

News at the Hearth: A Drama of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America

THOMAS C. LEONARD

DO NOT read the newspapers,' Henry David Thoreau said, 'if you chance to live and move and have your being in that thin stratum in which the events which make the news transpire—thinner than the paper on which it is printed,—then these things will fill the world for you. . . .'¹ Circulation figures show that Americans did not take this advice. But what evidence is there for the psychological impact of news in print?

One way to study the Americans Thoreau worried about is to look at pictures of people burying their heads in the news. Iconography confers no power to read minds. But when pictures are moved to the center of historical writing they may show attitudes that have been harder to see in other sources. This is particularly true for the history of private life in the nineteenth century. A vast array of diaries, correspondence, and fiction throws light on the household. But these are not the orderly and accessible records that are available for writing the history of public institutions. Pictures can be guides through the labyrinth of evidence about everyday life.

1. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, eds. 14 vols. bound as 2 (New York, 1962), 2: 45.

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Iconography can be just as misleading as any other single type of evidence about the past. Consider the delusion that might be called the Peasant Fallacy, after Roger Chartier's demonstration that genre artists in France celebrated a communal reading of books by peasants in the eighteenth century that probably did not take place. The pictures reflected urban romanticism more than social habits in the countryside.² In looking into more comfortable households of nineteenth-century America, one must guard against a Parlor Fallacy. This consists, surely, of generalizing about a class of households from a few pictured instances and taking that class, then, as representative of a phantom, *the* American family. Pictures must be constantly tested against other evidence.

This said, pictures can illuminate social habits. A survey of about 100 illustrations of newspapers in the home, with some forty picturing readers (see Appendix), suggests the following:

- The iconography of news reading in the home was prescriptive; it marked out lines of social dominance that exaggerated social facts. Most artists missed the way weaker members of the family were challenging patriarchy or at least sharing access to print.
- These pictures influenced behavior as they suggested that males of every class appropriately displayed their command of news in private and in public.
- Scenes of news at the hearth in the nineteenth century increasingly showed people cut off from others by their newspaper. They offer a critique of the vanity of the reader. To judge by pictures, newspapers did 'fill the world for you,' as Thoreau feared. But what preoccupied news readers was themselves, not the seductive events that worried this transcendentalist.

Leisure with a newspaper at the hearth may seem a mundane pastime, but this was not so as American democracy took shape. The spread of papers to the home circle amazed European visitors, who were not yet accustomed to seeing news readers outside

2. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 218-28.



Fig. 1. Lilly Martin Spencer, *War Spirit at Home (Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg)*, 1866. Collection of the Newark Museum. Purchase 1944. Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund.

of public settings such as taverns and coffee houses. The parlor might explode with news, as Lilly Martin Spencer showed in *The War Spirit at Home* (1866) (fig. 1). This shows news of the Union victory at Vicksburg being read aloud to a Yankee family (Spencer's own). Mother and children celebrate while a perturbed white maid scowls at the domestic broadcast.³

The canvas raises a number of questions about the connections between status and information. Is the complaining servant a sign

3. Alexander Mackay, *The Western World, or Travels in the United States in 1846-47*, 3 vols. (London: R. Bentley, 1850), 3: 242. For a precedent of a mother taking charge of a text, see Nina Baym, 'At Home with History: History Books and Women's Sphere Before the Civil War,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 101 (1991): 287-88.

of family politics or of national politics? A maid in Spencer's home in the Northeast would have been assumed to be Irish, a group associated with draft riots and other signs of displeasure with the Union cause. Harriet Beecher Stowe noted in *Oldtown Folks* (1869) how a newspaper in the parlor was a handy text for indoctrinating the help. She wrote of a Tory family of the Revolutionary Era that used newspapers "to instruct the servants and put them on their guard." Stowe told how servants were called to hear newspaper accounts of the revolution in France, 'the massacres, mobbings, and outrages.' News was an instrument for 'ordering one's self lowly and reverently to one's betters,' Stowe said.⁴

This much is sure about Spencer's flamboyant canvas of nurturing with news: the scene squares with what we know about news reading. A great deal of news *was* read by adults to children, and by children to adults in the home.

Stephen Allen of New York was raised by his uncle during the Revolution, and the journalism in his guardian's home made a strong impression on the boy. Allen, not yet ten, was frequently asked to read aloud Tom Paine's columns. Allen recalled that he could not take in the meaning of the words he read out to his uncle, but that this man's comments on the passages stayed with him all his life, a life that propelled him far from his artisan beginnings as a sailmaker to become mayor of New York. What the mayor remembered was not Paine's worries over the 'sunshine patriot' and 'summer soldier.' The boy learned a reverence for the Continental army.⁵

Political indoctrination was not the primary function of news read with children. Still less was entertainment the single goal. The family itself was to be preserved by sharing news across gen-

4. Stowe herself used newspapers as boldly as any Tory, for an egalitarian purpose. After the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she favored her critics with *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this book she supplied clippings from more than 200 Southern papers of the outrages of a slave society, especially the splitting of families. Stowe thought that if Southern families could truly read their own newspapers, hearts would break. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oldtown Folks*, ed. Henry F. May (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 526-28.

5. Stephen Allen, 'The Memoirs of Stephen Allen (1765-1852),' ed. John C. Travis, typescript, New-York Historical Society.

erations. The *American Farmer* (1819–97) told parents to summon their children to read the paper aloud when the ‘long and tedious’ articles on agriculture arrived:

. . . contemplate the picture of innocence and happiness, represented by the honest husbandman, sitting with his helpmate after the toils of the day round the cheerful fire, in the midst of a groupe [sic] of happy, healthful children, each of whom reads alternatively that which improves them. . . .⁶

Here news reading appeared to be a medicine dispensed by loving parents, unpleasant at times but for everyone’s good.

Well then, where are the pictures that document this generational bonding around the hearth? I have not found them and I suspect they do not exist. There are a few children listening. John Magee painted a dutiful child in *Reading of an Official Dispatch (Mexican War News)* (c. 1849). Children sprawled across newsprint at the feet of their parents on the masthead of a Boston paper in 1840. But this seems to be it. How could genre artists fail to show a younger generation as eager readers at the hearth?

Surely not out of any convention that children were unworthy subjects. The reach of print across generations was a common detail in genre paintings of news reading in public by Richard Caton Woodville and William Sidney Mount. Charles B. King’s portrait of a child pretending to read a paper held upside down was an antebellum favorite. The young did have a place in the scenes of reading by the hearth—but they were accessories and interrupters, not welcomed parties to the reading. Obstreperous children were not the only members of the household who missed out on reading the news. Boarders were common figures at the nineteenth-century hearth, with a place in perhaps a third to half of all families at some point. The scramble in the household to see the paper made for lively scenes. Yet this too seems to have gone unpictured. Why this depopulation in art that pictured reading?⁷

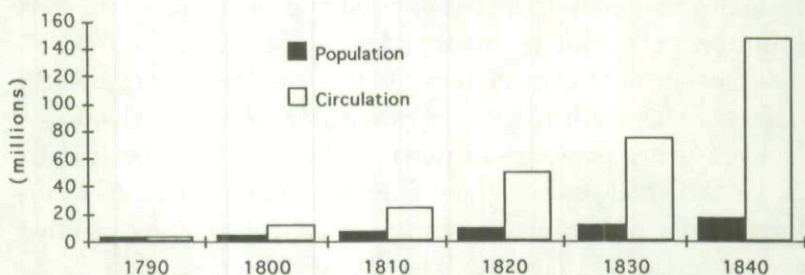
6. *American Farmer* 1 (1819): 265.

7. Tamara K. Hareven, ‘The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change,’ *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 105; Caleb Atwater, *Remarks Made on a Tour*

This was so, I believe, because the iconography of the home was toward the creation of sanctuary for the news reader. Self-absorption in the news grew through the nineteenth century. The sociable readers who populated genre scenes of taverns, post offices, and streets were rare in illustrations of news at the hearth. Pictures of households showed news becoming more exclusive, not inclusive.

The new scope of newspaper production in the nineteenth century helped insure more personal copies of the news. Census data leave no doubt about the explosion of circulation. The newspapers and magazines issued far outpaced population growth in the early Republic.

Newspaper Circulation and Population Growth,
United States, 1790–1840



SOURCE: adapted from Allan R. Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), Table 2.1.

Figures for the rest of the century (gathered by different methods) show the same pattern. Simply put, there were more publications to go around and more opportunity for a reader to have a private copy. Statistics tempt us to pin terms such as 'democratic' or 'egalitarian' onto reading. But these words miss much about the

to Prairie du Chien in 1829 (Columbus, Ohio: I. N. Whiting, 1831), pp. 23, 259–60; Ida M. Tarbell, *All In the Day's Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 13–14.

social transactions behind circulation. Pictures can help us see just how democratic the reading of news was.⁸

The notion that a strong grip on a newspaper put one person above another was the most common message about reading the news in illustrations of the American home. Almost always, it was the man of the house who had the newspaper. There seem to be no paintings of the American home before the end of the nineteenth century in which the female has news and the male does not. This is true for the mainstream of family portraiture, and also among naive painters who had not mastered (or did not care to follow) the conventions of representational art. Primitive painters, too, with their flat, angular figures put a newspaper out of woman's reach.

These American families look out on life from their parlor, anchored by dining table or hearth. In the early Republic these scenes spoke of a new concern for private living space. The home itself, as well as the room where the family gathered together, was seen as a refuge. Far more often than in the colonial era, the ideal home was isolated from other families, decorated to uplift its inhabitants, and cut off from the work place. The architecture and decor marked a new turning inward among American families.

Paintings documented features of material culture that say much about the demeanor of families reading the news. Hand work and reading went on together, usually near the hearth. This conventional view of the home owed something to sentiment, but just as much to the state of lighting and heating. Families had no choice but to gather around readers, for warmth and good light were in short supply. Only toward the end of the nineteenth century could family members be separate and comfortable in their homes at night.

At midcentury, furniture design itself began to distinguish the news reader from the non-reader. There was no strict determinism

8. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) is the most recent study to argue for a 'democratization of newspaper reading' (p. 96) without a full examination of the setting for these new texts.

to this, but in the full range of illustration in the Victorian era women often sit in chairs without arms. This left more room for knitting and for the petticoats and skirts of the day. Thus some women could not easily settle back; they were propelled forward to the hand work that filled so many of their hours in the home. As they looked out at the room, they looked up. Men's chairs were symbolically thrones. They were higher off the ground with taller backs than the chairs for women. Arm rests forced men back in the chair and positioned them to look down on people they addressed.⁹

In paintings of domestic scenes, newspapers received the attention and respect one might expect for guests. The paper established a hierarchical order and was sufficient reason for the dominant to ignore their inferiors. Usually the paper helped a man establish dominance but, as in Spencer's parlor, not always.

The paper was the high card, inevitably dealt to a revered figure. Eastman Johnson gave patriarchs newspapers to hold like shields as they sat in family portraits. These were formidable readers of the parlor. In *The Brown Family* (1869) the gentleman near the hearth is planted like an oak and only tips his paper slightly to acknowledge the child who reaches out to interrupt reading. The father in *The Hatch Family* (1871) sinks behind his newspaper and is oblivious to his fourteen relatives in the drawing room. Evidently the men who commissioned these paintings were pleased to be walled off by the news. Condescension had been a virtue in aristocratic societies and some of these patriarchs carried on this tradition as they lowered themselves to other members of the

9. On the transformation of homes see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream, A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), pp. 15, 77-78, 88-89; Sally Ann McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap. 5; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher, A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 166; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood, 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 57, 63-67. See Walter Buehr, *Home Sweet Home in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Crowell, 1965), pp. 87-94 on lighting. The influence of furniture design on female deportment has been noted by Katherine C. Grier, *Culture & Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930* (Rochester: Strong Museum, 1988), pp. 110-11, 206; and Harvey Green, with the assistance of Mary-Ellen Perry, *The Light of the Home, An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 97-98.

family. In a Currier & Ives lithograph of 1868 the gentleman by the hearth takes his newspaper out of the child's face and looks down benignly at the young questioner.

These sumptuous and mannered parlor scenes had an influence on Americans who lacked both affluence and domestic leisure. Lithographs and magazine illustrations spread the picture of the heads of households taking charge of the news. In the magazines designed for homemakers, these were scenes for emulation, not merely wonder. What one historian has called 'parlor consciousness' cut across class lines. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many rooms for ordinary citizens were modeled after the upper-class parlor. Railway cars, steamboats, hotel lobbies, even working class clubs, took on the appearance of nooks for the wealthy. These model parlors were pictured in advertisements and other promotional material. As the upper-class parlor diffused through the press, the male command of the newspaper was set before a large public as correct deportment. Social life for many was imitating the stage settings of a few.¹⁰

The drama of men taking charge of the paper sometimes called for a broadcast of the news. The Rev. William M. Baker noted these performances in telling how he passed the Civil War in Texas as a closet Unionist. (He hid the working manuscript in the ground and in his wife's clothing so that his Confederate neighbors would not see his 'photograph' of the rebel community.) As men read the news, Baker said, they cast a spell. This was memorialized in one of Thomas Nast's early drawings for *Harper's Weekly* (fig. 2). Baker said:

Never in his life could the Colonel read a paper, or any thing else, except aloud and very slowly. In consequence of this his wife managed to get her news without much trouble on her part. Every syllable was believed by the Colonel as he read it, and by his wife with a double faith, because of the fact that it came together from the lips and was backed by the comments and assurances of her husband. . . .¹¹

10. Grier, *Culture & Comfort*, see especially, pp. 19, 25-26, 39, 44 (see Appendix: 1882), 53, 66.

11. [William M. Baker] 'Inside, A Chronicle of Secession,' III, *Harper's Weekly* 10 (January 27, 1866): 54. Ibid. (January 20, 1866): 36-37. Oral transmission of the newspaper is

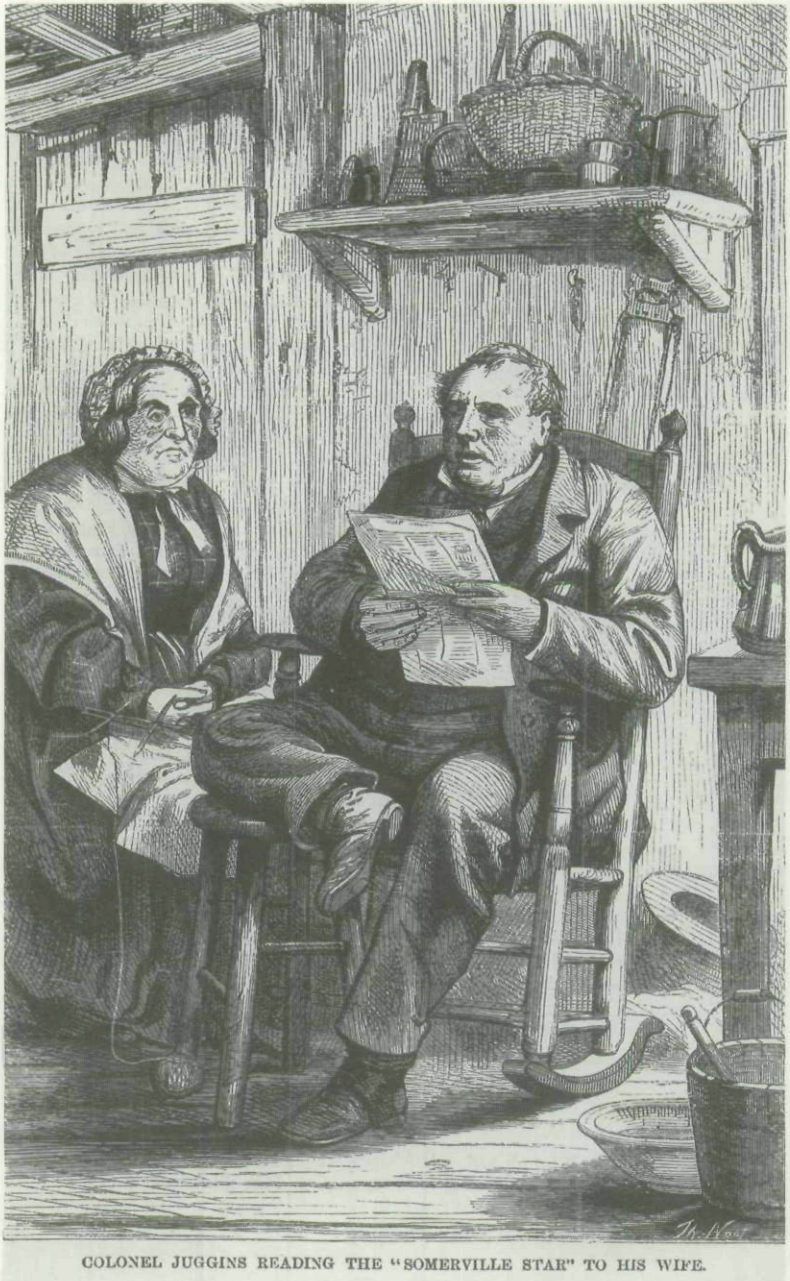


Fig. 2. Illustration by Thomas Nast for [William M. Baker], *Inside: A Chronicle of Secession* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866). Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

This was a man's story, but it squares with Caroline Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1838) a popular work pledged 'to present as exact a picture as possible of local habits and manners.' The spirited heroine of this story gave place to her husband in the parlor: 'If he was absorbed in reading, I sat quietly waiting the pause when I should be rewarded by the communication of ripe ideas.'¹² In 1851 a woman's magazine said that the American housewife was so busy that she could not seek knowledge herself and was fortunate if she had the energy to attend to her husband's reading of the news. Edward W. Bok, who made the *Ladies' Home Journal* the most successful magazine of the Victorian era, set his course on the observation that 'the American woman was not a newspaper reader.' This was an article of faith among top editors in the late nineteenth century, according to the women who asked them for jobs.¹³

suggested by women's choice of words in their letters and diaries at mid century, e.g. 'heard bad news in the paper.' See Marilyn Ferris Motz, *True Sisterhood: Michigan Women and Their Kin, 1820-1920* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 72-73.

12. Caroline H. Gilman, *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (New York: Harper, 1838), p. 297. William A. Alcott, *The Young Husband, or Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation* (New York: Arno Press, 1972) [1838] devoted a chapter to the male's heavy responsibility of selecting news for his family. Most antebellum papers did little to target women, but items that might interest them were common. See Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 153-54 and William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 221.

13. [Anon.] 'Every-day Life of Woman,' *Ladies' Repository* 11 (1851): 365-66 in *America's Families: A Documentary History*, Donald M. Scott and Bernard Wishy, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 265-66; Edward W. Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (New York: Scribner's, 1921), p. 104; Jane Grey Swisshelm, *Half a Century* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1880), p. 94; Florence Finch Kelly, *Flowing Stream, the Story of Fifty-Six years in American Newspaper Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1939), p. 477; and Rheta Childe Dorr, *A Woman of Fifty* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1924), pp. 92-93.

Ishbel Ross, *Ladies of the Press, The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider* (New York: Harper, 1936) has helped to implant the notion that 'housewives did not read the papers before 1870 and. . . [t]he modern woman who read her paper from the front page to the back does not inherit this taste from her grandmother' (p. 14). For testimony to the contrary see *Kentucke Gazette*, October 20, 1787 reprinted in *The Kentucky Press* 8 (1937): 2-3; *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago, Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne* (New York, Scribner's, 1887), p. 166; Elaine Forman Crane, ed. *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, 3 vols. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) 2: 895, 1016, 1113, 1489, 1498; Kelly, *Flowing Stream*, p. 69. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), chap. 7, has shown that many females read newspapers but concludes that few of these readers had wide interests

The notion that newspapers were male discourse had a powerful hold on journalists of Victorian America. The division of reading by gender was the rationale for allowing things to be said in a news column that could not be said in a magazine or novel. Vernacular language and harsh realities were ruled inappropriate for the genteel literature addressed to women. But in the newspaper, supposedly guarded by the male, straight talk about the unfolding of American life was allowed. This is one reason why many of the pioneer realists and naturalists in American letters found their first outlets in newspapers and prized the freedom they had in the daily paper. Pictures of news reading gave form to the male vision of female inattention: women made no show of attending to news, especially when men were on stage. Fathers and husbands held dramatic dominance with the newspaper. Women stepped out of character when they gripped a paper.

There was some truth to the conventional wisdom that news was safely in male hands. When women read aloud, either in mixed company or to one another, fiction seems to have been their overwhelming choice. (Females were urged to read histories, but often rejected the advice.) The solitary woman with a newspaper might take less interest than a man in the news of politics and business, of course, for she could do much less than a man with the knowledge she gained. This is best understood as a bargain between the sexes. By the middle of the nineteenth century the moral care of children was passed from fathers to mothers. By disclaiming their interest in public questions, many women gained unquestioned moral sway in the home. The mother achieved emotional bonds with children just as a mobile society threatened to strip her of daily contact with kin. Through family letters, women of the nineteenth century controlled a good part of the household's communication with the outside world. A patriarch settled in with his newspaper might act the part of family ruler, but the woman of

for 'most women . . . did not regard politics as women's concern and were content to be ignorant of public affairs' (p. 188).

the house controlled her own network in the outside world. Like other forms of femininity, the acceptance of males as conspicuous custodians of printed news shows care in choosing the battleground rather than weakness.¹⁴

But access to a paper and the leisure to read it was not a male prerogative, despite the stage settings of so many pictures. It was a myth that women did not see the crime news, political polemics, and local color that enlivened so many American papers. We know this from their diaries, their letters, and their memoirs. James Gordon Bennett saw this market in the 1830s when he congratulated himself on supplying his penny newspaper to the women of New York city. *Peterson's National Ladies Magazine* knew this in the 1850s when it sent out specimen copies to country editors, expecting new sales as women read about the magazine in their local papers. At this time a country editor in Iowa sang the praise of the inquiring but decorous female reader:

It is pleasant to sit with one's wife,
By the light of a brilliant taper,
While one's dear companion for life,
Looks over the family paper—
And now and then reads a song or story,
A marriage or death tragedy gory.

All the evidence that women did not read the news for themselves is really evidence about their acting, about the scenarios women

14. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 235–64; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South, Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 117–18; and Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 114. On the bargain that left men supreme in public life and women rulers of the home, see Sklar, *Katbarine Beecher*, pp. 113, 134–35. Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother, American Writing about Domesticity, 1830–1860* (New York: Institute for Research in History and Haworth Press, 1982) is the most comprehensive study; see especially pp. 45, 56. Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 175, and Motz, *True Sisterhood*, pp. 5, 53–81 have excellent discussions of women's control of family correspondence. For a review of the many lines of scholarship on gender roles in the family see Linda K. Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History,' *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 9–39 and Hareven, 'The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change,' p. 118.

followed so as not to upstage men. The iconography of reading the news documents a domestic drama in which many women assumed a role at variance with their real position in gaining information.¹⁵

The move towards equality with the newspaper is clear after midcentury. *Harper's Weekly* published its first picture of a woman reading a newspaper in 1865 (eight years after the founding of this illustrated magazine). The woman was Queen Victoria. But writers on the home suggested that sensible American women should take command of spreading news in their household. Lilly Martin Spencer's canvas was a sign of that assertiveness. Julia McNair Wright's *The Complete Home* (1879) advised mothers to have a member of their household read newspapers and magazines aloud so that a busy wife would be up to date. Other guides to behavior made news seem bliss. Women were not to worry about the time they spent keeping up 'with the truth of the present' in journalism. It was old fashioned to believe that unbound meant unworthy. Women were dared to read the news for themselves. 'A splendid feeling it is; like the swimmer's delight of riding forward on great waves in the sea,' one authority said.¹⁶

This pleasure seems intensely personal and women shown with

15. John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 21, 37; *Peterson's Ladies' National Magazine* 23 (1853): 99; *ibid.* 29 (1856): 95; the Editor's Table or Publisher's Corner of most issues reprinted praise of the magazine in local weeklies, addressed to the newspapers' women readers. *Demorest's Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (June 1870) also lured female readers with subscription discounts on leading political papers. John R. Adney, 'Pioneer Journalism in Iowa,' *Annals of Iowa* 38 (1967): 503.

On the general phenomenon of social dominance through the dramatization of leisure, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 101, 110-11. Rhys Isaac, 'Ethnographic Method in History: an Action Approach' updates this perspective; the essay has been reprinted in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: the Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) persuasively covers the ordering of behavior in this art.

16. *Harper's Weekly* 9 (August 12, 1865): 505; Julia McNair Wright, *The Complete Home: An Encyclopedia of Domestic Life and Affairs* (Philadelphia: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1879), p. 481, and *Gems of Deportment and Hints of Etiquette* (Chicago: Tyler & Co., 1881), p. 118. See also Maud C. Cooke, *Manual of Etiquette or Social Form, Manners and Customs of Correct Society* (Cincinnati: Lyons Brothers, 1896), p. 168; and Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966-68), 2: 47.

newspapers grow increasingly self-absorbed through the century. The woman in Ammi Phillips' portrait of 1817 holds out the masthead towards us and the reader meets our eyes. In contrast, Eastman Johnson showed a woman reading her paper in 1872 who did not engage the viewer in either way. That Lilly Martin Spencer child, nudged off the lap by the *New York Times*, was a sign that cherishing the news could be taken to dangerous extremes. Male readers too now seemed more oblivious to others, as in work by Eastman Johnson and John Harrison Mills. The news reader found sanctuary, not company.

The artist to push this image to its limit was William Harnett. He made news at the hearth into a solipsistic, fleeting pleasure. Between 1875 and 1890, Harnett painted at least sixty still lifes of daily papers. He invited the public to make sense of these canvases. 'I endeavor to make the composition tell a story,' he said in his only known interview.¹⁷ This has come to sound like a dare and an added deception. After all, Harnett gave titles to only two of the newspaper still lifes. The canvases have acquired titles that mix the prosaic with the antic: *New York Times*, November 9, 1879; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, March 2, 1880; *Staats-Zeitung and Pretzel* and *Lobster and the New York Herald*. Elegant and apparently impenetrable, Harnett's paintings of newspapers seem a trick played on society and on social historians (fig. 3).

Here it may seem that Thoreau's warning has been painted: 'these things will fill the world for you. . . .' A paper and the objects on a reading table have become the whole world. But Harnett, unlike Thoreau, does not exalt introspection over news reading. The painter refused to value any type of communication.

For Harnett, news was a male vanity. In the first place, he carried on the tradition of news as a sign of dominance and made newspaper reading into a man's business. Only his earliest three news-

17. Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt, William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 55, 163-87. See also *William M. Harnett*, Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, eds. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992).

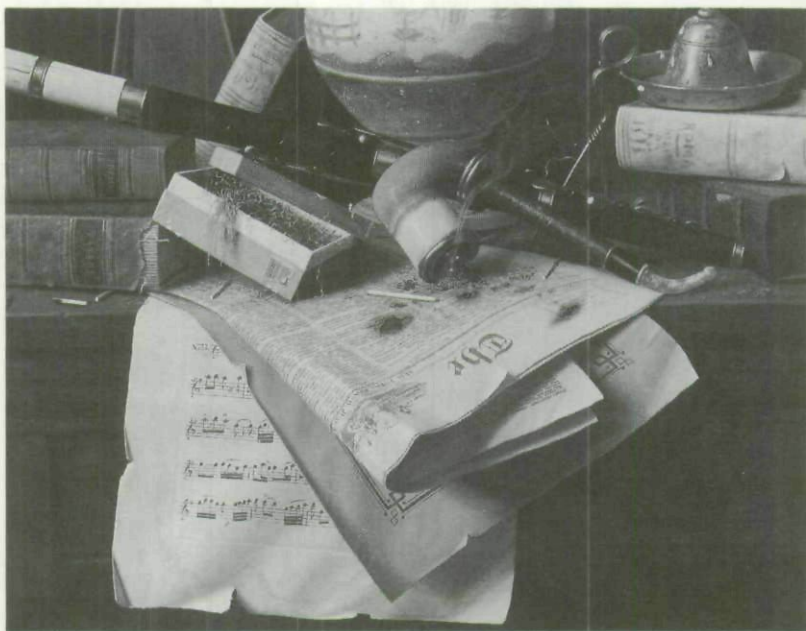


Fig. 3. William M. Harnett, *Emblems of Peace*, 1890. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Mass. Gift of Charles T. and Emilie Shean.

paper studies are tables at which a woman would have fit as appropriately as a man. The scores of newspaper canvases that followed marked the table off for a man in Victorian America. Pipes or cigars, a pocket knife, or a letter addressed to a man gave the scene male ownership. Harnett's news was not for women.¹⁸

Harnett turned this piece of sentiment into a subversion. Other still-life painters presented newspapers as part of comforting bachelor nooks. Not Harnett. He painted the vanity of male wishes. In the tradition of *vanitas* paintings, the pleasures of life are surrounded by symbols of transience. Harnett's inviting reading tables hold matches, ashes, and embers (some smoldering on

18. Harnett's typical subject matter has been called a bachelor's nook and he favored objects associated with men, as in his paintings of currency. But his gender code was strongest for news. When Harnett pictured books or musical instruments, for example, there is often no indication of the owner's sex.

the newsprint).¹⁹ His favorite object in the newspaper studies was the meerschaum pipe, which appears some three dozen times. The German word means 'sea foam': a clay easily broken. As with the pretzel and the lobster, one does not feel that many things in a Harnett painting are going to be around for long. The prominence of dated newspapers adds to this mood of the passing moment. Further, the newspaper is usually the only link to public affairs on a table filled with artifacts of private life. This one chance for communication is the false hope, for Harnett's newspapers make no sense. This master of trompe-l'oeil who delineated slivers of wood and fly specks, refused to make texts clear. Beyond the legible mastheads, his news columns are a gibberish of precise cross markings. He proclaimed, in effect, that one cannot know the world at large.²⁰

Harnett's life's work was the smashing of the neighborliness and civic-mindedness that had carried the newspaper into American art. The genre painters of the nineteenth century assumed that citizens read the news in company to pass judgment on public questions. American art had recorded deference but it had proclaimed participation. Harnett's work shifted the focus of artists to news taken in private and alone, away from others and divorced from public questions. His creation of a sanctum for news runs through the canvases of women reading by William Paxton and Mary Cassatt. Taken to its logical conclusion, this tradition ends with the self-absorbed commuters and apartment dwellers, hunched over their newspapers, painted by Reginald Marsh and Edward Hopper.

Social historians have shown us a transatlantic Victorian culture that attempted to make the home a 'fortress of privacy' in every social class. Flaubert sounded an alarm, 'You have to close your door and windows, curl up like a hedgehog, light a roaring fire in

19. Frankenstein, *After the Hunt*, nos. 21a, 21b, 77, and 117.

20. See Barbara S. Groseclose, 'Vanity and the Artist: Some Still-Life Paintings by William Michael Harnett,' *American Art Journal* 19 (1987): 51-59 and Chad Mandeles, 'William Michael Harnett's *The Old Cupboard Door* and the Tradition of *Vanitas*,' *ibid.* 18 (1986): 51-62.

your fireplace because it's cold, and pluck some great idea from your heart.' Or read. Near the hearth, a drama of self-absorption with the news played out in the new private spaces of American life. The iconography of reading tells us to attend to something other than the relentless march of circulation figures. The performances that separated one member of the household from another may be as important as the spread of news itself.²¹

The isolation of news readers is more than an intriguing iconographical tradition. The failure of American families to pass on the habit of reading newspapers to a younger generation has dogged the industry in the last third of the twentieth century. One reason that this demographic trend is poorly understood is because it stems from reading habits that historians have not unraveled: how people behave with texts and how setting may shade meaning. Victorian America is a good place to begin.²²

21. Michelle Perrot, ed., *A History of Private Life*, Vol. 4: *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. Phillippe Aries and Georges Duby, gen. eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 346, 356 and in general 'At Home.'

22. For skillful autopsies of reading habits with shorter historical views, see Leo Bogart, *Press and Public: Who Reads What, When, Where, and Why in American Newspapers*, 2nd ed. (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989) and *The American Media: Who Reads, Who Watches, Who Listens, Who Cares* (Washington, D.C.: Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, 1990) with press accounts of this survey such as *New York Times*, June 28, 1990. Thomas C. Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) discusses how political stories contributed to mass readership in the nineteenth century.

APPENDIX

Chronological List of
 Pictures of Newspaper Reading in Domestic Settings
 (a person is reading or has been interrupted)

- 1809-21 *The Return from the Market*. By John Lewis Krimmel. Reproduced in Milo M. Naeve, *John Lewis Krimmel: An Artist in Federal America* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1987), no. 29; see pp. 120-21 on engravings in circulation.
- 1817 c. *Lois Atherton Allerton*. Reproduced in *Ammi Phillips: Portrait Painter, 1788-1865* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1969), p. 30.
- 1824-30 c. *Grandfather's Hobby*. By Charles B. King. Two of three versions extant. Copied by Thomas Sully and this engraved and published in S. G. Goodrich, ed. *The Token: a Christmas and New Year's Present* (Boston: S. G. Goodrich, 1830). King and Sully versions reproduced in Andrew J. Cosentino, *The Paintings of Charles B. King* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), p. 94.
- 1836 *The Family at Home*. By H. Knight. Reproduced in Edgar W. Garbisch, *101 Masterpieces of American Primitive Paintings* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1962), Plate 57.
- 1837 *The York Family at Home*. Reproduced in Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), Plate 30.
- 1837 *The Tilton Family*. By Joseph H. Davis. Reproduced in Edgar de N. Mayhew and Minor Myers, Jr., *Documentary History of American Interiors* (New York: Scribner's, 1980), Figure 57.
- 1839 *The Fruits of Amalgamation*. Lithograph published by John Childs. Reproduced in David Grimsted, ed. *Notions of the Americans, 1820-1860* (New York: G. Braziller, 1970), p. 104.
- 1840 *Family Scene with Newspaper*. Albert Alden Proof Book. Used in masthead of *Boston Notion*, December 19, 1840. Engraved by David C. Johnson. Reproduced in William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 117.

- 1840 c. *The Hollingsworth Family*. By G. Hollingsworth. Reproduced in *American Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1969), Plate 221.
- 1842 c. *The Bashful Cousin*. By Francis W. Edmonds. Reproduced in H. Nichols B. Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds: American Master in the Dutch Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), Plate 2.
- 1844 *Single*. Lithograph published by J. Baillie. Library of Congress copy negative LC-USZ62, #17647.
- 1845 c. *David Crane and Catharine Stolp Crane*. By Sheldon Peck. Reproduced in Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, eds., *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980), p. 138.
- 1846-47 *John J. Wagner Family*. By Sheldon Peck. Reproduced in *Antiques* 108 (1975): 284.
- 1849 c. *Reading of an Official Dispatch (Mexican War News)*. By John L. Magee. Reproduced in Hermann W. Williams, *Mirror to the American Past* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), Plate 63.
- 1852 Frontispiece household scene in Caroline M. Kirkland, *The Evening Book* (New York: Scribner's, 1852).
- 1853 *The Winter Breakfast*. By Sir David Wilkie. Reproduced in *Peterson's Monthly Magazine* 24 (1853): 262.
- 1854 *Arguing the Point, Settling the Presidency*. By Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait. Reproduced in Williams, *Mirror to the American Past*, Plate 99.
- 1857 c. *Portrait of William Wallace Warfield and Son*. By Robert Loftin Newman. Reproduced in Marchal E. Landgren, *Robert Loftin Newman, 1827-1912* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), Plate 11.
- 1859 *Interior of a State-Room*. *Harper's Weekly* 3 (September 24, 1859): 620.
- 1860 c. *Grandpa's Prodigies*. By Lilly Martin Spencer. Reproduced in Robin Bolton-Smith, *Lilly Martin Spencer, 1822-1902: The Joys of Sentiment* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), Figure 36.

- 1861 *Hard Times (Out of Work and Nothing to Do)*. By Francis W. Edmonds. Reproduced in Clark, *Edmonds*, Figure 105.
- 1861 *Thoughts of Liberia: Emancipation*. By Edwin White. Reproduced in Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: the Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), figure 33.
- 1863 *Evening Newspaper*. By Eastman Johnson. Reproduced in Patricia Hill, *Eastman Johnson* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1972), p. 60.
- 1864 'The First of April, 1864,' by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly* 8 (April 2, 1864): 216-17.
- 1864 'The Press in the Field—Newspapers at Home,' by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly* 8 (April 30, 1864): 280-81.
- 1865 'The Great Labor Question from a Southern Point of View,' *Harper's Weekly* 9 (July 29, 1865): 465.
- 1865 'The Atlantic Telegraph Cable,' by E. Forbes, *Harper's Weekly* 9 (August 12, 1865): 504-5. Republished *ibid.* 10 (August 11, 1866): 504-5.
- 1865 'Our Watering-Places,' by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly* 9 (August 26, 1865): 536.
- 1866 *Colonel Juggins Reading the 'Summerville Star' to His Wife*. By Thomas Nast. Published in *Harper's Weekly* 10 (February 3, 1866): 69 and in [William M. Baker], *Inside: A Chronicle of Secession* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866).
- 1866 *The War Spirit at Home*. By Lilly Martin Spencer. Reproduced in *American Heritage* 23 (Oct.-Nov. 1982): 23.
- 1866 'Snuffing the Candle for Granddad,' *Harper's Weekly* 10 (March 17, 1866): 161.
- 1868 *The Four Seasons of Life: Old Age*. Lithograph by Currier & Ives. Reproduced in Harold L. Peterson, *Americans at Home . . .* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), Plate 131.
- 1869 *The Morning Paper*. By John F. Weir. Reproduced in Kathleen Luhrs, ed., *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York: The Museum in association with Princeton University Press, 1980), 2:111.

- 1869 *The Panic of 1869*. Attributed to Charles Knoll. Reproduced in Peterson, *Americans at Home*, Plate 133.
- 1869 *The Brown Family*. By Eastman Johnson. The DeYoung Museum, San Francisco.
- 1871 *The Lesson*. By John B. Whittaker. Reproduced in Mayhew and Myers, *Documentary History of American Interiors*, Plate 106.
- 1871 *The Family of Afredrick Smith Hatch in Their Residence at Park Avenue and 37th Street, New York City*. By Eastman Johnson. Reproduced in James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover, 1970), Plate 58.
- 1872 *Interesting News*. By Eastman Johnson. Reproduced in Hills, *Eastman Johnson*, p. 82.
- 1872 *The Parlor on Brooklyn Heights of Mr. and Mrs. John Bullard*. By Edward L. Henry. Reproduced in Mayhew and Myers, *Documentary History of American Interiors*, Plate 23.
- 1875-90 Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt, William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and *William M. Harnett*, Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, eds. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992) survey more than 60 domestic settings for newspapers.
- 1875 c. *The Sportsman's Dream*. By C. F. Senior. Reproduced in *American Naive Painting of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries . . .* (West Point, N.Y.: U.S. Military Academy, 1970), Plate 109.
- 1875 c. *Old Woman Reading the Detroit Morning Post*. Reproduced in *American Paintings in the Detroit Institute of Arts* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1991), p. 360.
- 1882 *News from Home*. By John Harrison Mills. Reproduced in Lee M. Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1986), Plate 25.
- 1882 Advertisement for Chicago and Alton Railroad. Reproduced in Katherine C. Grier, *Culture & Comfort: People, Parlors, and*

Upholstery, 1850-1915 (Rochester: Strong Museum, 1989),
p. 44.

1888

—, *Moore's Rural New Yorker*. Reproduced in Sally Ann
McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century
America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 151.

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