DURING THE EARLY NINETEENTH century, most books sold in the United States were foreign imports or copies. At an 1834 book trade sale, for example, of the 114 fiction books printed in America, 95 were English reprints (Exman, *Brothers Harper* 50). A reliance on British literature was facilitated by the lack of an international copyright law and what Laurel Brake has called “a vestigial, high cultural value attached to the ejected imperial power” (106). However, America’s nascent publishing industry was also shaped by what Meredith McGill refers to in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* as a “Jacksonian resistance to centralized development” that kept the nation’s book production system dispersed (109). This decentralization compounded and reinforced the young nation’s lack of a strong literary identity and led to its reliance on imports from Great Britain for literary sustenance. British novels easily filled the bill for this decentralized system of publishers who struggled to survive by printing what was well known and had a ready audience of consumers. American magazines were no exception: They took the culture of reprinting even further by adapting a wide variety of British publications for their own purposes. Despite a growing sense of literary nationalism that was emerging at mid-century, McGill contends that reprinting was the cultural norm for most of the century and was even considered to be proof of an enlightened democracy because it produced affordable books for the general public and avoided monopolistic publishing practices. In
fact, opponents of an international copyright agreement defined the manufacturing and dissemination of texts as America’s primary cultural role, not the creation of original literature (95). Harper’s New Monthly Magazine is the quintessential example of a literary endeavor that sought to adapt British literature to the establishment of a healthy and egalitarian publishing empire in the United States.

That Harper’s was strongly influenced by British literature is evident to anyone who skims its pages, which are brimming with articles copied directly from British periodicals and with novels written by British authors. Harper’s popularized novel serialization in America in a monthly format at the same time Dickens’s weekly magazine Household Words was successfully serializing novels for middle-class families in England. Dickens’s magazine served as an important model and a valuable resource for literary material that was copied directly into Harper’s pages. However, Harper’s altered Dickens’s weekly magazine formula by adding lavish illustrations, increasing the amount of material, calling attention to its own cultural superiority, and appealing more overtly to the pride of middle-class readers who would be able to express their class status by purchasing the magazine. While Dickens changed the reputation of weeklies by including high-quality fiction in Household Words and later in All the Year Round, his magazines still appeared to be more like cheap newspapers with narrow columns of print and no illustrations. Thus, Harper’s essentially became the first family literary magazine by building on, borrowing from, and transforming British literary sources. McGill suggests that “the transnational status of reprinted texts makes it difficult for us to assimilate them into national literary narratives.” As a result, critics have tended to “sift through” relics of a reprint culture looking “for signs of an original, national difference,” rather than assessing “the ways in which foreign literature is repackaged and redeployed” (2–3). For McGill, it is crucial to see the predominance of reprinting in America as a culture rather than a barrier to culture. In this chapter I keep this in mind as I examine how Harper’s successfully repackaged and redeployed British literature for a nationalistic purpose, thereby participating in the nation’s transformation from a culture of reprinting to a culture of authorial originality and nationality.

While Harper’s mimicked the survival techniques that many American publishing houses used in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, its preoccupation with creating a national literary identity out of “pirated” scraps of British periodicals signals a transition from national dependence on British culture to a more patriotic devo-
tion to elevating the status of American literature during the 1850s. As literary nationalism rose, so did more centralized and nationalized systems of publication. Harper and Brothers was one of the first national publishers, and Harper's was intended to be a national—and not just a regional—magazine. Through what seems an unlikely appeal for a publication famous for its literary piracy, Harper's editors forged a patriotic message addressed primarily to women readers. While the magazine valued British novelists such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray over American writers, its focus on British authors was rhetorically constructed as nationalistic. The editors theorized that by providing the public with these examples of “excellent,” high cultural texts, the magazine would raise the standards of American readers and in turn raise the quality of American literature. Thus, Harper's urged its women readers to nurture the next generation of native readers with the British literary models it provided so that they would eventually have the skills to both recognize and create a distinctly tasteful American literary culture.

My argument coincides with McGill’s claim that “Reprint publishers frequently acknowledged nationalist aims, using foreign texts to refract an image of the nation as a whole that was seemingly impossible to produce by domestic means alone” (20–21). Foreign texts, McGill claims, offered neutrality during a time of sectional division and thereby became indispensable to creating a unified national identity (24). However, while McGill sees Harper’s as a prime example of reprint culture and its rival Putnam’s as a magazine devoted to the sensibility of nationalism, I argue that Harper’s was actually able to straddle these two modes to produce a new periodical format that was not merely eclectic and cosmopolitan, but focused and nationalistic. In the midst of developing its patriotic message based on the cultural logic of reprinting, which treated reprinted British works as reconstituted American texts, Harper’s managed to adapt British material into a new genre of magazine that would travel back across the Atlantic to become a model for the most popular periodical format in 1860s England, the family literary magazine. Examining Harper’s within the context of the emergence of a new magazine genre thus complicates the standard notion of transatlantic exchange that assumes a one-way flow of ideas from Britain to America rather than a reciprocal trade. My study of the first five years of Harper’s shows that while it borrowed from and even revered British culture, it also influenced the development of that culture. In Atlantic Double-Cross, Robert Weisbuch argues that the widely accepted idea that Americans had no real culture typically elicited an
“aggressive, parodic response” to British literature from American writers (15). Harper’s, in contrast, called for the reverence of British models as a means of helping Americans produce something new without engaging in aggressive competition with their counterparts across the Atlantic. Surprisingly, this precarious project did produce something new, an influential magazine genre.

In England, Harper’s was familiar to the most prominent authors of the period, whose works were serialized in its pages. It was also known by major publishers who saw Harper’s as a successful example of how to use an in-house magazine as an advertising forum for a company’s publications. Harper’s became increasingly influential in London publishing circles with its astounding success in America, and its parent company’s development of successful publication deals with British writers such as Wilkie Collins, Dinah Mulock Craik, George Eliot, and Charles Reade. The model relationship between publisher and magazine set forth by Harper and Brothers led the way for the development of a healthy trade in family literary magazines in London a decade after Harper’s had proven itself as a profitable endeavor that was publicly embraced as an authoritative cultural arbiter. The overwhelming success of Harper’s and of family literary magazines that followed it eventually led Harper and Brothers to launch a successful British version of the famous magazine in 1880, which shared most of its contents with the American version. The invasion of Harper’s onto British soil led the London Bookseller to voice its fear that the success of Harper and Brothers would put an American company at the head of England’s publishing industry (Exman, House of Harper 160–61). While this anxiety proved groundless, it was Harper’s emphasis on transatlantic connections that prompted its unprecedented success in America and that facilitated the migration of the family literary magazine to England. Those transatlantic connections and the magazine’s promotion of them therefore warrant a closer examination than they have yet received.

In order to understand how Harper’s achieved such powerful transatlantic influence, it is necessary to trace its origins and its rise to dominance at home, where it was the most successful magazine in America between 1850 and 1855. Published at the beginning of the American industrial age, Harper’s rose to prominence in part by featuring some of the earliest electroplate images in the nation and being produced at one of the country’s first steam-powered presses, located at Harper and Brothers headquarters in New York (Allen 5–11). The magazine’s editorial staff also brought status to the endeavor. From 1850 to 1856 Harper’s was officially edited by the reputable journalist Henry J.
Raymond, who also founded the *New York Daily Times* in September 1851. However, one of the Harper brothers, Fletcher Harper, oversaw the magazine until about 1875 (Mott 391). As a result of the collaborative nature of the magazine’s editorial control, compounded in this case by the fact that the “Editor’s Easy Chair,” the “Editor’s Drawer,” and the monthly “Literary Notices” were all conducted by different subeditors (including “Easy Chair” penmen Donald G. Mitchell and George W. Curtis, “Editor’s Drawer” writer Lewis Gaylord Clark, and “Literary Notice” editor George R. Ripley), I often refer to *Harper’s* as having a collective voice that reflects its distinct and emerging character and goals rather than the opinions or decisions of one particular leader. As John Gray Laird Dowgray puts it, “There was no real editor,” and the problem of “actual responsibility for the contents” is a difficult one to solve (39, 36). While my personification of this magazine—and others mentioned in this book—serves as a convenience that may elide the agency of the editors and writers, it coincides with my view that every periodical has a distinct character that results from a combination of editor, contributor, and reader influence. Furthermore, I like the way this construction of a magazine’s agency stresses the collaborative nature of periodicals, in which no single author, originator, editor, or publisher can be identified as having sole responsibility for what emerges as its agenda.6

In any case, Fletcher Harper did initially guide *Harper’s* format as a middle-class, family literary magazine by cultivating a nonpartisan tone, avoiding political controversy, and emphasizing nationalism over sectionalism on the eve of the Civil War. He defined the noncontroversial periodical as “a popular educator of the general public” that would serve the nation’s citizenry while also turning a profit (Perkins 167). To further ensure the broad appeal of the magazine, *Harper’s* subscriptions were sold at an affordable, three-dollar yearly subscription rate, or for twenty-five cents an issue. All of these factors helped raise the magazine’s circulation from its first run of 7,500 copies in June 1850 to 50,000 copies six months later. Between 1850 and 1865 the magazine’s sales averaged an astounding 110,000 copies per issue, prompting *Harper’s* competitor *Putnam’s* to proclaim that “Probably no magazine in the world was ever so popular or so profitable” (“Harper’s Monthly and Weekly,” 293). However, the key component to the magazine’s success was neither its cost nor its apolitical tone, but its focus on selling British literature to women readers as a patriotic reading endeavor.

Laurel Brake contends that *Harper’s* “transatlantic connection’ was first and last economic and commercial” (104). While this is certainly
true, *Harper’s* elaborately justified the literature that made it into a money-making machine. The magazine not only benefited from the convenience and profitability of publishing British works that had proven their success across the Atlantic, but also canonized them by defining British realist novels, particularly those by Dickens and Thackeray, as examples of high cultural realism appropriate for women readers. For *Harper’s*, realism was defined as a particularly British literary form that pointed out the vital impact women could have on public culture while maintaining their traditional domestic roles. Realism was seen as a genre that would effectively teach women to participate in and improve public culture by passing proper taste on to their children, who represented America’s literate and literary future. Touting British realism allowed *Harper’s* editors to establish themselves as vital public servants worthy of respect. Realism, then, was also equated with the professionalization of literature as a field of study. Nancy Glazener argues that

The construction of realism as a non-addictive variety of fiction was probably the most important means by which realism was fitted to be an object of connoisseurship. The emotional discipline that differentiated men’s cultural consumption from women’s also differentiated the cultural consumption of privileged groups from that of people casually lumped together as “lower.” Mirroring the imaginative embourgeoisement of realist readers was the professionalization of realist authors, which was supposed to guarantee that they provided healthy, public-spirited, non-addictive works of fiction. (95)

*Harper’s* editors used the category of realism in precisely these ways, legitimizing the magazine and its choice of featured British novelists, ironically, through a discourse emphasizing the national benefits of realism. The taste for realism encouraged by *Harper’s* represented sophistication and self-control for readers and professional respect for authors; both of these traits translated into advantages for the development of American literature.

This already complex explanation of *Harper’s* construction of the national benefits of British realism is further complicated by the magazine’s relationship to American sentimentalism. From its inception *Harper’s* struggled to appeal to a wide range of readers, to make a healthy profit, to promote high culture, and to sustain a good reputation within literary circles. The endeavor to unite these contradictory
goals among a diverse editorial staff helps to explain the frequently competing voices that emerge within the magazine. The voices motivated by both profit and a strict sense of literary standards exhorted readers to improve their literary taste by reading British realist novels that were defined as gentlemanly, high cultural texts and to indulge sparingly in sentimental American tales that were overtly criticized as feminine embodiments of low culture. British realism and American sentimentalism were repeatedly constructed as gendered opposites in the editorial commentaries, which rendered invisible the female British and male American writers included in the magazine. Though the magazine overtly judged national literatures by the gendered categories of high and low culture, Harper's actually included many sentimental stories and articles. In fact, several recent critics characterize Harper's tone as overwhelmingly sentimental (see Lea Bertani Vozar Newman, Sheila Post-Lauria, and Laurie Robertson-Lorant). I argue that despite its rhetoric of high culture and its equation of good literature with British realism, in practice Harper's supported a melding of the forms of realism and sentimentalism rather than a strict division between the two literary modes. In fact, the magazine’s defense of Dickens as the most important realist novelist was predicated on his ability to provide Americans with a guide for the creation of an effective national literature that would not completely eschew sentimentality, but would show writers how to transform an American tradition of sentimentality into a higher cultural form.

A “Good Foreign Magazine”: Literary Piracy and the British Origins of Taste

At a time when some American magazines were going to great expense to create a unique American literary identity in what many of the best writers saw as a culturally barren nation, Harper’s continued to fill its pages with selections from British magazines at virtually no cost. Harper’s planned to use what others labeled its piratical practices “to place within the reach of the great mass of the American people the unbounded treasures of the periodical literature of the present day” to be sold “at so low a rate . . . that it shall make its way into the hands or the family circle of every intelligent citizen of the United States” (“Advertisement” to Volume I). In this way, Harper’s participated in and profited from the democratization of print culture that
served as the initial nationalistic impulse of the magazine. However, there was another impetus to focus on British fiction: Harper and Brothers had made its fortune publishing inexpensive copies of British novels. The company’s successful “Harper’s Household Editions,” advertised as “uniform, compact, legible, handsome, and cheap,” had made the company a brand name associated with the most famous and popular British novelists (The Archives of Harper and Brothers B3). The extension of the company’s book-publishing skills into the world of magazine publishing was facilitated by building on its popular association with British fiction. During its first five years, all of Harper’s major serials were British novels later published as “household editions.” The company was therefore able to profit twice on works it first serialized and then sold in volume form. By 1855 Harper’s had showcased three of England’s premiere novelists by serializing Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s My Novel, or Varieties in English Life (October 1850–February 1853), Charles Dickens’s Bleak House (April 1852–October 1853), and William Thackeray’s The Newcomes (November 1853–October 1855).

The tone was set for Harper’s focus on British works when in the introductory note to the first issue the editors declared their intention to “transfer to its pages as rapidly as they may be issued all the continuous tales of Dickens, Bulwer, Croly, Lever, Warren, and other distinguished contributors to British periodicals,” which “enlist and absorb much of the literary talent, the native genius, the scholarly accomplishment of the present age” (“A Word at the Start” 2, 1). The editors cite Blackwood’s, Dublin University Magazine, and the Edinburgh Review as sources they will use to provide readers with the “wealth and freshness of the literature of the nineteenth century . . . embodied in the pages of periodicals” (1). While Harper’s avoided expressing political views that were central to the periodicals it mentioned, it focused on a major cultural issue debated in those magazines: literary taste. Pulling from a wide array of British periodical resources (including magazines like the Lady’s Companion, which had a much more overtly domestic focus), Harper’s forged a new magazine form intended to appeal to the entire family and to balance entertainment with cultural improvement.

The first issue of Harper’s included only British writers and, although the authors were rarely identified, almost all of the selections unabashedly advertised that they were reprinted by citing their British periodical sources beneath their titles. The contents of Harper’s premiere issue represented material from a cross-section of British magazines, but the most frequently cited source was Dickens’s Household Words. Dickens’s magazine is lavishly praised in “A Word at the Start”:
“Dickens has just established a weekly journal of his own, through which he is giving to the world some of the most exquisite and delightful creations that ever came from his magic pen” (1). Eight articles from Household Words were copied in Harper’s first issue alone. During its first year, items from Household Words dominated the magazine, with the July 1850 issue including the highest number of selections from the magazine, at fourteen. Furthermore, in August 1850 the “Monthly Record of Current Events” admitted its dependence on Dickens’s Household Narrative— a supplement to the magazine that reported current news items—by stating that “The English literary intelligence of the month is summed up in the Household Narrative, from which mainly we copy” (422). The importance of Dickens to the establishment of Harper’s is apparent. What deserves further investigation, and what I address in greater detail later in this chapter, is what Dickens symbolized to Americans and how his work came to embody the magazine’s nationalist project.

Throughout its first year, Harper’s reveals its rootedness in the culture of reprinting by shamelessly advertising where its articles were copied from and even articulating antinationalist literary arguments that created a rationale for its role as a cultural disseminator rather than a cultural originator. For example, its reprint of Dublin University Magazine’s “American Literature” (June 1850) proclaims that America’s excessive “Liberty, equality, and fraternity” are not “so favorable to the cultivation of elegant tastes as might be imagined” (37). According to the article, America’s loose class structure and preoccupation with money as a class marker decreased the likelihood that the nation would cultivate its own tasteful literature. The novel, in particular, was seen as a genre strongly connected to the British nation and its class system. As Nina Baym points out, the message was “if the novel depended profoundly on the class structure for its effects, then American novels could not, or ought not to be, written” (241–43). Harper’s goal, then, was both to fill a void in American life and to facilitate the democratization of print culture by making these novels more accessible to Americans than they were to the British. Harper’s thus cast its piratical practices as beneficial to readers in a nation in which a native literature was going to be difficult to develop.

One point in the Dublin University Magazine article does not coincide with Harper’s agenda. The article insists that since there was no clear cultural elite to regulate knowledge in America, the nation’s literature would inevitably suffer from market value running rampant over aesthetic value. However, Harper’s did not necessarily see these values
as opposed. The fusion of market value and aesthetic value was central to the magazine’s mission and its transatlantic character, as well as to its expression of critical authority. By melding these seemingly opposing forces, Harper’s attempted to establish itself as the nation’s primary regulator as well as popularizer of literature.

Rival magazine publishers responded angrily to Harper’s privileging of British works and vociferously attacked what they characterized as its blatantpiracies not because they did not follow similar policies in their own magazines but because they had not been as diligent in the practice or as overwhelmingly successful. John Jay, who had gained exclusive rights to reprint Blackwood’s in America, advised another publisher in 1851 that “in consequence of the fatal rivalry of eclectic magazines such as Harper’s,” which provided “choice selections from all the British miscellanies,” single magazine reprints were no longer viable (quoted in Barnes 44). In addition to such rivalries, reprinting was becoming distasteful as a matter of principle due to the belief that the reliance on British writers was primarily responsible for preventing American authors from making a living and America from creating its own literature.

Amid the climate of growing American literary nationalism, Harper’s British character was an easy target for criticism from magazines that were financially strapped by their payments to American writers. The magazines that were breaking away from the culture of reprinting failed to generate the profits Harper’s produced not only because they sold fewer copies, but also because their expenses were much higher. As a result of the extravagance and success of its practices, Harper’s was universally reviled as unpatriotic by the American publishing community. In March 1851 one of its competitors, Graham’s, described it as “a good foreign magazine” and predicted that even “The veriest worshipper of the dust of Europe will tire of the dead level of silly praise of John Bull upon every page.” Graham’s goes on to argue that America is fast catching up with its mother country: “John is a stout fellow—drinks his ale, and eats his roast beef with great gusto—but he hasn’t quite all the brains of the family. . . . [H]e forgets young Johnathan has whipped him twice in war—is his master at mechanics, and is not altogether a dolt at letters” (“Graham versus Reprints” 280).

Equating Harper’s literary selections with an excessive reverence of Anglo-European traditions and outlining the past successes and current potential of the United States helped spark a sense of outrage among the American literati that began to transform a literary climate in which foreign books were acceptable and even necessary into one in which
native authors were privileged. *Graham’s*, which claimed to have paid as much as $1,500 an issue for its original contributions by American writers, was losing its hold on the public largely because of the success of *Harper’s* cheap reprints. *Graham’s* attacks on *Harper’s* proved to be futile, however. The magazine was failing to compete even as it struggled to sustain a national literary culture. *Graham’s*, which had been around since 1841, was pushed out of the market in 1858 after a last ditch attempt to woo *Harper’s* readers by doubling its length to include reprints from British magazines (Wrobel 158).

In a similar scenario, the *American (Whig) Review*, a journal founded on the principle of improving American literature, publicly blamed *Harper’s* for shirking its national duty and keeping American writers in poverty. In “A Letter to the Proprietors of Harper’s Magazine” (July 1852), the *Review* angrily protested that the magazine’s practices were not only unfair to American as well as British writers, but also immoral:

> As a scheme for making money, I cannot too highly commend your enterprise. It is a manifest improvement on the shopkeeper’s maxim of buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest, for you do not buy in the market at all. . . . You prove your right to the enviable title of sharp businessman, but you also show yourselves utterly destitute of regard for the literary talent of your own countrymen. . . . To regard this as a fair business competition, would require a species of moral training to which I could not wish myself or any honorable citizen subjected. (15, 18)

As with *Graham’s*, the popularity of *Harper’s* quickly helped push the ethically and patriotically motivated *American (Whig) Review* to its demise in 1852.

However, *Harper’s* defended its piratical practices on the grounds that they provided literary models that would serve a nationalistic end despite the fact that reprinting—now cast in the outlaw garb of the term “piracy”—was beginning to be seen as unpatriotic, unethical, and even criminal. While this philosophy was sustained throughout the magazine’s first five years, increasing pressure from the literary community pushed *Harper’s* to alter its image. Due largely to a changing culture of ethics surrounding copyright issues and reprinting, *Harper’s* blatant piracies declined. After its first year, the magazine eliminated credit lines for its reprinted articles and instated a policy of payment and attribution, especially to major authors like Dickens, who was paid generously for *Bleak House*. The magazine’s shifting strategy can be seen in
the “Editor’s Easy Chair” for January 1852. This column, written just three months before the serialization of *Bleak House* began, includes a comment on the American publishing industry’s failure to properly remunerate Dickens for his writing: “We could honor Mr. Dickens with such adulation, and such attention as he never found at home; but when it came to the point of any definite action for the protection of his rights as an author we said to Mr. Dickens, with our hearts in his books, but with our hands away from our pockets, ‘We are our own law-makers and must pay you only in—honor!’” (255). With *Harper’s* unpaid reprints from *Household Words* silently swept under the rug, the magazine may already have been negotiating its agreement with Dickens, for which it now hoped to be recognized as a prime mover on the copyright issue that Dickens toured America to promote in 1842. However, the magazine also underwent more overt changes in its format and appearance in response to the antinationalist charges it faced.

“A Strictly National Work”: The *Americanization* of *Harper’s*

Though the American reading public was more amenable to *Harper’s* rhetorical and editorial shifts than the professional literary community, the magazine quickly adapted its editorial practices in response to growing criticism from that small but loud constituency. The *Americanization* of *Harper’s* was marked by a shift in the advertisements for the magazine placed at the front of each bound volume. While *Harper’s* continued to privilege British serial novels, its ads increasingly focused on the national character of the magazine. By the second volume (December 1850–May 1851), *Harper’s* opening advertisement tones down its British identity and claims that “in addition to the choicest productions of the English press, the magazine will be enriched with such original matter as in [the editor’s] opinion will enhance its utility and attractiveness.” It was announced that the magazine would include “original” American works if they matched (or exceeded) the quality of the rest of the magazine, implying that American works that could compete with British works existed, but also indicating that they were not easy to find. With the publication of volume three (June–November 1851), the editors made a more definitive claim for American cultural production, stating that “the best talent of
the country has been engaged in writing and illustrating original articles for Harper’s pages.” Furthermore, they declared that the magazine would now regularly include “one or more original articles upon some topic of historical or national interest, written by some able and popular writer.” By the fourth volume (December 1851–May 1852), many more American writers and topics were incorporated, and the opening advertisement boldly declared that “the most gifted and popular authors of the country write constantly” for Harper’s. This public-relations campaign helped to alter Harper’s image as a “foreign magazine,” but the nationalistic claims were nonetheless exaggerated. Despite Harper’s contention in the advertisement to volume two that it intended to be “a strictly national work” filled with “patriotism,” Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, and Thackeray continued to dominate the early years of the magazine, holding the coveted position of featured serial novelists.

Harper’s did, however, make some changes that coincided with its advertising claims. For example, in the first issue, the “Monthly Record of Current Events,” overseen by Henry J. Raymond, is described as “a digest of all Foreign Events, incidents, and opinions that may seem to have either interest or value for the great body of American readers” (emphasis added; June 1850, 122). Only a month later Raymond informs readers that “THE DOMESTIC EVENTS of the month (which in accordance with requests from many quarters, this Magazine will hereafter regularly record) have not been numerous or very important” (July 1850, 275). While acquiescing to demands for the inclusion of American news, Harper’s still implied that the country’s events were insignificant (even though the news report included the invasion of Cuba and a congressional debate on slavery). By Harper’s second volume, the “Monthly Record” was organized nationally, with American news listed first, followed by reports on British and European events. Similarly, the series “Leaves from Punch,” which began in January 1851 and featured humorous material copied from the famous British magazine, was changed in June 1852 to the less derivative title of “Comicalities, Original and Selected” and began to feature more original pieces by American artists (Dowgray 73).

Harper’s also responded to criticism by increasingly incorporating features on American landscapes and governmental institutions into its pages. This move is, in part, consonant with McGill’s contention that “Nationalist manifestos customarily began with a condemnation of American subservience to British literary models, and finished with a call for a literature commensurate with the majesty of American scenery and the ideals of republican institutions. Throughout, the
emphasis was on independence and self-sufficiency figured as the reciprocity of art, land, and nation” (192). While Harper’s did not condemn subservience to British literary models and in fact argued that America would benefit from those models, the magazine began to strategically place essays on American history and scenery on its front pages. Articles such as Benson J. Lossing’s “Our National Anniversary” (July 1851), which featured illustrations of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin and included a facsimile of the signatures as they appear on the Declaration of Independence, honored American thinkers and institutions without treading into issues of high and low culture. Similarly, Harper’s began to focus on America’s landscapes and architecture as aesthetically pleasing national treasures in articles such as “Sketch of Washington City” (December 1852), “The Landscape of the South” (May 1853), “Monticello” (July 1853), and “Arlington House” (September 1853). By volume seven (June–November 1853), the editors confirmed the success of their strategy by claiming in the advertisement that “No feature of the Magazine has met with more general approval than the series of illustrated articles upon American scenery and History.” This emphasis on American themes in nonfiction allowed Harper’s to appear more nationalistic while continuing to argue that America would benefit from following British literary models.

Harper’s, in fact, began to include more and more American writers, though their contributions were typically anonymous. The most prominent authors whose names were featured in the magazine tended to contribute nonfiction works that avoided American themes. The Abbott brothers were the most popular writers of this class. John Abbott was famous for writing the longest-running serial in Harper’s history, Napoleon Bonaparte (September 1851–February 1855), which gave readers an anti-British view of the French leader by emphasizing his honorable qualities. Jacob Abbott wrote exotic travel narratives such as the serial Memoirs of the Holy Land, introducing Americans to exciting and remote places. Despite—or possibly because of—their avoidance of fiction and of American topics, Jacob Abbott opened fourteen and John Abbott opened four of the first forty-two issues of the magazine. Not only were these American brothers honored with bylines and opening positions within the magazine, but they also fared quite well monetarily.11

The magazine’s creation of several new editorial departments—the “Editor’s Drawer,” the “Editor’s Easy Chair,” and the “Editor’s Table”—was one of the most visible and lasting signs of Harper’s attempt at Americanization. The “Editor’s Easy Chair” featured the notable critics
Donald G. Mitchell and George W. Curtis. However, the editorial commentaries of these distinctive American voices reflected the principles of the magazine more than the values of the writers themselves. Harper’s American critics continued to champion British novels over American ones. When the magazine did support American literature, it was often in Lewis Gaylord Clark’s “Literary Notices” section, which reprinted positive British reviews of American works as proof of their literary value. Ironically, the practice of citing British sources as a confirmation of the worth of American books became more and more common as the magazine decreased its reprinting and increased its nationalist profile. Thus, while the magazine characterized itself as patriotic and attempted to appear more “American” than it was when it was launched in 1850, it was still open to charges like the one made by its rival Putnam’s. In March 1857, several years after Harper’s had undergone its transformation, Putnam’s gave itself credit for what it characterized as its rival’s superficial facelift:

[T]he first immediate effect of Putnam was to nationalize Harper. That magazine ceased to be a second table of the English periodicals, and became gradually more and more American. But it was American in subject rather than American in treatment. Its spirit was still timid and hesitating. Every month it made its courtly bow; and, with bent head and unimpeachable toilet, whispered smoothly, “No offense, I hope.” (“Harper’s Monthly and Weekly” 294)

By characterizing Harper’s as not only piratical, but also too eager to please the public, Putnam’s summarized the magazine’s lasting reputation within nineteenth-century critical circles. But, as far as the reading public was concerned, Harper’s formula worked regardless of the nationality of its writers.

Despite its efforts to change, Harper’s spent decades shedding its reputation as a pirate periodical. On November 12, 1870, Punchinello—an American derivative of Punch—printed a cartoon satirizing Harper’s piracies, indicating that twenty years later the magazine’s early publishing practices were still fresh enough in people’s minds to make them laugh (Figure 1). The cartoon’s caption explains that it depicts the “piratical rover, ‘Harpy,’ springing a trap upon the good ship ‘Author’ in a favorable trade wind” (105). An issue of Harper’s that is held to the deck with a miniature sword peeks out from under the pile of bodies. These casualties of the magazine’s bloody editorial practices are concealed from the waving crowd of onlookers by Fletcher Harper, who
appears to be yelling orders to editorial columnist George W. Curtis. Curtis stands on a barrel labeled the “Easy Chair” (the title of his editorial column) playing violin music, which, according to the accompanying poem “The Harpy,” is a seductive siren song that lulls the magazine’s readers into complaisance (104). Amid the chaos Fletcher’s sword remains hidden from the public, who can see only the welcoming authors, who appear waving and reading to them from the ship’s deck. Both Harper’s publishing practices and its seduction of readers remained notorious, though the magazine had been dramatically altered by the time this cartoon was printed.

“The Vestal Virgins . . . on the Altar of the Fine Arts”: Appeals to Women Readers

While Harper’s engaged first with the culture of reprinting and then experimented with literary nationalism, ultimately uniting the two, the magazine never strayed from one unifying mission: the initiation of common readers into the culturally informed middle class. Harper’s, like
the American publishing system, was characterized by a democratic view of its relationship to readers. The magazine created what Ronald Zboray calls “a fictive people,” an audience that is invented as it is described. This audience was encouraged to participate in the pursuit of socioeconomic mobility through “self-culture,” a strict program of reading that would not necessarily provide economic improvement but an improvement of the heart and mind, joining the masses with the educated middle class in a precarious marriage of sensibility and taste (129–30). The editors proclaimed the magazine’s superior ability to transform the common reader into the educated reader by stating that they had “no doubt” they could “present a Monthly Compendium of the periodical productions of the day which no one who has the slightest relish for miscellaneous reading, or the slightest desire to keep himself informed of the progress and results of the literary genius of his own age, would willingly be without” (“A Word at the Start” 2). However, while the magazine was constructed as the embodiment of democracy, its message was hierarchical and authoritative. Harper’s defined itself as a magazine for the literate but undereducated masses, but not of them; it was a sort of anthology of the best literature of the day chosen by experts who would guide readers toward high cultural literacy. As Nancy Glazener puts it, both Harper’s and its high cultural contemporaries like the Atlantic Monthly fulfilled the “need to secure a wider audience for high culture who could testify to the worthiness of its controllers’ leadership by submitting to their rules of access and standards of valuation, and the need to signal that not just anyone was in the position to understand that culture and enjoy it properly” (35). While the magazine claimed to empower readers, it also endowed itself with the cultural power to compel them to buy the magazine in order to signal their literary taste.

The magazine’s call for more literate and, especially, tasteful Americans (for more Harper’s readers) is exemplified in a statement on America’s participation in England’s Great Exhibition in the December 1851 “Editor’s Easy Chair.” According to Harper’s, the greatest display of the attainments of civilization was not a success for the United States:

[I]t is quite certain that on the score of taste, we have made a bad show in the palace. It was in bad taste to claim more room than we could fill; it was in bad taste to decorate our comparatively small show, with insignia and lettering so glaring and pretentious; it was in bad taste not to wear a little of the modesty, which conscious strength ought certainly to give. (132)
Harper’s suggests that Americans would do best to take a lesson in subtlety from their forebears before attempting to boldly create a new style that could embarrass the young nation. The bad taste exemplified by the gaudy ornamentation of the American exhibit—which corresponds with the magazine’s critique of the excessive emotionalism of American sentimental literature—emphasizes the need for British influence to tame and therefore cultivate the growth of American aesthetic sensibilities. Harper’s took as its broader mission the improvement of American taste by studying British examples, and women readers—as guardians of the cultural life of the family and nurturers who would ultimately raise the level of public culture by influencing the private lives of potentially powerful public figures—became the primary targets for the magazine’s lessons in literary influence.

In keeping with the common conception of women as both the primary readers of fiction and the literacy educators of the family, Harper’s aimed its rhetoric of taste at them. By feminizing the magazine’s readers, the editors were better able to adopt an authoritative (and sometimes condescending) tone that eliminated the need to negotiate the boundaries of taste with male readers, whose status would be closer to their own. James Machor points out that this was not an uncommon practice. He maintains that critics and editors used “a strategy of informed reading that was essentially conservationist and ultimately narcissistic” as they “sought to multiply their own images, as cultural incarnations, in modified and well-controlled female replicas” (75). The general public was thus represented by the educable and educating American women readers, to whom Harper’s devoted its literary lessons, lessons that focused on British novels as a means to create tasteful, middle-class readers who would ostensibly participate in the larger project of preparing Americans to produce their own literature and establish a national literary identity that was lacking within Harper’s pages. As a means of bolstering its authority through the empowerment of its target audience of women readers, the magazine placed importance on the private realm as a place in which future public skills would be nurtured. In other words, if women readers could gain literary taste and an appropriate sense of national duty, they would transform the public realm by educating the literate and literary Americans of the next generation (who would hopefully continue to read Harper’s).

The magazine’s focus on women is apparent in its first issue, which showcased at least eight selections that concerned primarily women’s lives, including articles about how to effectively use hard water in the household; the life of the Duchess of Orleans; the duties
of motherhood; and the superior qualities of married (over single) men. In addition, the substantial number of pieces copied from the *Ladies' Companion* during the first year and the standard inclusion of two to three pages of fashion plates indicate that *Harper's* catered to the female members of its audience. In fact, the fashion plates not only offered tasteful clothing styles to go along with the other lessons in taste the magazine presented but also provided the magazine’s rhetorical readership with images of their imaginary selves, arranged in everyday home or outdoor settings, looking back at them from *Harper’s* pages.

Isabelle Lehuu’s analysis of the fashion plates in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* is relevant in the context of *Harper’s* as well. Lehuu argues that women readers of American magazines were not positioned as passive consumers, but rather as active participants in the transformation of American culture (74). In particular, she argues, fashion plates depicted women in standardized duos or quartets that became “repetitious
representation[s] of almost identical ladies, like a species” constituting a “sisterhood’ of middle-class women” and a “blueprint for the formation of a group consciousness” (81–82). This consciousness was defined not only through tasteful attire but also through domestic activities such as reading that would strengthen the family and the nation. In fact, several of Harper’s fashion plates depict women with books in their hands, indicating the power of print even while focusing on the fashionable, middle-class body (Figure 2).

The books depicted in Harper’s fashion plates serve as a reminder that the power of women within the magazine was not confined to fashions or even household duties. Indeed, Harper’s women readers were expected to improve their minds so that they could effectively fulfill their roles as middle-class wives, mothers, and disseminators of cultural knowledge. Therefore, the editors announced that they would “seek to combine entertainment with instruction, and to enforce, through channels which attract rather than repel attention, the best and most important lessons of morality and of practical life” (“Advertisement” to Volume I). The moral and the practical were united in women’s roles as guardians of their family’s literacy and taste. The fitness of women for the job of dispensing literary knowledge to their families is clearly established in an article on “Woman’s Offices and Influence” (October 1851), written by University of Michigan Professor J. H. Agnew. Agnew claims that along with their duties to create a happy home, to soften the effects of public life on their husbands, and to maintain morality and religion within the family, women “are the vestal virgins to watch the fires on the altar of the fine arts,” whose obligation it is to “Tell [their] sons and [their] sires that there are higher sources of joy. Point them away from earth’s sordid gold to the brighter gems of literature. Direct their energies to the intellectual and moral advancement of their age” (555). Thus, Harper’s insisted that women had a responsibility to maintain their family’s pursuit of literary activities because their husbands could be too easily distracted by their association with the corrupting world of business.

The magazine never wavered from its insistence that women were crucial to the development of a superior literary culture and even gave this endeavor an intellectual tenor that might seem surprising. For example, “Men and Women” (June 1850), an article signed by “A Young Wife” and reprinted from The Ladies’ Companion, reinforces Harper’s argument that in addition to their traditional domestic duties, women should play an intellectual role within the family. It exhorts men to learn “to choose wives among the women who possess [intel-
lectual] qualities” because “The improvement of both sexes must be simultaneous.” According to the article, it is unfortunate that “A ‘gentleman’s horror’ is still a ‘blue stocking,’ which unpleasing epithet is invariably bestowed upon all women who have read much, and who are able to think and act for themselves” (89). This article encourages the development of female intellect but acknowledges that men must be conditioned to accept smart women as a positive influence on their family and their country. As Harper’s invited women to participate in and perpetuate the literary lessons it offered, it asked men to accept the vital role women could play in refiguring American cultural life, including aspects of the public realm.

It is precisely because of the editors’ stated belief in women’s power to transform public culture that Harper’s was so preoccupied with creating proper women readers and controlling the literary values that would be passed on to the next generation. As Lori Merish argues in Sentimental Materialism, while conceptions of taste typically reinforced male authority, taste was also envisioned as “the natural property of women” (5). Women’s tasteful consumption became a civic identity that justified an increasingly commercial society and in fact reinvented commodities as “forms of interiority proper to . . . domestic life” (6–7). While women were supposedly protecting men from the undue influence of commerce, what they bought—whether a magazine or a bonnet—was a crucial signifier of individual and national identity. Women’s tasteful consumption of literature was therefore subject to strict controls intended to sustain the magazine’s own authority as a commodity that would bring credit to the home and the nation. Whenever the feminine public’s consumer desires seemed to deny the civic duty Harper’s assigned to them, the magazine scolded its readers for participating in literary “crazes.” For example, when readers—identified as women—rushed out in droves to attend Thackeray’s American lecture tour, they opened themselves up for an attack on the grounds that they were participating in a distasteful literary trend. Thackeray, seen as an otherwise admirable British realist, suddenly became objectionable because of his association with unpredictable consumer impulses that the magazine sought to control. The January 1853 “Editor’s Easy Chair” reflects this anxiety about women’s ability to determine literary trends:

At the date of our writing, [Thackeray] is beguiling two evenings a week very pleasantly, for a very large crowd of listeners, in most crisp and pointed talk about Humorists of a century ago in England.


CHAPTER 1

Mr. Thackeray’s talk has given start to a Swift, and Congreve, and Addison furor; the booksellers are driving a thrifty trade in forgotten volumes of “Old English Essayists”; the Spectator has found its way again upon parlor-tables . . . Tristram Shandy even is almost forgiven his lewdness; . . . and hundreds of Lilliput literary ladies are twitching the mammoth Gulliver’s whiskers. (279)

This passage seeks to quash the literary craze by calling into question the morality and taste of the eighteenth-century works that Thackeray praised. The “lewdness” of Shandy and the intimacy of the ladies with Gulliver’s whiskers certainly suggest an inappropriate relationship between such literature and women readers.

The February 1853 “Easy Chair” similarly criticizes women readers for jumping on the bandwagon of popular fads:

Aside from the Henry Esmond and Thackeray fever of the winter, we do not know that we have any particular contagion to speak of. New York ladies are certainly literary the present season . . . The taste for German, Hungarian, and music, has yielded to a taste for old English literature; and the number of “British Essayists,” and “Addison’s Works,” and “Gulliver’s Travels” . . . which have been done up in calf and gilt, and sold for Christmas cadeaux, is, we are told, most surprising; and far exceeds the number for any previous year. (419)

Harper’s reasserts its control by poking fun at the crowds who blindly follow Thackeray’s return to the eighteenth century and by instructing its readers to stick to the realist and moralist British works of the nineteenth century, which it promotes as the embodiment of high culture. Of course, less than a year later the magazine seemed to have jumped on the bandwagon itself as it proudly promoted its new Thackeray serial, The Newcomes. These self-contradictory statements point to Harper’s obsession with both preventing the spread of disease-like fads that would threaten literary taste and maintaining its own respectability even while marketing high culture to the feminized masses. Frivolous gift books and literary fevers, signs of a literary consumer culture run amok, threatened the taste and stability that Harper’s promoted. Even though the system of literary consumer culture allowed Harper’s to exist as another artifact of the expanding and increasingly national publishing market, the magazine attempted to avoid becoming a symbol of crass consumerism by controlling taste and thereby creating a literary demand that only it could fill.

52
Interestingly, it is Thackeray’s novel *The Newcomes* that provided *Harper’s*’s audience with a model woman reader able to successfully fulfill both her private and public roles as educator and patron of the arts. Ethel Newcome transforms herself from a strong-minded yet directionless woman into an educated and self-sacrificing one. At the beginning of the novel, Ethel’s grandmother Sophia Newcome taints the idea of women’s intellectual activity by dying after she has stayed up reading alone late at night. However, Ethel makes reading a positive force for the public good. After breaking her engagement to Lord Farintosh and gracefully accepting the news that her cousin and true love, Clive, has married another woman, she not only “devoted herself entirely to the nurture and education of her brother’s orphan children. She educated herself in order to teach them” (July 1855, 205). Her self-education allows her to appreciate the importance of art as she learns to see in it the “secret of all secrets,” “the truth [that] may lighten . . . darkness” (August 1855, 345). Ethel continually defends and supports her cousin Clive’s decision to be an artist despite the fact that her family sees this as an unworthy profession. She is regardless, too, of his own admission that he is not even a very good artist: “[M]y art, Ethel, is not only my choice and my love, but my honor too. I shall never distinguish myself in it; I may take smart likenesses, but that is all” (February 1855, 370). Ethel respects Clive for his honorable devotion to art rather than for his artistic productions.

Within the context of *Harper’s* this commentary on the struggling artist and the self-educating woman reader takes on an added richness. Clive corresponds to *Harper’s* conception of the American writer, who must be nurtured and provided with British literary models in order to move to a higher level. In fact, Clive only succeeds in selling his art to his friends, who buy it as an act of charity. Several of *Harper’s* rival magazines argued that such acts of charity were the responsibility of American publishers and magazines and accused *Harper’s* of neglecting this duty. *Harper’s*, however, leaves the job of nurturing art to its women readers. Moreover, this is a job Ethel does well as she ultimately sacrifices part of her own inheritance to preserve Clive’s devotion to his unprofitable work. When she discovers a letter hidden away in the book that her grandmother Sophia was reading just before she died, Ethel is spurred to action. Addressed to Sophia’s lawyer, the letter expresses her intention to change her will to include Clive. Ethel thereby reads her way to rescuing her cousin and his family. Ethel finds happiness by following the path suggested by *Harper’s* itself: She educates herself, passes her knowledge on to her family’s youth, and ultimately saves art—or at least one struggling artist.
Realism, Sentimentalism, and Charles Dickens’s “Heart-Mind”: Bleak House as an Exemplar of Literary Taste

Sentimental literature was often characterized in Harper’s as a weak and feminine form that would destroy the nation’s ability to create its own high literary culture. The December 1853 “Editor’s Easy Chair” laments the fact that such a practical people as Americans could also be “the most sentimental people in the world. . . . There is a kind of literature and art grown up among us, which is weak and unhealthy, and yet the most popular of all” (132). Harper’s rejects women’s sentimental fiction as a predominant trend in American literature and discourages readers from wasting their time on the “pert sentimentalism” of “alliterative ladies” like “Tabithy Toadstool” when Dickens and Thackeray “are easy to obtain, and are of an incomparable superiority” (ibid.). The magazine warns that “If you suffer yourself to be so much pleased by . . . sentimental books, you will find that you have lost your taste for the great works of literature” (ibid.). Thus, sentimental fiction was characterized not only as an inferior form, but also as a form that was dangerously appealing to women because it interfered with the development of high literary taste and would, as a result, weaken the nation’s potential to produce good literature.

In theory, Harper’s defined American sentimentalism as an inferior and addictive pleasure for women readers and an amateur and frivolous endeavor for women writers who often adopted silly pseudonyms. However, despite Harper’s often harsh antisentimental rhetoric, in practice, the boundaries between the real and the sentimental were deliberately collapsed as the magazine contained many of its own sentimental selections and frequently used sentimental language to appeal to its readers. Highlighting the magazine’s repressed sentimentiality, Dowgray calls Harper’s “a school for sentimentalism” that “also included an academy annex in English serial fiction for the revolt against sentimentalism” (114). In 1857 Putnam’s explained Harper’s paradoxical character by stating that it had “managed to hit the average taste of the public” as a consequence of the fact that it had “no strong expression, except of pathos or humor, because, as it wanted to sell itself to everybody, it was necessary that nobody’s prejudices should be hurt. . . . In the very reasons of its success lay the impossibility of its becoming an intellectual power in the country” (“Harper’s Monthly and Weekly” 293–94). While Harper’s may indeed have struggled overmuch to satis-
fy the public and maximize profits, it took seriously its mission to define its own standard of taste. Despite the fact that Harper’s safely straddled the old culture of reprinting and the new culture of literary nationalism and refused to overtly defend American sentimentalism or devote itself to American authors, it defined sentimentality and realism as symbiotic forms that could coexist successfully and even strengthen one another. Indeed, Harper’s justified implicit acceptance of sentimentality as a means of elevating the function of literature in society. According to the December 1853 “Editor’s Easy Chair,” in order for sentimentalism to be valuable, it had to serve a greater purpose than providing a simple emotional outlet for readers. Just as “Marat was fond of kittens,” anyone could experience an emotional response to literature and continue to be unfeeling in real life (132). Thus, sentiment had to have a function similar to that of high cultural works, which are characterized as “tenderer than sentimentality” because “tears which are drawn from an easy sensibility do not wash away much unhappiness from the world” (ibid.). Harper’s argues that it is not tears but the recognition of literature’s higher societal purpose that is vital to a healthy culture and a more humane world. Because it linked reading literature and transforming the public realm, the magazine accordingly called on women readers to teach literary values to their families. The magazine seems to propose that once readers sympathetically engaged with the world’s problems represented in literature, they could effect change. However, the mechanisms for change were never fully articulated. Regardless of the vagueness of the relationship between reading and public transformation, it was clear that pure tearfulness or a love of kittens would be useless, but good literature—whether it contained sentiment or not—was constructed as that which helped to transform the public consciousness by tapping into the moral power of Harper’s women readers.

Though Harper’s editors trumpeted the supremacy of British realism as a cultural form and implied that Dickens was an exemplary British realist, the qualities that made Dickens a central figure in Harper’s had at least as much to do with his sentimentality as they did with his creation of a sense of reality. While printing the work of Dickens was an obvious choice for a periodical that intended to capitalize on the success of British serial novelists, the magazine editors chose not to promote their serialization of Bleak House by focusing on his popularity among both readers and critics. Instead, Harper’s translated the aesthetic qualities of Dickens’s work into a particularized standard of taste that it promoted. The poem “Sonnet to Dickens, Esq.,"
reprinted from *The Examiner* in September 1854, points out what made Dickens so powerful within the pages of *Harper’s*:

So, unto hosts of lives thy varied powers
Have given to heart and mind a better birth. . . .
So doth thy pen delightfully compel
The hardest heart to yield unto thy sway. . . .
Thou master of most pleasant Humor-wit,
Thine is the largest Heart-mind ever writ! (572)

The use of the term “heart-mind” to explain Dickens’s talent reflects what his contemporaries saw as his expert ability to unite emotionalism and rationalism in his writing and to simultaneously appeal to the heart and the intellect by combining sentimentality and realism. So, while *Harper’s* advocated British novels because of their high cultural cachet as realist works, the magazine actually emphasized the superior sentimental qualities of Dickens’s work as much as the realistic qualities. Examining the specific ways in which *Harper’s* praises Dickens helps to clarify what the standard of taste in the magazine really was, since it was not as simple as the editorial commentaries made it seem. Although the magazine separated realism and sentimentalism in theory, its most popular writer embodied the magazine’s own melding of these two forms.

Dickens’s ability to combine the sentimental and the real helped establish his reputation in America even before *Harper’s* adopted his work as its model of high culture. In December 1844, two years after Dickens’s rock-star-like tour of America (organized in part to raise awareness about the need for an international copyright law), the influential critic E. P. Whipple began his own successful lecture tour, during which he lauded Dickens as the greatest novelist of the century. Published in the *North American Review* in October 1849, Whipple’s analysis of Dickens was reprinted in journals and newspapers all over the country (Gardner 8–10). “Novels and Novelists: Charles Dickens” summarizes the major aspects of Dickens’s work that I contend made him a suitable choice for *Harper’s*, including his combination of realism and sentimentalism, his mild but stirring social critiques, and his educational purpose.

Whipple begins by praising Dickens as a poet of practical life, whose “perfection of knowledge and insight” give his novels “their naturalness, their freedom of movement, and their value as lessons in human nature as well as consummate representations of actual life”
He sees Dickens as a writer who accurately depicts the world while also providing a moral philosophy that educates readers. Even though Whipple argues that Dickens’s genius is reliant on his depictions of “reality” and “truth,” he also values the writer for his ability to move readers emotionally: “It is difficult to say whether Dickens is more successful in humor or pathos. . . . It is certain that his genius can as readily draw tears as provoke laughter. . . . One source of his pathos is the intense and purified conception of moral beauty, that beauty which comes from thoughtful brooding over the most solemn and affecting realities of life” (403–4). This is a significant statement because it shows that Whipple believed Dickens provided realistic representations that touched the hearts of his readers and, even more importantly, that Dickens attained such a high level of realism by accurately expressing sentiment. According to Whipple, morality itself derives from the experience of sympathy, which Dickens evokes through his realistic writing. Thus, for Whipple, Dickens’s sentimentality—his ability to evoke intense emotional responses through the depiction of sympathetic (if not pathetic) characters—is integral to his form of realism. However, Whipple avoids using the word “sentimental” to describe Dickens, and he draws clear distinctions between the sentimentality of so many American writers and the pathos of Dickens’s works, as well as between the caricature presented in American fiction and the ability of Dickens’s novels to excel “in the exhibition of those minor traits [of character] which the eye of genius alone can detect” (402). Though Whipple, like Harper’s, overtly disparages sentimental American writing, it is precisely Dickens’s ability to meld the realistic with the sentimental that makes him a “genius.” According to Whipple and Harper’s, emotional identification with characters leads to moral understanding and to public change, both of which are at the heart of realism. This assessment of Dickens’s value coincides with Harper’s promotion of his work through a variety of editorials, literary notices, pilfered pieces from Household Words, and, most significantly, through the serialization of Bleak House in nineteen monthly issues of the magazine.

Bleak House, in particular, demonstrates Dickens’s skill at combining the real and the sentimental for a moral purpose. As Mary Lenard claims, “many of Dickens’s central themes and literary techniques—his use of illness and other forms of physical suffering to arouse feelings of pathos in his audience, his allusions to commonly held religious beliefs, his understanding of death, even his construction of himself as a preacher who taught his audience their social duties—all mark Dickens as a part of a feminized, sentimentalist discourse of social reform” (60).
Whether Harper’s admitted it or not, Dickens had a lot in common with the American women writers the magazine sometimes ridiculed. Furthermore, the form and themes of the novel suited the magazine’s efforts to allow private, feminine voices to influence public life with the legitimizing guidance of its own expert intellectuals who wrote editorial commentaries.

One of the most powerful ways Bleak House combines the real and the sentimental is in the juxtaposition of its dual narrative voices. In fact, the voices of Esther and the omniscient narrator in Bleak House echo the conflicting voices within Harper’s itself. What Sylvere Monod has called Esther Summerson’s “sentimentality and frequent tearfulness” parallels Harper’s sentimental appeals to its women readers, whereas the “imperious authority” Monod notes in the omniscient narrator coincides with the authoritative voice of Harper’s cultural arbiters, who attempted to exert control over public taste (18, 6). These voices compete within Bleak House and serve as contrasting bookends for the narrative, which is introduced by the “objective” omniscient narrator and concluded by the sentimental Esther. The novel opens by comparing the Court of Chancery, around which the events of the plot revolve, to its surrounding environment of smoke, mud, and fog, which symbolize the pollution of the law and the court system:

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth. . . . Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. . . . Fog everywhere. . . . Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth. (April 1852, 649)

Just as Harper’s critics unflinchingly draw the line between high and low cultural forms (though the magazine proceeds to violate them), the omniscient narrator of Bleak House passes judgment on the entire Chancery Court system with an incisive use of metaphorical language that compels the reader to submit to its own seemingly self-evident conclusion about government officials who are so deeply immersed in their own bureaucracy that they are inevitably driven to entrenchment
and corruption. These portions of the novel take us into male institutions such as courtrooms and solicitor’s offices, allow us to follow Detective Bucket from fact to fact until he uncovers the mysteries of the novel, and bring us into the aristocratic realm of the Dedlock family. This narrative voice provides access to professional spaces and class domains that Esther cannot have much experience with because she is a middle-class woman. The domineering editorial voices in Harper’s likewise familiarize women readers with critical realms they may not be fully cognizant of because their intellectual experiences have been limited. Both the omniscient narrator of Bleak House and the seemingly all-knowing editors of Harper’s provide a background against which women (represented by Esther’s narrative voice on the one hand and Harper’s ideal women readers on the other) can make their private wills public.

In contrast to the omniscient narrator, Esther provides access to middle-class scenes of domesticity and sympathetic depictions of the living conditions of the poor, with which women would typically be more familiar. Esther’s delineation of her own sentimentalty highlights her suitability not only for the private sphere but also for performing charitable acts that transgress the boundaries between the private and the public realms. As a narrator she is able to guide readers through private experiences such as her childhood as an orphan, the emotional abuse she receives at the hands of her aunt, a bout with smallpox that leaves her scarred, the nurturing relationships she has with the many downtrodden children she encounters, a covert reunion with her long lost mother, and her secret love for Allan Woodcourt. All of these events are delivered through tears, self-deprecation, and a few fainting spells as Esther self-consciously constructs herself as a sentimental heroine. She plays this role well, sometimes with a sense of irony, but always with an understanding of what is expected of her as a proper woman:

I don’t know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, and I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed and say, “Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn’t!” but it is all of no use. I hope any one who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can’t be kept out. (June 1852, 95)
Indeed, by the end of the novel Esther has something to do with each aspect of the omniscient narrator’s public tale as well as her own private one. Her story demonstrates the integral role women can play in the course of public events despite their societal limitations. Even the omniscient narrator acknowledges Esther’s importance, asking the rhetorical question “what connexion can there be” among so many characters and plot lines, a question that only Esther herself can answer (September 1852, 374). As Carol Senf argues, Dickens’s use of two narrators in *Bleak House* is not intended to present two mutually exclusive worlds, but rather to allow the reader to “synthesize the two narrators as he or she reads the novel” (22). While Senf concludes that the synthesis of the two narrators leads to an androgynous voice that critiques the separation of spheres, I maintain that the dual narrators showed contemporary readers something a bit more modest and practical. Without overturning the idea of separate spheres, the synthesis of the voices of the omniscient narrator and Esther Summerson, like the synthesis of the voices in *Harper’s*, indicates that private, female voices could indeed have a powerful effect on the public, masculine sphere.

Despite *Harper’s* strong support of Dickens, the author began to face harsh criticism for his exaggeration of both social wrongs and individual characters with the publication of *Bleak House*. In the May 1852 article “On The Genius of Charles Dickens,” *The Knickerbocker* expressed the generally accepted view of Dickens in its anticipation of his new novel: “No man knows better how to . . . appeal to our best sympathies, and sustain the cause of the suffering poor. . . . [Dickens’s works] shall be admired at some later day . . . because they have set forth nothing less general than the truth of nature, and appeal to all men by a common bond” (430). However, as George H. Ford points out, the increasingly harsh social criticism in *Bleak House* and Dickens’s subsequent works drove a wedge into his formerly solid critical support (100). By October 1853, the last month of *Harper’s* serialization of *Bleak House*, the *North American Review* had turned on Dickens. In opposition to Whipple’s earlier insistence in the *Review* that it was not Dickens but rather American writers who were caricaturists, the journal proclaimed that “Mr. Dickens is, so to speak, only a caricaturist” and that “In point of literary merit . . . *Bleak House* is a falling off from its predecessors” (424). Likewise, in England, the *Athenaeum* declared that “There is progress in art to be praised in this book,—and there is progress in exaggeration to be deprecated” (108). *Bentley’s* noted that “A book which, Mr. Dickens himself assures us, has had more readers than any of his
former works, is, to a certain extent, independent of criticism... [But], in no other work is the tendency to disagreeable exaggeration so conspicuous as this” (372). Critics on both sides of the Atlantic struggled with Dickens’s protest against contemporary societal institutions as well as with exaggerated characters such as Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, whose over-the-top devotion to their socially active agendas result in the neglect and abuse of their duties as wives and mothers.

Harper’s, however, vigorously responded to “sharp criticisms upon Mr. Dickens’s Mrs. Jellyby” in its “Editor’s Easy Chair” for June 1854: “As usual, whenever Dickens is censured, we do not agree. We believe that the satire was the result of very shrewd observation and wise consideration... The Borrioboola-Gha style of philanthropy is the most fatal blow to real charity. Fictitious feeling exhales in a fancied sympathy, which not only tends to bring actual sympathy into disrepute, but dissipates the action and the charity of those who are truly, but not wisely, generous” (119–20). Dickens’s characters are defended on the grounds that they are essentially real, even if they are satirical or sentimental, because they convey a moral message that expresses truth. Once again, the magazine maintains its complex aesthetic by dividing false sympathy (which could be manufactured by overly sentimental writing or an affection for kittens) from true sympathy (presumably elicited from Dickens’s more “realistic” use of sentiment). For Harper’s, Esther exhibited true sympathy because she reinforced the construction of women as private forces for public change who could do their jobs more skillfully from within the home than from weakened positions as public actors. Within this context Esther Summerson’s narration of half of the novel exemplifies “real charity,” whereas presumptuously public women like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle “bring actual sympathy into disrepute.”

Esther’s moral authority is made clear when, after observing Mrs. Jellyby’s indifference to her filthy and neglected children, Esther describes the “telescopic philanthropist” as a middle-aged woman “with a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off” as if she “could see nothing nearer than Africa!” (April 1852, 663). Mrs. Jellyby is so focused on the Africans that she neglects her family, leaving them hungry, dirty, and miserable. She even neglects her own hygiene, forgetting to brush her hair and failing to properly dress herself. In reporting what she witnesses at the Jellyby household to Mr. Jarndyce, Esther indicates that she has her own priorities straight. She concludes that “it is right to begin with the obligations of home, sir; and that, perhaps, while those are overlooked and neglected, no other duties can possibly
be substituted for them” (May 1852, 816). As Esther passes her first test of domesticity, Jarndyce immediately hands her the all-important keys to the household stores and allows her to assume the fairy-tale role of “Dame Durden,” loved and respected head of the household.

Esther describes Mrs. Pardiggle as another one of those ladies distinguished by her “rapacious benevolence,” her loud voice, and her ability to take up most of the space in a room, knocking down chairs with her skirts as she passes through (June 1852, 90). Mrs. Pardiggle is shown to be a bully who abhors Mrs. Jellyby’s neglect of her children but tortures her own by forcing them to participate in her exhaustive charitable activities, which consist primarily of condescendingly preaching to the poor (ibid., 94). In contrast to Mrs. Pardiggle’s alienating ministrations, Esther becomes the ideal reformer who listens to the poor, feels true compassion for their plight, and helps each sufferer she meets on an individual basis. Esther’s reflection on the caricatures of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle leads her to a more acceptable balance between fulfilling her household duties and participating in the reformation of society. Like Ethel Newcome, Esther embodies the model woman reader imagined by the magazine, the reformer who works from within the private sphere to effect the public sphere but does not move from one sphere to the other as the dangerous women activists do.

The novel concludes with Esther’s characteristically self-deprecat ing response to her husband’s inquiry, “don’t you know that you are prettier than you ever were?”: “And I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—” (October 1853, 686).

Esther’s seeming passivity and reluctance to admit her own powers of attraction (and of housekeeping, healing, charity, and organization) contrast with the authoritative statements the omniscient narrator makes. Yet, her subjective tale overpowers the omniscient narrator’s critique of societal institutions. Esther’s domestic narrative counteracts the omniscient narrative of poverty and legal tyranny and defeats the bleak world with a new Bleak House that is not so bleak after all. The sentimental domestic form thus “wins” the battle of the competing narratives, but remains dependant on the objective, realist form to legitimize the relevance of the private sphere to the public realm. In other words, a reader’s belief in the “truth” of Esther’s private narrative is
reliant on the factuality and confirmation of the omniscient public narrative. It is only the power of Esther’s private voice, however, that effectively transforms the public realm. Likewise, the “critical authority” of Harper’s editors is useful only insofar as it interacts with the private voices of the magazine’s women readers, who are given the mission to transmit the cultural literacy the magazine supplies to their families for the good of the nation (and, of course, of Harper and Brothers’ bottom line).

“Assuredly No British Offshoot”: The Serial Showdown between Melville and Dickens

Recognizing Harper’s origins in an American culture of reprinting and its implicit support of sentimental realism helps to explain the Harper brothers’ neglect of one of their most promising American writers, Herman Melville. Although they had already agreed to publish Melville’s Moby-Dick and may have potentially increased profits from the novel by first serializing it in their magazine, Harper and Brothers chose not to do so. Instead, Harper’s featured only a brief excerpt from Moby-Dick, “The Town-Ho’s Story,” in October 1851, one month before the novel’s publication. Though Harper and Brothers used “The Town-Ho’s Story” to advertise the book, duly noting its forthcoming publication by Harper and Brothers as well as Bentley’s in London (658), it might seem surprising that such a financially savvy publishing house would forgo the opportunity to publish more excerpts from the book or to serialize it in its entirety before publishing it in volume form in order to maximize profits. Though Harper’s may have urged its women readers to follow Ethel Newcome’s example by saving the nation’s art and supporting the next generation of American writers, the magazine was not in the business of saving struggling American writers itself, particularly writers like Melville who did not conform to its sentimental-realist style.

The only step the company took was to continue publicizing the book within the magazine by printing reviews and advertisements for it. The “Literary Notices” section for December 1851 opens with an original review by George Ripley, one of Harper’s most prominent “literary guides,” who wrote many of the notices and edited that section of the magazine (Hetherington 213). Ripley praises the novel for surpassing “the former productions of this highly successful author” and
constructing “a romance, a tragedy, and a natural history, not without numerous suggestions on psychology, ethics, and theology,” which illustrate “the mystery of human life” (137). Though Ripley contends that “the genius of the author for moral analysis is scarcely surpassed by his wizard power of description,” Harper and Brothers had not been convinced that Melville’s work was worthy of a prominent place in their magazine. The “Literary Notices” for January and April 1852 include reprints of favorable British reviews of the book from the *London Atlas* and the *London Leader*, respectively. The *London Atlas* declares the novel to be Melville’s “greatest effort,” revealing “finer and more highly soaring imaginative powers” filled with “thoroughly original veins of philosophic speculation” (277). The pronouncement featured in the *London Leader*, which Hugh Hetherington claims was made by G.H. Lewes (195), further confirms the originality and power of Melville’s work:

Want of originality has long been the just and standing reproach to American literature; the best of its writers were but second-hand Englishmen. Of late some have given evidence of originality; not absolute originality, but such genuine outcoming of the American intellect as can be safely called national. Edgar Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville are assuredly no British offshoots. . . . [It is] significant that these writers have a wild and mystic love of the super-sensual, peculiarly their own. To move a horror skillfully, with something of the earnest faith in the Unseen, and with weird imagery to shape these phantasms so vividly that the most incredulous mind is hushed, absorbed—to do this American literature is without rival. (711)

While *Moby-Dick* is famous for its many negative reviews, this evidence suggests that on both sides of the Atlantic Melville was considered by some to be a very important American writer. However, Harper and Brothers determined that Melville’s “wizard powers of description,” “highly soaring imaginative powers,” “philosophic speculation,” “mystic love of the super-sensual,” and “weird imagery” were unsuitable for its best-selling periodical.

I do not mean to suggest that the Harper brothers’ relationship to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* fully explains Harper’s neglect of American novels, but merely highlight the fact that while Harper and Brothers had easy access to Melville’s work, they deliberately chose not to feature it in their magazine despite its potential popularity as a descendant of Melville’s
well-received works *Typee* and *Omoo*. The fact that Melville owed the company $700 preceding the publication of the book could have served as an even greater motivation to do everything possible to make money off of the writer’s new book. However, the Harpers’ refusal to lend Melville money on expectation of his earnings indicates that their confidence in the novel’s profitability was low. Furthermore, it seems that they may have made the right decision, considering that the novel did not follow in the footsteps of Melville’s more popular novels. Instead, it sold only about 3,800 copies over a year and a half and earned less than any of Melville’s previous works (Robertson-Lorant 295–96).

In addition to other possible motivations, Harper and Brothers may have determined that Melville’s novel would not be profitable for the magazine because it would not interest its target audience or fulfill its particular standard of taste. It may well have been the case, as William Charvat suggests, that “the chief consumers of fiction in America,” namely women, “settled the fate of *Moby-Dick*” since they “could not have failed to notice that . . . there was no place for women, or that there was unlikely to be one in a book about whaling” (242). Furthermore, Melville’s novel certainly did not meet Harper’s standard of sentimental realism in the way that *Bleak House* did. However, instead of providing a more comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Melville’s novel was unfit for Harper’s, I hope to show how a Dickens-Melville rivalry played out in ways that may provide more productive insights into Harper’s character and agenda. In order to do so, I examine the connections (and disconnections) between Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and Dickens’s *Bleak House*, the novel sitting in the place of honor while Melville subscribed to the magazine and wrote what would be his first published short story.

A number of critics have interpreted “Bartleby,” which Melville published in *Harper’s* more patriotic rival *Putnam’s*, as both an imitation and a refutation of Dickens’s novel. The story came out in November 1853, one month after *Bleak House* had concluded its serial run in *Harper’s*. The connection between the two works was noticed as early as June 1856, when Boston’s *Daily Evening Traveler* commented that “Bartleby” was “equal to anything from the pen of Dickens, whose writings it closely resembles, both as to the character of the sketch and the peculiarity of the style” (quoted in Foley 241). However, despite their similar characters (law copyists Nemo and Bartleby), themes (the law, bureaucracy, and inaction), and Meville’s Dickensian use of names (Ginger Nut, Nippers, and Turkey), the works diverge in their primary messages.
As I have shown, Dickens’s novel criticizes societal institutions but offers hope for the nation through the influence of the domestic realm as the problems caused by the Court of Chancery are resolved by the triumphs of private relationships, especially those involving Esther Summerson. In contrast, Melville’s story displays a Wall Street business world so devoid of the domestic that Bartleby’s private life takes place in a public law office in which “walls” exist everywhere but fail to provide the space necessary for domestic nurturing. Even Bartleby’s coworkers Nippers and Turkey bring their private bodily ills into the office, and Ginger Nut seems reliant on the crumbs of food he eats there. Furthermore, while Bleak House ends (re)productively with the birth of a promising new generation of humane, middle-class subjects produced by Esther, who is the domestic and moral center of the novel, “Bartleby” concludes with death as the only resolution for the inaction and alienation of the business world. Within the context of Harper’s, Dickens’s ability to balance the private and the public and to reveal the power of the domestic realm over the corrupting forces of public life was likely to be more appealing than Melville’s more pessimistic, masculine approach. Dickens’s emphasis on the power of the feminine, the sentimental, and the domestic corresponded with Harper’s focus on women readers as guardians of the nation’s cultural life, which was seen as necessary to temper the corrupting influence of the public sphere.

Robert Weisbuch posits that Melville’s story was meant as “an all-out attack” on what he saw as Dickens’s superficial analysis and easy solutions to social problems. According to Weisbuch, Melville wanted to expose Dickens’s “cowardly refusal” to “dig for disturbing, obscure truth” by showing that he could delve more deeply into epistemological questions in the space of a few pages than Dickens could in his entire sprawling novel (39–41). Melville may also have wanted to prove that English realism was limited and limiting because it failed to provide satisfying answers to the deeper questions that interested him. Instead, British realism offered neatly packaged appeasement and happy endings. The figure of the “copyist” in “Bartleby” may have been intended to parallel the realist writer who in an attempt to imitate life failed to create an artistic vision that moved readers to action. Bartleby’s preference not to copy also parallels Melville’s refusal (or failure) to write a novel that followed British models or that suited Harper’s.

However, Melville did attempt to please Harper’s editors with Israel Potter, a serialized novel that Harper’s rejected before Putnam’s published it in 1854. The story about a revolutionary-war hero may have
seemed perfect for a magazine that intended to boost its nationalistic profile, but, regardless of Melville’s attempt to conform to the magazine’s agenda, the Harpers once again denied Melville a prominent place in their magazine. Melville did, in fact, succeed in getting seven stories accepted for publication in Harper’s between 1853 and 1856, including “Cock-a-Doodle-Doo!” (December 1853), “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (April 1855), and “Jimmy Rose” (November 1855). Interestingly, Laurie Robertson-Lorant, Lea Bertani Vozar Newman, and Sheila Post-Lauria characterize Melville’s stories in Harper’s as his most sentimental works, an assessment that suggests Melville made a concerted effort to shape his submissions to suit the style of the magazine. Even more significantly, Post-Lauria claims that, although Melville’s stories published in Harper’s “treat social issues through sentimental rhetoric that is suggestive, the author’s stories for Putnam’s criticize sentimental views that soften social and political realities” (166). This contrast in Melville’s literary styles indicates that Harper’s neglect of Moby-Dick and Israel Potter probably inspired Melville to make a concerted effort to adapt to the demands of the editors, which led to the acceptance of a series of more marketable short stories in Harper’s. However, despite Melville’s efforts to fit in, his contributions were printed anonymously in the magazine, whereas Dickens’s name was scattered liberally throughout its pages.

Considering Melville’s laborious efforts to publish in Harper’s, his diatribe against copying seems to be not only an attack on Dickens or on the magazine that rejected him as a serial novelist, but also a protest against the entire enterprise of Harper and Brothers, a company founded on selling cheap copies of British literature to the masses. In fact, “Bartleby” comes to appear very much like a nationalist literary manifesto intended to hasten the demise of the culture of reprinting. Bartleby’s previous work in a Dead Letter Office—and the narrator’s contention in the concluding lines of the story that “On errands of life these letters speed to death” (Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, December 1853, 615)—takes on new significance as a critique of fiction whose only purpose is to approximate life but instead results in perpetuating the status quo, acceptance, inaction, and even the metaphorical death of a nation that happily consumes foreign literature without attending to its own artistic development.

Though Melville eventually adapted his style to suit Harper’s, in “Bartleby” he rebelled against this concession of his artistic integrity by condemning the sentimental valuation of feeling over action that he saw, perhaps incorrectly, as the magazine’s focus. In “Bartleby,”
sentimentality prevents the narrator from facing the fact that his
employee is the monstrous creation of a soulless industrial society and
allows him to escape recognition of the part he has played in sustain-
ing that world. Perhaps Melville hoped Harper’s editors would recog-
nize their relation to the narrator of his story. However, regardless of
whether “Bartleby” was written as an explicit critique of the serializa-
tion of Bleak House in Harper’s or of Harper’s agenda itself, Melville’s
work defies the magazine’s publishing practices. Melville’s denial in
“Bartleby” of the healing effects of the domestic realm and of the supe-
riority of the realist writer clearly struck a blow to the heart of Harper’s
identity, an identity that continued to be exemplified by Dickens,
regardless of Melville’s publication of a series of stories in the maga-
zine.

In his introduction to Bleak House (which was not printed in
Harper’s), Dickens presents a defense of himself that we can imagine as
a response to Melville’s critique of the novel. He explains himself as
a writer whose intent is to explore the fanciful within the limits of real-
ity. Dickens claims that he has “purposely dwelt on the romantic side
of familiar things” (Bleak House 43). However, despite his appeal to the
fancy, Dickens intended his novels to “present only incidents that
might occur” (ibid.). This desire to record reality faithfully is apparent
in the introduction, when Dickens defends his negative portrayal of
Chancery Court cases and his use of spontaneous combustion in the
novel by citing documented sources as evidence that the events in the
novel could actually occur. Dickens’s combination of fact and fancy,
reality and sentimentality, fit perfectly within a periodical that empha-
sized the connections between such disparate concepts as piracy and
nationalism or the private and public realms. Just as Harper’s conferred
upon British literature the ability to inspire better American literary
productions, it conferred upon women the power to transform the
nation from the privacy of their own homes.

Jean Ferguson Carr argues that, like Dickens’s magazine Household
Words, Bleak House makes “use of a feminine guise, privileging the inti-
mate, private, and authoritative powers usually associated with women
over the social, public, and authoritative powers usually associated
with men. But [Dickens] was also disrupting the conventional wisdom
that sharply divided the domestic and public spheres [by insisting] on
the interpenetration of these realms” (163). So, while Bleak House and
Harper’s have in common the incorporation of the feminine, they
interweave this “household narrative” with a public and authoritative
one. Together these competing voices made clear the relevance of the
domestic realm to the success of public culture and began to allow women to make sociopolitical claims that were integral to the nation’s identity. Like Esther Summerson, Harper’s women readers held the household keys—but these keys opened more than the household stores. They opened opportunities for women readers to play a role in establishing a truly national literature if they would only transmit Harper’s literary lessons to the next generation of American writers.

Piracy and the Patriotic Woman Reader