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## Reading Women: Did the periodical press influence the construct of 'the woman reader' in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?

**Alesha Bonser**

### **Abstract**

An analysis of the weekly periodical press, specifically the women's weekly magazine *Home Chat*, to demonstrate the emergence of the distinctive literary character of 'the woman reader' in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This article will argue that although publishers were ostensibly responding to the needs of the newly created female readership, the periodical press was simultaneously contributing to the construction of 'the woman reader' in its dissemination of gendered editorial and advertorial content. It will be argued that the content of these magazines, in combination with the marketing tactics employed by publishers themselves, led to the specific segregation of 'writing for women' which has ultimately resulted in the trivialisation of female readership.

### **Key Words**

Home Chat; Weekly Periodical; Woman Reader; Periodical Press.

## Introduction

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterised in British history as a time of radical social change. The educational legislation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century ensured state provision of elementary education to all children, regardless of class. It has been argued that this access to primary education, previously unavailable to those who could not afford it, was the key factor in the evolution of a predominantly literate population by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.1900 (Altick 1957, 355). This newly literate society with its seemingly 'new' reading tastes and habits stimulated the innovation of print culture. As contemporary novelist Walter Besant (1899, 30) exaggerated, "reading...[once] the amusement of the cultivated class, has now become the principal amusement of every class; all along the line from peer to chimney sweep".

Above all however, the democratisation of reading and literacy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century led to a fundamental shift: for the first time, *women* were to be identified as a central component of the reading public. This is because, following the Education Act of 1870, middle and working-class girls were granted access to education previously reserved for only the most privileged upper-class females. Again, there were new reading tastes and habits to consider. This had radical consequences for the publishing industry as the commercial potential of catering to a wholly *female* readership was relatively uncharted territory. Therefore, in order to provide its new mass reading public with this 'principal amusement', the publishing industry needed to disseminate cheaply produced print that was accessible and appealing to both men *and* women.

## The rise of the periodical press

Unsurprisingly, this evolution of a mass readership is closely associated with the rise of the periodical press in Britain. As Beetham (2006, 233) elucidates, periodicals "catered for hundreds of thousands of readers, rather than the tens, hundreds or possibly thousands of earlier decades". The enormous growth in the reading public was underpinned by technological advancements that meant that serial publications could be produced and sold more quickly and inexpensively than traditional bound volumes. Clearly then, the periodical press was a sign of the times, signifying the publishing industry's shift away from the dissemination of highbrow culture towards a more populist 'mass' media.

The expansion of the publishing industry into the periodical press was not without its criticism however. Indeed, it was viewed contemporarily as evidence of the degeneration of quality literature and, indeed, of the reader. The nature of the periodical as a medium meant that publishers employed certain journalistic devices such as shorter paragraphs, a more informal 'chatty' editorial tone and heavy use of illustration to fill its pages. Beetham

(234) argues that this change in journalistic and publication style “suggested to traditionalists that the new reading public was incapable of sustained concentration and was only interested in the sensational”. This allegation is certainly echoed by contemporary intellectual opinion of the same era (Cranfield 1978, 219). For example, Matthew Arnold (638), writing in 1887, dismisses the periodical as a “sensational” and “featherbrained” medium.

Nevertheless, the importance of the periodical medium for publishers catering for a female readership cannot be overestimated. Between 1880 and 1900 a total of 48 new periodical titles were launched exclusively for women (Allbrooke 1994, 60) reflecting, amongst other things, the enormous growth in female readership. However, although there was certainly more diversification and specialization of titles available to female readers, as Allbrooke significantly identifies, “the biggest expansion came in the middle market” (1994, 61). This expansion into the middle-class female market came specifically in the form of cheap women’s weekly periodicals such as Arthur Pearson’s *Home Notes* (1894-1958) and Lord Northcliffe’s *Forget-me-Not* (1891-1918) and *Home Chat* (1895-1959). These so-called “indispensable companions of middle-class women” (Allbrooke 1994,61) will be the main subject of analysis throughout the course of this article as we explore the role of these periodicals in the construction of ‘the woman reader’.

### **‘The woman reader’**

The reasons for this article’s focus on the periodical press - specifically the women’s weekly periodicals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century - are that these texts constitute a coherent genre with very distinct and recognisable characteristics. They thus form the ideal basis for the study of the publishing industry’s role in constructing the concept of ‘the woman reader’. However, before we consider the role of the publishing industry, it is first important to clarify what is meant or implied by the term: ‘the woman reader’. A “fashionable topic in feminist criticism” (Flint 1993, 16), Kate Flint dedicates an entire book to the study of the historical construction of ‘the woman reader’. Despite exploring in detail varying historical attitudes towards female readership, Flint also identifies some key prevailing themes that will be the key subjects for consideration in this article.

The most fundamental of these themes is the generalisation that female readers are “...passive, purely receptive individuals who can only consume the meanings embodied within cultural texts” (Radway 1984, 6). This approach to female readership, often associated with historical patriarchy, is well documented. The suggested implication is that the woman, untrained as she is in the techniques of literary analysis, is unable to decipher the true meaning of text. The woman is therefore susceptible to external, often dangerous,

influences as she is unable to critically interpret what she is reading as rationally as a man. This potential for corruption obviously had important political consequences for a patriarchal society. In particular, middle-class women, identified as “the protectors of morality” (Phegley 2004, 5), were worryingly vulnerable. However, while these political implications are somewhat irrelevant to this article, this idea of the female reader as a passive and receptive individual (with no powers of rational or critical evaluation) is key to our understanding.

Another important theme in the concept of ‘the woman reader’ is the idea of the woman as a simplistic and unsophisticated digester of texts, reading exclusively for trivial recreation. I believe that this characteristic of ‘the woman reader’ concept has led to the specific segregation of ‘writing for women’ which, in turn, has ultimately resulted in a long tradition of trivialisation and condescension towards female readership. Indeed, this phenomenon of ‘writing for women’ can still be observed in the continued publication of ‘chick lit’. Although it is a genre that is widely promoted and marketed as female literature for female readers, the ‘chick lit’ phenomenon is nevertheless constantly denigrated for its lack of literary merit, contributing to the continual trivialisation of women’s reading, and indeed, writing..

It is however important to note that in the same era, this idea of the unsophisticated and simplistic reader was also more generally applied to members of the working and lower classes, regardless of gender. It was widely assumed that those “...on the fringe of literacy wanted not so much to keep up with the world as to escape from it.” (Cranfield 1978, 170) Furthermore Northcliffe himself purportedly declared that the newly literate working classes had “...no interest in society, but they will read anything which is simple and sufficiently interesting” (Williams 1961, 174). However, it is surely significant that this characteristic of the simplistic reader is generally applied to ‘the woman reader’, regardless of background, whereas, in this instance, Northcliffe specifically reserves it for the working class male of limited education and means.

Having clarified the characteristics of ‘the woman reader’, we turn now to *Home Chat*, as a primary example of this distinct genre of women’s weekly periodicals. The reason for the close examination of *Home Chat* will be to ascertain its character and agenda and to explore the interaction between the editor/publisher and the reader. The study will be particularly focused on the use of paratextual devices by the publisher in order to determine the extent to which the periodical press influenced the construct of the middle-class ‘woman reader’ as identified above.

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### ***Home Chat***

Lord Northcliffe was a hugely influential publishing and newspaper magnate during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is largely remembered for his pioneering attitude to tabloid journalism and his successful establishment of the *Daily Mail* in 1896. Marketed as ‘the busy man’s daily journal’, the *Mail* provided an interesting and inexpensive newspaper to those readers who were previously reluctant or unable to purchase one. (Cranfield 1978, 220). However Northcliffe’s true innovation arguably lay with his shrewd recognition of the commercial potential of catering for a female readership. In addition to his insistent inclusion of domestic columns “about clothes and cookery” (Ferris 1971, 116) in the pages of his newspapers, Northcliffe also launched a series of magazines which began to carve out a mass women’s market. One of these was popular weekly magazine *Home Chat* where “advice about love, marriage and beauty was combined with sentimental fiction” (117) for the middle-class female readership. This magazine therefore acts as an ideal primary source for the consideration of the editorial and marketing tactics employed by publishers in order to attract and, as I will argue, to *define* ‘the woman reader’.

Initially, we can even claim that the choice of title *Home Chat* demonstrates the publisher’s inherent attempts to both attract and define its female readership. Unlike Northcliffe’s earlier women’s magazine *Forget-me-Not* which had a notably more abstract – though admittedly feminine – title, *Home Chat* explicitly identifies both its content and its reader. While the word ‘Home’ is not necessarily significant as women of this era were indeed confined to the private and domestic sphere, the use of the word ‘Chat’ is undeniably suggestive. As explained earlier, the word ‘Chat’ could summon undesirable and demeaning connotations with the new journalistic style employed in periodicals in order to entertain the ‘easily distracted’ new readership. At its very inception then, the publishers assigned the magazine with a title aligned with this simplistic style. When we consider the implications of this decision in the construction of the unsophisticated ‘woman reader’, the very title implies a magazine created for a readership unable to digest anything more refined than simple ‘chat’.

In order to adequately explore *Home Chat* I have chosen to focus on three separate issues from various points in the magazine’s history: 1895, 1916 and 1925. This will allow us to consider the magazine’s evolution throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and develop a coherent impression of its content and agenda.

The 1895 issue is from the year of the magazine’s launch and is important as an example of the publisher’s early efforts to attract and cultivate its female readership. On first glance of this issue, there can be little doubt of its intended audience. Indeed, the front cover seems

to be designed to fit the criteria of the ‘featherbrained’ periodical exactly. The cover, bordered in pink - the quintessential female colour – is also emblazoned with eye-catching straplines designed to encourage purchase. For example, *Home Chat* is subtitled as “A Weekly Magazine for the Home” and is advertised as containing “over 50 illustrations”. This is arguably yet another deliberate effort to entice a female readership. However, as heavy use of illustration was frequently associated with inattentive and unreceptive readers (Beetham 2006, 234), this explicit mention of illustration within the magazine is a marketing tactic that both attracts and simultaneously defines the women who purchase the magazine. Whether the female reader is indeed inattentive or unreceptive is never explored; the use of such marketing techniques ensures that, in purchasing and reading this magazine, she indirectly conforms to the simplistic stereotype of ‘the woman reader’.

The front cover of the 1895 issue also promotes the magazine as an affordable luxury, with value for money clearly an important consideration: “48 pages for 1d!” This identifies another significant subject for discussion: the pricing of the magazine. Undoubtedly, the publishers behind *Home Chat* were pricing to their market as the price needed to match the limited disposable income of middle-class married women. Even so, the initial price of the magazine at 1d (one penny) is nonetheless symbolic as it would have automatically drawn subtle comparison with the infamous ‘penny dreadfuls’ of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is certainly noteworthy as contemporary cultural commentators were notoriously disparaging of the consumption of penny dreadfuls considering it to be “a mindless activity, akin to spiritual and intellectual self-poisoning” (Halsey and Owens 2011, 5). Penny dreadfuls were regularly dismissed as unwholesome ‘trash’ for unsophisticated working-class readers. The specific pricing of *Home Chat* at 1d is therefore pertinent to the definition of the unsophisticated ‘woman reader’. As these so-called “penny rags for women” (Mitchell 1992, 110), received unwelcome comparison with the penny dreadfuls, a new genre of ‘trash’ was created, further trivialising the female readership.

One final element of these early front covers of *Home Chat* that deserves attention is the inclusion of the following text: “Founded by Alfred Harmsworth 1895”. Although Northcliffe’s name was subsequently dropped in 1901 (Ferris 1971, 117) it is notable that, for six years, this exclusively female magazine was framed by its association with its male creator. While this is neither surprising nor exceptional, it does substantiate this article, demonstrating that the men behind the rise of the periodical press were indeed explicitly responsible for identifying and classifying their female market.

There is further evidence of specifically targeted and trivialised ‘female’ subject matter in the editorial content of the magazine. For example, the contents page of the 1895 issue

introduces the “Editorial Chit Chat” page (29), the “Toilet Table” (35) beauty page, a recipe section that is marketed as “The Weekly Menu for Tired Housekeepers” (31) and, most significantly, the “Society Small Talk” (1) column. This highly illustrated feature, notably the first editorial page of the magazine, provides a summary of the latest court gossip. A similar feature is also an opening page of the 1916 issue, this time in the form of “Gold Spoon Babies” (2) with the slightly ironic subtitle “Children who are burdened with wealth beyond the dream of avarice”. Perhaps in the face of wartime austerity, this take on the original feature was a sign of change as British women were steadily granted a more active role in society.

Irony aside, features like this are still an undeniably popular fixture in modern women’s magazines, though the focus may have shifted from the aristocracy to celebrities. However, were gossip columns like this included by a male publisher hoping to attract an indeterminate female readership or were they indeed a reaction to popular demand? Regardless of the feature’s origins however, the continued decision to place this feature on the opening page was indeed a deliberate choice made by *Home Chat’s* publishing or editorial team. Again, it seems as if the publishers were catering for the paradigmatic ‘woman reader’ by fulfilling her desire for trivial and sensational entertainment. Notably, this gossipy ‘chat’ feature is more or less absent from men’s periodicals of the same era.

Another notable characteristic of *Home Chat* is the inclusion of serialised fiction. Serial romance fiction is included as a central feature in all three issues of the magazine. Tellingly, these stories are always situated near the centerfold of the magazine and are highly illustrated, revealing the publisher’s investment in their value. The 1928 issue’s serial romance “Clipped Wings: A Romance of Youth” (68) even includes a full double spread of colour illustrations (72-73). The content of the romance is also seemingly adapted to the appropriate historical context with the 1916 wartime issue’s romance title “Invalided Home” (27) depicting the consequences of an absent soldier’s reunion with his sweetheart.

These three romance serials all seem to adhere to Radway’s (1984, 104) informal formula for romance fiction: including stock characters (a naïve heroine and a brooding love interest) and a sensationalised plot involving (often inconceivable) twists of fate and excessive sentimentality. Unquestionably, the popularity of romance fiction prevails to this day, with the recent success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2012) demonstrably confirming public appetite for this genre of stock romance fiction. However, at the time of *Home Chat’s* launch, romance fiction was “routinely accused of plumbing the depths of penny dreadful awfulness” (Vaninskaya 2011, 72). Again, the conventional content of women’s weekly magazines is likened to the ‘trash’ genre of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The final element I wish to consider is the use of advertising. If, as Ferris states, for Northcliffe “editorial content was one side of the operation; advertising was the other” (1971, 71), the use of advertising in *Home Chat* should give us significant insight into the publisher’s attitude towards his female readership. Unsurprisingly, advertorial content of *Home Chat* is primarily geared towards the middle-class domestic readership. The back cover is typically adorned with advertisements such as “Selvyt Brand Polishing Cloths and Dusters” in the 1896 issue, “Nestle Milk Babies” in the 1916 issue which promotes the use of Nestle milk to strengthen future soldiers and nurses and a “Glitto Kills Grease!” full page advert on the opening page of the 1928 issue. These adverts all seem to reflect the publisher’s recognition of their domestic ‘woman reader’ whose primary concerns involve housekeeping and child rearing. However there is also implicit acknowledgement of the female as an impressionable and frivolous customer who could be easily persuaded to purchase the latest beauty or fashion trend. Such adverts include “How to improve your appearance: Lutas Leathley & Co’s New Fabric Patterns” (11) in the 1896 issue and the advert for a permanent cure for “unsightly red noses” (iii) in the 1916 issue. The copy for these adverts is written to encourage impulsive purchase based on the fulfillment of a specific need that is identified in the opening line. This evokes the concept of the passive and receptive ‘woman reader’ who is unable to recognise implicit textual meaning. The reader of *Home Chat* is encouraged to spontaneously respond to the adverts in an effort to remedy the requirement identified, whether that be to make her house “gleam with Glitto” (1928, 1) or to “restore the natural beauty of her skin” with Ilcma Cleansing Cream (1916, 35).

### **Afterword**

The rise of the periodical press in the early 20th century is almost synonymous with the creation of a mass reading culture in Britain. The identification of the middle-class female readership as a commercially viable market in particular led to fundamental changes to the publishing style of the era. Using *Home Chat* as a primary example of woman’s weekly periodicals of the early 20th century, we have established several characteristics which substantiate the argument that publishers simultaneously targeted and defined their new readers. The interplay between the content and paratextual devices of the magazine reflects the construct of ‘the woman reader’ as a passive and unsophisticated individual who reads solely for trivial gratification. However, the continued popularity and prevalence of these features make this argument a complex issue. It is difficult to separate the male publishers’ perception of their readership from the actual reading tastes of the women themselves. Nevertheless, we can certainly argue that despite this uncertainty, the weekly

periodical press had huge influence over the concept of 'the woman reader', cultivating attitudes that still prevail today.

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