Abstract: For many years, American literary scholars have mined the vast archives of nineteenth-century periodicals on microfilm for secondary resources to supplement their reading of novels. Nineteenth-century periodicals often included either serialized full texts of popular novels or excerpts included in book reviews of said novels. Many of these newspapers also included correspondence or editorial commentary regarding the reception of popular novels. Researchers have relied upon these periodicals as contemporaneous sources to support reception theories, as well as historical context for nineteenth-century novels. However, because of the difficulty in using microfilm, very few teachers have ventured into using periodicals as primary texts in the classroom. Fortunately, today teachers have much more accessibility to nineteenth-century periodicals through web resources. In this essay, I describe how I implemented an assignment using online resources for nineteenth-century periodicals to introduce students to several types of women's periodicals. The assignment allowed me to show students the breadth of women's voices during this time period and the importance of closely reading fiction and non-fiction in the traditional media of the nineteenth century.

Periodicals\(^1\) have been a major component of our popular culture for almost two centuries. From their earliest beginnings in the national period as broadsheets filled with news items to their modern-day diversity of gloss and glitter, periodicals have become a staple of American consumerism. As a group, periodicals remain a rich source of cultural and literary history that deserve to be analyzed as primary sources and not just secondary places we search to reinforce our readings of novels. During the nineteenth-century, periodicals quickly became the easiest way to gain the public's attention to promote a specific cause or political party, but they also suffered from a flooded market

\(^{1}\) While newspapers and periodicals are usually considered different genres, I will use the term 'periodical' to refer to both magazines and newspapers throughout this essay.
because almost everyone who had something to say, said it in a periodical. In fact, periodical publishing in the United States reached its most productive period beginning in the 1830s and continuing into the late 1890s (Smith and Price 3-7). During this time, new magazines, journals, and newspapers appeared in the literary marketplace almost daily. These periodicals ranged from general information magazines and newspapers for a broad audience, to more specialized journals, such as hunting magazines for men or fashion magazines for women. Fashion magazines for women were part of one of the largest and most popular type of periodical in the nineteenth century, specialty magazines often called "ladies' magazines."

As part of my upper-level American literature course "Women Writers," I implemented a group assignment requiring students to research four different women's or "ladies'" magazines from the nineteenth century and to present their conclusions regarding the significance of these texts as examples of women's voices within American literary history. The four periodicals I chose for the assignment were Godey's Lady's Book (1840-1883), Ladies Repository (1841-1876), The New England Offering (1840-1842), and The Woman's Magazine (1888-1889). Selected issues of these magazines are available on the Research Society for American Periodicals (RSAP) website under the Research Resource page. The editors for the website have collected scanned copies of periodicals from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries that are available from free sites and digital archives and organized them into time periods and topics for

2 http://home.earthlink.net/~ellengarvey/rsapresource1.html
research and teaching resources. Many of the full issues of periodicals are housed in university collections; for example, *Ladies Repository* is indexed in the University of Michigan Making of America (MOA) collection\(^3\) and *The New England Offering* and *The Woman's Magazine* are indexed in Women Working: Harvard U. Libraries Open Collection Program.\(^4\) The availability of these periodicals on the RSAP website allowed me to construct this unit on periodicals as primary texts and to show my students the wide range of women's voices in the nineteenth century. In this essay, I argue that the study of nineteenth-century women's periodicals can provide a historical context that allows students to imagine themselves as the primary audience for the mainstream media of the nineteenth century. In this mode, students are able to research, analyze, and discuss ways of reading women's voices throughout literary history.

Most of the students in my "Women Writers" class had never considered the possibility of studying historical newspapers as part of an assignment. In general, my students are accustomed to reading fiction, poetry, drama, or the occasional non-fiction essay in upper-level literature courses. When I introduced the unit on periodicals, I emphasized the importance of reading literature within its historical context and I connected the study of periodicals to the main theme in our course, "women's voices." We had begun the course by reading *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and discussing how Charlotte's voice is consistently silenced by the other characters in Susanna Rowson's text, including the author herself in the form of the intrusive narrator. Students quickly

\(^3\) [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/)

\(^4\) [http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html](http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/magazines.html)
identified with Charlotte and her lack of agency throughout the text and they understood
the significance of Rowson's construction of her varying audiences as part of her
didactic purpose. The didactic purpose of this novel set the stage for our later
discussions regarding nineteenth-century women's ability to use "duty" as a doorway
into the literary marketplace. That is, women writers knew that if they asserted that
writing instructional novels for young girls was their "moral duty," then they could carve
out a niche for themselves in the public sphere without running the risk of being labeled
"unfeminine." Once students had a sense of the challenges women writers faced in the
eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary marketplace, they had the ability to analyze
the significance of women's voices in various formats.

One significant aspect of women's voices that we examined at length during the
course was the notion of "truth v. fiction." For example, Rowson asserted that her
novella was a "true" story; in fact, the original subtitle for Charlotte Temple was "A Tale
of Truth." Even though Rowson stated that her story could be true, she admitted in the
Preface that "I have thrown over the whole a slight veil of fiction" (5). When students
analyzed this statement by Rowson, they began to construct themselves as the original
audience for Rowson's text and they felt the tension between these concepts. As
readers, should they accept the moral of the story because they have been told it is
"true?" On the other hand, if the story is fiction, does that make it any less powerful or
instructional for young girls, the original primary audience? Furthermore, how can we
read the historicity of nineteenth-century women's voices if we do not know the
difference between truth and fiction? As students began to engage with these questions in *Charlotte Temple*, they began to understand the interplay between author and audience and how women writers used "truth," real or constructed, to justify their place in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace.

In order to examine further the challenges this literary marketplace posed for women writers, we moved into another novel that addressed the "truth v. fiction" dilemma, *Ruth Hall* (1855) by Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton). Unlike *Charlotte Temple*, Fern's novel purported to be a fictional tale about a young mother’s hardships in finding gainful employment following the death of her husband. However, the book was based on Fern's own life and included characters based on her family, albeit fictionalized ones. When her true identity was made public, Fern faced criticism for revealing her family's lack of compassion to her when her husband died.° Nineteenth-century readers were sympathetic to the character Ruth's story, but when critics discovered that the novel was semi-autobiographical, they attacked Fern for her "lack of femininity in seeking revenge" against her family (Warren xx). That is, some readers were willing to accept a fictional tale of hardship and triumph over adversity, but they were not willing to accept the author's truth behind the story because as a woman, Fern became "unfeminine" when she attacked her family in public. Of course, Fern did not intentionally set out to harm her family. When she wrote *Ruth Hall*, she assumed her identity was safe from the

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5 In order to understand the saga behind the revelation of Fanny Fern's (Sara Willis Parton's) identity to the public, see Joyce Warren's "Introduction" to *Ruth Hall and Other Writings* (1855). Ed. Joyce W. Warren. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986.
public. Nonetheless, the key debate for nineteenth-century critics was the unclear boundary between truth and fiction in her novel.

This debate continued in my "Women Writers" class when my students began to question the significance of a fictional novel versus an autobiographical tale. Specifically, students were divided over the conflicting reasons behind the reception of the two novels, Charlotte Temple and Ruth Hall. How can we explain the positive reception of Charlotte Temple (a fictional tale presented as truth) with the negative critical reception of Ruth Hall (a true story presented as fiction) throughout the nineteenth century? If an assertion of "truth" was necessary for Rowson's success in 1794, why did Fern's novel of "truth" receive such criticism in 1855? What changed in American culture from 1794 to 1855 that could explain the opposite reactions to these two novels? In order to answer these questions, my students imagined themselves as nineteenth-century readers and considered the historical context of each of these novels.

As readers, my students identified with Charlotte's plight in Charlotte Temple and they were caught up in the sentimental discourse that drove them to empathize with her downfall and eventual death. In this respect, they were very much like the original audience for the novel. In addition, most of my students also empathized with Ruth's misfortunes in Ruth Hall and they cheered her triumph at the conclusion of the novel when she became an independent woman supporting herself through her writing. Again, my students represented the primary audience of readers in their support of Ruth Hall,
but they also seemed to be divided over the autobiographical aspects of the novel. Some students agreed with the nineteenth-century critics who argued that Fern should not have attacked her family by speaking the truth in public.

A lively debate ensued within the classroom between those students who argued that "truth" did not matter because the story was good and the ending satisfying, and those students who felt deceived by Fern's fictionalization of her life. As the debate concluded, I asked the students why this debate occurred after reading *Ruth Hall*, but not after reading *Charlotte Temple*. Why were students not upset about the deception in *Charlotte Temple* when they discovered a "true" tale was actually fiction? Is it because Charlotte dies as a result of her bad choices and Ruth survives as an independent woman? That is, Charlotte's death reinforces the importance of a woman's submissiveness and filial duty, while Ruth's success as an independent woman defies traditional roles for women. Perhaps the debate between truth and fiction is really about how women respond to expectations for their proper role in nineteenth-century society? Is this the real debate that my students were consciously or unconsciously reenacting as a nineteenth-century audience? As a result of this debate, I asked my students to consider how women's roles were constructed in the nineteenth century and how women writers responded to shifting notions of women's proper roles? This debate provided a perfect segue into our unit on nineteenth-century women's periodicals, where I asked students to analyze the historical context of these questions.
For this assignment, students chose one of the four periodicals, *Godey's Lady's Book, Ladies Repository, The New England Offering, or The Woman's Magazine*, for their group research project. Within each group, I divided the tasks for research into four major pieces found in each periodical: fiction, non-fiction, fashion/housekeeping, and editorials/correspondence. Each student was responsible for reading the available issues for their periodical and then analyzing the specific pieces to which they were assigned. Their research projects were two-fold: an individual paper and a group presentation. First, each student was required to write a short two- to three-page paper describing and analyzing their section of the periodical. For example, a student assigned to fiction in *Godey's* addressed at least three separate fiction pieces in three different issues. Within each section, I asked the students to consider the following questions: Who are the authors of your various pieces? What audience are they constructing for their writing? How do they confront the issues of women's roles in the nineteenth century? To what extent do these writers focus on political issues in their fiction, non-fiction, or editorials? What impact, if any, do the editors of these periodicals play in the main emphasis of the paper? The second part of the project required each group of students to produce a class presentation (PowerPoint slides) on their assigned periodical. Here, I asked each student group to summarize their findings and then explain to the class what they learned about women's voices in nineteenth-century periodicals.
As the most popular ladies' magazine of the nineteenth century, *Godey's Lady's Book* (1840-1883) proved to be a wonderful entrance into our examination of periodicals. The students assigned to *Godey's* were impressed by the breadth of information that the magazine covered, especially the combination of fashion plates/advice for women and political discussions surrounding the roles of women. As editor of *Godey’s*, Sara Josepha Hale controlled the content of the magazine, which targeted middle class white women. Students noted works by well-known authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as unknown authors such as Elizabeth Ellet. In the editorials discussion, students were able to see the clear voice of Hale as she encouraged men to buy subscriptions to *Godey's* for the women in their houses. They interpreted this as men having power over what women read, a concept that Hale intended to appeal to and broaden her audience. In their final conclusions regarding women's voices, the students in this group agreed that Hale was a powerful voice for the traditional roles for women; but some of the fictional pieces she included seemed to contradict this stance and argue for women's independence, especially through education.

The focus on education was also noted by the group working on *The Ladies' Repository* (1841-1876). However, the students were more interested in the fact that this "ladies' magazine" was in fact edited by men for its entire four decade run. Beginning with Leonidas Lent Hamline in 1841, the *Repository* was edited by a total of eight men, most of them Methodist clergy. The magazine was begun by the Methodist
Episcopal Church of Cincinnati, Ohio, with a stated purpose of providing women with articles on literature, arts and religion. The students covering the fiction and non-fiction portions in this periodical were surprised by the lack of difference between the two. That is, the fictional pieces were very didactic in tone and actually argued that there is no "truth" in fiction. Here, the students were quick to note the comparison to our earlier examination of *Charlotte Temple*. In the non-fiction pieces, the focus seemed to be on educating parents so they could raise educated children, but again, students pointed out the reinforcement of gender roles and the inequality between the sexes. In the editorials section, students noted the overwhelming agenda for Christianity and the fact that every piece that went into the magazine was censored by these male editors. Despite the fact that the editors stated that "ladies will be foremost" in the magazine, most issues included pieces authored by male writers or the editors themselves. As a result, students concluded that this periodical did not fairly represent women's voices in nineteenth-century society at large.

On the other end of the spectrum, the students working on *The New England Offering* were quick to point out that the entire magazine was written and edited by women. During the 1840s, this magazine was produced by female textile workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, and edited by Harriet Farley. The students were impressed by the fiction written by these young women while maintaining strenuous jobs on their feet for fourteen hours a day. The students found that most of the fiction pieces focused on love and the factory environment, even detailing a story "Leap Year," that showed a
man waiting for a marriage proposal from a woman, and commenting on the reversal of
gender roles. The non-fiction pieces were focused on worker's rights and one student
described a worker's strike that resulted in a reduced work day (eleven hours, instead of
fourteen). The editorials by Harriet Farley were clearly political in nature and focused
heavily on women's rights and worker's rights. Because of the single editorial voice, the
focus on women's struggles, and the original fiction by female textile workers, the
students in this group concluded that this periodical was one of the best examples of
women's voices in the nineteenth century.

Finally, the focus on working women was a key component of the last group's
periodical, *The Woman's Magazine* (1888-1889). Students commented upon the clear
objective of women's rights in each section of the magazine, beginning with fiction that
showed a seamstress spinster turning down a marriage proposal and a father refusing
to allow his daughter to marry a wealthy man. Both situations were a significant shift
away from traditional choices for women and revealed a focus instead on women's
independence. In the non-fiction, students found articles on women's work exchanges
and calls for women to help each other to find jobs and to fight poor working conditions.
Like the *New England Offering*, the audience for this periodical was working class
women. The female editor, Esther T. House, used her editorial space to challenge her
readers to work for woman's rights and support the new woman's suffrage platform.
Another significant shift in this late nineteenth-century women's periodical was a new
view of Methodist church policy in allowing women to become delegates to their national
conference. Students were quick to point out this difference from the earlier examination of the strict anti-woman policies found in the Methodist church-sponsored *Ladies' Repository*. This group also agreed that *The Woman's Magazine* was a positive example of women's voices, especially in the clear rhetoric in support of woman's suffrage.

Overall, the student groups presenting on nineteenth-century women's periodicals located a number of instances where the issues of women's roles were directly confronted. In addition, they found that the various pieces of fiction and non-fiction within each magazine provided a broad depth of women's voices in the nineteenth century. The pieces on fashion/housekeeping were also helpful in understanding how women functioned in their daily lives, as opposed to novels that often present idealized pictures of nineteenth-century life. As a result, students were able to place our discussions regarding gender roles into a broader historical context and to understand the significant impact these women writers contributed to literary history.

In conclusion, this assignment provided students with a clear objective in researching and contextualizing nineteenth-century women's voices. When we began our class discussion surrounding the theme of "truth v. fiction" in women's writing, I was not sure students would grasp the historical importance of women writers attempting to publish in the literary marketplace. By implementing this assignment on nineteenth-century women's periodicals, I was able to provide students a window into the broader
world of publishing and to show them the everyday media that a nineteenth-century audience would encounter. Even though most students may not read print media today, they clearly understood how an editorial in a nineteenth-century newspaper could equate to a modern-day blog. Furthermore, students were invested in these projects because they were "teaching" each other through their group presentations. Throughout the remainder of our class, students were able to anchor their discussions in the historical knowledge they obtained in these projects and they were able to understand how women's voices developed through a literary history timeline that eventually led to our last novel of the course, *The Help* (2009).
Works Cited


*Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1840-1883) [http://www.history.rochester.edu/godeys/toc-m.htm](http://www.history.rochester.edu/godeys/toc-m.htm)

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