

5 The Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century saw vast leaps in mass literacy in Europe, bringing in large numbers of new readers among children, women and workers.

5.1 Children, Women and Workers

As primary education became compulsory from the late nineteenth century, children became an important category of readers. Production of school textbooks became critical for the publishing industry. A children's press, devoted to literature for children alone, was set up in France in 1857. This press published new works as well as old fairy tales and folk tales. The Grimm Brothers in Germany spent years compiling traditional folk tales gathered from peasants. What they collected was edited before the stories were published in a collection in 1812. Anything that was considered unsuitable for children or would appear vulgar to the elites, was not included in the published version. Rural folk tales thus acquired a new form. In this way, print recorded old tales but also changed them.

Women became important as readers as well as writers. Penny magazines (see Fig. 12) were especially meant for women, as were manuals teaching proper behaviour and housekeeping. When novels began to be written in the nineteenth century, women were seen as important readers. Some of the best-known novelists were women: Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot. Their writings became important in defining a new type of woman: a person with will, strength of personality, determination and the power to think.

Lending libraries had been in existence from the seventeenth century onwards. In the nineteenth century, lending libraries in England became instruments for educating white-collar workers, artisans and lower-middle-class people. Sometimes, self-educated working class people wrote for themselves. After the working day was gradually shortened from the mid-nineteenth century, workers had some time for self-improvement and self-expression. They wrote political tracts and autobiographies in large numbers.



Fig. 12 – Frontispiece of Penny Magazine. Penny Magazine was published between 1832 and 1835 in England by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It was aimed primarily at the working class.

Box 3

Thomas Wood, a Yorkshire mechanic, narrated how he would rent old newspapers and read them by firelight in the evenings as he could not afford candles. Autobiographies of poor people narrated their struggles to read against grim obstacles: the twentieth-century Russian revolutionary author Maxim Gorky's *My Childhood* and *My University* provide glimpses of such struggles.

