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Fictional reading expectations in victorian women

Maria João Pires

Universidade do Porto

The more evidence of debates about reading which I gathered, the more problematical the matter became: how a woman might read in victorian times is thus practically unanswerable. In fact, one has to recognize the great heterogeneity among nineteenth and early twentieth-century women readers. The construction of the woman reader cannot only be regarded as a textual phenomenon divorced from a fuller socio-historical context. This would de-historicize the concepts of 'woman' and of 'reading' and deprive us of the cultural debate that this issue implies.

The industrial revolution, which evolved at the same time as the rise of literacy in the west, put printed matter into everyone's hands. It also created new and national cultural solidarities, meaning that there were observable differences between reading strategies as well as opposing conceptions of book culture. In the european countries.

Throughout the nineteenth century, things worked to encourage the sale and the reading of books, now products of mass distribution. The french revolution had established the principle of the responsible citizen who ought to have a minimum of schooling, but it had done nothing to create the infrastructure for that schooling. A population shift towards the cities and the need for a more skilled labor force contributed greatly to the spread of literacy. At the same time, a rise in the standard of living allowed a greater proportion of the population to acquire low-priced books and periodicals, particularly in the more industrialized areas. Many families now had at home a few school texts, some novels and illustrated revues rather than the devotional literature of previous times. Personal libraries and home offices proliferated and furniture specially designed to hold books began to be made.

However, people read in many ways and women and men may read with different priorities. Solitary silent reading existed, as well as a number of forms of group reading that ranged from reading aloud in a small circle of people, to collective reading among workers, or to reading in the home by the father, the mother and often by a schoolchild.

The social status of an author was totally different from what it had been during the eighteenth century. The reading public had grown and writers, who saw themselves as the spokesmen of the people, reached an increasingly large public. In reality, the vast public that gained access to reading appreciated classics, old schoolbooks and novels by recent authors: in France *Les Misérables* and in England Dickens's latest novels. Writers needed to diversify their strategies, as 'industrialized' literature was demanding greater and greater concessions to public taste.

The awareness of victorians and Edwardians of 'the woman reader', as a category, and the hypotheses about her special characteristics, as well as her presumed needs and interests, affected the composition, distribution and marketing of literature. Reviewers continually used the figure of 'the woman reader' or 'the young person' (by implication almost invariably female) as a frame against which to place fiction with undesirably explicit sexual content, or as a marker so suggest a work's sentimentality.

Sexual division in reading expectations is most apparent in relation to fiction in both novel and novelette form; certain types of religion fiction, verse and devotional prose; and works which deal explicitly with the position of woman within society. Such works range from *Jane Eyre* to the so-called new-woman fiction of the 1890s. This can be distinguished mainly by its form, as well as by content; its preferred form is the *Bildungsroman*, and it shares a certain number of characteristics with nineteenth-century women's autobiography. Frequently it privileges childhood, both as a nostalgic realm and as a recognized site of gendered injustices. It presents a woman's life as a process, stressing the value of continuity of learnt and self-generated principles – Emma Frances Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), Sarah Grand *The Beth Book* (1897).

This kind of fiction expected that its readers would take the activity of reading seriously. Posing provocative social questions, the novels encouraged an interrogative manner of reading, not only in relation to the printed word, but in relation to society. Among the so-called new-woman novelists, Sarah Grand made the most relevant use of reading as a topos (*The Heavenly Twins*, 1893 and *The Beth Book* 1897).

Reading, and its implications for sexual knowledge is presented again in Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). Throughout the novel, the heroine, Mary, defines herself and her life against forms of story-telling. She refers specifically two of her favourite childhood books, *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* and, like so many Victorian girls, Mary had to use books to obtain information about subjects crucial to women: the questions of marriage, of maternity, of education (Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 1894).

It is in the polemical publications of the suffrage movement that the importance accorded to reading in new woman fiction finds its true immediate successor. In these novels, reading is treated in a straightforward way. Since the emphasis falls on activity (speaking, marching, demonstrating, debating), reading for pleasure or the general

expansion of one's knowledge hardly figures at all (Gertrude Colmore, Suffragette Sally 1911, Charlotte Despard and Mabel Collin's *Outlawed*, 1908, and Constance Elizabeth Maud's *No Surrender*, 1911).

One should not forget the emphasis placed on the idea that women should read thoughtfully and critically through the encouragement given by writers in *Votes for Women* and *The Vote* as well as by critics, particularly Rebecca West in *The Freewoman* (1911) and the *New Freewoman* (1913). These magazines supported the suffrage while dealing with broader social and political issues as well. Their writers laid the foundations for later twentieth-century feminist criticism.

This is not to say that men never read these types of writing. However, such books were received, classified and interpreted by both publishers and critics within a context of what women should and should not be reading. In *Edging Women Out* (1989), Gaye Tuchman develops this point quoting, for example, Geraldine Jewsbury, in her role as publisher's reader in the 1860s, reinforcing the belief that women preferred light stuff.

This prescriptive attitude had further consequences: circulating libraries had a restrictive influence and provided reading material suitable only for the entire family circle. The debate about access to appropriate reading material, the growth of the public libraries movement and the reading of the working classes increased after the passing of the 1870 Education Act. Here, class and gender differences as well as reading materials and habits were at issue. Stereotypes were under discussion and reading started to play a part in social debates. Judith Rowbotham's *Good Girls Make Good Wives* (1989) examines the content of didactic fiction for girls and shows how the nature of the stereotype changed throughout the Victorian period, as educational and employment opportunities for girls improved.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a range of articles attempted to classify changing tastes, not just through observation based upon popular stereotypes, but through statistical inquiry, analysing evidence gathered through questionnaires. The opportunities for obtaining books and the differing degrees of supervision contributed to the wide-ranging practices of girls and women throughout the period. Additionally, the activity of reading was often the vehicle through which an individual's sense of identity was achieved or confirmed. Such individuation inevitably takes place within changing social and ideological structures including, and stretching beyond, the family.

The reading beliefs and practices of the Suffragettes provoked this incessant mediation between the individual and the social. Acknowledging themselves publicly as women readers disruptive to dominant lines of thought, they failed to challenge some central values as expressed in literature. Besides, much of the evidence concerning individual readers comes from those who reflect about their own actual practices. They incorporate their personal histories of reading into autobiographical material, in ways rhetorically important to the construction of an autobiographical self.

There are two polarized stereotypes of women's reading in victorian and edwardian periods: the one which improves the spiritual or moral condition of the reader and the provocative which stimulates and challenges social, sexual, cultural or political roles of women. Despite the existence of stereotypes functioning to determine attitudes about reading in the home, in education and in public libraries, individuals explicitly challenge these stereotypes from within. The recognition of the heterogeneity of the woman reader also makes part of the common-sense statement that we all are different and, therefore, each of us has different reading experiences. However, the question of gender in reading cannot be considered apart from questions of class, of education, of religious belief and other social factors.

As Diana Fuss has put in *Essentially Speaking* (1989), readers, like texts, are constructed; they inhabit reading practices rather than create them *ex nihilo*. As she also notes, such practices develop according to historic and cultural influences. This is to say that there is no such thing as a natural way to read a text. Therefore, the practice of nineteenth and early twentieth-century women readers had nothing to do with their biological sexuality, but rather with their demands particular texts made upon them and with the modes of reading which they consciously employed. Recognizing herself as a woman when she reads and seeking to transform the social circumstances which the woman reader must negotiate, was a form of self-affirmation during this period.

Reading, in the victorian and edwardian periods, was an activity through which a woman could become aware of the simultaneity of the sensations of difference and of similarity. In other words, if reading, on occasion, provided the means for the victorian woman to withdraw into fiction, it allowed her to assent her sense of selfhood as her own choice of reading was, in the broadest sense, a political one.