
Sweeney Todd's Dreadfuls and Mass Readership

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Abstract

Throughout history, in all societies, the upper classes have had control in almost every aspect of everyday life, including print culture and reception. 19th century England was no stranger to this notion. Most pieces getting published were those wanted by the upper class, which was mostly due to monetary issues and the political climate. But the Education Act of 1880 upset that to a large extent, along with the production of serialised fiction. This article will examine how publishers used serialised fiction, like *A String of Pearls: A Romance*, in response to the Education Act and England's political climate, and prove how this was vital to changing mass readership and shifting the control high society has on the industry.

Keywords

Penny dreadfuls; Readership; Print culture; Lowbrow fiction; Highbrow fiction; Serialised fiction; Education Act of 1880.

Introduction

Late 19th century England found itself going through several changes. One of the largest shifts was within education. With the hope of maintaining the nation's global respect and standing, industrialists pushed a bill through parliament entitled the *1870 Education Act* (UK Parliament, 2017). The bill was the first step in ensuring that everyone was educated rather than just high society. This initial bill established a system of school boards throughout the country and was particularly important because it showed that parliament was committed to making a change to the education system.

A particularly important change was the *Education Act of 1880*. This required that children between the ages of 5 and 10 attend school. Because of this act, many more people across class lines became literate. As James Raven states in his article, "New Reading Histories, Print Culture and the Identification of Change: The Case of Eighteenth-Century England", in the 18th century there was a large class divide between the literate and illiterate, which greatly affected readership (1998, 287). This change meant that the working class became more literate and reached out for literature to read. But, it had to be cheap and appeal to their interests; that is where the penny dreadfuls came in.

As Springhall (1994a, 568) the penny dreadfuls became "the most alluring and low-priced form of escapist reading available to ordinary youth" upsetting the tradition of the upper classes being the only ones to enjoy reading as a whole, and *The String of Pearls: A Romance* was a large part of that.

The Literate Rich

High society had a tight grasp on the publishing industry in 19th century England. Michael Suarez recognises this fact in his essay: "The Production and Consumption of the Eighteenth-Century Poetic Miscellany." While it is focused on poetry, this piece explains the crowd that publishers focused on, which was the elite. He explains that when one examines the subscription list to this poetry, it is evident that the readers were "social and cultural elites and a more affluent clientele" (Suarez et al. 2003, 220).

As Karen O'Brien points out in "The History Market in Eighteenth-Century England" this was the same within the history market (O'Brien et al. 2003, 106). She says, "The staple audience for narrative histories remained, throughout this period, the elite". This shows that across multiple genres, the upper classes were the main readers of the time. In *The Book Trades*, James Raven goes on to explain that this was mainly the publishing industry's doing: "Elite support for specialist literature had been nurtured most recently by subscription collection and by specialist publishers directing their output to specific clients" (Raven et al. 2003, 12).

Not only does Raven's explanation show the power the elite had on 18th century England, but it also shows the importance of subscriptions within fiction. Suarez's look at the poetry subscription points this fact out, as well. Once again, the publishing industry was focusing on the upper classes and making it so the working class could not invest themselves in many works of literature, because they could not afford to subscribe to various works. The lack of education also made this difficult, hence the subsequent legislation being important to readership as a whole.

Mid to late 19th century brought about a change in this with the variety of laws put in place and the political climate. Not only does this include the education laws, but also the increase in industrialisation and production. After these laws and social changes came about and showed a difference in who was literate and who wanted to engage with fiction, publishers took advantage of the gap in the market and filled it with the penny dreadfuls. As Anna Vaninskaya (67) "publishers' target market, shifted squarely to lowerclass boys". She also reiterates the fact that the new education acts were the main contributors in this shift of production. Furthermore, she states that:

The belief that publishers rather than educational institutions held the key gave comfort to many other commentators over the next thirty years. Although remedies like the provision of good literature in the classroom received the obligatory nod, this school of thinking pinned its hopes primarily on the market. (Vaninskaya et al. 2011, 73)

This shows the importance that the penny dreadfuls had when it came to educating a class of people rather than just relying on the material the school boards provided. Furthermore, she explains, “the errand-boy had learned to read in the classroom, but its barren literary fare had left his appetite for fiction unsatisfied, and his imagination was starved by the fact-cramming exigencies of the three Rs system” (67). This is what made the penny dreadfuls so important to Victorian England.

Penny Dreadfuls and the Gothic Genre

Loosely defined, the idea of the penny dreadful is used to describe all depressing tales of horror and terror. But, arguably, this all-encompassing definition does the actual penny dreadfuls a disservice. An editor well versed in the world of horror, gothic, and thriller literature, Stefan Dziemianowicz examines the phenomenon that is the penny dreadful in his introduction for the compilation, *Penny Dreadfuls: Sensational Tales of Terror*. He narrows the definition to “[...] cheaply priced publications that provided thrilling popular fiction, primarily for the British working class” (2016, 7).

Anna Vaninskaya (2011) expands on this by explaining what sort of escape this genre provided for this newly educated class. She states: “Working-class pupils were not cured of their addiction to penny fiction by the salutary influence of a Public School environment: on the contrary, it was only through penny fiction that they gained access to it” (2011, 80). Ultimately, one could deduce that it is through the penny dreadfuls that the working class was able to receive the education that they needed to truly excel within the school system. While it wasn’t exactly highbrow fiction, it did administer a love for reading that would eventually lead to more sophisticated publications. Vaninskaya uses London hat-maker, Frederick Willis’ first-hand account to show how vital this was to the working class:

[they] encouraged and developed a love of reading that led [a boy] onwards and upwards on the fascinating path of literature. It was the beloved ‘bloods’ that first stimulated my love of reading, and from them I set out on the road to Shaw and Wells, Thackeray and Dickens, Fielding, Shakespeare and Chaucer. (2011, 68)

Even those from a more conservative nature recognised the impact of the penny dreadful by admitting, “if to acquire a taste for reading is a good thing by itself, it may be accounted something even that [children] should read ‘penny dreadfuls’” (68). Unfortunately, not all responded as favourably to the publications due to their gory, gothic nature.

The gothic genre produced many different types of work. There were stories of monsters, crime, and many other twisted themes that upset many critics. Vaninskaya (2011) explains this in the beginning of her essay:

In the quarterlies and reviews penny dreadfuls were condemned (and occasionally defended), blamed for every occurrence of juvenile crime, and subjected to disapproving sociological and literary analyses. The emphasis by the 1880s had, along with the publishers’ target market, shifted squarely to lowerclass boys. The act of reading penny literature was equated with unwholesome eating habits, with the consumption of ‘poison’ – as damaging to the mental constitution as a poor diet was to the physical. And the epidemic was one of national proportions. (Vaninskaya 2011, 67).

There were many who reacted poorly to the production of these papers, but as time progressed, it was clear that these were just used as an excuse. One of the experts on the penny dreadfuls, John Springhall (1994a, 568), is sure to point out that they were harmless “the profusion of melodramatic and sensational, but generally harmless, serial novels, published in instalment, periodical, and complete novel form that, from the 1860s onwards, found a new following among the increasingly literate young”. While many conservatives were opposed to these pieces, it is clear that they were useful to the economy of Victorian England.

Springhall continues his argument in *The Economic History Review* by examining the change in the industry. This article explores “the entrepreneurial standards debate by throwing light on a variety of competing individuals and small firms trading, before the arrival of corporate publishing giants, in cheap serial fiction and periodicals for the young” (1994a, 567). It

became cheaper to print, therefore works were cheaper to purchase, making it so the working class could submerge themselves in literature. Despite the elite looking down upon these publications, the clear monetary gain from increased readership made it so their criticism was null and void.

Affinity for Sweeney Todd

One of the main penny dreadfuls was *A String of Pearls: A Romance*, rumoured to be written by James Malcolm Rymer. This piece, written over eighteen weekly instalments, explores the life of Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. He is a barber who murders his customers and turns their remains into meat pies sold at his partner in crime, Mrs. Lovett's pie shop. The storyline is fascinating. In addition to this, Rymer's descriptions made it so the work was an effective piece when it came to escaping the difficulties of being a part of the lower class. The description of Sweeney Todd is a perfect example of the vivid imagery Rymer produced:

The barber himself was a long, low-jointed, ill-put-together sort of fellow, with an immense mouth, and such huge hands and feet that was, in his way, quite a natural curiosity; and, what was even more wonderful, considering his trade, there never was seen such a head of hair as Sweeney Todd's. (Dziemianowicz, S. and Rymer, J. 2016, 416)

While the critics of the time would not see this as good literature due to the content, Robin Glimour emphasizes the fear it instilled and melodramatic nature made it one that engaged its audience in her book, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (2013, 4). Springhall points out France Hitchman's claim that, "people who read such romances have ceased to take an interest in them since they found that the penny weeklies gave them three or four times as much matter of the same character for the same price" (Springhall 1994a, 568). On top of the plethora of content, as Tony Williams points out in his book, *The Representation of London in Regency and Victorian*

Drama (1821-1881), it is clear that it is an exaggerated representation of Victorian England, which results in a connection that cannot be ignored (2000, 6).

As one would expect, the working class struggled, often at the hand of the upper classes. Not only did they control material society, but they also affected intellectual creation, which was pointed out by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The German Ideology*:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (1976, 42)

This influence is a large reason as to why the penny dreadfuls and Sweeney Todd were such a phenomenon. They looked to the working class and responded to their society while providing fiction that was enchanting and applicable to the lower classes, which resulted in mass readership changing significantly.

The Results

When looking at the fact that readers surpass class lines today, it is clear that this shift in readership has occurred, but it is also clear when looking to the years following the phenomenon of the penny dreadfuls. Granted that there were multiple factors that lead to the expansion of the English novel, such as the spread of the English language due to colonisation, as John Ayto points out in *Twentieth century English – an overview* (2016). While acknowledging this fact, the rise of the gothic genre and the enjoyment of reading throughout Great Britain shows it goes beyond that.

As Leslie Howsam points out in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, it is slightly difficult to see the exact effect on readership due to lack of cataloguing, but looking at collectors' database and lending habits, such as library records, does help one examine

the reception (2016, 5). Howsam continues to explain that in order to have a thorough understanding of readership, one must understand that:

The book is a *cultural transaction*—a relationship of communication and exchange that operates within a culture and a political community...The book is an *experience*—the reader, the collector, and the scholar, in their different ways all react emotionally as well as intellectually to the books in their purview. (4–5)

Furthermore, one must understand that the book did and will continue to change. Leslie Howsam explains this concept more in her essay, “Thinking Through the History of the Book” (2016). She goes on to say that there is a change with each generation and with each new introduction of a certain type of book a “transition, permeation, rebirth, inheritance, and/or organic transformation” is had (2016, 4). Now that this is understood, it is necessary to examine the direct result that the penny dreadfuls had on readership in the coming years.

An effective example of this is Rupert Brooke and his poetry during the First World War. His poetry drew on real life experiences while embellishing them for entertainment, just as the penny dreadfuls did. As Alisa Miller points out in *Rupert Brooke and the Growth of Commercial Patriotism in Great Britain, 1914–1918* (2010), how important the reader’s role is in a variety of settings. She focuses on poet-soldier, Rupert Brooke, to analyse the political, literary, and social settings at the time while showing how vital it is to have transparency when producing literature to the masses. Miller’s analysis of Brooke’s poems and constructed mythologies opened a dialogue about the war for readers to engage others and the texts in which they were reading; newspapers did this particularly well (2010, 141). This candid reporting and writing was very rare pre-penny dreadfuls. In addition to that, all classes were reading Brooke’s works broadening readership and bring classes together.

This continues into the Second World War and Katie Halsey (Halsey et al. 2011) commented on this during an interview with George H. Doran. She explained how vital this type of fiction was in providing an escape for soldiers, particularly in the First World War. She also

leans on Angus Calder's account to show that not all of it was an escape and that it occurred across the classes (84).

The evidence of it transcending class lines is shown by C Hilliard (2013). These libraries were aimed at the working class. Once again, the gap in the market was being seen. Through these libraries, all were given access to literature. They also provided fiction that all would enjoy, such as cheap papers and magazines. In addition to this, the libraries provided "middlebrow" bestsellers for the lower classes to engage in. The book business was slowly opening itself to all readers and classes due to their openness to the variety of fiction that was finally being offered to them, and the penny dreadfuls made that very evident for all onlookers, creating a situation for increased monetary gain and readership.

The book industry was beginning to take the lower classes seriously. It took almost one hundred years following the publication of *A String of Pearls*, but the publishing industry was catching up and the target market was expanding and changing. The education acts in conjunction with the penny dreadfuls changed mass readership indefinitely. If one were to lean on Howsman's thoughts that it is constantly evolving, it is evident that the penny dreadfuls were a huge part in jumpstarting that evolution into something that would result in people of all gender, ages, economic standing, orientation, and more enjoying the written word, rather than just the elite.

Conclusion

Post 19th century England resulted in more readers. As Adrian Bingham (Bingham et al. 2011, 139) points out "surveys found that only a tenth [of adults] did not see a daily newspaper". This increased dramatically due to the penny dreadfuls and the ability to connect to a large audience through stories such as *A String of Pearls: A Romance*. As aforementioned, the working class found themselves reaching to literature that they would not have looked at otherwise if it weren't for the penny dreadfuls. Despite the criticism that accompanied the literature, it had great results both monetarily and with those engaging with the texts.

Anna Vaninskaya expands on this by explaining, “this type of identification may not have resulted in a ‘common schoolboy culture that transcended class’, as Rose opines, but it certainly proved that the reading habits condemned by critics could produce the most unexpected results” (Vaninskaya et al. 2011, 80). While these results had positive monetary consequences, they also changed readership significantly and provided a way for escape, as literature arguably should.

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