appeared in sentimental literature throughout the twenties and thirties. Seduced by a married man, she is soon identified to the reader as an innocent abroad: "Her eyes were dark pools of ineffable tragedy. On her cheeks were the traces of tears that had dried" (West 22). West's language here echoes the occasional melodrama of sentimental fiction, and Sally is constructed as a classic sentimental heroine struggling for self-control (Tompkins 172). Instead of being rescued, however, as might be expected from a sentimental novel, and discovering and retaining a sense of self, Sally is dealt with in a surprisingly unsentimental manner.

A major sub-plot in the novel is Jordan's links to the white slave trade: he tricks young women into sailing to South America, promising them careers as showgirls before selling them into brothels. West is typically forthright in describing the horrors of this practice. Jordan is aware that the women he helps to deceive are being sent to their deaths: "A good girl could earn up to fifty thousand dollars for her house before she was ready for the ash-bin or a mosquito swamp" (West 33). Although he is at first a reluctant conspirator, he soon "discover[s] that dirty money ha[s] the same power as clean" (West 32). Like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1850), one of the founding texts of the sentimental genre, West's work is intent on exposing the horrors of the slave trade. But unlike Stowe, West avoids dealing with these horrors on any ethical or moral level.<sup>3</sup> West has no interest in making a political statement. What was for Stowe the driving force behind the novel is for West merely a useful plot device that allows her protagonist to have some flickers of conscience, although West is particular in her description of the victimization of women. All the doomed young women are named—Violet, Bessie, Polly and Adelaide—and thus the poignancy of their predicament is heightened.

What is particularly interesting about West's portrayal of this echelon of society is her critique of female culpability. Rita Christinia—the "dark, vivacious" (West 32)—is a Latin American Madame who travels to America four

times a year to collect shipments of girls to sell to South American brothels. The danger of the “flesh marts” (West 31) is taken seriously by West, and Rita’s sadism (and her jealousy of Lil) is repeatedly highlighted throughout the text: “How she [Rita] would have liked to lash Lil’s white flesh with a cat-o’-nine-tails, as she had lashed so many of her charges who had proved the least bit recalcitrant” (West 32). Writing in prose rather than for the stage allows West to develop her characters in far more graphic detail, as her description of female sadism illustrates. As Hammill notes, “[t]he increased freedom offered by print publication is likely the reason why West’s fiction is more detailed and explicit with regard to taboo subjects than is her work in other media” (94). In addition to the obvious contrast West establishes between Lil’s whiteness and Rita’s darker coloring, Rita’s role as chief danger to female virtue is established. Instead of the plot revolving around whether or not poor Sally and the other young women can be saved from the slave trade, West is entirely focused on Lil and her attempts to seduce Captain Cummings. Sally, the text later informs the reader, has indeed been shipped to South America, and thus becomes the main casualty of the narrative. At no point does Lil display any shock at Sally’s fate; female solidarity is always second to Lil’s relationship with men. Contemporary feminist readings of the text would rightly take issue with Lil’s casual attitude to the source of her lover’s money, as West continuously mistakes female self-obsession for female independence.

Rather than considering Lil’s position as part of a community of women, West always characterizes Lil as being different and separate from other females. Lil’s understanding of what is actually going on at Suicide Hall, and what is happening to other women in her neighborhood, is carefully circumscribed in the text, and West makes it clear that Lil does not fully comprehend what her lover is involved in:

She was perfectly indifferent as to how Jordan made his money, as long as he did make it, but she would have drawn the line at white slavery had she known that that traffic was his chief source of revenue. Lil was funny that way. Certainly sex held no mysteries for her. But if she knew that most of the money that Gus spent to buy her diamonds came from the marketing of women’s bodies she would have resented it strongly. True enough, she had sold her own body, but she had always been a complete mistress of herself and her emotions; she had never been a pawn in a man’s game. These girls who were rustled down to Rio were no better than sheep led to the slaughter. They had not her strength of mind, her ability to make cool decisions, not her all-alluring voluptuousness that bent men to her will. She felt an instinctive sorrow for women who lacked her capacity to keep the predatory male under control [West 75].

Once placed within the framework of sentimental literature, this is a remarkable piece of writing. Ostensibly seeking to establish Lil’s sympathy for female

victims, the passage actually confirms Lil's status as different from other women: she perceives herself as more of a sexual predator than a victim, whereas sentimental heroines (such as Warner's Ellen Montgomery, or Gertrude Flint from Maria Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* [1854]) must usually suffer some form of emotional abuse before attaining self-mastery.

Lil seems to sense at least some of the irony inherent in seeing herself as belonging to a different class of womanhood, admitting that "she had sold her own body," but the passage situates money, rather than sentimental feeling, at the heart of West's narrative. Lil is "perfectly indifferent" to the source of Jordan's money but the reader is assured she would admit to a qualm if she knew it came from the "marketing of women's bodies." Paradoxically, the text emphasizes from the start that "Diamond Lil" is only able to function through the marketing of her own body and image. At the back of the Suicide Hall's bar, a large painting depicts "alabaster and gold Lil reclining in all her voluptuous nudity upon a background of purple velvet" (West 14). Lil does not recognize that there is a parallel between the marketing and exploitation of her own body—even though hers is consensual—and the "marketing" of the women destined for South American brothels. She perceives that these women are "no better than sheep led to the slaughter" but does not examine the source of her blood diamonds too closely.

In addition to considering, and problematizing, relationships between women, West explores the concept of female sexuality, a topic that several of her previous works had also interrogated. In 1926 West was arrested for obscenity for performing in her play *Sex*. The play was one of Broadway's biggest hits of the year (Hamilton 38), an achievement no doubt helped by the notoriety surrounding the production, in which West played a prostitute and brothel owner named Margy Lamont. In West's texts sex often has the power to liberate the female instead of simply oppressing her, and this belief clearly influenced West's management of her own public image. If sentimental fiction can be interpreted as a form of cultural and social critique, then West's creation of the self-aware "loose woman," as opposed to the traditionally virtuous sentimental heroine, marks part of her complex engagement with sentimental literature.

The American and English traditions of sentimental literature often centered on the seduction narrative (as in Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* [1740]), but in *She Done Him Wrong* sex is primarily initiated by Lil. When Lil meets Pablo Juarez, one of Rita's associates whom she will later sleep with, she surveys his handsome figure and "ma[kes] a mental note to give him closer inspection at her leisure" (West 42). Displaying a sexual freedom unavailable to many women in the 1930s, Lil

never attempts to ignore her desires, and certainly never regards them as something other than normal and healthy.

Much of the plot of the novel focuses on Lil's attempts to seduce the righteous Captain Cummings, and she is far more interested in Cummings's body than his mind. Discussing sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century, Weinstein explores how women authors engaged with the complexities of the marriage question: "If the heroine's *Bildungsroman* represents a journey toward self-possession, which culminates in the decision to marry the man of her choice, what then happens to that story of self-possession when she becomes legally possessed by another? When she becomes, analogically speaking, like a slave?" (Weinstein 212). Weinstein's question is a crucial one, and one that West seems—partly, at least—to attempt to answer in the ending of her text. Lil, a self-possessed heroine if ever there was one, does end the novel with the man of her choice, but not necessarily on her terms. There is no guarantee that she will not be arrested later, after all, and even in the final lines Lil tries to convince herself that this is a love match rather than a match of necessity. West thus rewrites the sentimental ending: Lil, it seems, will continue as a mistress, a sex symbol, a possession, and an emblem of male success. Hamilton suggests a correlation between West's own jail sentence for obscenity and Lil's willingness to be arrested at the end of *She Done Him Wrong* (116). Unlike her creator, Lil will presumably be able to bargain (her body) out of this predicament.

Weinstein also suggests that "one of the most complex issues taken up by sentimental fiction is the marriage relation, because sentimentalism demands that its novels conclude in marriage" (212). West's novel famously concludes with the threat of handcuffs for Lil rather than with any account of marriage (although Cummings seems curiously reluctant to actually arrest her). Cummings—now revealed as the "Hawk," scourge of the Bowery and pride of the New York police department—at no time professes his love for Lil, nor she for him. The emphasis is placed instead on sexual desire, and the novel ends with Lil celebrating the fact that Cummings has become one in a long line of men that she has been able, at last, to seduce. Cummings sweeps Lil into his arms and declares: "I tell you that I'm mad about you. I want you!" (West 187). West's hero does not confess his love for Lil, only his desire to sexually possess her, and he does not propose marriage.

West is unashamedly romantic and ends the text with a kiss between hero and heroine because she knows it sells, and the ending can be interpreted as a happy one in the sense that Lil finally gets the man she has wanted for the last hundred and fifty pages. Cummings perceives Lil as redeemable: "I know that giving Jacobsens's Hall to the Salvation Army isn't the only good thing



you've done" (West 187). Cummings knows that Lil is a gangster's mistress and that this is a role she has played before with other men, but in the final scenes of the novel he is compelled to translate her into a Jezebel with a heart of gold. Lil must play another role for another type of man: "Diamond Lil" must now become "Lil the good Samaritan." She is allowed her version of a happy ending, despite the fact that by the end of the narrative she has murdered Rita, engineered the arrest of her former lover Chick Clark, and arranged the shooting of small time criminal Dan Flynn for trying to encroach on Jordan's business interests. Lil may end the novel by kissing the man of her choice, but even in the final lines there is a sense of performativity and insincerity:

A wild gladness surged up within her at the words which told her that the man she had wanted for so long was hers; yet, she asked herself, "Is this love? Really love? Or something just for the winter season?"

But her self-confidence had returned to her completely, and it was sweet triumph. As her lips were crushed hotly to his she murmured: "I always *knew* you could be *had!*" [West 187]

The sense of any kind of a moral or spiritual awakening is completely lacking in this ending.

Even as Cummings is finally professing his attraction to her, Lil is congratulating herself. The "wild gladness" is ambiguous as it also signifies her relief that she (probably) will not have to go to jail if the arresting officer is infatuated with her. The fact that Lil questions whether she might (or might not) be in love suggests some authenticity, for though several male characters in the story (Chick Clark, Pablo Juarez, Gus Jordan) profess strong feelings for Lil, her reciprocation on anything other than a sexual level is never implied. She is clearly still questioning whether a relationship with Cummings could be yet another temporary measure, just "something for the winter season." Although the ending is framed as Lil's great triumph over another man apparently rendered helpless by her blatant sexuality, West allows her heroine one final pun. Lil's self-congratulatory comment that Cummings could be "*had*" functions on two levels: she can now enjoy him sexually, as she always suspected she would, but he has also been "had" in the sense that he has been tricked. He has fallen for her charms like so many before him. Lil does not question his new identity—indeed, his actual name is never revealed—so the final irony of the text is that Diamond Lil, that great image of Bowery sexuality, has herself fallen for a fabricated persona.

In addition to the attention paid to relationships between women and West's consideration of female sexuality, the text is also placed within a framework of Christian belief. West, who was herself raised Roman Catholic, not only problematizes the concept of organized religion but also uses it as a device

to explore Lil's potential for spiritual awakening. It is no coincidence that Cummings poses as a captain in the Salvation Army, a Christian group focused on outreach and with an emphasis—as its name suggests—on salvation and redemption; surely there are multiple identities he could have assumed in the Bowery. West's decision to affiliate her hero with Christianity offers a way for her to explore Lil's sense of her own morality, and thus parallels many nineteenth-century sentimental texts in which religion and religious awakening inform the plot.

West continually places the spiritual at odds with the material, represented in the text by Lil's love for diamonds. When the play opened in 1928 it had been only three years since another blonde bombshell, Lorelei Lee, had famously declared in *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* that "Kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and sapphire bracelet lasts forever" (Loos 55). Curiously, West does not reference Loos's hit, except perhaps in her attempt to associate her heroine even more closely with diamonds by making the gemstone a part of Lil's name. Just as in Loos's comic masterpiece, diamonds are a central motif in West's text. In real life, West was a prolific collector herself, claiming in her autobiography that, like her fictional creation, all her diamonds came from appreciative gentlemen admirers. "I hadn't started out to collect diamonds," she claimed, "but somehow they piled up on me and in self-protection I became a gem expert" (West, *Goodness* 107). She actually pawned her diamond collection to help finance the original production of *Diamond Lil* (West, *Goodness* 124), so *Diamond Lil* was literally constructed by the diamond trade.

*Diamond Lil* was first performed before the Wall Street crash of 1929, although West did not convert the play into a novel until 1932, when America was in the fierce grip of the Depression. Even though the action is set in the 1890s, at no point does West reveal any concern about the discrepancy between Lil's appreciation for material goods and the dire economic circumstances of most Americans. Lauren Berlant suggests that "the turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world" (21). Applied to West's work, this assertion suggests that *She Done Him Wrong* can be categorized as escapist fiction, offering a nostalgic view of an America in which diamonds were plentiful and the threat of unemployment and homelessness were as yet unknown.

As Lil lies in bed with Juarez (she eventually does take that moment to "give him closer inspection") and they discuss her affinity for jewelry, she declares that "Diamonds is my career!" (West 89). Indeed, diamonds are the markers of Lil's career as a singer and a high-class prostitute; they demonstrate her worth and operate as an example of Thorstein Veblen's theory of

“conspicuous consumption.” Lil believes in showcasing her worth and, by extension, her skill as a mistress: “On her fingers and wrists was a profusion of other diamonds all calculated to blind the percipient male” (West 10). Diamonds are Lil’s armor, her weapon, and her main choice of payment, and West continually details Lil’s fondness for them. On Lil’s dressing table, “her diamonds lay heaped from the night before. Bracelets, rings, pendants, necklaces, dog-collars, she let them ripple through her fingers with a feeling of exultation. They represented progress and conquest” (West 6). Lil knows that she is an expensive commodity, and as the text progresses, there is the promise that she may begin to measure her self-worth in other, less material ways. Her relationship with Cummings is therefore the catalyst for her moral interrogation of herself.

Lil’s main problem with religion concerns hypocrisy (there is never any reason or backstory given for this in the text); she describes the singing of the Salvation Army as “holy howling” (West 10). When Lil first sees Cummings from her bedroom window she concedes, “He’s the best looking thing I’ve seen in a long time” (West 11), but her attraction to him is immediately problematized by the realization that the Captain is a religious man: “Lil had no illusions concerning men. She knew them too well. If this young preacher yielded to his fleshly desires, how then did he square that up with denouncing those desires in others?” (West 11). Lil cannot separate the man from the moral, although she has little problem separating the man from the crime—as evidenced by her association with men such as Clark, Jordan, and Juarez. Cummings’s religious leanings upset her far more than the well-documented criminality of all of her former and present lovers. This is clearly because Cummings’s faith prompts Lil to explore her own sense of self in more detail than she is accustomed to.

Prior to meeting Cummings, Lil has attempted to model her character on the hard beauty of the diamond. She “[does] not like to think herself soft in any respect” (West 49) and never sheds a tear in the text—an interesting trait considering the importance of weeping in the sentimental novel (Weinstein 213). Lil’s attachment to diamonds comes when she is at her most emotional, and when the sentimental language of feeling plays its main role in the text—when she thinks she is about to die—she thinks not of Cummings but of her gem collection: “She couldn’t die and leave her diamonds. That couldn’t be!” (West 150). Unlike the sentimental heroines of the previous century, Lil searches not for self-possession but for material possessions; accruing and safeguarding her considerable stockpile of movable wealth is her primary motivation throughout the novel.

It is only her conversations with Cummings that begin to dent Lil’s tough

exterior. When Cummings first comes to visit Lil she compares herself to Mary Magdalene, but the Captain swiftly reveals that he has come to thank her for various donations to the Salvation Army (West 111). Lil is quick to silence him, but the exchange reveals a softer side of her character: the hard-as-nails showgirl apparently has a history of charitable donations. During their debate about religion Lil continues to align herself with the fallen women of the Bible: "I'm the scarlet woman. When I die, I'm going to burn in hell" (West 116). Lil is able to demonstrate that her lack of interest in religion does not stem from ignorance; she has read the Bible and admits that "Samson intrigued her" and "she adored Solomon" but the "pale Nazarene and his doctrine of self-abnegation were too meek and mild for her" (West 101). Lil perceives the Bible only in the form of a spectacle, as entertainment. She is interested in Biblical figures as characters rather than metaphors, focusing on the surface image as opposed to the underlying message. Lil may not believe in the teachings of the "pale Nazarene," but she clearly believes in divine retribution. Casting Lil's character within the framework of religious debate helps to humanize her; she may scoff at religion but she clearly fears for her soul. When Cummings tells her that "the good will come to the top, if you'll only give it half a chance," the comment can be read on two levels: in his guise as Captain Cummings he is warning her to repent, but as the "Hawk" he is also warning her to change her lifestyle (West 116). The quest to "save" Lil functions on both physical and metaphysical levels.

West is aware that for Lil to have a moment of spiritual epiphany would be entirely out of character, but she is also aware that some kind of religious awakening is needed to validate Lil's attraction to Cummings. Slowly, the path to Lil's potential salvation is made apparent. She feels "certain qualms of conscience" after sleeping with Juarez even though she "could be bothered with a conscience only just so long" (West 100). It is obvious that it is only the handsome presence of Cummings that has attracted Lil; the beginnings of her moral awakening are not linked to Sally's plight, as they would be in the nineteenth-century novel, for example. Religion has to be appealing and attractive in Lil's eyes; she remarks that it "[j]ust goes to show that religion'd be more of a success if they had better-lookin' people sellin' it" (West 106). Religion, like everything else in Lil's world, is framed in purely economic and material terms. It is a product to be sold, and therefore the salesperson needs to be attractive.

Lil's desire for Cummings becomes inextricably bound to her self-reflection, "her reaction and subsequent high-handed treatment of the captain" acting as "an instinctive protest growing out of the feeling that she was inferior, at least morally, to this man who professed Jesus and did the work of God"

(West 127). Lil has no wish to become a project for the Captain—“He would be interested in her only from the angle of redemption. And that was not at all the way in which Lil wanted him to be interested in her” (West 127)—but against all the odds, one conversation with Cummings serves as a catalyst for Lil’s spiritual awakening: “down in her heart she felt an impulse, a desire to be raised up to this level” (West 129). This line might have come directly from a nineteenth-century sentimental novel by Warner or Sedgwick.

Finally, West places the emphasis on feeling rather than acquiring. Even finding out that Cummings has no money does not dull Lil’s ardor, as it would have for the Diamond Lil of old (West 134). Instead, she spends her money buying the Salvation Army meeting place, Jacobsens’s Hall, so that the organization can continue its work. Cummings makes clear the difference between the image of Diamond Lil and the woman that she has the potential to become: “Diamonds always seem so cold to me. They have no warmth. No soul” (West 143). Lil sees diamonds only for the financial value; Cummings perceives the materialism that they represent.

The irony that the Captain is interested in Lil’s redemption purely in a legal sense is not made apparent until the final few pages of the novel. And of course, Lil is eventually proven right: the captain is sexually interested, but the debates between them allow West to explore the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical in some detail. In a traditional sentimental novel, the handsome Captain would redeem Lil, and the text would chart her journey back to God through the love of a good man. In this text, Lil’s awakening is rendered null and void by the revelation of the captain’s true identity. And yet, the Captain’s inherent goodness—he is “so utterly clean,” Lil believes—forms a significant part of his attraction (West 128). She even debates whether she would be “willing to make an effort to tread the straight and narrow for him” (West 128). If part of Cummings’s attraction is his moral candor as a Captain of the Salvation Army, his allegiance to another type of institution, the police force, does not give Lil much pause. The final joke, it is implied, could actually be on her.

Lil, never one to miss a trick, is quick to capitalize on her new status as the deceived party; she “ha[s] by no means exhausted her bag of tricks” and protests Cummings’s embrace with “calculating weakness” (West 186). The chances are good that Lil will escape jail, but her awakening was for nothing. She may not need to be Diamond Lil in quite the same capacity as before but she is still being forced to play a role. She is very clearly in command of the situation again by the end of the novel, and has already perceived the potential benefits of being involved with a policeman. As Gregory D. Black explains, this was very much part of the typical Mae West character: “The role West

carved out for herself was that of a woman who enjoys sex, who controls men not by her body but by her brain: She simply outsmarts them" (73).

In conclusion, *She Done Him Wrong* is not a sentimental novel in the traditional sense, but West's novel clearly engages certain elements of the sentimental tradition. Like her most famous creation, West managed her career by using her image as a superb tool for self-promotion. As the years went on, the line between "Mae West" and "Diamond Lil" grew increasingly blurry, and in 1963, a Los Angeles court decreed that the "Diamond Lil" brand and identity legally belonged to West (Leider 202). Four years before the court ruling, West revealed her role as the author of her own image and brand: "I first had to create myself, and to create the fully mature image I had to write it out to begin with" (West, *Goodness* 72). However, it is hard to imagine that West was offering anything other than a self-description when she described Lil in lushly glamorous terms: "There was nothing tough about her; she was young, her waist was like the stem of a wine-glass and her breasts were full and firm. Her eyes were large cool blue ponds, her hair was yellow as maize and she wore it in an astonishingly lovely style of her own" (West 2).

This is ostensibly Clark's recollection of the first time he saw Lil, but taken out of context, it could describe almost any publicity photograph of West from the mid-1920s onwards. West's decision to deliberately market herself as a modern and highly sexualized woman reveals a savvy understanding of the entertainment industry, as she emphasized her femininity to survive in a patriarchal environment. She fully understood the power of the Mae West brand, and her image was widely used on fans, soap advertisements, and perfume bottles (Hammill 87). When discussing Lil, a role she would continue to inhabit until the 1960s, West finally admitted that the line between creator and creation was increasingly blurred: "Lil in her various incarnations—play, novel motion picture—and I have been one" (West, *Goodness* 115).

In creating Lil on stage and translating her to the page in *She Done Him Wrong*, West uses key components of the sentimental tradition—relationships between women, the concept of female sexuality, and an engagement with religion—and updates them for a specific context and audience. If questioned, West likely would have argued strenuously against any type of sentimentality because, like Lil, West wanted to be seen as a businesswoman. Yet, her writing reveals an acute awareness of one of the major trends in American literature. Diamond Lil is not a sentimental heroine in the traditional sense, but she is part of a text that operates within the sentimental tradition. By re-imagining the main components of the sentimental novel, West used a well-established and popular genre to help launch her writing career, creating the "Diamond Lil" brand for the twentieth century.

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1. Although West was proud of her literary achievements, the novelization of *Diamond Lil* in 1932 warrants only a footnote in her autobiography (West, *Goodness* 115).
  2. West was not keen to share the credit or the limelight. *Diamond Lil* is partly based on a 1915 play called *Chatham Square* written by Mark Linder, the brother of vaudeville agent Jack Linder (Leider 188). West rewrote the play extensively and Linder was given a fifty percent financial share in the original stage production. Linder sued, claiming he deserved more of a share of the considerable profits, but the case was later thrown out of court (Leider 194).
  3. West actually references the book directly when Chick Clark, Lil's incarcerated former lover, hears that Lil now has enough diamonds to mount a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.