

Women and Sisters in Civil War Domestic Fiction: Harper's New Monthly Magazine and the Southern Literary Messenger

by Julie Still

In the nineteenth century, one staple form of entertainment, enlightenment, and edification was the periodical, providing access to news, literature, travel, politics, and science. The limited information available to people meant that those producing periodicals had a great deal of power – they had to be receptive to their readers' wishes and demands, as all good businesses must appeal to their markets, but they also had the opportunity to shape the ideas and opinions of their readers not only via the type of articles selected for publication but also the manner in which the articles were written. If a popular periodical is a mirror of the society that produced and purchased it (Papashvily, xv) then the morals and values are represented in a myriad of ways, as are its prejudices and politics.

In recent years Civil War history has seen a resurgence in interest, primarily military, but there is also an interest in social aspects and the role of women in war, as well as women's daily lives. A study of popular culture or at least some aspect of it, during the war years (1860-1865) will give some idea of the social forces at work in the Civil War. As the popular periodical was available to middle class households it would prove a useful form to study the proclivities of the middle class. Periodicals touched on many aspects of life, but looking at the domestic fiction published may provide a look at what middle class women were both producing and consuming. One interesting angle may be to study a northern periodical and a southern periodical to see what, if any, cultural differences can be gleaned from the popular press. To review solely what women might have been reading, this study is limited to short fiction, and what might be viewed as domestic fiction, focusing on specific representations of women, especially their friendships with, and sibling relationships with, other women.

A comparison of two such periodicals would require that the titles be similar in many ways, such as their prestige and regional impact, their editorial focus, their history, their frequency, circulation and audience, and their size and content. It would be impossible to find two titles that matched in all of these ways but some of the factors need to be equal in order to gauge cultural differences as opposed to differences in audience or editorial style.

Harper's New Monthly Magazine and *The Southern Literary Messenger*, while not having all of these items in common, are similar enough to compare. They were, to some degree, the *New Yorkers* of their day. Both were prestigious and had an impact on their respective regions. Both had one editor through the years 1861-1865, or in the case of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, to 1864 when it ceased publication. *Harper's* was larger in size and circulation but both were monthly, although *The Southern Literary Messenger* became almost a bi-monthly journal for the year 1861. Both serialized long fiction and published short stories. Both a page by page scan and a search of online contents were used to locate

relevant materials, in this case short stories, and additional bibliographic data, such as, in the case of *Harper's*, author's names.

The Southern Literary Messenger is the older of the two, having been founded in 1834 and was published in Richmond, Virginia. George Bagby served as editor from June 1860 to January 1864; Frank Alfriend became editor at that point. It is described as "the most famous periodical the South ever produced" (Tucker, 14), and "the most acclaimed of all nineteenth-century Southern magazines" (Riley, 233). As may be discerned from these quotes, *The Southern Literary Messenger* was started and published as a magazine by, for, and about the South. Of course the editors encouraged those living in other regions to subscribe; they also accepted (and often paid for) contributions from writers living outside the South and did not limit the content of the magazine solely to the South. However, *The Southern Literary Messenger* retained its regional flavor until it ceased publication in June 1864.

Unfortunately the efforts of the editors were not always returned in kind by the readers (Tucker, 14). Of the congratulatory notes received on the magazine's creation and first issues the majority came from outside the South (Mott, v.1, 631). Early editors hoped that the region's leisure class, specifically the gentlemen of leisure, would inundate the magazine with contributions of literature, travel, essays, and but most of the contributions from within the South came from the middle class, especially from professionals – doctors, lawyers, and teachers (Jacobs, 70). Those contributions from the upper classes were primarily written by women and for the most part consisted of poetry and fiction (Riley, 234).

Perhaps most disheartening to the editors and publishers was the lack of support from the Southern reader. Delinquent subscribers, including former president John Tyler (Mott, v.1, 647), had to be prodded often and the magazine was never a financial success. What must have been particularly galling was the popularity of Northern newspapers and periodicals in the South. In 1862, editor George Bagby wrote the following "Southern patriotism is, and has always been, a funny thing – indeed the funniest of things. It enables a man to abuse the Yankees, to curse the Yankees, to fight the Yankees, to do everything but quit taking the Yankee papers." (Bagby, Editor,'s, 688).

In contrast, Harper's began publication in June of 1850 with the official title *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. It survived the Civil War, the world wars, and is, in fact, still in publication. Alfred H. Guernsey edited the magazine for the years 1856 to 1869 (Mott, v.2, 383) though Fletcher Harper retained a great deal of power and authority in regard to the magazine that bore his name (Mott, v.2, 391). Its origins were less lofty than those of *The Southern Literary Messenger's*. Fletcher Harper himself admitted that the magazine was started to make money (Mott, v.2, 383) and therefore it had no qualms about "borrowing" materials from British publications; however by 1860 it was publishing most, if not all, original

contributions (Shackleton, 34). Since *Harper's* was not trying to create a literary identity (although it hoped to publish works by American authors) the editors accepted contributions from writers living in all parts of the country. With its high circulation and affiliation with the successful House of Harper publishing firm, it could afford to pay its contributors. This was to the detriment of smaller magazines, such as *The Southern Literary Messenger*, that were trying to establish regional identities. Those authors whose writings were good enough to attract an audience and build a following were more likely to publish where they would be better paid, if paid at all. In fact, Harper's prided itself on being a magazine for the middle class (Mott, v. 1, 391).

The war had such a dramatic effect on the subscription list that the sudden reduction in revenues caused Fletcher Harper to think of ceasing publication. Part of this reduction came as a result of the war when some Southerners stopped their subscriptions (Mott, v. 1, 393). To avoid offending anyone the magazine tried to avoid taking sides in the war and preceding sectional conflict. In fact one of its competitors claimed that *Harper's* was "more unexceptionable on the subject of slavery than any northern work of similar kind" (Mott, v.1, 392). However, the fact that it was published in New York and that the Harper family was of the Democratic political persuasion was not lost on the southern audience.

Thus even though *Harper's* had a higher circulation and was more profitable it had several things in common with *The Southern Literary Messenger*. Both had a stable editorial style throughout the war, since both had one editor during those years (with the exception of the last few issues of *The Southern Literary Messenger*). Both wanted to provide a selection of general interest fiction and non-fiction for the average reader. Both were affected by the war although one took sides and the other tried to remain neutral. Both contained columns of current events as well as humor and book reviews. Both were representative of the popular press of the day. It is in looking at the differences in the material published in these periodicals, especially the subtle difference in similar kinds of writing that sectional and cultural biases will show.

Both periodicals serialized novels but also published short stories. Many of these tales fell into the category of domestic fiction, the forerunner of the modern romance novel and chick lit. Domestic fiction, like its modern counterparts, contains clues to the values and morals of its time. Domestic fiction was written primarily for and by women. The success of their literary ventures sorely vexed their more "serious" contemporaries -- Nathaniel Hawthorne once referred to these female writers as a "damned mob of scribbling women," though his antagonism may have had something to do with the fact that some of their books were outselling his (Hart, 93). The literary ladies presented their tales in a variety of settings, however, and once again like their modern counterparts, the plots were often similar. The heroine found true love and marriage or died after rejecting her suitor or after being rejected herself and taking it with Christian

grace. One difficulty in comparing the short fiction in the two publications is identifying authorship as many stories are published anonymously or under a pseudonym. David K. Jackson has compiled a list of contributions to *The Southern Literary Messenger* and assigned authorship to a number of entries; the online version of *Harper's* often lists authors but it is impossible to directly compare whether stories were written by women or even if there is overlap in the authorship of stories in the two titles. However, with the information available it would seem that the publications drew from different pools of writers.

Both *Harper's* and *The Southern Literary Messenger* viewed themselves as moral instructors, devoted to maintaining the moral character of the middle class, comprised primarily of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants:

The *Messenger's* publisher-editor shared *Harper's* concern about the presence of both prosperity and societal anxiety, but he attributed the dilemma to the failures of northern society, failures for which, he insisted, southerners were blameless. While *Harper's* had a circulation well over 100,000, the best estimate is that the *Messenger* never had more than 5,000 subscribers. Nevertheless, that was more than any other magazine published in the south. (Ratner 56)

Both also were concerned about the place of women in society. The war galvanized women in a variety of ways. Even though women writers were viewed less favorably in the South than the North, there was an increase in women's writing during the War. It was far more acceptable for women to write if it served a public cause (Klein). Of *Harper's* Ratner writes:

Given the magazine's significant number of women readers and their importance to the magazine's commercial success, offering opinions that pleased women was important. The magazine urged men to acknowledge and respect the role of women in American society while defending the position that each gender had a different role to play, both in the family and in society at large. *Harper's* writers, both men and women, and its editors spelled out women's role as guardian of Christian and republican morality. They described women as educators of their sons to the nature and importance of that morality and as protectors of family cohesion. (Ratner 53)

The need for male dominance is stated clearly in Harriet Prescott's "How Charlie Came Home" in *Harper's* January 1861: "Men never know how to right themselves under feminine bondage, unless by turning tyrant too, and this is unpleasant for a gentleman to do." In this case, it was a reference to an overbearing house keeper and not a wife, but the sentiment remains the same.

The Southern Literary Messenger also had a traditional view of women and considered women's rights advocates fanatics. This was also considered more

of a northern problem and, as Ratner says “assured his readers that southern women had not been convinced by these fanatics” (Ratner, 60).

Cohn studied the way the War was represented in the fiction of several popular magazines during the War itself, including the two titles studied here. He looks specifically at war-related plot lines and not the cultural differences in the fiction overall. However, there were differences. Note this passage from Moss (p. 13):

Even the central character of the southern domestic novel, the ingenuous heroine, differed significantly from her northern sister. Whereas northern heroines usually were orphans, southerners typically had at least one living parent, usually their father. Whereas northerners characteristically travelled from place to place on their respective journeys toward self-knowledge and integration, southerners more often than not remained in a plantation setting. Finally, whereas northerners almost never strayed from the path of righteousness, southerners frequently wandered, choosing obviously unscrupulous male and female companions and rejecting the sensible in favor of the easy, the vain, and the rich.

For example, a character in Maud Miller’s “My Sister’s Husband” (*The Southern Literary Messenger* January 1864) says “I was not heroine enough to pine away from disappointed love.”

Harper’s eschewed what it considered overly sentimental fiction “not only as an inferior form, but 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” (Phegley, 79).

The plotlines in *Harper’s* and *The Southern Literary Messenger* follow these tried and true patterns but there are differences and these are very telling. The variations of certain characters in an accepted plot format reflect regional or cultural views or biases. Two significant variations involve gender roles and social mobility / social class.

Gender role variations manifested themselves in three ways, female characters in relation to the Cult of True Womanhood, views of female friendships and of sisters, and the control of romantic relationships. The Cult of True Womanhood had four behavioral traits: purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness (Welter, 152) and women who exhibited these four traits were viewed as the ideal. Women were expected to retain the innocence and trusting qualities of childhood while becoming household managers and helpmates. It is interesting to note that the female characters in many of the short fiction pieces appearing in *The Southern Literary Messenger* maintain the childlike qualities. They are often protected by a father or other male relative. Even if left orphaned they still appear childlike. The hero of Richard Anderson’s “Boarding an Engineer” which appeared in that magazine in February / March 1862 summed it up this way, “Tell

me what a man loves better, than to take a strong young spirit into his hands and mould it to his will." This is in keeping with Moss's study of domestic novels where she notes that:

The persistence and prominence of prescriptions for ornamental femininity in antebellum southern culture have led historians to characterize the region's dominant feminine ideal, the Southern Lady, as an extreme manifestation of True Womanhood, a behavioral model advanced through contemporary periodical literature. (Moss 34)

Women in *Harper's* exhibit the more mature aspects of womanhood. They nurse the sick, do household chores, and assist in their husband's work. In Caroline Cheseboro's "For Better, For Worse" (April 1863), a wife takes over her husband's business when he is accused and convicted of arson. *Harper's* heroines stand up to their parents, manipulate their spouses and manage their households and children. The ending point of the short stories is another difference. *The Southern Literary Messenger* does not usually concern itself with life after marriage. Since that was the measure of a woman's success the attainment of married status could be considered the zenith of her life – nothing else mattered except the maintenance of that status and the advancement of her husband's (and therefore her own) social career. *Harper's*, however, featured some stories that went beyond the marriage ceremony to concern problems that occurred after marriage, and some ways to solve them. For example, Mary Bradley's "Mrs. Henderson's Anniversary," concerns the rejuvenation of a marriage gone stale. Once Mr. Henderson buys Mrs. Henderson a sewing machine she is happily occupied making clothing to donate to soldiers in the War. In other words, Mrs. Henderson needed some occupation or expression of self other than simply being Mr. Henderson's wife.

The control of romantic relationships also varies between the two. In all cases the women were sought after. Whatever their personal feelings might be, men were required to initiate and advance a relationship (Rothman, 105). However, they might introduce friends to relatives or ask a friend or relative to introduce them. Some of the women in *Harper's* fiction were not so content as to let their partners make all the decision. In Katherine Williams's "The Rarey Method," a wife attends a lecture on horse-training and uses those techniques to persuade her husband to buy her a new house.

Domestic violence makes an appearance in *The Southern Literary Messenger's* "The Hasty Marriage," by Laura Bibb Rogers. A woman does not wait for her suitor to finish college but instead marries a flashier man who it turns out is impoverished and married her for her money. Her previous suitor finds her abandoned and recommends her for a governess job with a friend of his family. When the woman's husband is killed in argument about gambling the two eventually marry. *Harper's* published a similar story on April, 1863, "The Widow Thorns First Marriage," by N. G. Shepherd, in which a woman marries an abusive

man (against her sister's wishes) and then after his death marries her original beau who treats her well.

Another different in female characters between the two magazines can be seen in the relationships between female friends and sisters. The relationship of sisters in domestic fiction has been a subject of study, though primarily in novels, and predominantly in British fiction. Sarah Annes Brown did discuss fictional sisters in 19th century British and American fiction but the American authors she used were primarily northern and she does not distinguish between the two continents, considering them one literature.

These female-female relationships have very different dynamics in the short stories in the two Civil War periodicals. In *The Southern Literary Messenger* sisters are seen as competitors as opposed to colleagues especially in romantic relationships. Most sister stories involve the older sister being "dumped" for a younger sister. In Maud Miller's "My Sister's Husband," this is because of an inheritance going to the younger; the older sister's former beau, later the younger sister's husband, dies in the war, still loving the older sister. In Alice Hawes's "Yule" the sisterly competition is due to the jealous nature of the older. The narrator goes so far as to wonder "if sisters can ever truly be friends?" In "Yule" the fiancé of the older sister also ends up marrying the younger; the first engagement being broken because of his love for the younger. In Mabel's "Unloved," two cousins raised together are loved by the same man, who is originally the intended of the older but falls in love with the younger. She jilts him for a less worthy man and while the first suitor prospers, the older cousin dies and the younger is never mentioned. The lure of a younger woman is also the theme of "Not a Fancy Sketch," by the same author. An orphan takes a governess position but when the wife becomes ill and the husband expresses too much of an interest in the young girl she is sent from the household, became a seamstress, and soon after died.

In *Harper's* sister stories have a different dynamic. The two sisters fall in love with or become involved with two male friends. This leads to a foursome instead of a triangle. In some cases the women initiate or at least manipulate the romance. A few examples are Harriet Prescott's "How Charlie Came Home" (January 1861), Edward House's "Love by Mishap" (December 1862), Elizabeth Stoddard's "Tuberoses" (January 1863) and N. G. Shepherd's "The Widow Thorn's First Marriage" (April 1863) in which the heroine makes a grave error by marrying a man her sister doesn't like. In fact, the bonds of sisterhood and female friendship are very strongly represented during this time period, second only to that of the mother-daughter bond. (Smith-Rosenberg, 12). However, that is not to say there weren't examples of sisterly competition and estrangement. In Louise Baker's "My Lost Sister: A Confession," the older of two sisters begins a years-long resentment of her younger sister when she is allowed to study Latin. Only the younger sister's death, coincident with the older sister's learning Latin independently, brought forth a sense of shame and forgiveness. Interestingly,

the family in the story are slave owners, though the author is careful to mention of one of the neighbors "He owned a fabulous number of slaves of unadulterated African descent – not a mulatto among them." At a later point in the story the author notes "Such is the unhealthy sentiment which slavery engenders." In another story, T. S. Arthur's "Angel Sister," the sister bond is viewed by the mother who grieves the loss of one daughter until she learns to view this child as the guardian angel of the surviving daughter.

Both magazines made it easy to determine a character's social class. Dialect was the most common method but manners and habits were also used to characterize the upper and lower classes. Characters refrained from pointing out the bad manners of others but the narrator made sure readers caught those social faux-pas. Black characters were given lower class dialect as well. However, *Harper's* allowed characters to cross social boundaries and to move up and down the social ladder. In Louise Moulton's "#10 Blank Street," a young man marries a woman from the lower classes after meeting her in a boarding house. At one point he thinks "Why must I pile up useless wealth and she suffer?" In another story a young man's father loses the family fortune and he is forced to try to turn a profit running the family farm. He woos and wins the heart of his neighbor's daughter. Her father disowns her when she married the poor boy next door. Of course all's well that ends well and the young man finds the fortune that his grandfathers had buried in the orchard and the woman's father forgives her when he sees his first grandchild. In Louise Furniss's "Through Suffering," a woman insults her beau. She loses her money and is forced to take in sewing. Her old boyfriend finds her again and marries her regardless of her financial state.

In *The Southern Literary Messenger*, the characters either begin the story as the same social class and standing or characters of a lesser social standing are vanquished or ignored, but there is no moving across those lines. In Bagby's "A Horrible Scrape" a man is rescued by a country family and nursed back to health. The daughter in the family is particularly attentive yet at the end of the story he rides off into the sunset without giving her a second thought. In Anderson's "Passion and Prejudice" a young woman takes a governess position because she does not get along well with her stepmother. The stepmother speaks with a country accent and cannot understand her stepdaughter's proclivity towards books and reading. We are led to believe that the father has made a bad choice for his second wife. The daughter leaves home, falls in love with her employer who, it turns out is divorced (something neither magazine condones or accepts regardless of circumstances). She returns home and dies a lonely death. It is suggested throughout the story that none of this would have happened if the father had married within his social class. The title character in Ireton's "Cousin Maude" rejects a suitor not because of his class but because of his relative lack of education. At the end she realizes her error and accepts his renewed attentions. His speech, manners, and financial status are never called into question.

It would be impossible to make any sweeping generalizations based upon the examination of only two magazines; however, the differences in the two are intriguing. Although the fiction in both followed the formula domestic fiction plots of the day there are variations. The women characters in *The Southern Literary Messenger* are more childlike and in sister competition stories it is the younger sister who most often wins the love of the male protagonist, even if he was originally attracted to the older, more mature sister. *Harper's* sister stories more often end with a foursome, the two sisters each having a beau and eventual husband. The northern characters were more likely to successfully marry outside their class than those in the south. While authorship in the nineteenth century can be difficult to verify with certainty, more short stories writers in *The Southern Literary Messenger* use male sounding names (Richard, George, etc.) than do those publishing in *Harper's*. That may be indicative of those willing to publish their work. As previously mentioned southern women were less encouraged to write unless it directly concerned the war effort. More thorough research in more titles is needed before any conclusions can be formed. While this study compares only two periodicals there are clear differences. The southern way of life, with a restrictive role for women is reflected in the fiction of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The competition among women in that periodical's short stories, perhaps a true representation of the southern culture, prevented them from considering each other as friends and a form of social support. The northern view, as presented in *Harper's*, shows women in more varied roles, working outside the home both before and after marriage, having interests and hobbies of their own, managing and rejuvenating established marriages, and befriending their sisters and other women generally. They could also marry outside their social class with an expectation of happiness. The two world views expressed in the domestic short fiction of these periodicals reflect the world views of their publishers and most likely their readers as well.

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