

Print Media and the Representations of Women in the 1840s and 1850s in the U.S.

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Introduction

It may seem odd to start my paper on “print media” with an oil painting, but let me tell of the famous genre painting, *War News from Mexico* (1848) [Fig. 1], by Richard Caton Woodville, as it summarizes the topics of discussion of this paper. Woodville was an American painter who was born in 1825 and died in 1855. During his career, he drew so-called genre paintings, paintings of everyday life in the United States of this period, and was concerned mainly with political issues. (Turner 640-1)



[Figure 1]

Although this painting shows people's astonishment at hearing the news of the Mexican War (1846-1848), it gives us information about people's lives through the printing media in the United States in the 1840s (Pohl 201-2). A young man stands in the center of the picture holding a newspaper. He is wide-eyed with surprise, and perhaps reads the news aloud for people surrounding him. As the sign on the building above shows, the man and others are in front of the entrance of a hotel. However, another small sign on the pillar on the right side testifies that this hotel also functions as a Post Office. In this era, post offices were not necessarily located in an independent office. They sometimes were located in hotels or general stores. Daniel Howe says, "Newspapers, not personal letters, constituted the most important part of the mail carried by the Post Office. Printed matter made up the overwhelming bulk of the mail" (Howe 226-7). From the scene in the picture, we can learn that newspapers were delivered to the post office located in a hotel where people stayed. The newspaper might be delivered by the same coach or train which brought guests to the hotel. The news, soon after it arrived, was shared among guests and workers of the hotel, who probably brought the news back home or to the places that they went after the hotel. Thus, this picture tells us how the information was distributed through the media and people during this era.

More interestingly, the picture suggests the status of African Americans and women of the period. On the surface, people surround the man in order to listen to what he reads of the news, or they try to read the news from behind him. However, the space of the canvas is divided into two: white males are on the porch and between two pillars of the entrance; an African American father and his son are represented in the front, as well as a woman shown in the far right side of the picture, are outside the frame composed by the pillars and the porch (Pohl 202). The African American father sits on the steps of the porch and his child stands wearing shabby white clothes. A woman in the right side of the picture is represented very vaguely because she is inside the hotel. The faces of the woman and African Americans show their indifference or lack of understanding of the news, whereas white men show deep concern with it.

This painting exemplifies my research focus, because my work is concerned with the developments of the print media and its subsequent effects on how people distributed and acquired knowledge. This research will target newspapers, journals, and magazines published from 1840 to 1860.

I chose this period of time for two reasons. Firstly, print technologies were greatly developed in the 1840s. As I will show later, the ways in which publicized illustrations in periodicals and books before the 1840s are fundamentally different from those after 1840s.

Secondly, the contents of publications and their circulations, as well as the readers' ordinary lives, began to be affected by the Civil War in the 1860s. In order to include the examination of periodicals of the 1860s, the discussion of war related representations in publications is necessary. Doing it in this short essay is rather impossible.

Although literary descriptions are important sources of information, the main concern of this paper is the visual representations through which people gained information. As a result, my study is on publications such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Gleason's Pictorial Magazine*, and *Godey's Lady's Book*. These three periodicals were famous for their illustrations, and were some of the most popular and successful periodicals in the era.

The Development of Print Media

As Daniel Walker Howe showed in *What Hath God Wrought*, the national democracy proceeded through the innovations of transportation and communication (Howe 203-42). The development of print media is not only attributed to these innovations, but also it contributed to them. His book clarifies how print media were utilized in order to distribute thoughts, doctrines, or ideologies.

As we see in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, there were newspapers and periodicals even during the colonial period before the formation of the United States. However, artisans used their hands for typesetting such that the mass production of any publication was not easy until the pivotal type-casting machine was invented by David Bruce in the late 1830s. This machine not only operated much faster than hand typesetting, but also created decorative or ornamental type, which were impossible by hand typesetting. Moreover, early newspapers were not as visually entertaining as those published after 1830. Puritan tradition affected the scarceness of images in publications, at the latest, by the middle of the eighteenth century (Brown 9), and printing technologies were not properly developed enough to print and reproduce good illustrations. *A History of the Book in America* shows in detail how technologies related to the print media had developed during the period. Although the printing quality was not satisfactory, a cylinder press came into use for printing in the middle of 1820s. In 1847, the improved high-speed cylinder press could create 8,000 sheets per hour. It accelerated the speed of the distribution of information with cheap prices (Hall 42-3, 55).

The innovations of transportation also contributed to the success of the distribution of print publications. Improved transportation systems facilitated not only the delivery of a publication itself but also the delivery of paper. Paper is necessary for any type of publication. The raw

materials for papermaking also changed in the middle of nineteenth century. The shift from linen to cotton as the source of fiber for papermaking changed the quality of paper. With this, and developments in the field of chemistry, the variety of paper increased. Improved roads and trains also made people's access to the places where they could get print productions easily.

During the 1840s and 1850s, the movements for women's suffrage were brought forward as well as those for abolition. As we know, they materialized in the form of 300 people gathering at the convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. These movements are also indebted to the innovation both of communication and of transportation. The fast acquirement of fresh news gave knowledge of the world to women at home. Improved transport systems eased women's access to the outside world so that they could get to know people whom otherwise they would have never met (Weber 8-9).

In addition to this, women's participation in activities outside of the home, especially religious activities, were promoted by communication and transportation innovations. As Howe suggests, "the female evangelists took a preliminary but essential step in the direction of the next generation of women's-rights activists" (Howe 190). Because "middle-class women often had more time and energy to devote than their men," they easily joined in activities of church or of other social reform organizations (Howe 191). Women "get out of the house and into the larger world, taking responsibility and making decisions" (Howe 191). Through these activities, women could exchange ideas, knowledge, and information which might be necessary for their own innovation.

Illustrations of Women

However, in opposition to what is represented above we rarely see illustrations of a new woman with a promising attitude in mass print products of this era. According to Joshua Brown, images shown in women's print products functioned as media which "should instruct the household and sanctify the home." "The Scenes, places, and incidents represented were carefully chosen to provide 'moral scope and bearing' against the increasing depredation of the "industrial and commercial spirit." (Brown 10)

Godey's Lady's Magazine (former *Godey's Lady's Book*) is a representative of such a magazine, as it is describes, "the authoritative voice of American Victorianism for women of the emerging middle class" (Fackler 240).

As household economic production waned, middle class families also provided the essential markets for an expanding consumer culture. "Refinement" became a marker of bourgeois

respectability, not aristocratic gentility. Books and magazines, whether advice manual or the fashion plates in *Godey's Lady's Book*, taught these Americans how to comfort themselves in everything from childbearing to penmanship (Groves 33).

This magazine was a periodical seasonally published from 1837 to 1878 and was “the most popular women’s magazine in the mid-1800s” (Endres 114). It targeted middle-class women, and contains poetry, articles, fictions, as well as musical scores and designed patterns for laces. They include illustrations of the scenes for a poem or for a fiction on the same volume. Illustrated pages are separately printed from other parts of the volume. Pictures for “Dress for the Season” were printed on high quality paper and hand painted, such that they stood out the most. Probably because of the quality of paper, illustrations or binding, the price of *Godey's Lady's Magazine* was more expensive than other magazines, but its circulation was higher than other periodicals.



[Figure 2]

Sarah Hale, one of the coeditors of the magazine, advocated “Victorian ‘true womanhood’” (Fackler 241).

Hale’s ideal woman served her family. A woman’s domain was her home. From there a woman could be a helper to her husband, a guide to her children, and, perhaps most important, he moral center of the family (Endres 115).

Although there are studies that point to the educational purposes of a magazine for women with occupations as shown in *Godey's Ladies' Magazine*, the women represented are ideal figures of Victorian domesticity. The picture from the season's fashion pages in *Godey's Ladies Magazine* [Fig. 2] exemplifies all women have inverted triangle shaped upper bodies. Big skirts and loose-sleeved dresses are not appropriate for moving about in or working in society.

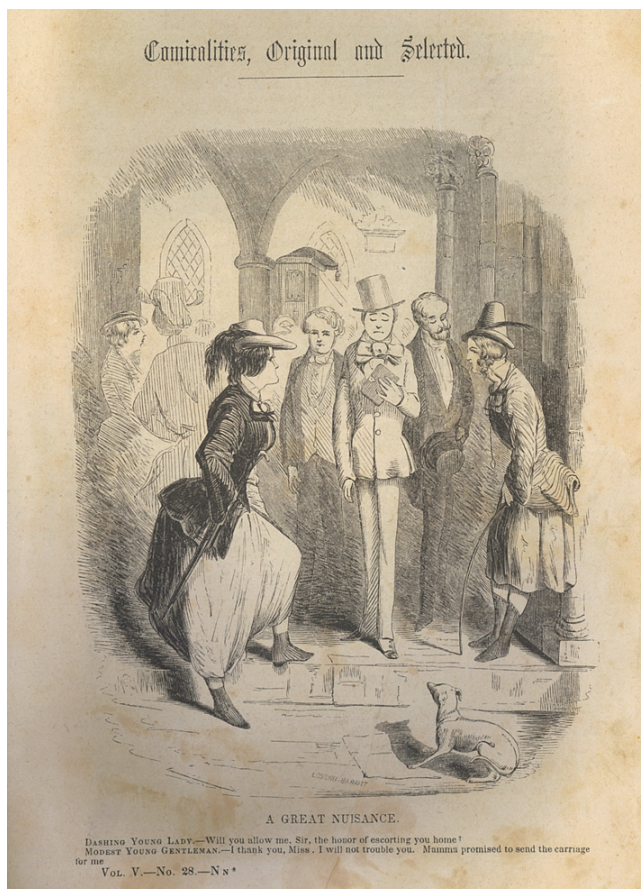
Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion was a popular periodical from 1851 to 1855, and it later became *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*. It was famous for illustrations of woodcut engravings, and reported the scenes of inside and outside of the United States (Stern 141). The illustration of a woman from this magazine [Fig. 3] also represents women whose waists are tightened by corsets and are as narrow as their necks.



[Figure 3]

Harper's New Monthly Magazine was started by Harper and Brothers in 1850. The original printing house started in 1817, and the firm became the biggest printing company in the world (Stern 151-3). This monthly periodical contains a novel series, fictions, articles of social and seasonal topics, editor's essays, and cartoons. Cartoons and important topic-related illustrations occupy one full page, whereas small illustrations are printed on the same page as the text.

New women first appeared in the section “Comicalities, Original and Selected” of *Harpers’ New Monthly Magazine* published in 1852. All women shown in these caricature pictures wear bloomer pants. They caricature new women in such a way that they are shown to begin to take off female gender roles and start behaving like men. In the first picture [Fig. 4], a woman poses as if she is a male, because she puts one foot on the platform where a man stands, and places her hand on the side of her waist while she is approaching him. She offered a man an escort to his home. However, the man declined her offer, saying that his mom “promised to send the carriage for” him. His mother may warn him not to follow anyone whom he does not know.



[Figure 4]

Compared to women shown in *Godey's Lady's Book*, it is clear that a new woman named "Strong Minded" in the second picture [Fig. 5] is intentionally represented as an ugly woman in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (the picture was originally published in *Punch*, a British magazine). The way she dresses and her clothes do not appear to be "refined," and she roughly puts her hair together. A woman with glasses was often caricatured in this era, and she is represented as an "educated" woman or "unmarried old woman." In this case, however, the woman in the picture is married, and tells her husband to "Get down such a novel. Do something rational." The last picture from the magazine [Fig. 6] also depicts women wearing bloomer pants (the name of the woman in the center is "Bloomer"). Here again, traditional gender roles of a man and woman are switched. Whereas the woman is proposing to a man, he talks to her in a way such that she needs to ask his mom's permission.



[Figure 5]



[Figure 6]

Conclusion

When we go back to the discussion of *War News from Mexico*, we can see the fact that both the African Americans and the woman situated outside the white male community, where politics and important matters were discussed. The African American father sits on the steps of the porch, and both the father and his child are clearly depicted in bright colors. In contrast, the woman is represented very vaguely because she is inside the hotel.

Although both the movements for women's rights and those for abolition were prompted during this period of time, women were not granted their rights to vote until 1920 whereas African American men were given such rights after the Civil War had ended. The representations of women were still influenced by the ideology of Victorian domesticity in the print media. If one considers the circulation of these periodicals as well as the speed of the distribution of publications, it is possible to see how effectively the images of women in these periodicals functioned to distribute the ideas of what women should and should not look like in the middle of 19th century America.

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