

Introduction:

Magazines of the Early Nineteenth Century and the Emergence of American Literature

This section looks at a few magazines that played a significant role in the development of American literature in the period roughly between 1800 and 1850.

At the turn of the 19th century, Americans had been publishing magazines for six decades, a period in which roughly 90 magazines were launched, the majority closing within a year. The number of launches increased significantly toward the end of the 18th century, but the survival rate remained low: 55 magazines appeared in the decade of the 1790s, but only three were doing business on January 1, 1800. We could say that as the new century began, publishers' enthusiasm to bring magazines to market was on a rising curve, but the public's response remained equivocal. By and large this was because magazines were expensive to produce, expensive to send, and too expensive for all but well-to-do readers to buy. Noah Webster spoke from personal experience when he said, "The expectation of failure is connected with the very name of a Magazine." (Mott I, 13)

Nevertheless, 18th-century American magazines attracted a number of the country's most talented writers, artists, and publishers, among them H. H. Brackenridge, Charles Brockden Brown, Mathew Carey, Joseph Dennie, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Paul Revere, Isaiah Thomas, and Webster himself. It's indisputable that the magazines of their day made significant contributions to American politics, science, and culture.

A Diversifying Industry

Although each publication was unique, the magazines of 18th-century America fell into two broad categories. Some provided assorted content of general interest. The remainder covered specialized subjects such as religion, medicine, or agriculture, or aimed at specialized audiences, such as women, children, German-Americans, and so on. These were broad specializations: classes rather than niches, which is why magazines with specialized content were often called *class* magazines in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Between 1800 and 1850 readers grew increasingly receptive to both general-interest and class magazines, and as the market expanded, it was important for publishers to distinguish their products in the market. Some general-interest magazines targeted different segments of the literate public, through regional focus, frequency, or the mixture of topics they covered. The special-interest magazines simply grew more specialized. The diversification of subject matter covered by class magazines reflected the period's accelerating pace. Magazines emerged for farmers, abolitionists, educators, mechanics, scientists, businessmen, lawyers, members of dozens of faiths, musicians, and for people with many other special interests.

Literature in General Interest Magazines

In the first half of the 19th century, reading was one of the few forms of entertainment that could be enjoyed without leaving the home, and, along with essays, history, political commentary, and engravings, most general-interest magazines contained a variety of stories, criticism, and poetry. Editors expected that each copy would be read by more than one person, and they sometimes balanced content to accommodate every member of a family; in other words, to address different levels of sophistication, education, and taste. A successful magazine could contain material that appealed to men, women, boys, and girls.

Broadening or popularizing accompanied a major shift in American public education, reading habits, and buying patterns of reading material. As literacy rates rose in the first half of the 19th century, every market segment grew dramatically. And as more people acquired fundamental reading skills, attractive opportunities began to appear for publishers who were able to satisfy popular tastes. In 1812 this trend was noted critically by the Boston *Monthly Anthology*:

Owing to some glaring faults in our scheme of widespread superficial education, we are harassed with a class of authors more numerous here, in proportion, than in any other country—worthless weeds springing up prematurely.

The profusion of “weeds” didn’t mean that outstanding writing couldn’t be popular as well. Many canonical American writers of the early 19th century—such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Cullen Bryant—were extremely popular in their lifetimes, with celebrity value publishers could use to boost to sales. An expanding market brought good writers a growing audience, and some of the periodicals that published and promoted these writers found great success.

Launch Activity and Locale

The pace of magazine launches remained very consistent between 1790 and 1820. We noted that 55 magazines were started in the decade of the 1790s. Fifty-three were started between 1800 and 1809, and 58 between 1810 and 1819. (Mott I, 791ff) Around 1820, however, the rate of growth more than doubled. Ninety-eight magazines were launched between 1820 and 1829, 122 between 1830 and 1839, and 133 between 1840 and 1849. (Mott I, 796ff)

During the first half of the 19th century, the center of magazine publishing shifted from Philadelphia to New York City. In the decade of 1800 to 1809, 16 percent of all new American magazines were launched in New York, 29 percent in Philadelphia. By the 1840s circumstances had reversed: 33 percent of all launches were New York-based, and only 12 percent were based in Philadelphia. The shift obviously reflects New York’s growing importance as the nation’s commercial hub. Of course, magazines can be published anywhere, and in each decade between 1800 and 1850 more magazines were launched *outside* New York or Philadelphia than *in* either city.

This is due in part to the country’s expansion west of the Appalachians. As settlements proliferated in the West, rapidly-growing communities and the difficulty of long-distance transportation combined to create an environment that encouraged local publishing.

In the early 19th century two cities in the Ohio Valley—Lexington, KY and Cincinnati, OH—vied to become the magazine publishing capital of the West. Although each gave the other a pretty good run for the money, in the end the laurels went to Ohio. Lexington produced 11 magazines in the first 50 years of the 19th century, Cincinnati 22. (Mott I, 796ff) With good reason, Cincinnati was proud of its achievements in literature and publishing. In 1826 Cincinnati’s two libraries contained approximately 2,500 books, and by 1840 the city was home to 25 publishers of books and periodicals whose combined annual sales exceeded \$500,000. (Gohdes, 194)

Several other Western cities were home to magazines in the first half of the 19th century, including Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. The opportunities promised by the country’s westward expansion were a source of pride and frequently a subject of magazine writing. The *Cambridge History of American Literature* (168) says that western magazines were “serious, well-considered, and, for the time and place, highly creditable.”

The American Language

During this period all sorts of regionalisms began to influence American writing, from sectionalism in politics, especially in the Jacksonian era, to regional humor and dialect. Some notable scholars such as Noah Webster encouraged the development of American English: new, practical, and independent of the “old” language as written, spoken and taught in Britain. To Webster we owe many American spellings, such as *humor* and *theater* as opposed to *humour* and *theatre*. But there were reactionaries, too, who fought hard to maintain British standards. For years Joseph Dennie of the *Port Folio* called his writers *antibours*, a variant that out-Britished the British.

Americans worked up a voracious appetite for journalism. In 1790 there was one newspaper title for every 37,000 Americans. By 1835 there was one for every 12,000. In 1835 per capita newspaper circulation in the United States was at least double that of Britain.¹ Media historian Paul Starr wrote, “As of 1840, total weekly circulation in the United States, with a population of 17 million, had surpassed that of all Europe, with 233 million inhabitants.” (87)

This hunger for news was a defining feature of the American republic in the first half of the 19th century. The appetite was not exclusively urban. Traveling in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on what he called “the astonishing circulation of letters and newspapers among these savage woods,” and he described how settlers plunged from the Michigan frontier into the wilderness equipped with “Bible, ax, and newspapers.” (in Starr, 48)

Newspaper postage was kept low by subsidy, and newspaper editors were allowed to send “exchange” subscriptions at no cost. This encouraged the spread of both news and literacy. Within a few decades of the turn of the 19th century, a well-run magazine could actually prosper—something that had occurred rarely, if at all, in the 18th century.

A National Literature

By the turn of the 19th century, Americans had produced only the barest beginning of a national literature, and almost all of what could be called great American literature was political. America may have been home to the Federalist Papers, *Common Sense*, and the Declaration of Independence, but the country's authors hadn't reached the same level in drama, tales, sketches, poetry, novels, or history. For decades Americans had been conscious of this and defensive. During the Revolution Hugh Henry Brackenridge said that Americans “had some *d-m'd* good writers on their side of the question,” and fought the British “no less successfully with the pen than with the sword.” (in Richardson, 199) However, this was true mostly in polemics and propaganda, of which his claim was a good example.

As of 1800, few if any American writers could hold their own when compared to “Augustan Age” British authors like Addison, Defoe, Fielding, Johnson, Pope, or Swift. Literary historian Harold M. Ellis noted that Joseph Dennie's *Lay Preacher* essays were published in 1796. He compared what Dennie and other Americans wrote in that year to their contemporaries in Britain:

In 1796 Burns died and Prescott was born. In America there appeared Joel Barlow's *Hasty Pudding*, written three years earlier, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason, Part II*, Susannah Rowson's *Americans in England*, *The Lay Preacher*, the Essays of Count Rumford (Benjamin Thompson), and Washington's Farewell Address, with two or three other works which can hardly claim to be

¹ Some estimates suggest that it was as much as six times higher. (Starr, 86)

literature. In England, to offset this, there are listed, besides Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Fanny Burney's *Camilla* and minor works by Peter Pindar and George Colman the younger, the first published work of Walter Scott, the first volume of *Poems* of Coleridge, and the *Joan of Arc* of Southey, of whom at least two were to become more notable writers than any American then living. Whether one considers the historical significance or the intrinsic value of these works, the American output appears pitifully light in the scales. (90)

One major obstacle to literary achievement in America was that the American press of 1800 didn't pay enough to provide talented writers with an independent living. Book publishers were very selective when it came to American fiction—absence of an international copyright allowed them to plunder abroad to their hearts' content. The periodical publishers were grateful for material, but didn't pay for it. Self-publishing was an option, but only for those who had the means to print their own pamphlets or books, and the time to solicit advance orders.

In 1799 Charles Brockden Brown, one of the country's very few professional writers, described American literature as "extremely superficial" and listed lack of compensation as one of five reasons why. The remaining four were:

- Preoccupation with business and industry
- Defective system of college education
- Lack of compensation for scholarship
- Scarcity of books and difficulty in obtaining them. (in Mott I, 187)

Other critics found additional reasons. The *Monthly Anthology* said that most Americans were too distracted by politics to care about literature. The *North American Review* said that America was held back by not having its own language, that the country lacked a "remote antiquity," and that Americans lacked literary enterprise. (Mott I, 187)

At the time Brown drew up his list there was at least a kernel of truth in each of these explanations, but by 1850 all were obsolete. Publishing grew and prospered as much as other American industries, schools and scholarship were established across the continent, books and publications of all sorts dropped in price and flourished, and American writers like Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Hawthorne found that their country did indeed have its own language and antiquity. It became not only possible but potentially lucrative to be a professional writer, and within a half century America had not only developed a national literature but produced some of its greatest writers and defined new literary forms.

Historian S. G. Goodrich compiled statistics on American book manufacturing. In 1820, approximately 30 percent of the books manufactured in the U.S. were written by American authors, and 70 percent were written by British authors. By 1850, these figures were reversed, with American authors representing 70 percent and British authors 30 percent. The trend was consistent and continued past mid-century.

- 1820: American authors, 30 percent. British authors, 70 percent.
- 1830: American authors, 40 percent. British authors, 60 percent.
- 1840: American authors, 55 percent. British authors, 45 percent.
- 1850: American authors, 70 percent. British authors, 30 percent.
- 1856: American authors, 80 percent. British authors, 20 percent. (In Brooks, 484)

Magazines helped enable this rapid emergence of national literature and were an integral part of it.

Three trends helped to characterize American literary magazines in the period between 1800 and 1850: 1.) rising passions of literary patriotism, 2.) the increasing viability of writing as a profession, and 3.) the

development and expansion of new forms of literature related to periodicals, especially the short story. All three were made possible by the rapidly-growing market for magazines that began to take shape in the early years of the 19th century and blossomed in the 1830s.

Literary Patriotism

It's remarkable how many American publishers in the early 19th century were motivated by the desire to promote and contribute to the country's literature: one magazine prospectus after another promised to cultivate American writing good enough to rival the British. Historian Frank Luther Mott called this fervor the third war with England. (I, 183ff) Fewer people died in the third war than in the Revolution or the War of 1812, but it was fought with no less enthusiasm, especially in the first two decades of the century.

Much of the war was stoked by attacks from across the Atlantic. "Who reads an American book?" scoffed the influential *Edinburgh Review*. The British *Quarterly Review* said Americans were "inherently inferior" to Europeans intellectually. And a parade of European travelers published unflattering descriptions of America when they returned home. Mott wrote that "So great was that sensitiveness to criticism that Americans were maddened by it and blinded to other points of view." (I, 188) In 1815 the *Port Folio* referred to English travelers as "unblushing miscreants... slanderers by profession," and one year later William Tudor wrote in the *North American Review* that "the travellers who described us have with very few exceptions been so ignorant or so profligate, that we almost despair of an able and unprejudiced account of the United States from a European." (in Tebbel, 26f)

One effect of the war was to encourage numerous magazine launches, or at least to provide justification for launching. Many of the publications that came to market in the first half of the 19th century—including most of the publications profiled in the following pages—were inspired by a desire to showcase the country's literature and dedicated to improving it. And perhaps equally importantly, literary patriotism encouraged editors to find writers who could deliver the goods.

Payment

At the beginning of the 19th century, magazine writing was a diversion for gentlemen. Publication was a contributor's only reward, and attribution by name was rare: most writers were identified by noms de plume or initials, if at all. Payment was unheard of and probably would have been considered a little vulgar if it had been offered. But by the same token, editors complained frequently about the difficulty of getting material, and there were many occasions when an editor ended up writing most (or all) of an issue because promised contributions failed to arrive. It could not have been too difficult to put two and two together, and in rising numbers magazines began to compensate their contributors for material. One of the first to pay writers was the *Christian Spectator* in 1819 (Tebbel, 29). Soon others followed, including the influential *North American Review* in 1825.

By the early 1840s "magazinists" had emerged—these were writers who were able to support themselves by contributing to periodicals. Many of the magazinists were clever and facile. Some, like Edgar Allan Poe or John Neal, were outstanding authors and critics. Publishers found that featuring well-known writers on the covers of their magazines improved sales, and this allowed popular writers to charge more for their material.

Obviously, writers went where the money was. In the 1830s and 1840s, the allure of financial reward drew them to magazines and annuals, which needed content and were willing to pay for it. This had the effect of shaping the country's writing: authors wrote what magazine publishers would buy, and what magazine publishers bought in large numbers were short stories.

Emergence of the Short Story

Short stories are particularly suited to periodicals, and had been a staple of American magazines since the mid-18th century: the *New-England Magazine* (1758) and the *American Magazine, or General Repository* (1769) were among the first to publish short stories. The romances and gothic tales of the 18th century may have been shallow and formulaic but they were popular, and the demand for tales grew as the number of magazines expanded. In the early 19th century a handful of American writers, including Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe, published tales that had depth, complexity, and what Poe referred to in a definitive essay as “unity of effect.” By recognizing this and other elements that combine to make an engaging tale, Poe was among the first critics to define the short story as we know it today.

The short story is not only one of the newest literary forms, it's a genre shaped, nurtured, and made popular by magazines. Because the market for periodicals was growing so rapidly, the short story, in a wide range of styles and types, became a staple of American literature. The important influences of German and other European writers notwithstanding, it's possible to argue that American writers contributed more to the development of the short story form than writers anywhere else—and that American periodicals were singularly responsible for providing those writers with a forum and a paycheck.

The “Golden Age” of Magazines and American Literature

The period of 1825 to 1850 has been called the “Golden Age” of American magazines (Tebbel, 45), a catchy way of describing a time in which the number of magazines launched, and the size of their audiences, grew rapidly. It was certainly a golden age of American letters—many writers who are foundational figures in American literature emerged in the same period, including Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hawthorne, Irving, James Russell Lowell, Poe, and Henry David Thoreau. This isn't completely coincidental: many of the best American authors of the early 19th century were not only published and promoted by magazines but were actively involved in editing and managing them.

The forces that attracted important writers to magazines and the effect the magazines had on the development of American literature provide an interesting perspective on the emergence of America's national literature. The writers have been studied carefully for almost two centuries. Less effort has been made to examine the role of periodical publishing in supporting them. The following pages look more closely at how several “Golden Age” magazines, along with their antecedents, successors, and related projects, played a defining role in American literature and literary criticism.

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