

# {essays in history}

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## Signifier of Sophistication: The Bookcase in Nineteenth Century American Periodical and Literature Illustrations



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By the mid-nineteenth century, the American middle classes lived in a world navigating the convergence of the print, transportation, and communication revolutions. These Americans were literate, possessed disposable income for book and bookcase purchases, and sought to emulate upper-class modes of display, which served to differentiate the middle classes from the lower classes. When increased literacy, steam powered printing presses, and the expanded railroad system made the book more accessible, the bookcase came to represent a significant aspect of middle-class sophistication and taste. During the 1850s the new cultural significance of the bookcase manifested through pictures in popular periodicals and books.<sup>[1]</sup>

The antebellum American middle-class bookcase, as depicted in popular illustrations at the end of the 1850s, signified the destabilization of the upper-class's hegemony over literature. In an era of expanding print culture, the democratization of literature, and of literacy, book collecting and display represented an end of "histoire immobile," a long historic period without change for upper-class hegemonic control of text.<sup>[2]</sup> Illustrations such as engravings and fashion plates depict a dynamic bookcase, as understood by nineteenth century middle-class Americans, which represented literacy as a democratizing agent of sophistication. As access to literature increased, presentation of books on a bookcase became a cultural mediator and signifier of sophistication for the middle-classes through what I term the "agency of display."

The agency of display describes the socially accepted method of display within the antebellum middle-class milieu, which predates economist Thorstein Veblen's critique of leisure class conspicuous consumption at the end of the nineteenth century. The agency of display applies to any commodity consciously arranged to communicate information about the object's owner, such as a book exhibited in a bookcase to signify refinement, irrespective of the commodity's actual value.<sup>[3]</sup> As such, the

book's publisher sold the book with the purchaser's desire for display potential as a purchase point. By gazing at the book in the bookcase, the viewer(s) would then evaluate the purchaser's sophistication.

The agency of display illuminates how the parlor bookcase came to represent sophistication by elements of nineteenth-century literary culture across the middle-classes. Historian Richard L. Bushman has shown that the act of purchasing a bookcase, for antebellum Americans, showed a "serious devotion to books" and their presentation. Bushman does touch on the significance of the bookcase in antebellum American life; however, he does not fully develop the object's meaning by mid-century, particularly when presented in the middle-class parlor. Bushman's study of books and mental culture primarily focusses on the uses of reading to project "vernacular gentility" among the middle-classes.<sup>[4]</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the emergence of the antebellum American bookcase as a specific mode of communication that signified gentility within the parlor setting across the middle-classes.

When grouped together in the parlor bookcase, books communicated an "aura" of either inclusion or exclusion. In this sense, the bookcase represented an elite tradition of readership to the literate. To the illiterate, the bookcase remained an object of mystery with its "veil" still intact.<sup>[5]</sup> Ideas of inclusion constituted an "imagined community" among the literate middle-classes, which inherently incorporated exclusion of illiterates.<sup>[6]</sup> In her study of Victorian parlor making, historian Katherine C. Grier argued that the parlor served as a medium for "middle-class self-presentation" through the décor.<sup>[7]</sup> The furnishings in the semi-public parlor, the primary space within the home for entertaining guests, served as a visual representation of the cultured family. By mid-century, the parlor bookcase began to project the appearance of sophistication across the middle-classes through the agency of display.

Traditionally, books appeared in portraiture as an accessory held by, or in proximity to, the painting's subject. In this way, the book itself became a signifier that communicated ideas of sophistication. This proximity to literature, customarily the province of the upper-class, stressed the subject's connection to gentility and mental culture.<sup>[8]</sup> Elite portraiture could include the bookcase, but this representation characterized upper-class hegemonic association and access to writings.

This inclusion of the bookcase in elite portraiture is typical of Ralph Earl's painting *Oliver and Abigail Wolcott Ellsworth*, 1792. Earl's painting depicts the upper-class couple sitting at a table in front of a window, with a bookcase full of books directly behind Oliver Ellsworth.<sup>[9]</sup> By the 1850s, this direct relationship with books on a bookcase typified middle-class sophistication.

By mid-century, the bookcase functioned as a recognizable signifier of the genteel middle-class, particularly when presented in the antebellum parlor. As historian Ronald J. Zboray has shown, when the availability of mass produced books increased, even hardcover paper and cloth bound books at the lowest prices —typically “between 75¢ and \$1.25” which equaled about a day's pay for a “skilled white” male worker—largely fell into the domain of the middle-classes that could afford them. Softcover books sold on average for fifty cents, still “out of reach of most working-class readers.”<sup>[10]</sup> The middle-classes used books to help distinguish themselves from the lower classes that typically could not afford enough volumes to merit a bookcase. Therefore, the bookcase primarily operated as a signifier across middle-class stratification from the parlor of new entrants, all the way up to the gentleman's library of the wealthy. Illustrations in popular periodicals at mid-century exemplified the need for a parlor bookcase by embodying a medium that served as its own message.

Sincerity served as the paramount attribute the middle-classes expected from each other during social interactions within the parlor. “The war on hypocrisy” permeated all aspects of well-mannered interaction in the antebellum parlor, as historian Karen Halttunen has argued, because middle-class respectability stemmed in part through parlor culture.<sup>[11]</sup> Refined members of polite society stood vigilant to ward against unsophisticated social climbers invading the middle-class parlor. The parlor was where genuine polite society met to engage in genteel and sincere intercourse, which was often about the contents on the readily accessible bookcase.

Robert Darnton has suggested that various interdisciplinary approaches to book history shared the idea of the book as a medium of communication. In “What Is the History of Books?”, Darnton describes a communicative “Circuit” which ended back at the book's author. Darnton explains how the book traveled from the author, through the

publisher, printer, distributor, bookseller, reader, and back to author, which completes the book's "life cycle."<sup>[12]</sup> However, as literary critic and theorist Walter Benjamin has shown, communication also depends on context. The bookcase suggested ideas about the mentalités of the owner and the viewer through the contemporary understanding of amassed books. This concept of the bookcase as an object that both "symbolizes" and is "symbolized," by viewer and owner, is evident in the conscious choice of book display, as well as how that collected display is understood within the antebellum middle-classes.<sup>[13]</sup> These concepts are evident in popular periodical illustrations of the bookcase.

By examining popular literature in literary monthlies and weeklies from regions across antebellum America, we can discern how books on a bookcase inform class identity as related in 1850s short stories. As historian Leslie Howsam explains, historical analysis looks at how the book "functions in a given society."<sup>[14]</sup> I use literary theorist John Frow's general concepts for the "historicity of the text" for textual analysis of nineteenth-century literature, as it relates to historical analysis. I also examine how mid-century writers and readers thought about their own culture, as English Professor Jane Tompkins explained in the introduction to *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*.<sup>[15]</sup>

With these concepts in mind, I look at a wide selection of popular literature and illustrations from a cross section of antebellum fiction, editorial, review, and contemporary commentary. Works considered include literature such as *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature and Art*, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, and *The Living Age*, as well as antebellum newspapers the *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences* and *The Western Democrat*. Literary journals, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *The International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science*, the *New Englander and Yale Review*, and *The American Whig Review*, also provide texts. The literature within these diverse publications contains complex cultural meaning, which I tease out through the context in which the bookcase appears.

Literary texts, as well as illustrations, reveal antebellum ideas about the book and bookcase. These cultural constructs can often manifest in unexpected and unintentional ways. French historian Roger Chartier explains the reaction of the viewer as "internalized conditionings" that

are not always attributed to conscious thought processes.<sup>[16]</sup> When applied to an analysis of references to bookcases in antebellum popular literature, and their inclusion in parlor illustrations, the cultural meaning of the bookcase's function begins to emerge.

I examine instances where the bookcase performed as a social mediator, character, set piece, or simple object within the text. In this way, I argue that the conscious display of books communicated social and cultural significance to the nineteenth century observer, which manifested through characterizations and illustrations of the bookcase as a signifier of middle-class refinement.

### The Democratization of Literature and Literacy

In the rapid economic expansion during the first half of the nineteenth century, America experienced several developments that directly influenced the availability and the perception of the printed word. The print revolution, the communications revolution, and the transportation revolution combined with America's expanding public school system and extraordinarily high literacy rate to create a new appreciation for literature by mid-century. The book's ability as an object to project social status, especially when grouped together on the bookshelf of the rising middle-classes, made the bookcase a virtual "treasure chest" for the literate.<sup>[17]</sup> This, in turn, expanded the capacity to display one's literacy.

The print revolution created a significant increase in the production of literature. New developments in printing made relatively inexpensive paper and cloth bound texts available to the public in general and leather bound editions to the wealthier middle-classes in expanding quantities. Tooled leather represented the most desirable binding because of its looks, durability, and expense, which the antebellum viewer conveyed as a signifier of the owner's middle-class gentility. New steam printing technologies made printing faster and more cost effective. In 1852, new technologies made possible the unparalleled printing of over 300,000 copies of Harriet Beecher Stowe's, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This included leather and cloth bound editions, at a wide range of prices, to cater to readers of varying means. The prodigious availability of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was in addition to the nationally circulated serialization of Stowe's work the previous year in the newspaper *The National Era* out of Washington D.C.<sup>[18]</sup>

The print revolution included the proliferation of nationally distributed newspapers and magazines, which expanded the American taste for fiction. The antebellum popularity of fiction reflected a new society of readers that did not represent the preferences of America's wealthy upper-class. The growing print market helped fiction rapidly gain popularity among the middle classes at mid-century. Through serialization of popular books in nationally distributed monthlies, such as installments of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* of New York (with 130,000 subscribers in 1853), major works of fiction made their way all across the country.<sup>[19]</sup> Serialization of popular stories such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Bleak House* made books more recognizable when shelved and readily accessible as tasteful "subjects for conversation" in America's parlors.<sup>[20]</sup>

The extended transportation system facilitated the distribution of texts into all corners of America. Canals, turnpikes, and the railroad in particular, after the federal declaration as a postal route in 1838, enabled publishers to have their books delivered over ever-greater distances to the reading public.<sup>[21]</sup> Booksellers also benefitted from developments in transportation. Although the South had a smaller literary market than other regions of the country, and the rail system was not as extensive as in the North, booksellers acting as distributors still managed to ship enough books and periodicals to warrant advertising in local Southern papers. Smaller booksellers, such as Philadelphia's Thomas Coperthwaite and Company, successfully advertised and distributed books nationally at mid-century.<sup>[22]</sup> Americans now had greater access to books in which to display in antebellum bookcases.

The burgeoning antebellum school system promised literacy for Americans of all classes and created an expanded reading public. In 1850, "47 percent of total expenditures for [all] schooling" went to public education, the highest to date. In 1852, Boston was the first city to enact "compulsory" public education, the first such legislation in the United States.<sup>[23]</sup> These developments helped to create and foster the highest literacy rate in the world. The public school system ultimately broadened the American reading base and aided entry into the middle-class for the newly literate lower classes, which put stress on book ownership and display. The democratization of literacy had new significance in "the age of learning," while also transcending

gender. [24] Historian Linda K. Kerber has shown that the “improvement of schooling” significantly narrowed the “literacy gap between American men and women” by 1850. [25] At mid-century, many antebellum parents could expect girls as well as boys to learn to read.

Literacy, in turn, stressed the importance of books for mental culture and self-improvement. One antebellum book of proverbs promised that contemporary youth find their “true dignity” through reading. [26] Purchasing books to display as a class signifier now suggested inclusion for both males and females in the growing imagined literary discourse community, as the juxtaposition of figure one and two, discussed below demonstrates. These developments made depictions of the parlor bookcase in popular literature suggest literacy *and* gentility across gender lines, to a diverse audience across the middle-classes, which began to develop different tastes for literature.

The communications revolution—the increased production of newspapers and magazines available on a national scale in the second quarter of the nineteenth century— expanded the American taste for fiction. Novels rapidly gained popularity among the middle-class by mid-century. Ronald J. Zboray found an increase of over 100% for novels in the charge records of the New York Society Library from 1848 to 1854. [27] This emerging popularity of antebellum fiction represented a change in the “makeup of the audience,” as Nina Baym has argued, that reflected a new society of readers that *did not* represent the upper-class preference for classic Latin and Greek literature. [28] As fiction became more popular, religious organizations such as Tract Societies denounced the genre. These societies saw fiction as a replacement for the family’s Bible. [29] Although the Bible was still widely read, literature and particularly popular fiction largely disseminated throughout America by the middle of the nineteenth century to an expanding reading public. [30]

By 1857, the proliferation of the printed word, greatly extended distribution systems, increased literacy, and subsequent book ownership enabled the bookcase to act as an easily recognizable signifier of middle-class sophistication. This in turn, made the depiction of the bookcase more readily recognizable and accessible as a signifier of middle-class taste and refinement. Middle-class antebellum Americans, in regions all



over the United States, had greater access to books, which they proudly displayed on parlor bookcases.

### Books and the Bookcase in the Parlor

The rise of American literacy, purchasing power, and print culture, enabled the middle-classes to purchase more books. Ordinary readers as well as serious collectors needed to store these books. Mid-century cabinetmaking and furniture manufacturing trends, in regards to the bookcase as an object, reveal changes in book accumulation and storage. As Bushman has shown, by 1850, bookcase ownership in Chester County, Pennsylvania, increased over the previous century by more than a factor of nine. Eight percent of all households recorded bookcase ownership, which implied a dedication to “mental culture” by prominently displaying their books.<sup>[31]</sup> In turn, mental culture, understood to be cultivated through reading and essential to the developing sophistication and taste of the middle classes, manifested in a new way through an agency of display in periodical illustrations of the parlor bookcase.

The antebellum popularity of periodicals and books reflected middle-class mores and attitudes about their own social standing and strive for improvement. Mental culture and self-improvement, gained primarily through reading, was traditionally treated as social currency by the upper classes through the ability to converse intelligently about literature. From 1825 to 1850, the idea of improvement through reading proliferated among the American middle classes.<sup>[32]</sup> By 1852, George Harris, the protagonist of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, epitomized the idea of improvement through mental culture by his “well-selected books.”<sup>[33]</sup> This was because of the belief at mid-century that books represented a “commitment to mental culture,” which was unattainable without reading.<sup>[34]</sup> Reading also fueled polite parlor conversation. The books provided an avenue to display one's refined “taste and sensibility” by both conversing about the books and displaying them in a bookcase.<sup>[35]</sup>

The middle-classes typically kept their books in a small bookcase-desk piece or bookcase-and-bureau that resembled a smaller version of the typical china cabinet. The common “secretary,” with a small upper bookcase, usually referred to as a home “library,” held most books.<sup>[36]</sup> The antebellum use of the term *library* is sometimes misleading.

Occasionally a small book collection constituting one or two shelves contained the entirety of the home's "library."

Antebellum literature suggests that it was relatively common to keep a bookcase in the best room in the house. One writer simply stated that the "room furnished as a parlor" held a bookcase with "interesting books." [37] The books are prominently displayed and readily accessible while entertaining genteel guests. Another author explained in verse that the "simple ornaments" in the parlor, which included a "book-case," showed "more than country taste." [38] The bookcase enabled the middle classes to emulate upper-class taste through the agency of display in the quasi-public parlor.

The middle-class home "library," varying in size from a single shelf up through a large bookcase, was not the same as the upper-class "Gentlemen's Library" that often consisted of a separate room of bookcases to store and display the extensive book collection. What was more common, as an 1860 story in Boston's *Atlantic Monthly* suggested, was for "a single glazed bookcase [to hold] the family library." [39] However, as an 1850 story in *The International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science* out of New York depicted, the protagonist notes a sad little unglazed "dwarf book-case" that held the entirety of the "Lady's library." [40] The better-off middle-classes that could afford a parlor exclusively for entertaining often employed a sitting room that doubled as a family library. [41] Though again, the sitting room generally contained only one smallish to medium bookcase, either glazed or unglazed depending on number and value of the books. The sitting room, used for private family entertainment, did not perform the same function as the more public parlor.

The agency of display that the bookcase represented within the parlor setting included English books. As imported commodities, the English books exhibited in the bookcase suggested a recognizable desire for self-improvement. New York City's *The American Whig Review* book review section simply states that English literature has a "tendency to elevate and improve." [42] Americans viewed English books as suitable signifiers of sophistication. In 1859, London's *Fraser's Magazine* indicated that Americans "love" the artisanship of English bookbinding. The article made no mention of the book's contents within this context only that

Americans favored the “beautiful garments” of expensive English bindings. These tastefully leather bound and cultured books on the parlor’s bookcase communicated to the genteel observer that the middle-class owner could afford to purchase and maintain such expensive items. Similar to other commodities displayed in the parlor, the antebellum bookcase contained imported books meant to convey the possessor’s dedication to refinement and mental culture.

Many imported commodities, primarily from Europe, also demonstrated the owner’s tasteful appreciation for fine objects. Kristin L. Hoganson has argued that imported commodities in white middle-class parlors in the latter half of the nineteenth century embodied a sense of “the world beyond the United States.” Well-off American women used objects to evoke their own sense of cosmopolitanism. However, she has shown that these articles were “decontextualized” from their unusual meanings.<sup>[43]</sup> Many imported objects in antebellum parlors acted as an antecedent to this phenomenon but retained their original significance. Books, particularly English editions, fit within the contemporary context of the parlor setting along with other expensive imported possessions that were commonly displayed objects. Global commodities like furniture constructed from Caribbean mahogany,<sup>[44]</sup> table linen imported from Scotland,<sup>[45]</sup> and European silverworks such as candelabra,<sup>[46]</sup> presented the American parlor as a sophisticated middle-class version of the upper-class drawing room.

The physical appearance of a cloth bound book could dictate its reception among the middle-classes that participated in parlor culture. An 1859 article in New Haven’s *New Englander and Yale Review* advised readers that the new *Treatise on Theism* will be “attractive in the parlor” and “useful in the study and the classroom” as a purchase point. The review did favorably discuss the content, but put emphasis on the “handsome” cloth bound volume’s display potential as a separate item for consideration; which, when delivered, made the prospect for display inside the parlor an acceptable reason in and of itself to make the purchase.<sup>[47]</sup>

In 1854, the publishing firm Putnam & Company, of New York, offered books designed to provide the customer with a ready-made collection for display. The “Ellen Montgomery’s Book-Case,” by Susan and Anna Warner, first reviewed in New York’s *The Living Age*, 1854, was a series of

books written for children. This “little library,” designed to fill a child’s bookcase, symbolized the fictional Ellen Montgomery’s books. Ellen is the main character in Warner’s popular sentimental novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). This “ingenious” collection, written and designed for display together on a bookcase, offered both the texts and aesthetics that the antebellum middle-class strove for in the parlor.<sup>[48]</sup> “Ellen Montgomery’s Book-Case,” the child’s first expression of the agency of display, offered a sort of sophistication primer of parlor culture for children.

As the century progressed, the importance of quality books and superior reading material increased for the middle-class. With the greater emphasis on contemporary ideas of books that contributed to personal improvement, coupled with the middle class’s penchant for fine things, the bookcase’s appearance as an object became more significant to project refinement. Decorating with “handsome [cloth or leather] books” in the parlor for guests to appreciate, helped grant the room a genteel air through the agency of display.<sup>[49]</sup> This effect did not work as well with less expensive bindings such as paper.

### The Bookcase in Antebellum Fiction

The fictional representation of the bookshelf allowed Harriet Beecher Stowe to provide a powerful characterization of George Harris. Through the books Harris displayed above his writing desk, which constituted “the family library,” Stowe communicated the gravity of his education. Although Harris is a fictional character and ex-slave, the reader understands that he is well read. A glance at the books above his head attested to his “self-cultivation” and commitment to mental culture, he has left slavery behind and now *deserves* to be free.<sup>[50]</sup> One glance, or in this case a short description, leaves the reader with an impression of Harris as polished, independent, and both physically and mentally freed from his earlier bondage.

The appearance of the binding could take precedence over the text on the spine of the displayed book. For one antebellum character, dull looking books promised a dull read, indeed. The protagonist in 1858’s “Aunt Bessie’s Story,” published in San Francisco’s *California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences*, looked for “gay covers [of] red and gilt” because they were her “favorites” among the “ample book-case” that she

frequently returned to for entertainment. The character proposes that, if forced to read from among the over abundant “calf-bound” [leather] volumes, she thought it the “greatest penance” that could be visited upon her. The protagonist even goes as far as wondering if anyone ever read the dull looking books. For her, they served no purpose than to needlessly take-up space.<sup>[51]</sup> This character’s perception and interaction with the agency of display is irrespective of the book’s content. She simply judges the books by their covers. She does not refer to title or author, but simply prefers the bright festive appearance of some few, to the more numerous somber looking volumes, which she implied will aid in her cultivation and self-improvement.

The social expectation of antebellum readers of fiction could take both aspects of aesthetics and content into account. When a character in an 1859 *Atlantic Monthly* story balked at the idea of living in the same house as a man of “no taste,” he reminds himself that there is “a complete bookcase, tasteful, inside and out,” for his use, which instantly placated his fears.<sup>[52]</sup> Not only does the character demand the bookcase be aesthetically pleasing and configured in a tasteful manner, he is not satisfied unless the books are also tasteful selections that contribute to improvement. The author clearly and overtly defines what antebellum readers expected from a genteel bookcase.

Through the agency of display, the text on the spine of the book tells the viewer about the owner’s taste, education, and perhaps most importantly, the character of the person who read the books set out for display. As the 1860 writer of *The Professor’s Story* suggested, “It would have been instructive to get a look at it, as it always is to peep into ones neighbors’ bookshelves.”<sup>[53]</sup> As another author pointed out, in a non-fiction news piece, the “peep” told a tale of its own. *The Western Democrat*, of Charlotte, North Carolina, reported a minister’s arrest for possessing counterfeiting equipment and \$1,000 in bogus bills. After his incarceration, the preacher’s character was determined by an “examination” of his bookcase.<sup>[54]</sup> A close look at the texts on the spine of the books, most titles related to successful criminals and their methods, was all the viewers needed to confirm the guilt of the minister.

The incorrect display of books on the bookcase or displaying the wrong sort of books, considered conspicuous and ill-mannered, perpetuated a

violation of intrinsic class code. When the books did not conform to contemporary arrangement expectations, as the volumes lined up on the bookcase suggested to Sir Edward Bulwer [Lord] Lytton, they stood upon the shelf as if arguing. However, these harmless novels purchased by the women of the family with “very inflammatory” titles, *sitting* next to books of sermons, suggested to Bulwer that the “next-door neighbors” should be an example to “the rest of us” in how to get along peacefully. Because the books appeared to be of differing social subjects, with several volumes not quite polite enough for a “country gentleman,” Bulwer saw the close proximity as an example of domestic harmony.<sup>[55]</sup>

Antebellum writers utilized the quasi-anthropomorphic nature of the bookcase to thematic effect. For one writer, when moved from its original position, the bookcase became a set piece. The faded outline acting as “an image on the wall” that helped to drive the story’s theme of things forgotten.<sup>[56]</sup> The bookcase, used by another author, helped to lift up a common girl. By sharing the unnaturally clear light that “fell” through the “lofty, narrow windows,” the brightly lit bookcase underscored the young girl’s altruistic motivation in the story.<sup>[57]</sup> Each instance utilizes the bookcase to support and move the story along in ways that nineteenth-century readers found easily accessible.

At other times, the volumes on the bookcase manifest through the agency of display as silent and obtuse watchers. The books sit quietly waiting for the next person to come along and turn their gaze to the bookcase, which invariably elicits a reaction. For Charles Dickens, in the 1852 *Bleak House*, dull books make poor company for a young woman forced to wait for an official. Bereft of interesting titles, the bookcase stands in the corner mute with nothing worth saying.<sup>[58]</sup> The bookcase turns into an unhappy and silent watcher, silent and boring books juxtaposed to the potential for vibrant and interesting reads. The protagonist delivers the critique as if the reader understood that this bookcase intrinsically has so much more potential to interact with the bored human stuck waiting all alone.

The bookcase, sometimes depicted in antebellum fiction as sanctified, did not become subject to the traditional rules of debt upon the decease of the genteel owner. The mark of a true Christian Gentleman, as the author of one 1858 story suggested, is that upon the death of a debtor, he

does not “dare to stir a volume” from the deceased’s bookcase and insult the man’s family. A Christian Gentleman did not violate another Gentleman’s bookcase, even after death. For this author, the contents of the bookcase are personal, and since the bookcase’s contents embody all aspects of polite parlor culture and the upstanding genteel middle-class, the “old carved bookcase and its contents” must remain inviolate by an interloper only interested in usury.<sup>[59]</sup>

Through literary depictions throughout the mid-nineteenth century, either real or fictional, authors used the bookcase to communicate complex social ideas about the amassed books and their owner. Although the agency of display primarily worked through the more public parlor, popular mid-century fiction reveals how the bookcase itself came to represent the co-option of literature by the middle-class. The democratizing effect of print culture, represented as sophistication in the middle-class owner, was also easily recognizable as a class signifier in popular periodical illustrations.

### The Bookcase in Nineteenth Century Illustrations

The bookcase began to regularly appear in popular nineteenth century American periodical illustrations when it became a commonly recognizable signifier of sophistication for the middle-classes. I viewed over 20,000 images from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The latter, which represented the bulk of the illustrations, primarily consisted of drawn, carved, or painted depictions of women’s fashions.<sup>[60]</sup> Karin J. Bohleke argues that nineteenth century women’s magazine editors consciously chose “what to leave in and what to leave out” in order to best reflect their notion of a refined American society. Bohleke explains that these magazines strove to illustrate “female perfection,” which included arranging the Fashion Plates to define the proper social “context” for the reader.<sup>[61]</sup> This coincides with what scholar Michael Twyman terms the nineteenth century “passion” for visual learning.<sup>[62]</sup> Plates in nineteenth-century books and periodicals functioned on different levels. Fashion Plates contained the latest styles, but the features of the illustrations also transmitted socially acceptable ideas about American society, particularly what defined the middle classes.



Figure 1, Frontispiece, *Godey's Ladies Book*, Edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, Philadelphia: Godey Publishing Co., March 1842.

An engraving from Philadelphia's *Godey's Lady's Book*, May 1842 [Figure 1], a predominantly women's magazine, the earliest bookcase illustration I could find in a periodical, features a family sitting down to breakfast while the wife, child, and servants listen to the patriarch read a book. There is a large bookcase dominating the background with one door open. The illustration suggests the dominance of the bookcase, as well as the patriarch as he mediates the shelved books; he is the only member of the family reading. The bookcase stands central to the wife and child, while the servants are off to one side with the man's back to them.





Figure 2, Frontispiece, *Godey's Ladies Book*, Edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, Philadelphia: Godey Publishing Co., January 1857.

When this image is juxtaposed to the second illustration, the first instance when women are directly associated with books and the bookcase in an illustration, a different narrative emerges. The image, from an 1857 *Godey's Lady's Book* frontispiece, dates fifteen years later [Figure 2]. This was the next instance I found in a periodical, which significantly post-dates the aforementioned developments. It is clear that the bookcase is now associated with women and the family in general. The closed bookcase still dominates the background, but it is the matriarch that reads to the daughter and *her* family, interacting with them by turning the pages for all to see while pointing to the contents. What is more significant is that the bookcase has now moved into the refined middle-class parlor where family and guest interaction typically takes place. Furthermore, as Twyman has shown, nineteenth century illustrations had an “artifactual” relationship to the text.[63] When considered along with the illustration, the meaning of the text deepens. The inscription above the picture, “A Library In Itself,” implied that *Godey's* recognized the cultural capital gained from direct association with the parlor bookcase and the market potential for their affluent middle-class readers.[64]



Figure 3, Google Ngram, “book-case” and “bookcase,” 1845 to 1865. Jean-Baptiste, Michel\*, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, William Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and Erez Lieberman Aiden\*. “Quantitative

## Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” Science (Published online ahead of print: 12/16/2010)

The appearance of the bookcase in popular periodical illustrations of the middle-class parlor coincides with changes in the use of the term “book-case.” An Ngram<sup>[65]</sup> of “book-case” reveals the term’s increased use during the 1850s, with a significant peak at 1856. The Ngram indicates the term “book-case” became more prevalent in antebellum literature, which corresponds with the cultural and technological developments this essay explicates. The Ngram [Figure 3] further shows “bookcase” without the hyphen, eclipsing “book-case” by late 1857 as the latter begins to fall out of use.<sup>[66]</sup> This indicates that the rising use of the bookcase, and the subsequent use of “book-case,” enamored the literate public to the term’s use. With repeated reference to the two-word “book-case,” the hyphen lost its meaning and “bookcase” replaced the earlier term. The Ngram also shows that the two terms remained divergent, with “book-case” spiraling out of the lexicon and “bookcase” replacing it while maintaining steady growth in use over the following years.

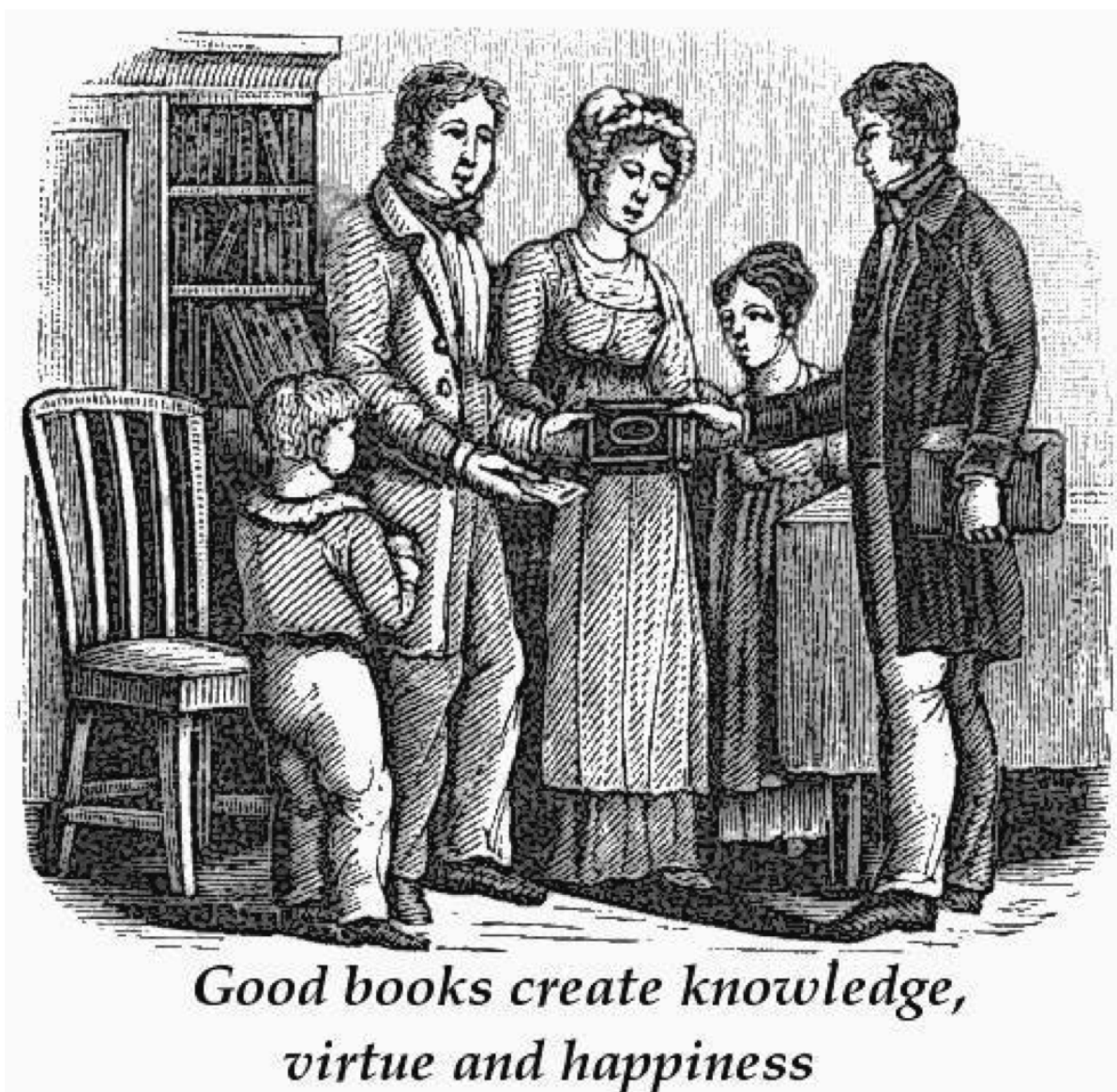


Figure 4, John W. Barber, “Good books create knowledge, virtue and happiness,” *The Handbook of Illustrated Proverbs* (New York: George F. Tuttle, 1857), 181.

When the “book-case” appeared more frequently in conjunction with the family in antebellum illustrations, the “bookcase” transmitted gentility as a class signifier through parlor depictions. In John W. Barber’s *The Handbook of Illustrated Proverbs* (1857), an illustration accompanies the proverb “Good books create knowledge, virtue and happiness,” in which a middle-class family purchases a book from a bookseller [Figure 4].<sup>[67]</sup> Barber emphasized the books must be “good” in order to be of service in self-improvement. The new book, held in the father’s left hand while the right hand gives payment to the bookseller, is surrounded by the family. Note that only the hands of the males are visible. The bookcase, positioned directly behind the father, again with the door open,

suggested the books not only support the family, but the patriarch mediated the contents of the bookcase. Although still facilitated by the male head of the household, as the 1842 illustration also suggested, Barber's 1857 illustration depicted the bookcase as an accepted part of middle-class parlor culture by mid-century.



Figure 5, Fashion Plate, *Graham's Magazine*, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Philadelphia: George R. Graham Publishing, 1848.

The bookcase first appeared in a Fashion Plate, a contextualized representation of predominantly middle-class women's period costume in a periodical, by the end of the antebellum period. Historian James D. Norris estimated that American publishing houses produced over 4,000 different periodicals in the 1850s.[68] During this time of expanded periodical publication, when the "book-case" became the "bookcase," fashion, and therefore illustrations of fashion, became "sensible and moral" to reflect middle-class ideals.[69] This was reflected in the drawing's compositional environment of the middle-class parlor. By the end of the 1850s, the bookcase began to appear in popular antebellum periodical illustrations of the parlor, which reinforced the middle classes' penchant for mental culture to enhance social capital. The inclusion of the bookcase in the parlor's sophisticated setting communicated to the reader the potential for cultural capital that the bookcase now embodied as a middle-class signifier of sophistication.



Figure 6, Fashion Plate, *Graham's Magazine*, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Philadelphia: George R. Graham Publishing, 1849.

Interiors of women's Fashion Plates portrayed the parlor as a refined setting. Throughout the antebellum period, Fashion Plates often included depictions of cultured décor that included a piano, mahogany furniture, and Grecian architecture. Fashion Plates in Philadelphia's *Graham's Magazine* in 1848 featured a piano [Figure 5],



and then in 1849 a mahogany table [Figure 6], and in 1852 a Grecian arch, column, and another piano [Figure 7], all depicted the parlor as a cultured setting. However, fashion was still the focus. *Godey's Lady's Book* espoused “republican fashion” as an alternative to the previously popular “artificial styles” that corrupted American women.[70] This idea put forward the cultured and conservative values the commodities invoked and acted to support the women's fashions by conveying middle-class taste, which is ultimately the focus of the illustrations.



Figure 7, Fashion Plate, *Graham's Magazine*, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Philadelphia: George R. Graham Publishing, 1852.

For the first time, in 1860, parlor illustrations in Fashion Plates included the bookcase. An 1860 *Godey's Lady's Book* Fashion Plate [Figure 8] and an 1860 *Peterson's Magazine* Fashion Plate [Figure 9] featured women standing in the parlor in front of bookcases. This suggested the co-opted bookcase had become entrenched in middle-class antebellum mentalités in connection with republican ideals, sophistication, and the parlor, which the middle-classes used to define themselves.



Figure 8, Fashion Plate, *Godey's Ladies Book*, Edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, Philadelphia: Godey Publishing Co., 1860.

Fashion Plates do not depict explicit female interaction with the bookcase until 1874, which is when two women appear actively taking a book off the shelves. An 1874 *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* [Figure 10], from New York, depicts a woman pulling a book from the bookcase for the first time in a Fashion Plate. The appearance of overt female interaction with a book suggests that the bookcase projected sophistication about middle-class homes, regardless of gender. Furthermore, this suggested the imagined literary discourse community expanded to be more openly inclusive. Halttunen has argued that outward appearance represented the “index of character” for the woman

of American fashion.[71] The fashion illustrations reflected a recognizable late nineteenth century view of women's connection to mental culture, and in turn, their actions in relation to books as illustrated within the Victorian parlor and home.



Figure 9, Fashion Plate, Peterson's Magazine, edited by C. J. Peterson, Philadelphia: Charles J. Peterson Publishing, 1860.

An examination of the progression of nineteenth century illustrations, where the bookcase is *intentionally* included, depicts a gendered aspect to how middle-class women related to books and the bookcase. The first illustration taken from *Godey's* in 1842 [Figure 1], depicted the male head of the family as the only one that interacted with books and the bookcase. Compared to Barber's 1857 *The Handbook of Illustrated Proverbs* (figure 4), where the patriarch is still mediating the bookcase but the whole family is engaged in the book's purchase, the book represented cultural capital with the potential to be shared by the middle-class family.



Figure 10, Fashion Plate, Demorest's Monthly Magazine, edited by Ellen Louise Curtis Demorest, New York: Arkell Publishing, May 1874.

When compared to the second *Godey's* illustration, also in 1857 [Figure 2], which overtly states women only needed *Godey's* and in effect did not need access to the closed bookcase in the background, suggested that women could co-opt the bookcase's cultural significance from men by reading *Godey's Lady's Book*. Within three years, the bookcase, now

used to signify women's sophistication, joined other recognizable signifiers in the middle-class parlor setting (Figure 8, *Godey's*, and Figure 9, *Peterson's*). This idea is further strengthened by the first instances women are shown interacting with the bookcase from the 1874 Fashion Plate in *Demorest's* [Figure 10], which appears thirty-two years after the bookcase's first depiction in the 1842 engraving from *Godey's*.

### Conclusion

As literacy disseminated across class boundaries throughout America, the nineteenth century middle classes emulated upper-class modes of display in relation to the bookcase. The print, transportation, and communication revolutions, combined with a historically high literacy rate, came together at mid-century, which enabled the American middle-classes to co-opt upper-class hegemony of literature and create "proper [domestic] environments" to distance themselves from the lower classes.<sup>[72]</sup> In turn, proximity to books and the bookcase, traditionally depicted in upper-class portraiture, became the providence of the middle classes as represented in illustrations circulated through popular periodicals and books.

The bookcase became associated with middle-class parlor culture, which operated in imitation of the upper-class, and through the agency of display communicated sophistication and taste. Antebellum American mentalités concerning the bookcase, as discerned through popular literary review, commentary, fictional characterization, and illustrations, revealed the object's antebellum connection to global commodities and its emergence among the middle-classes. Through print culture, the middle classes recognized the bookcase as a signifier of sophistication that provided an *appearance* of gentility. An occupant's ownership and display of a bookcase in one's home conveyed social and cultural capital to the expanding middle classes, which in turn imbued the bookcase itself with an aura of inclusion in an imagined literary discourse community for the literate. Such inclusion of the literate and subsequent exclusion of the illiterate overtly signified an occupant's class status in nineteenth century illustrations by the end of the antebellum period.

Footnotes:

[1] My research encompassed evidence from regions across America, many of the publications were subscription based and so they were sent to all corners of the country. This is why I found the subject so compelling, essentially, it was everywhere I looked hiding in plain sight. As far as race, the images I found that included the bookcase only depict Caucasians. The literary sources, other than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, make no mention. There were middle-class Americans other than whites that partook of literary and parlor culture, and undoubtedly had parlor bookcases proudly displaying their books, just not overtly in the evidence I found. For an analysis of elite African American book culture, and its emulation of typical white middle-class practices, see Richard L. Bushman. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1992), 435-440.

[2] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

[3] Expensive tooled leather was the most desirable book binding. However, cheaper editions with distinguished titles/authors or distinctive cloth bindings such as Ticknor and Fields "Blue and Gold" series, acted as signifiers in the same manner.

[4] Richard L. Bushman. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1992), 283.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction." *Selected Writings Volume 3: 1935-1938* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso/New Left Books, 1983).

[7] Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1988) 3.

[8] Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 283.

[9] Bushman, *Refinement of America*, front of jacket painting.

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- [11] Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 59-60.
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- [13] Walter Benjamin. "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000).
- [14] Leslie Howsam, "New Directions for Research and Pedagogy in Book History," *Kyngotyra* ["Book Science" internet journal] (2013), 9.
- [15] John Frow, "Afterlife: Texts as Usage," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, 1, (2008): 1-23. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- [16] Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 28.
- [17] L. L. L., "Betty Mills's Grand Match, Part I," *The Ladies' Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*, 20:1 (1860), 42.
- [18] For a more comprehensive discussion see: David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).
- [19] Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 27.
- [20] Florence Hartley, *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: G. W. Cottrell Publishing, 1860), 28.
- [21] Ronald J. Zboray, "The Transportation Revolution and Antebellum Book Distribution Reconsidered," *American Quarterly*, 38:1 (1986), 58-59.



[22] Ibid., 62.

[23] David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 66.

[24] Hartley, *The Ladies' Book*, 216.

[25] Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 193.

[26] John W. Barber, "Good books create knowledge, virtue and happiness," *The Handbook of Illustrated Proverbs* (New York: George F. Tuttle, 1857), 183.

[27] Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Reading Patterns in Antebellum America: Evidence in the Charge Records of the New York Society Library" *Libraries & Culture*, 26:2, (1991).

[28] Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, And Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 29.

[29] David Paul Nord, "Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America" *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15:2 (1995): 241-272.

[30] Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly*, 48:4 (1996), 587-622. Zboray discusses books as a commodity and the bible's place in New England reading culture.

[31] Bushman. *Refinement of America*, 283.

[32] Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 23.

[33] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cutchogue: Buccaneer Books Edition, 1982), 426.

[34] Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 283.

[35] Ibid., 88.

[36] Dean F. Failey, *Long Island is My Home: The Decorative Arts & Craftsmen, 1640-1830* (Albany: Mount Aida Press, 1998). Examples of

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- [56] ---, "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2:10 (1858): 367.
- [57] ---, "Her Grace, the Drummer's Daughter" *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2:13 (1858): 666.
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[64] For Pierre Bourdieu cultural capital is tied to self-improvement, or at the very least the appearance of self-improvement, and ideas of personal distinction that can be used to one’s advantage in social situations. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Capital*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-58.

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[67] Barber, “Good books create knowledge,” 181.

[68] James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 27.

[69] Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 70.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 159.

[72] Bushman, introduction to *Refinement of America*, xviii.



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