

Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America

Cultural Consumption, Conspicuous and Otherwise

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"Everybody wanted culture in the same way that a few years earlier everybody wanted sewing machines," recalled writer Mary Austin of her youth in the town of Carlinville, Illinois, in the late 1870s. Culture "by this time . . . meant for one thing, more than another, the studious reading of books." Writing in a Veblenesque vein in the 1920s, when deriding the bourgeoisie was an almost necessary badge of intellectual seriousness, Austin made fun of her neighbors' "fetishistic use of books," the conspicuous parading of culture that prompted them to discuss and even quote books they had not read. For those seeking to "keep up," there was "a general consensus of opinion . . . that you did have to read to maintain your pretensions to culture." It was, she claimed, "the one item in which, without violating any principle of democracy, you could entertain the pleasant consciousness of being superior to your fellows."

Austin knew whereof she spoke: she had been as eager a consumer as her neighbors and prided herself on coming from a family in which "more and better books were read than was usual." Her autobiography records her encounters with print in loving detail: learning her ABCs; the sequence of childhood and adolescent reading (and resulting conflicts with her mother); and a mystical experience with a geology text from the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle: reading Hugh Miller's *The Old Red Sandstone*, "the earth itself became transparent, molten, glowing."¹ In highlighting the vogue for cultural consumption in middle America, Austin was delineating the strivings of the middle class to attain what Pierre Bourdieu has called "cultural nobility."² Her critique of her neighbors' affections signaled an elitist disdain for the parvenu, for those who could not master the basic "rules" of culture or distinguish the truly great works from those that merely aspired to be. As a successful writer, Austin looked back (and down) on those who did not meet her high-culture precepts.

More recently, critics of the Frankfurt School and others of a mainly Marxist persuasion have contrasted the uses and aesthetic properties of "serious" cultural works with those that are mass produced. Unlike the former, these critics maintain, the popular and formulaic genres that dominate mass culture reduce the reader (or viewer) to receiving previously encoded messages, that is to passivity. In a subtle analysis of the defects of this analysis, Janice Radway reminds us that consuming originally meant "burning up, wasting, destroying" by natural forces such as fire: "The point in extending its use to the process of purchase was to suggest that in personal consumption, one used up an object fully, thus exhausting its exchangeable value." Viewing cultural consumption as a wasting process also suggests that the act of reading is ephemeral, nonproductive, even self-destructive. The use of food metaphors carries similar negative connotations: the "predigested" "pap" of mass culture is insubstantial and un nourishing. Radway suggests that in its three metaphorical constructions—as purchasing, wasting, and eating—the consumption metaphor has been employed to suggest invidious distinctions between "mass" and "high" culture and to establish hierarchies among types and uses of artistic products. Each of the constructions figures the reader (or viewer) as a passive bystander, without personal agency.³

The persistently negative evaluation of cultural consumption derives in part from its association with leisure, that is with the "non-productive," hence self-indulgent, use of time. In an influential interpretation of American literary culture, Ann Douglas has argued that an alliance between ministers and women writers moved literature out of the "serious" category into the debased realm of American consumer culture. In her view, an eighteenth-century minister who read "dense argumentative tracts . . . was producing, not consuming." By contrast, the new "light" literature—of which women were the "prime consumers"—was "an occupation for the unemployed, narcissistic self-education for those excluded from the harsh school of practical competition." This literature functioned "as a form of leisure, a complicated mass dream-life" rather than work, consumption rather than production; it was, consequently, less worthy. Douglas assumes that efforts to please a middle class (rather than elite) audience were similarly tainted.⁴

A different view emerges if one moves beyond the image of powerful cultural product and passive consumer—an image that posits the individual as a kind of *corpora rasa* on which culture imprints itself—and examines the cultural and personal uses of reading in a particular time and place. What Douglas considers a chapter in the history of debased taste may have been instead a chapter in expanding access to culture that brought with it new consumers and new opportunities for self-creation.⁵

Recent approaches to the study of consumption allow for Hvelter conceptualization of its role in the shaping of identity. Anthropologist Grant

McCracken defines consumption as "the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used." Maintaining that consumer goods have more than utilitarian significance, he emphasizes "their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning." Consumers, in this view, are engaged in a "cultural project" . . . the purpose of which is to complete the self.⁸ If this observation applies to oriental rugs and refrigerators, it is even more true of reading; an activity charged with intense symbolic meaning. Reading, particularly what has been called "deep reading," involves much more than the ability to decipher the little black marks on the page.⁹ It is a complex process that can go to the very heart of who an individual is or wants to become. McCracken's approach has the added virtue of bringing Culture in its aesthetic meaning under the rubric of culture in its anthropological sense: "the ideas and activities with which we construe and construct our world."⁷ Reading—not only what, but how and with whom—can be crucial to the meanings with which individuals imbue their lives. Never more so than in the late nineteenth century.

This essay will examine the culture of reading that emerged in Victorian America and the ways it helped to shape the identity of a new, white middle class, presumably the "everybody" to whom Mary Austin referred.⁸ By "culture of reading," I mean an environment that fostered intense engagement with books and in which reading was esteemed as one of life's noblest endeavors. Some proficiency with letters was by then essential for employment in the new white-collar sector that historians agree was becoming the crucial dividing line between the middle and working classes.⁹ My concern here, however, is not with the acquisition of skills or formal education but with the cultural, class, and individual uses of reading. Although one is not what one reads any more than what one eats, reading and other forms of "cultural consumption" have played an important part in the creation of class, group, and individual identity.¹⁰

The bourgeois culture of reading aimed to mark off boundaries of respectability and taste, boundaries commonly thought to coincide with those of class. In these respects, the culture of reading was coercive in intent. But the diffusion of books that was so marked a feature of Victorian life, coupled with the high value then placed on reading, also provided opportunities for imaginative self-creation to men and women growing up in the middle class or aspiring to join it. If the culture of reading encouraged the demarcation of class boundaries, it also provided a means of crossing them.

The Expansion of Print Culture

Reading was the most pervasive form of cultural engagement in Victorian America. Unchallenged by cultural forms that dominated twentieth-century life—film, radio, and television—books, magazines, and

newspapers enjoyed wide popularity among the working as well as the middle classes.¹¹ Numerous paintings depicting scenes of reading attest to the iconic power of the activity as well as to changes in reading practices. As the century progressed, images of fathers reading aloud by the family fireplace gave way to more varied and freer scenes of reading, of women alone or in groups, not only in parlors but out-of-doors. "The New Novel," Winslow Homer's famous 1877 portrait of an absorbed young woman reading while stretched out dreamily on the grass exemplifies this shift.

Whether measured in terms of production, distribution, or consumption, books—as well as magazines and newspapers—were on the rise. Historian David D. Hall discerns a fundamental shift in reading patterns by the 1850s, a shift "from scarcity to abundance," from a landscape dominated by a few "steady sellers," including the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, psalmbooks, and sermons, to one of considerable variety. Those connected with the book industry commented on this expansion with awe as well as satisfaction. Children's book author Samuel Goodrich contrasted the present "era of literary affluence, almost amounting to surfeit" with the "poverty of books suited to children" in his youth. As "Peter Parley," he spoke with authority, claiming he had written or edited about 170 books with a combined sale of seven million copies.¹² Industrialization and mass production had come to printing.¹³

Improved distribution was critical to the growth of print culture. In a sprawling, expanding, and still overwhelmingly rural nation, "getting the books out" depended on improved communications. Perhaps most important, an expanding railroad network brought a steady supply of books to the hinterland.¹⁴ Eager to be part of a gentlemen's profession, publishers warned against selling literature and art as "common merchandise": "You cannot sell books together with a line of corsets and gloves" without creating a "bazaar-spirit."¹⁵ But books were sold like other products, in numerous places and by a variety of marketing schemes. In addition to urban bookstores, books could also be bought at trade and parcel sales, book fairs, and country stores. A range of titles, including *The English Version of the Polyglot Bible*, *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, and *The Underground Rail Road* (distributed by author-publisher William Still, a former slave), were sold through a vast subscription publishing network. And in the mail order catalogs that went to rural America, books were arrayed precisely like corsets and gloves. The Sears, Roebuck catalog of 1897 included twelve pages of book ads that offered prospective buyers volumes traditionally found in homes (Bibles, dictionaries, and encyclopedias), how-to manuals on recreation and letter-writing for a self-improving population, and both "popular" and "standard" works of literature.¹⁶

Rising literacy fueled the demand for books. By 1850, an estimated 90 percent of the adult white population, male and female, was literate.¹⁷ The expansion of public schooling, in addition to stimulating literacy, created a demand for schoolbooks, the largest publishing category before 1850.¹⁸ The American publishing industry took off, as new genres, including essays, history, travel, biography, and especially fiction, flourished; the pirating of foreign authors contributed mightily to this development prior to the conclusion of an international copyright agreement in 1891.¹⁹ Novels not only predominated among best-sellers but also constituted about two-thirds of the books borrowed from public libraries, a source of concern to librarians and others who viewed books as a means of uplift rather than entertainment.²⁰ Fiction was also available in the magazines and weekly papers that proliferated in the years after the Civil War.

Along with the increased quantity of merchandise, the growth of a potential audience, and the development of new and popular genres came a dramatic reduction in price. Book publishing was a highly competitive industry. "Dime novels" have attracted the most scholarly and antiquarian attention. But the dimes, which quickly became identified with the "blood and thunder" western, were part of a wave of paperback fiction that dated to the 1840s.²¹ In the 1870s and 1880s, a flood of publications collectively designated as "cheap books" became available at a cost of five, ten, and twenty cents. Cheap in price and often in paper and typography, "cheap library" series nevertheless included works that defy easy cultural labeling. Among the early issues of one of the best known, the Seaside Library—which published more than 1,250 titles between 1877 and 1889—were *The Mill on the Floss* and *Jane Eyre*, as well as novels by "The Duchess" and detective fiction by Emile Gaboriau. And in 1887 Lovell's Library included, in addition to racy items, more than thirty titles apiece by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin.²²

Reading and Victorian Middle-Class Culture

By 1870, then, there were numerous books to read and people to read them. Historians are on less certain terrain when they turn from production and distribution to the "consumption" of books. As we have seen, consumption has frequently been employed as a negative metaphor. Beyond this, the difficulties of systematic research and generalization about how people received or interpreted what they read and how reading shaped their lives are considerable.²³ By supplementing publication and distribution records with sources such as diaries, letters, commonplace books, and autobiographies, it is nevertheless possible to discern the importance of print culture in helping to shape the identity of an emerging middle class and its individual members, at least some of them.

Whether valued as precious objects, as conveyors of cultural status, or as wellsprings of personal meaning, books held a privileged place in the lives of broad sections of the Victorian middle class. Books—reading them, talking about them, sometimes owning them—became a marker of middle-class status, for some perhaps the critical marker. One might lose one's money but presumably not one's culture. In a world in flux, reading, the right reading, differentiated not only the middle from the lower classes but the genuinely cultured from the nouveaux riches.²⁴

The ability to pursue literary activities in a sustained way depended on the increase of leisure (though not of a leisured class) that also manifested itself in the new popularity of vacations and art.²⁵ In the case of reading, however, access must be differentiated from ownership: since books did not have to be owned to be enjoyed, reading depended less than other forms of cultural consumption on a rising standard of living. The available evidence suggests that few families who constituted the broad middle class, as distinct from the wealthiest segments, owned large numbers of books, certainly not enough to satisfy the needs of avid readers.²⁶

Despite the limited home supply, books and reading were associated with the gradual elaboration of the middle-class home that required discretionary income. The emergence of the middle-class domestic ideal, a family unit constituted around a male breadwinner, a housewife, and children freed from long hours of physical labor, made it possible for more people—in particular women and children—to devote time and energy to literary and aesthetic pursuits formerly the preserve of the rich.²⁷ Along with parlor organs, pianos, and chromolithographs, books became tokens of leisure and cultivation. They were nowhere more manifest than in the parlor, which, in Louise Stevenson's view, constituted the center of Victorian middle-class intellectual and moral life. The ubiquitous parlor table, complete with "a Bible, recent magazines, a carte-de-visite album, travel books, books of poetry, or a stereoscope and slides" exemplified the material side of that life.²⁸ The plaster casts of famous authors (Shakespeare, Milton) and scenes immortalized in literature (Miles Standish's courtship) that decorated parlors and the long-lasting popularity of the card game "Authors" further attest to the cultural resonance of literary references.²⁹

Books became symbols of the intangible cultural aspirations of the broad middle class. Belief in the power of print was almost unlimited in Victorian America. Schoolbooks, newspapers, children's literature, and religious tracts promoted reading as a means of building character, promoting economic success, and preventing crime.³⁰ The moral value attached to books in general rather than the traditional texts of Protestant culture was one of many signs that a reverence for culture was replacing an older religious sensibility. For a middle class moving away from a tightly bounded evangelical religion, Matthew Arnold's definition

of culture as "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world" offered values, certainties, and possibilities of transcendence once found in religion.³¹ Even traditional hostility to fiction had broken down in many quarters, as critics proclaimed the importance of imagination to moral appeal; some maintained that the novel had replaced the sermon as the principal shaper of character.³²

This "sacralizing of culture" was fundamental to Victorian middle-class life.³³ By the last third of the century, previously suspect forms of entertainment, such as the theater and even paintings and statues depicting the female nude, became acceptable as "art" to many who had shunned them in their evangelical days. A case in point is Harriet Beecher Stowe, daughter and sister of two of the nation's most illustrious preachers, whose father had forbidden all fiction except the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Recording the experiences of her first European trip in a travel book, she meditated freely on art and admitted a liking even for Rubens, despite her expectations to the contrary. She also wrote the text of *Woman in Sacred History* (1874), less a religious than an art book and one that depicted several scantily clad heroines.³⁴ The metamorphosis of her younger brother, Henry Ward Beecher, from a young hell-fire preacher into an apostle of culture is even more emblematic. Having condemned fiction, along with theater, gambling, and other temptations of modern life in his 1844 evangelical tract *Lectures to Young Men*, two decades later he wrote *Norwood*, a successful novel that first appeared in a story paper, still a suspect genre in some circles.³⁵

The growing respectability of fiction did not eliminate fears about its impact on youthful minds. Precisely because novels exercised such a powerful hold on people's imagination, they must be monitored, a task required as well by the profusion of books "flooding" the market. Good reading habits, like other virtues, began at home. Contemplating "Why Young People Read Trash," Charles Dudley Warner claimed that it was because their parents "either have not the habit of reading or they also read trash." The right parental influence could make even "dull boys read."³⁶

Since the pursuit of culture began at home, mothers had an important role in their children's literary education. Middle-class women often taught their children to read and set the cultural tone as well. Although fathers sometimes involved themselves with their children's education, under the prevailing gendered division of labor—at least at the level of prescription—women, generally thought to be more responsive to the spiritual appeal of culture than men, were figured as the preeminent "consumers" and purveyors of the arts. By the 1870s and 1880s, when many women sought cultural enrichment in study clubs and home-study programs like the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, they brought their new learning and

sometimes the books and magazines connected with it into their homes, as Mary Austin's mother did.³⁷ Men, however, were the principal buyers of books for home libraries, which, with their leather chairs, port, and cigars, often exuded the atmosphere of a men's club.

The process of cultural transmission started early, as parents inducted their children into a culture of reading designed to reinforce middle-class norms. Children were primed to revere literature in general and certain works in particular. As Henry Ward Beecher put it: "The child that grows up in the presence of books will feel their power almost before he is allowed to open them."³⁸ Gifts of books on birthdays and holidays or subscriptions to the new children's magazines that proliferated after the Civil War encouraged the reading habit.³⁹ From fairy tales and school stories, children went on to the "sacred" cultural texts. The Bible, often taught as literature rather than as the revealed word in the last third of the century, the ancient classics, and the "standard" works of English history and literature all counted in this category. Children sometimes received tangible rewards for performing assigned tasks well: Mary Austin collected five dollars from her grandfather as the first grandchild to read the Bible "*all through*."⁴⁰

Literary activities permeated middle-class homes. Families read aloud and played word games during long evenings at home. Children wrote poems for special occasions and performed prodigious feats of memory by reciting "miles" of poetry—Scott, Macaulay, Longfellow, and Tennyson, among others. They also produced homemade plays and newspapers, the latter either hand-lettered or printed on the toy press that was popular in the 1870s and 1880s.⁴¹ Though some of these literary activities derived from parental assignments, many took on a life of their own and became occasions for boisterous good times or intimate confessions. Girls and young women in particular developed their own reading cultures that provided refuge from the restrictions surrounding their lives. Altogether the collective and participatory nature of home-based literary activities encouraged young readers to become young writers; some even sent off their essays and poems to magazines, including prestigious publications like *Harper's Monthly*.

This kind of family reading culture was widely diffused in the United States in the late nineteenth century, in the Midwest as well as in the East, and among a small but important African American middle class. Given a certain level of education, access to it required perseverance rather than financial well-being. Two examples are suggestive.

Growing up in the frontier town of El Dorado, Kansas, in a family perpetually short of funds, William Allen White recorded his adventures with books in his autobiography. Of course there was the family Bible. His mother, the more cultured parent, owned several volumes of poetry,

including a two-volume edition of poems by the Tennyson brothers and compilations she bought from book agents, as well as a "file of the Seaside Library." His father's stock consisted of *Plutarch's Lives*, a book on horticulture, another on agriculture, a volume of political essays, and four daily newspapers. These holdings were not enough for White, who checked out books—especially the works of Mark Twain—from the El Dorado City Library (of which his mother was a founder), and traded books with friends. He also spent his nickels and dimes at bookstores and newsstands for boys' fiction he considered above the "mere vulgar" dime novels and later bought books in the "Red Line Poets" series from a mail-order dealer. Like many young men and women brought up in the bourgeois culture of reading, White aspired to a literary career and wrote poetry, "producing" as well as "consuming" literature. He became a journalist and editor whose influence extended far beyond his newspaper, the *Emporia Gazette*.⁴²

For African Americans, newly freed and struggling to become literate, growing up in a family with an assured reading culture was rarer than it was for those of European ancestry. But it was not unknown. James Weldon Johnson, whose father was a hotel headwaiter in Jacksonville, Florida, describes the family's reading and his evolving passion for books in much the way White does. His mother read books and stories to him from an early age, ranging from *David Copperfield* to *Handy Andy*; *a Tale of Irish Life*, while his father, who owned a copy of the ubiquitous *Plutarch* (bound in sheepskin), presented him with a "library" of books about "good little girls and good and bad little boys," which Johnson claimed were too simple for him even then, but which he still owned at the time he wrote his autobiography. Later a writer, lyricist, and executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Johnson went on to more Dickens and to Scott's novels and poetry, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Grimm's fairy tales, and works of lesser standing.⁴³

As middle-class childhood and youth lengthened—longer years at school, later marriages—parental concern about reading, as about other forms of leisure, grew. Eager to preserve children's "innocence," adults declared some reading off limits. Maintaining that "the fascinations of a bad man are less ensnaring than those of a bad book which is written with brilliancy and power," Yale professor Noah Porter insisted that books be selected "with a more jealous care than we choose our friends and intimates."⁴⁴

Parents evidently agreed, judging by their efforts to monitor their children's reading. Conflicts over reading were particularly acute during early adolescence, especially for girls who often read with great intensity at this time. Disturbed by her daughter's interest in "trashy" serial stories, Lucy Stone tried to curtail Alice Stone Blackwell's reading of the

New York Ledger, a weekly story paper, even though it had by then published Longfellow, Henry Ward Beecher, and other respected writers. Alice—whose diary is full of entries like "I felt that to wait till night for my *Ledger* meant insanity"—was outraged when her mother said she "never meant to let another [*Ledger*] come into the house . . . To stop me off right in the midst of Mark Heber's Luck! I straightway went off to bed mad, with tears in my eyes."⁴⁵ The mother of M. Carey Thomas, another ardent reader, tried to substitute books about religion for novels on visits to the Baltimore Mercantile Library and would not let her daughter read *Jane Eyre* until she turned fifteen.⁴⁶

Not all parents would have banned *Jane Eyre* (which young Carey finally read with parched throat and "cheeks fairly scorched"), but most would have excluded works they considered sexually suggestive or emotionally overwrought: that went without saying. Dime novels were a more frequent target. Here the issue may have been less overt sexuality than the freewheeling depictions of smoking, drinking, gambling, and the use of vulgar language—habits the middle class wanted their sons to avoid and to which they considered them susceptible. Robert Morss Lovett, later a professor of English, said of his youthful passion for reading Beadle half-dime novels, "such reading was a major vice . . . and could only be indulged out-of-doors or in school behind a geography." He classified boys' stories by Horatio Alger and "Oliver Optic" at a somewhat higher level because they avoided "actual crime as material," but his mother said of them anyway, "They will give you a false view of life." This, Lovett observed, was "exactly what I wanted."⁴⁷ Despite parental precautions, male and female autobiographers recall reading "forbidden" books and papers, including the notorious *Police Gazette*, which featured graphic crime stories; invariably they claimed they had been unharmed by their transgressions.⁴⁸

To Noah Porter, "cheap literature" not only stimulated the passions and taught "false" views of life (among them that people could become rich without hard work) but planted "the seeds of robbery and lust." Envisioning "scores, hundreds, thousands, myriads of readers," he even suggested that it was "almost no worse that a procession of harlots should walk the streets of every city or village" than to have such books and newspapers distributed across the land.⁴⁹ The hyperbolic language betrays deep-seated fears that middle-class youth would be contaminated by reading about behavior their elders associated with a degraded working class. The putative readers of cheap fiction and the working-class figures represented in it were alike to be avoided. According to Porter, cheap literature was (at best) "simply a reflex of the commonplace aims and the vulgar feelings of the mass of readers for whom [it was] written." Thus did Porter and other advice givers equate moral boundaries with class boundaries.⁵⁰

To suggest that reading was important in shaping middle-class identity in Victorian America is not to claim a fixed category of "middle-class reading" or that certain genres are read exclusively by a particular class. The relationship between class and cultural preferences is a subject of debate. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that literary taste, like other cultural preferences, is as much a "marker of class" as is food. Those who gravitate to "high culture" begin with more "cultural capital" from their families and acquire additional increments through education. Bourdieu underscores both the importance of "cultural competence" as a prerequisite for the enjoyment of particular types of work, and the correspondence between hierarchies of the arts and "a social hierarchy of consumers." Roger Chartier, on the other hand, warns against equating cultural levels with class: "It is pointless to try to identify popular culture by some supposedly specific distribution of cultural objects."⁵¹

In fact, we know much less about the relationship between reading and social class in nineteenth-century America than we do about the discourse of moralists on the subject. Material is particularly scarce about the U.S. working class, but it is likely that David Vincent's findings for England are applicable to some degree: that workers had less leisure time in which to read, less access to books at home and, in a more crowded home environment, less privacy for solitary reading than did members of the middle class. Despite such limitations, Vincent demonstrates the many ways in which print suffused workers' lives, on and off the job.⁵²

Anecdotal evidence suggests that cultural stratification was not so marked in the United States in the Victorian as in the modern and post-modern eras and that, despite middle-class efforts to establish class-based reading boundaries, there was considerable overlap in reading publics.⁵³ Just as Shakespeare was broadly popular among theatergoers, so working-class audiences in the United States and England favored Dickens and other critically approved writers.⁵⁴ The practice of serializing stories in newspapers, the most widely diffused form of print, encouraged such crossings; Lucy Larcom, a Lowell mill girl, read *The Old Curiosity Shop* in a Philadelphia paper. By twentieth-century standards, the works of "high culture" were found in unlikely places. A tourist observed in *Publishers' Weekly* in 1888: "The writer has traveled extensively in the United States, and has seen George Eliot, Carlyle, Scott, Victor Hugo, Emerson, Edwin Arnold, Homer, Goethe, Dante, and Shakespeare read in the backwoods of Arkansas and in the mining camps of Colorado, in the popular 10 or 20 cent editions." No doubt workers in such locations enjoyed dime novels and story papers as well.⁵⁵

A journal kept by Edward Jenner Carpenter in 1844-45, while serving as an apprentice cabinetmaker in Greenfield, Massachusetts, further suggests the difficulties of categorizing reading by class or assessing its relationship to individual advancement. Carpenter attended lyceum lectures

and debates at the Literary Club with his peers; he also read an assortment of newspapers and books, many of the latter borrowed from apprentice printers or his employer. His reading included temperance newspapers, stories, and at least one novel, *Easy Nat, or Boston Bars and Boston Boys*—all presumably in the self-improving category—and the recently published *The Mysteries of Paris* by Eugène Sue, a work he was "considerably taken up with," and one almost universally condemned as sensational and morally harmful by guardians of culture. Carpenter read numerous historical romances and other popular novels as well as a book about U.S. history and a geography text. His class status, like his reading, seems mixed. His father was a physician with a library of about 146 books, one-third of them medical, but Dr. Carpenter had little money to leave his eight children. Edward Carpenter later established a "periodical bookstore" and wholesale newspaper distribution business and served as town librarian of Brattleboro, Vermont, thus parlaying his youthful interest in reading into a career that placed him securely in the middle class.⁵⁶

Carpenter's story taps into another image of working-class reading, one quite distinct from Porter's assault on dime novels and their readers. However much they sought to protect middle-class children from the contaminating influence of "low" literature—and to keep it away from lower-class youth—proponents of reading could not deny that books could benefit anyone who took them seriously. This was a central component of the "ideology of reading." Drawing on a staple of American mythology, Lyman Abbott, editor of the *Christian Union*, proclaimed: "If you have but one room, and it is lighted by the great wood fire in the flanging fireplace, as Abraham Lincoln's was, do as Abraham Lincoln did: pick out one corner of your fireplace for a library, and use it." The image of honest Abe reading by the fire intimated not only that getting ahead was possible but that laboring over books was somehow crucial to the process.⁵⁷

This image dovetails with the passion for self-improvement that was so much a part of American cultural life in the mid to late nineteenth century. Calls for the "diffusion of knowledge" came from both the more and less well educated, the former seeking to dispense it, the latter to attain it. This they could do by attending lyceums and popular lectures, by reading "how to" books that disseminated "useful knowledge," and by individual and group forays in "self-culture."⁵⁸ In view of high literacy rates and the availability of public education, the reading potential of the working class was considerable. But access, companions, and personal inclination all played a part in determining what, how much, or even whether someone read. Carpenter may have devoted more time to books than many of his companions—he missed a political meeting to read—but his interest was not alien to them.

Accounts like Carpenter's are rare and his rise in status may have been as well, especially with the hardening of class lines after mid-century. Harvey Graff has argued that, "the literacy myth" notwithstanding, the ability to read and write did not enable many laborers to move up the class ladder. But the potential was there, as Carpenter's story suggests. Later in the century, Jack London, an ambitious outsider, tried to work his way into the middle class by a self-imposed course of reading; he found in literature validation for his ascent and emulated what he read.⁵⁹ An exemplary consumer of culture, he was engaged, in Grant McCracken's terms, in a "cultural project" . . . the purpose of which is to complete the self."

For African Americans especially, beset by severe discrimination and exclusion, self-culture was often a decisive means of compensating for limited educational opportunities. The life stories of novelist Charles W. Chesnut, journalist and crusading anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, and Anna Julia Cooper, who was born into slavery and went on to graduate from Oberlin College and, in her sixties, to attain a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne—all attest to the ways in which literary activities, sometimes undertaken privately, sometimes collectively in lyceums and study ventures, could contribute to successful re-envisioning of the self.⁶⁰

Reading as Appropriation: Gender, Class, and Culture

As we have seen, middle-class boys and girls were socialized to be culturally literate in the hope that they would become men and women of good "character." Parents and guardians of culture assumed that children would absorb traditional views on gender roles and on the "superiority" of the Euro-centric culture of their class.⁶¹ Many no doubt learned their lessons well. But reading is an activity that cuts two ways: given a "safe" book, there is no telling what a person may find there. As Roger Chartier observes, "reading is not simply submission to textual machinery"; his own work on French popular culture in the *ancien régime* has highlighted the "appropriation" of texts, the ways readers "use infinite numbers of subterfuges . . . to subvert the lessons imposed on them."⁶² How readers interpret or appropriate texts, and what these texts and the experience of reading itself mean to them, are not easy matters to discern.

Reading experiences are highly subjective: that is what makes them so interesting. To understand the significance of reading acts, of reading as a social practice, we must look to particular lives and the contexts of particular social settings. Here Janice Radway's analysis of the importance of the situational aspects of reading (what the act of reading itself meant beyond simply what was read) is of great importance.⁶³ What and how people read depends on numerous factors, among them social location—in particular

communities of readers, ranging from formally constituted groups and informal local networks that can be documented fairly precisely, to broader reading or "interpretive communities." The last have been defined by Radway as "collections of people who, by virtue of a common social position and demographic character, unconsciously share certain assumptions about reading as well as preferences for reading material."⁶⁴ Most often such wide-angle markers as race, class, and gender have been highlighted for study. But, as we have seen, we cannot assume that class divided readers and reading practices as if along a geological fault. In our present state of knowledge, closer attention to smaller social groupings may be more revealing. Such studies can help us discern greater overlap in reading patterns between men and women and between individuals of different ages than stereotypes would allow.⁶⁵

The blurring of boundaries between genre and class applies as well to gender.⁶⁶ Women were the principal readers of domestic fiction, but the importance of this reading in women's lives has been exaggerated. Evidence from diaries, letters, and a few secondary studies suggests that women read many genres, if they had a penchant for fiction, it was not exclusively of one kind. Initially read by adult women, domestic fiction after the Civil War appealed to adolescent girls, a straggle, according to Mary Austin, on the way to reading "Jane Eyre"—how you adored Rochester! and then you were at Jane Austen!⁶⁷ Women of the comfortable classes read—and were encouraged to read—a wide range of books, including history, biography, and the classics. Jane Addams's father even offered her "five cents a 'life' for each Plutarch here I could intelligently report to him, and twenty-five cents for every volume of Irving's *Life of Washington*."⁶⁸ With this sort of reading, even without such incentives there was plenty of room for blurring or ignoring traditional gender messages. Girls were also encouraged to recite, to write, and in some cases to publish, all acts of positive self-assertion. The importance of this early reading, particularly in the matter of self-creation, cannot be overestimated.

Growing up in a culture of reading where girls as well as boys were expected to have read certain books, it is not surprising that many white, middle- and upper-middle-class women found in reading a means of self-transformation that took them beyond traditional gender definitions. One of them was M. Carey Thomas, a passionate reader and seeker after culture from an early age. Like other girls, she read intensively during the years of latency and adolescence, the time when reading's influence is greatest.⁶⁹ In her early teens, Thomas engaged in imaginative feminist readings of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Crossing gender as well as intellectual boundaries and appropriating both works for her own purposes, she read herself as literary heroine and hero respectively. In her

early twenties, these ambitions were reinforced by members of a feminist literary circle who read and wrote together (and later engaged in joint philanthropic endeavors that included securing the admission of women to the Johns Hopkins Medical School). After earning a Ph.D. in philology from the University of Zurich, Thomas became president of Bryn Mawr College, where she fulfilled her longstanding goal of educating women up to their intellectual potential. Their interpretive strategies and social mode of reading helped women like Thomas first to imagine themselves as actors in the public sphere and then to carve out spaces there for themselves, as pioneers in education, the professions, and reform.⁷⁰

The ability of women like Thomas to read themselves into texts in empowering ways depended in part on their social location in the middle and upper-middle class, which, their gender notwithstanding, encouraged ideas of individualism. For women at this time, the importance of reading hinged as well on its central role in female friendship and intimacy. As was the case with Thomas and her circle, love, knowledge, self-improvement, and feminist politics were intricately connected: it was a powerful combination.

In view of reading's extraordinary capacity for opening up imaginative experience, the world of print may in fact have been one of the few places where people of different classes and culture could encounter one another across boundaries, boundaries of the imagination if no other. Reading was a means of extending horizons by learning about "others" as well as about self. For women of the comfortable classes, growing up in a society that sought to "protect" them from worldly knowledge, reading about those who were different offered a taste of the forbidden, their earliest association with people they would not normally encounter except perhaps as servants or Sunday school pupils. Analyzing the potential consequences of these encounters, Jane Addams maintained that because novels countenanced a "wide reading of human life," they enabled individuals to "find in ourselves a new affinity for all men" and perhaps, as in her own case, a commitment to "remedying . . . social ills."⁷¹

Addams's formulation overstates the ability of middle-class readers to "realize" the experiences of "others" and ignores the material basis of social ills. But it expresses her confidence in the possibilities of social solidarity based on the ability to cross class boundaries. These beliefs prompted the creation of Hull House as a place in the slums where educated people, mainly women, could live and put their "new affinity" for others to the test of action. Perhaps then it is not surprising that one of its first public activities was a reading party that began with George Eliot's *Romola*, a work full of personal meaning to Addams and Hull House cofounder Ellen Gates Starr. If Addams's insistence on bringing "high culture" to the slums seems unrealistic or coercive, a model of uplift rather than of self-development, culture

was in her view the most powerful tool and vision possessed by women of her class. Even as she rejected classifying people on the basis of their educational level—a view her teachers had propounded—she remained committed to the saving power of culture and to cultural exchange. For Addams, reading boundaries, like those of class, were permeable.⁷²

Ironically, many of the young working-class women Addams sought to influence were already embarking on their own cultural voyages. Just as Addams and her peers used reading to create their own identities, so many young working-class women looked to dance halls and movies for theirs.⁷³ It was a different culture than the one Addams would have chosen for them, but she was not insensitive to its appeal. In fact, the kind of bourgeois reading culture in which Addams had grown up was already diminishing in importance. According to Robert and Helen Lynd in their landmark study of a midwestern city, the importance of reading as a leisure activity declined between 1890 and 1930, for the middle as well as for the working class. More magazines entered people's homes during this period than previously.⁷⁴ But in many of them, particularly those targeted to women, became an ever more conspicuous feature, signaling a shift away from a culture of reading to one in which the acquisition of material goods acquired new significance.⁷⁵ By the early twentieth century, too, new forms of entertainment, especially the movies and the radio, had wide appeal. Henceforth these would rival and, for many, surpass the importance of reading as a means of self-definition.

Notes

I want to thank Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Joan Shelley Rubin, and members of my feminist writing group—Ann duCille, Joan Hedrick, Gertrude Hughes, Indira Kuramcheti, and Laura Wexler—for their spirited suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper, and Ann Morrissey for valuable research assistance.

1. Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon: Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), 100–102, 104.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 2.
3. Janice Radway, "Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor," *Book Research Quarterly* 2 (Fall 1986): 7–29.
4. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 7, 9.
5. Donald M. Scott, "Knowledge and the Marketplace," *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture*, ed. James Gilbert et al.

- (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 91-112, emphasizes the positive correlation between penetration of the lecture system by market forces and the expanding audience for "useful knowledge."
6. On "deep reading," see Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 280-94.
7. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), xi, 71, 88. See also the essays in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), and Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990).
8. An earlier version of this essay was prepared for a conference on "Constructing the Middle Class, Part II: Consumerism, Domesticity and Middle Class Identity," 15-17 Jan. 1993. It builds on my work on the Victorian culture of reading: "Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America," *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 201-25; "Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Renale Heroism," *American Quarterly* 45 (Mar. 1993): 73-103; and "Reading Little Women: The Many Lives of a Text," *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995), 245-66, 414-24. The examples here are drawn mainly from the period 1850-1890.
- On Victorian culture generally, see *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), especially Howe, "Victorian Culture in America," 3-28; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982); and Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (New York: Wayne, 1991).
9. Unless otherwise indicated, generalizations refer to the broad middle class. Defining class in the United States remains a vexed and vexing intellectual problem. In an important synthesis, Stuart M. Blumin views consumption as a major indicator of middle-class status, along with work, residential location, voluntary associations, and family organization and strategy; *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989). On the middle class, see Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976). See also Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), which examines family budgets that include expenditures for reading, and Dorothy S. Brady, "Consumption and the Style of Life," in Lance E. Davis et al., *American Economic Growth: An Economist's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 61-89.
10. See, for example, Benedict Anderson's important study of the ways in which print capitalism created "imagined" political communities in the form of nations.

Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983).

Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Stracino Zboray have recently explored the connections between reading and consumption, arguing, as does this essay, that despite the commodification of books, "many antebellum Americans imbued their books with a richness of meaning." See "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly* 48 (Dec. 1996): 587-622.

11. This essay will concentrate on books, the form of reading most closely associated with the middle class.
12. David D. Hall, "Introduction: The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850," *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William L. Joyce et al. (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 1-47; Goodrich quoted 1, 39. See also William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1989); Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989); and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Frigate People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).
13. For a thoughtful appraisal, see Ronald J. Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," *American Quarterly* 40 (Mar. 1988): 65-82.
14. Ronald J. Zboray, "The Transportation Revolution and Antebellum Book Distribution Reconsidered," *American Quarterly* 38 (Spring 1986): 52-71. Railroads were also distribution points for books and an important site of reading, inspiring the genre known as "railroad literature."
15. Quoted in Donald Sheehan, *This Was Publishing: A Chronicle of the Book Trade in the Gilded Age* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1952), 35-36.
16. On book distribution, see Michael Hokenberg, ed., *Getting the Books Out: Papers of the Chicago Conference on the Book in 19th-Century America* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1987), especially Michael Winship, "Getting the Books Out: Trade Sales, Parcel Sales, and Book Fairs in the Nineteenth-Century United States," 4-25, and Hakenberg, "The Subscription Publishing Network in Nineteenth-Century America," 45-75. On the distribution of consumer goods, see Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America," in *Consuming Visions*, 339-75, and Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), chaps. 4, 5.
17. Lee Solkow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 155, aggregate figures hide regional and other differences in literacy. See also Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987);

and Carl F. Kestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991).

18. Sheehan, *This Was Publishing*, 19. See also Michael Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 54-55.

19. For overviews, see John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972, 1975), and Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vols. 2 and 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938).

20. M. F. Sweetser, "What the People Read," *Hints for Home Reading: A Series of Chapters on Books and Their Use*, ed. Lyman Abbott (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1880), 7.

21. On dime novels, see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987).

22. On cheap books and libraries, see Raymond Howard Shove, *Cheap Book Production in the United States, 1870 to 1891* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Library, 1937), esp. 56-64, 74-82. See also Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *Publishers for Mass Entertainment in Nineteenth Century America* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980). The Seaside Library's inclusion of ads for British periodicals like *The Fortnightly Review* and *The Nineteenth Century* suggests a broad readership that included the upper-middle class.

23. Useful recent reviews of U.S. scholarship on reading are David D. Hall, "Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103, pt. 2 (1994): 337-57; Janice Radway, "Beyond Mary Bailey and Old Maid Librarians: Reimagining Readers and Rethinking Reading," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 35 (Fall 1994): 1-21; and Carl F. Kestle, "The History of Readers," in Kestle et al., *Literacy in the United States*, 33-72.

I explore similar questions about reading practices in "The Power of Reading, 1830-1890: Ideologies and Practices in an 'Era of Literary Affluence,'" in *The Industrial Book, 1840-1860*, vol. 3, *A History of the Book in America* (Cambridge Univ. Press, forthcoming).

24. For a suggestive analysis of European middle-class efforts to draw cultural boundaries in ways that excluded the working class, see Jonas Frykman and Oyar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987).

25. Historians who study the relationship between consumption and class emphasize the higher disposable income of the middle class as one key to their greater expenditure on consumer items. In addition, Blumin finds that nineteenth-century middle-class families spent more for home furnishings and cultural artifacts like pianos than did artisans of similar means, a finding he relates to the more precarious economic position of the latter as well as to divergent views on the "proper

character . . . of the physical home"; *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, chap. 5, esp. 162-63. Analyzing late-nineteenth-century surveys conducted in Massachusetts, David Paul Nord found that while total family income affected workers' expenditures on reading, there were significant differences based on region, nationality, and religion; "Working-Class Readers: Family, Community, and Reading in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Communication Research* 13 (Apr. 1986): 156-81.

26. On book ownership, see Soltow and Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy*, 77-85. Home libraries were principally the preserve of the upper and upper-middle classes. As the material standards of life increased toward the end of the century, home decorating manuals claimed that libraries were essential. Martha Crabill McLaughery, "Household Art: Creating the Artistic Home, 1868-1893," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18 (Spring 1983): 17-18.

27. For a discussion of new views on leisure and children's books, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), chaps. 4, 5.

28. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront*, 2. See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 280-312; Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a Nineteenth-Century America: Chromolithography, 1840-1940* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1979), and Shirley Wajda, "A Room with a View: The Parlor Stereoscope, Comic Stereographs, and the Psyche Role of Play in Victorian America," *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover ([Rochester, N.Y.]: Strong Museum, 1992), 112-38.

29. Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger, *At Home with a Book: Reading in America, 1840-1940* (Rochester, N.Y.: Strong Museum, 1986). See also Zboray and Zboray, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods."

30. On the "ideology of literacy" and its familial foundation, see Soltow and Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy*, 58-88.

31. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869), viii.

32. Anthony Trollope cited by Sweetser, "What the People Read," 9. For a comparable shift in the visual arts, see Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 32.

33. By "sacralizing of culture" I mean the quasi-religious veneration of designated cultural products from whatever quarter; a usage that differs from that of Lawrence W. Levine in *Highroads/Lowroads: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988). Levine relates sacralization to the efforts of urban elites to refine and redefine cultural practices in ways that excluded nonelite audiences. Joan Shelley Rubin suggests that the "dispersal of culture" and accompanying "democratization of gentility" in the mid-nineteenth century was itself a process of "desacralization"; *The Making of Middle-Brow Culture* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press,

- 1992), 15-19.
34. Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), 2:385-88; Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 265-71; Douglas, *Reminiscation*, 295.
35. William G. McLoughlin, *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), esp. 20-24, 57-58, 119-33. McLoughlin goes so far as to claim that, by yoking romanticism with Christianity, *Norwood* marked the end of New England Calvinism.
36. Warner, "Why Young People Read Trash," and Joseph Cook, "How to Make Dull Boys Read," in Abbott, *Hints for Home Reading*, 15-22, 70-77. This gendered representation of reading was common: girls were typically depicted as eager readers.
37. See Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs, 1860-1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997); and Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991). Through their clubs and privately, women were also prominent patrons of culture and helped to establish traveling and public libraries to make literature available to a wider public.
38. Quoted in Noah Porter, *Books and Reading: or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (New York: Scribner's, 1870), 367.
39. A flourishing secular children's literature was an important new feature of middle-class life after the Civil War. It was the heyday of children's literary magazines, ranging from the handsomely illustrated *St. Nicholas* to the less highbrow and more popular *Youth's Companion*. The seriousness with which this literature was taken is suggested by the extensive reviews of children's books even in such "high culture" periodicals as the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Nation*. Richard L. Darling, *The Rise of Children's Book Reviewing in America, 1865-1881* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1968).
40. Austin, *Earth Horizon*, 67.
41. Paula Petrlik, "The Youngest Fourth Estate: The Novelty 'Toy Printing Press and Adolescence, 1870-1886,'" in *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, ed. Elliott West and Paula Petrlik (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992), 125-42. Girls seem to have had a particular fondness for reading, memorizing, and reciting poetry in the nineteenth-century United States.
42. *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 60, 81, 95.
43. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking Press, 1933), 11-14, 17.

44. Porter, *Books and Reading*, 8, 103. Porter's was one of the early "how-and-what-to-read" books, a genre that proliferated in the second half of the century; advice about reading had earlier appeared in general guides to conduct, many of them gender specific. For an analysis of the post-1860 literature, see Stevenson, *The Victorian Homophon*, 30-47.
45. Marlene Deathl Merrill, *Growing up in Boston's Gilded Age: The Journal of Alice Stone Blackwell, 1872-1874* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 67.
46. M. Carey Thomas Journal, 23 Feb. 1872, in *The Papers of M. Carey Thomas in the Bryn Mawr College Archives*, ed. Lucy Fisher West (Woodbridge, Conn.: Research Publications International, 1982), reel I. Thomas's father purportedly threw Byron's *Don Juan* in the fire, the proper place for "bad" books, according to several reading guides. See below for more on Thomas's reading.
47. Robert Morss Lovett, "A Boy's Reading Fifty Years Ago," *New Republic*, 48 (10 Nov. 1926): 334-36.
48. For an analysis of the sensational and erotic literature widely available at midcentury, see David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). On crime literature and the "dreadful pleasures" of reading it, see Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998).
49. Porter, *Books and Reading*, 98, 99. Newspapers, the genre most widely read by the working class, were frequent targets for critics like Porter.
50. Porter, *Books and Reading*, 97. On the seemingly endless debates on what books to exclude from libraries for moral, literary, or other reasons, see Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876-1900* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), and Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 67-101.
51. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1-2. Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France," in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (Berlin and New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 233.
52. *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).
53. For works that emphasize the stratification of reading audiences by social class, see Deming, *Mechanic Accents*, 4, and Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).
54. On the popularity of Shakespeare see Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 13-81. See also Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957).

55. Quoted in Madeleine B. Stern, "Dissemination of Popular Books in the Midwest and Far West during the Nineteenth Century," in Hacksenberg, *Getting the Books Out*, 89.

56. Christopher Clark, with the assistance of Donald M. Scott, "The Diary of an Apprentice Cabinetmaker: Edward Jenner Carpenter's 'Journal,' 1844-45," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 98, pt. 2 (1988): 303-94. See also Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*; 230-35, and Robert A. Gross, "The History of the Book: Research Trends and Source Materials," *Book* 31 (Nov. 1993): 3-7.

57. "Introduction," in Abbott, *Hints on Home Reading*, 1.

58. On "useful knowledge," see the wide-ranging and useful synthesis by Joseph F. Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750-1990* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994); on manners, see John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

59. Joan D. Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), 32-36.

60. See *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnut*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993); *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Miriam DeCosta Willis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); and Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981).

61. Sometimes the equations were explicit. Noah Porter introduced and concluded *Books and Reading* with the figure of a savage who would be able to comprehend all modern institutions (church, school) except the library (1-5, 377-78). The chief characteristic of the savage was thus illiteracy.

62. Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 156, and idem, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), viii. In the latter work, he argues that in reading there is always a "dialectic between imposition and appropriation."

63. See *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).

64. Janice Radway, "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading," *Daedalus* 113 (Summer 1984): 54. For other influential discussions of interpretive or reading communities, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), and Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 1-23.

65. See, for example, Amy M. Thomas, "Who Makes the Text?: The Production and Use of Literature in Antebellum America" (Ph.D. diss., Duke Univ., 1992), esp. 8-9, for an analysis of an informal reading network of men and women of various ages.

66. On women's reading in the antebellum period, see Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," in this volume, and Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), chap. 7. For the postbellum era, see Siechman, "Sense and Sensibility," "Reading and Ambition," and "Reading Little Women."

67. Austin, *Earth Horizon*, 105.

68. *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1960), 48-49. For "cross-over" reading in relation to gender, see also Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Political News and Female Readership in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Journalism History* 22 (Spring 1996): 2-14, and Christine Pawley, "What to Read and How to Read: The Social Infrastructure of Young People's Reading," *Osage*, Iowa, 1870 to 1900, *Library Quarterly* 68 (July 1998): 276-97.

69. The relationship of reading to age needs further study, in particular the impact of youthful reading on the formation of ego ideals. For an interesting formulation, see J. A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990). See also Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968). Since school attendance was less rigorously enforced in the nineteenth century and exposure to popular culture more limited, it is likely not only that opportunities for voluntary reading were greater then than now, but that it had a greater impact as well.

70. On Thomas's reading, see Siechman, "Reading and Ambition" and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Nous Autres": Reading, Passion, and the Creation of M. Carey Thomas," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 68-95.

71. Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), 8-9.

72. Not everyone read like Addams; nor did reading necessarily make women more liberal in their social outlook. M. Carey Thomas, an elitist from an early age, was both anti-Semantic and racist; see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

73. Kathy Peiss, *Cheer Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1986).

74. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956), 225-50.

75. Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), documents this shift in a variety of ways. See also Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).