Victorian Sensations and Working-Class Readers

Abstract

In “The Unknown Public,” an essay published in *Household Words* in August 1858, Wilkie Collins expressed surprise at his discovery of a lower class reading public—“a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel-Journals.” This lower-class readership, in Collins’s thinking, was brought about by the ready availability of cheap reading materials, the penny-novel-Journals, at the time. Following Collins, this paper will examine working-class readers’ reading habits and their contribution to our understanding of the interplay of mass literacy and emotional entanglements in the Victorian period. It will investigate bourgeoning literacy among the lower class so as to address issues revolving around the material conditions of reading practices and the public realm of mass-circulation periodicals. Thus questions arise concerning: how did the age of bourgeoning literacy bring about the sentiments of reading among the working-class population? How did the sensation novel or penny journal produce affect in the worker-readers? And how did the sensational stories help cultivate working-class people’s taste for reading, bringing their emotions to a fever pitch? In response to these questions, this paper will consider how the working class becomes a more “thinking” class through the act of reading, whether in the workplace or at home. Attention will also be paid to the ways in which the worker reader’s emotions are produced, experienced and enacted during the process of engaged literary reading. Taken together, then, this paper is intended to create a middle ground for understanding how worker-readers become important participants in the consumption of literary texts as well as how their appetite for sensation helps shape the history of publishing and the development of literary culture.

**Keywords:** sensation novel, penny journal, working-class reader, emotion, feeling.

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