ALTHOUGH THE attitudes of working-class journalists toward all literary genres changed greatly between 1816 and 1858, toward no genre was there a more discernible and sweeping change than toward fiction. A study of the periodicals written for and by that class during this time indicates that working-class thought about fiction changed from an absolute rejection of the genre to general acceptance. Such a change parallels the slow shift in middle-class attitudes toward fiction, documented in such works as John Tinnon Taylor's *Early Opposition to the English Novel*, with an important difference: working-class journalists solidly based their reasons for rejecting or promoting fiction upon distinctive and identifiable class grounds.

There are three reasons for this change in attitude toward fiction. First, the genre itself changed considerably, in the minds of working-class reviewers. Almost all these critics from the 1830s on noticed the different and, to them, more relevant uses to which, say, Dickens, or Ernest Jones, put the genre than did Scott.

Second, the ideas working-class journalists had about what their readers should read changed. Early journalists perceived fiction as a dangerous diversion from serious literature. They felt that the earnest working-class reader should be concerned only with factual and rational
literature instead of imaginative works. In this they echoed the sentiments of middle-class literary reformers such as Charles Knight, editor of the *Penny Magazine*, put out by the SDUK. Unlike Knight, however, whose "useful knowledge" in that magazine steered clear of politics, early working-class journalists felt that the most useful knowledge was political, and that that knowledge was best found in their own periodicals. Later working-class writers and editors saw room for—indeed, a necessity for—imagination, recreation, and diversion and began to understand that political and social truths could be conveyed through imaginative as well as factual literature.

Finally, later working-class journalists themselves changed; they were in general very different from Cobbett, Wooler, and Carlyle, who restricted themselves almost exclusively to facts and to the epistolary essay as the medium for conveying those facts. Most later journalists realized that political essays alone would not hold their audience and reacted accordingly. They were, of course, able to turn out a rousing political essay if the situation demanded, but many—for example, Linton, Cooper, and Jones—were fiction writers themselves, as well as essayists, and saw value in both forms.

**Early Views: Fears of Fiction**

The three major working-class journalists from 1816 through the mid-1820s—Cobbett, Wooler, and Carlyle—all attest to Scott's popularity as a fiction writer by confusing, in almost all their pronouncements about fiction, the writer with his genre. To them, all fiction and Scott's fiction were largely the same. References to Scott in journals produced by these men appear with far greater frequency than do those to any other storyteller. Not one of the three mentions Jane Austen or any of her works.¹ Henry Fielding, Sterne, Ann Radcliffe, and other early nineteenth-century novelists might earn passing comments, and on rare occasions these journalists might notice a contemporary novel by a now-forgotten author. Scott, however, is the only writer of fiction who appears repeatedly, and the only one the journalists continually scorn for writing within a corrupt and useless genre. Study of the views of fiction by these early journalists, then, is largely study of their views of Scott.

One might wonder how a working-class audience could read Scott,
when his books were, at this time, commanding record prices for fiction, as high as 31s. 6d. (for Kenilworth). Cheap reprints of his works were not available until the late 1820s (Altuck 263, 274). Clearly, many readers simply did not read Scott at all; rarely did the early critics assume that their audience had any specific knowledge about Scott’s plots or characters. On the one occasion I have found in which any of these writers deals with specific details from Scott, Wooler is discussing a stage version of Kenilworth, of all books (see below). The theater was obviously instrumental in bringing Scott’s work to the poor; as Louis James writes in his Fiction for the Working Man, “The impression remains . . . that the main impact of Scott on the lower classes came through the numerous and popular dramatizations of his works” (103). It is clear, however, that even if part of their audience read or saw Scott, not one of the early critics assumed that his readers were familiar with him in any detail.

Although Cobbett maintains that as a young man, “novels, plays, history, poetry, all were read, and nearly with equal avidity” (quoted in Spater 18), he rarely mentions fiction in his Political Register. Besides calling Hannah More “that Old Bishop in Petticoats” and mentioning that “Mother” Harriet Martineau “is a vain gossiping creature, talking nonsense” (20 Apr. 1822: 188; 3 Jan. 1835: 12), those few times he mentions fiction he is discussing Scott. He mounts several strong personal attacks on Scott, whom he calls a man “I have always despised” (26 Jan. 1827: 85). His attacks on Scott’s fiction, however, and on fiction in general, are far less direct. In only one place, a digression in a letter “To the Planters and Gardeners” in his Register of 10 November 1827, does he straightforwardly develop his thoughts on the dangers of fiction by Scott and others like him. Discussing what he sees as good books on gardening, he turns to describing bad books, by which he means “the circulating library trash, abounding with WALTER SCOTT’S amusements.” Those “amusements” are dangerous, not to laborers or their families, but to a limited segment of the middle class: “the dirty-necked daughters of the Jews and jobbers, and the lazy wives, who sit and almost rot by the fire-side, stuffed with the drugs of the apothecary instead of being bustling about the house, and taking care to spare the purses, and make pleasant homes for their husbands and their children” (397–98). This disruption within the domestic economy of this small class leads, Cobbett maintains, without saying how, “to the destruction of the good morals of the country.”
Cobbett was not the first to argue that fiction is a time waster that keeps people from their proper duties. Certainly he is not the first to argue that fiction is especially dangerous to women. What is strikingly new about his view is its class bias. Earlier assaults on fiction had generally been directed toward all classes, although previously, if one class had been singled out for attack it was the “lower orders.” Cobbett turns that attack on its ear, targeting instead the worst elements of the middle class: nonlaboring and nonproductive middlemen. In essence, Cobbett argues that Scott’s fiction is useless, and leads the wives and daughters of useless members of society to be themselves useless. Fiction causes this class, already a heavy burden on society, to become an even heavier one.

In his personal attacks on Scott, Cobbett argues the uselessness of the genre of fiction by arguing the uselessness of the most popular novelist. He repeatedly notes that Scott was the first person to be “baronetted” by George IV, and often includes Scott among the placemen and pensioners he hates so intensely. Indeed, Scott is a pensioner for pensioners; he earns his £100 a year as a member of the Royal Society of Literature by writing “heaps of stuff for the amusement of the idle hours of those who live on taxes.” Cobbett is obviously galled that Scott, a “sentiment-monger,” should be esteemed more highly in some circles than Cobbett is. He notes with some chagrin that the Spanish refer to him as “Sir William Cobbett,” “thinking, doubtless, that it was utterly impossible that the author of such a work [Cobbett’s Protestant Reformation] should escape Barometting, while WALTER SCOTT, who had put forth nothing but what may well be called the dish-washings of literature, had not been able to escape the piercing eye and unsparing hand of the distributors of English honors.”

Whether this conceit of Cobbett’s is a fiction or not is impossible to say. Clearly, though, Cobbett compares genres and writers here, and sees himself and his form of writing as more valuable than Scott and his novels. Just as in his Grammar of the English Language and in grammatical articles in the Register he attacks earlier prose writers in order to promote a new working-class rhetoric with his own writing, so in his attacks on Scott and his fiction Cobbett indirectly emphasizes the importance of his own work and form by belittling another’s.

Although Wooler, like Cobbett, has very little to say about fiction as a genre or about individual works of fiction, curiously enough he almost certainly took the name for his journal from a work of fiction—by Scott.
Scott anonymously published his *Black Dwarf* in November 1816 (Johnson 557); Wooler published the first issue of *Black Dwarf* on 29 January 1817. The character of Elshender of Mucklestane-Moor, Scott's "Black Dwarf," is similar in many important respects to the persona of the Black Dwarf that Wooler takes on in many of his political and critical essays: both are stunted, philosophic, and superficially misanthropic; both are fully sensitive to the failings of human society; and both strive to improve it. While such borrowing shows that Wooler was at least somewhat aware of the popular fiction of the day, it does not necessarily mean that Wooler admired Scott's fiction in general. Wooler in 1817 could not have known that Scott wrote *The Black Dwarf*; at the time almost no one in Britain knew. Nor does Wooler's adoption of a fictional persona imply that he approved of novels. Like Addison's and Steele's Isaac Bickerstaff, Wooler's Black Dwarf may be an imaginary character writing to imaginary correspondents, but his subject matter is completely factual.

Wooler does offer several indirect views on fiction. In a review written in the persona of the dwarf, Wooler criticizes one of the many stage versions of *Frankenstein*, attacking "the taste for the marvelous" in fiction and drama, which he feels prevails "in all ignorant countries." Wooler has nothing but contempt for Mary Shelley's romanticism, and for the fantastic in fiction:

The story is taken from a novel, by Mrs. Shelley; who, dissatisfied with the ordinary means of introducing men into the world, sets Frankenstein upon the task of making a man at once! She does not furnish him with the best materials, for she sends him to the corruption of the grave to look for the principles of life; as if that which had left the body before the process of putrefaction began, was likely to be found there after the decomposition of the mortal corpse. The authoress however had the business in her own hands; and by putting together the largest and finest bones he could find, and covering them we suppose by flaying the most recently deceased body; borrowing the whitest teeth, and the longest and blackest hair, with the superaddition of some secret process wisely transacted behind the scenes (lest other ladies should grow enamoured of the new process of man-making, and every boarding-school miss set about making a lover for herself) a sort of non-descript devil is produced, from which the poor frightened Frankenstein shrinks with as much horror as other people.
Wooler ends his account with amazement that the audience, including the “learned,” found this stuff at all entertaining—though “the pit did not relish it so much” (6 Aug. 1823: 207–8). The hierarchy of the theater apparently parallels the social hierarchy; the groundlings are unaffected by such an imaginative flight, which only appeals to those in the higher seats and the higher classes (including, one assumes, the “boarding-school misses”). Obviously, as far as Wooler is concerned, those classes can keep their strange fancies.

Wooler’s other remarks about fiction are almost exclusively limited to attacks upon Scott. In a prospectus for a new series of the Dwarf, promising a greater variety than before, Wooler moves smoothly from the generic to the specific and back again: “Our next novel feature will be, a regular notice of modern literature. We have occasionally referred to this topic, on political subjects; but since Sir Walter Scott has begun to pervert history in his novels, to serve the despotism which he loves for the favours it has conferred upon him, a closer attention is necessary, to expose such frauds” (31 Dec. 1823: 920–21). Wooler himself gave his readers a clearer idea of one way that Scott perverts history in a review of a stage version of Kenilworth. There he maintains that Scott “has only put himself in hooped petticoats, laced stomacher, and large frill, and called it Queen Elizabeth” (7 Jan. 1824: 28). Later working-class journalists expanded upon Wooler’s political reading of Scott’s fiction and his charge that Scott is hostile to their class interests.

Every reference Wooler makes to fiction is negative. The Dwarf’s primary political purpose is to attack political abuses, and one of its literary purposes is to attack generic abuses. Nowhere does Wooler provide a model of good fiction; he can only look upon the genre with derision. Imagination invested in romances, Gothic nonsense, and pseudohistorical charades is misdirected. As a correspondent to Black Dwarf writes: “Sir Walter Scott may have imagination; so has a green sickness girl” (6 Aug. 1823: 196–97).

Carlile is the first journalist to deal with the political and social aspects of fiction at any length in a working-class periodical. He is also more doctrinaire and strident in his attacks than any other working-class journalist. He wages his struggle against fiction as violently as he struggles against the established system of political power and the established church. In a footnote to an article entitled “Fiction,” he writes “we
should, as lovers of truth, war even with the fiction of the poet, the novelist and the romance writer, and give it no quarter" (Lion 24 Oct. 1828: 523). Carlile’s belief about fiction, and that of several of his correspondents, is simple: fiction is not truth; therefore it is a collection of lies; therefore fiction is dangerous. He and his correspondents take this philosophy to extreme lengths, spelling out in wild and colorful detail the pernicious effects that fiction has on the human constitution and the body politic. And although they may cite this or that writer for particular censure, they never focus their attacks upon specific subgenres of fiction—upon “silver-fork” novels, for example, or Newgate novels—because they felt that the genre as a whole was corrupt.6

Such an attack nearly corresponds with previous and contemporary views about fiction held by two other groups: the Utilitarians and the Evangelicals. Leslie Stephen noted that for the Utilitarians “it was difficult to distinguish between fiction and lying” (367). During the first dozen years of its existence (1824–36), the Utilitarian Westminster Review mirrored the working-class press by displaying its hostility toward imaginative literature and in particular toward the “historical” romances of Scott (Nesbit 96, 105–9).7 Richard Altick cites several Evangelical views of fiction that—we shall see—are remarkably like Carlile’s and his correspondents’: they, too, saw novels, “the most dangerous of all literary forms,” as a kind of lotos fruit diverting the reader from profitable contemplation and positive moral values, overstimulating the imagination, and eventually leading to general debility (108–15).8 Considering that both movements were involved in bringing literacy—and transmitting their own ideologies—to the poor, such a connection is not surprising. Although the militantly free-thinking Carlile would certainly have been loath to acknowledge it, early religious training had a strong role in shaping the minds of many working-class readers and writers. Like Carlile, many from the working class got some, or often all, of their skimpy formal education from Sunday schools or church-run day schools, and it should come as no surprise that the generic views of their teachers found fertile soil.9 Working-class intellectuals did not simply parrot their middle-class teachers, however. Rather, using much the same argument, they substituted a class basis of criticism for a religious one; they were not concerned with fiction’s effect on the soul, but upon society.

Carlile’s first attack on fiction (as an editor, at least) comes in the Re-
publican in the form of a letter from a “Lancashire Weaver” who calls himself Epicurus and whose views on fiction Carlile highly commends: “He calls himself my pupil; but it seems that he is going on a fair way to become his master’s master” (6 Feb. 1824: 188). Epicurus’s subject is mental improvement, and he stresses the importance of knowing literature and the fine arts but questions the value of novels. Epicurus does admire Fielding, Smollett, and Richardson—why, he does not say—but he attacks the successors of these writers, “the bastard species of novelists, who have imitated the faults of their great originals, and whose volumes are fit for nothing but to be sold to grocers, tallow-chandlers, &c. for waste paper” (185–86). Again, the specific faults of these writers, and therefore of “their great originals,” Epicurus does not describe. Instead, he launches an attack on the novel itself: “Novels in general are a corroding poison in society, embittering the reader’s pleasures, which otherwise he might enjoy, pure and untainted” (186). To this weaver, novels are a drug, debilitating the ordered mind. He describes the mental effects of novel reading in lurid and often incomprehensible detail, restricting his description at first, but only at first, to effects on the bodies and minds of women, “the only exclusive novel-readers,” and presenting the novelist as a sort of seducer and rapist: “The novelist sports with female affections—dabbles and wantons with innocence itself—releases every fibre of the frame—unstrings almost every cord of life—plays with the vibration of the ears, produces, destroys, and produces again, the most nervous and painful sensations, until the animal machine is disordered by an action and reaction, of conflicting feelings and passions” (186). Women may be the most easily seduced by the novelist, but they are not alone:

The human mind ceases to be a mind when order and regularity are no longer predominant, but forced and beaten down into comparative non-existence. The fancy is courted; hundreds of illusions are admitted as realities; imagination flaps its sportive wings, and skims over the surface of things like a swallow over a lake, occasionally twitting and fluttering round particular objects, and having prevailed upon the memory to follow in the same fairy-like course, they finally write [sic] with their myriads of progeny to destroy the judgement, by compelling it to take a tour through regions where she [sic] inevitably gets lost and bewildered, and at last falls a victim to the powerful and capricious tyranny of the imagination. (186–87)
Epicurus's highly representational description of the human psychology, with its cords to the body, birds, and mysterious "regions of thought," as well as his abrupt and confusing transitions—from women to all people, from some novels to all, and later, from novels to religious writings—make it hard to try his letter by the test Epicurus sets for literature: "the touchstone of reason" (187). His passionate denunciation of fiction is at least as emotional as those of his Evangelical predecessors. Unlike the Evangelicals, however, the hell he fears is clearly one of this world. This avowedly self-taught weaver cries out a warning to those would-be autodidacts who are following him to avoid the trap of fiction—or of any purely imaginative writing. Instead, others should read, as he has, only "books that are written in favour of the liberties of mankind" (188).

In his next periodical, the Lion (1828–29), it is Carlile himself who wars against the genre and against three correspondents who champion fiction in different ways and who, in doing so, show that not all readers of radical periodicals agreed completely with Cobbett, Wooler, or Carlile. The first of these champions of fiction, R. T. Webb, notes "the beauty and utility" of some novels, citing a novel he or she thinks is by Godwin, Ann of St. Ives, as an example (Lion 21 Mar. 1828: 377). Webb believes that this story belongs to a new subgenre: the "skeptical novel." Two such novels, Webb believes, are Tremaine; or the Man of Refinement and The Mummy. Both promote free thought; The Mummy, for example, "hazards some thoughts about the soul, and resolves the body to its elements, to the full denial of a resurrection." Such works use fiction to make hard truths palatable. As Webb writes: "to draw a simile from the shop: we must sweeten physic for children, and sometimes gild a pill for grown persons" (378). Carlile in reply denies that fiction can somehow improve truth, or improve the ability of people to comprehend truth. Instead, fiction cloaks or covers truths, which are most effective unadorned: "We deprecate the fiction of novels, as part of the common evil of fiction, and the timidity that shelters its desire to promulgate useful truths under the guise of fiction" (379).

Another correspondent to the Lion, Anti-Parson, carries to extremes the idea that fiction is an adornment of truth. In the poem "Truth and Fable," Anti-Parson allegorizes the positive relation between the two. Fable,
cover'd with a gorgeous cloak
And deck'd with jewels rare,
(Most part were false, but all were fair)

comes upon "poor naked truth," shivering and alone. Fable suggests
that Truth share her cloak, so that

"By the same interests united,
No more will silly man be frightened;
For me—in wisdom's ear
My dear,
You'll whisper a kind word;
And by the senseless fool,
Nurs'd in blind folly's school,
Thro' me—your sober accents shall be heard—
With tastes distinct—but in one cause connected
Your harsher features will not be detected,—
And in whatever circle we appear,
Trust me you need not fear:—
Thanks to your reason, and my folly,
We shall be thought good company." (14 Nov. 1828: 624)

Curiously charitable, Carlile concedes "the general correctness of moral
or character of this Apologue," and then proceeds to condemn it: "Still it
is an evil, that should be corrected; and as in this publication, the aid of
fiction to truth is not found useful, I have to request that no correspon-
dent will hereafter forward any thing of the kind, as I have resolved most
strenuously to assert the propriety of exhibiting truth without the garb
of fiction" (624). Carlile puts himself, his periodical, and his reader-
ship above needing the crutch of fiction, here feeling that fiction is not
so much damaging as it is useless, at least for the educated reader. "In
other quarters," he writes, fiction "may be useful; but cannot be useful in
mine" (624).

The third proponent of fiction in Carlile's Lion is one Juvenis, whose
essay, filling several pages with small type, takes some empiricist ideas to
strange lengths, attempting to prove that fiction is a part of nature (29
Nov. 1828: 683–88). Briefly put (and would that Juvenis were), he argues that since all ideas can only be received through sense impressions, then all thoughts are born of those impressions, and must "express only what nature dictates." Therefore, "on these remarks, I think I have a right to establish the conclusion, that in giving birth to the wildest vagaries of the imagination, we are still conforming to nature, and therefore to deprecate fiction is, in fact, to revile nature. . . . In short, if fiction be dangerous, you must admit that nature teaches us dangerous and unserviceable lessons, and we must no longer take nature for our guide" (685). Carlile, whose temper flies forth in the form of angry footnotes throughout the essay, notes here with exasperation, "This is a jump. I do not see the chain to this conclusion." Certainly, Carlile is not wrong to question the logic of this confusing essay. Within its pages of questionable logic, however, the essay does take up and further develop Anti-Parson's arguments for the utility of fiction. "Abstruse and laborious disquisitions, though they be recommended by the most profound erudition, will seldom meet so much attention as when they are set off by a flourish of the imagination . . . for I hold the mind to be in one point of view, like a stomach, which sometimes requires to be flattered by dainties, and will refuse a plainly dressed dish" (686). Carlile appreciates this idea even less here than he did when Anti-Parson posited it, and he uses the editorial privilege of getting in the last word to dismiss his correspondent's laborious disquisitions with scorn. "In all romance writing, or novel writing, or poetic fiction, there must be in the mind that indulges it, a sense of trick and dishonesty, which to encourage is to encourage that same sort of vice, which makes general or more enlarged trick and dishonesty successful and socially mischievous. The difference can only be in the degree and not in the action. I hate it, and war against it in every degree; and can find no use for it in the present state of society in this country" (687). Carlile's subject here seems a generic hash, but to him, the romance and the novel are exactly the same. Northrop Frye argues that the contrast between romantic and realistic "is a nineteenth-century one" (45), but the idea that a novel could present any realism relevant to the working class is one foreign to Carlile.

Despite the contentious tone Carlile adopts toward all three of his correspondents, they are not wholehearted proponents of fiction. Each one seems somehow above fiction; even Webb, who praises the new
school of skeptical fiction and mentions that he has half written a couple of novels, states that he is slightly embarrassed to be discussing fiction in the sober pages of the Lion. The other two make it clear that fiction is useful only to those who need it: for Anti-Parson, the type of person who most needs fiction is “the senseless fool / Nurs’d in blind folly’s school”; for Juvenis, using fiction “is like giving medicine to a spoiled child, who will not take it, unless it be covered with sugar” (624, 687). In short, to all three, fiction is a tool with which the intelligent communicate truth to the ignorant. High on Carlile’s long list of intolerances, however, was one for ignorance; he has no desire to try to sweeten truths for those who cannot take them straight. Moreover, he sees no escape from ignorance in the lies of fiction. His correspondents may see fiction as a crutch; he sees it only as a snare.  

Besides sparring with his correspondents, Carlile discusses fiction directly in two generic essays. The first, “Literature and the Fine Arts,” he published in the Lion on 14 November 1828 (609–12). The second, “Literature,” appeared in Gauntlet on 10 February 1833 (2–3). Both clearly show that while Carlile may have taken the germ of his arguments from ideas of middle-class thinkers, he clearly reshaped them to suit a working-class audience. In these articles he maintains that literary reform is inseparably entwined with political reform. If literature were reformed to exclude fiction, society itself would improve.

In the earlier essay Carlile’s position is less clear, for it is not certain exactly what he is attacking. He places fiction in the more general and confusing category of “the perversion of letters” that constitutes “light reading,” a category that includes “the novels of Sir Walter Scott, and every piece of fiction that has been presented to mankind” (609)—what the total category includes can only be guessed at. Carlile’s target is clearer in Gauntlet: “Letters are the last remaining spark of the English Republic, and they, too, like state affairs, have fallen under the dominion of madmen. He whose insanity can body forth the greatest number of strange ideas, has been deemed pre-eminent in literature. Sir Walter Scott has been an instance of this kind, and verily it grieves me to see such a man as William Godwin bothering his brain to educe a mass of fiction under the name of a novel” (2). That Carlile includes Godwin in his condemnation suggests that the genre can only muddle the ideas of the most rational of thinkers. Both essays batter Scott relentlessly. “I had
rather bear a year's imprisonment where I now am," Carlile writes in 
*Gauntlet* from Gilspur Street Compter, where he was imprisoned for se-
ditious libel, "than be compelled to read the forty-five volumes of Scott's 
novels. The idea that the writer is an habitual liar, rises on every page" (3; 
see Wiener, *Radicalism* 176). In each essay Carlile moves from an attack 
on Scott to an attack on the genre in order to show that fiction writers en-
slave their readers, that "they who furnish mankind with light readings 
are their enemies, and the qualifiers for all the oppressions, degra-
dations, and deprivations that are found among them" (*Lion* 610). Novels 
are "a despotism in letters, that fetters the mind and degrades the body" 
(*Gauntlet* 2). While novelists may be the madmen who write this "trash 
unworthy the notice of being" (*Gauntlet* 3), Carlile is just as angry at the 
novel reader, who, instead of reading those texts that will elevate and lib-
erate, has a "sickly appetite" that "pores over the source of its own dis-
ease, and drains every current of health to gratify its own depraved 
 cravings" (*Gauntlet* 2).

Fiction does more, though, than pose a threat to individuals; it en-
dangers the whole social system. Carlile, like Cobbett and Wooler, main-
tains that fiction imperils the higher classes. He writes of the class of 
"drawing-room dolls" in this same issue of *Lion*: "Well as they are, as far 
as all the luxuries of life are in question, they shrink from the labour, and 
dread the process of thought. . . . They give fashion to that which is na-
tionally useless, rather than useful, and decry the innovation of original 
thought, or any thought, that thinks there is room for improvement in 
the present, and to them delightful, constitution of things" (611). But to 
Carlile, the working class is besotted by fiction as well. Their penny fic-
tion may differ from the novels only the higher classes can afford, but the 
effects are the same. In his latter essay Carlile draws a direct parallel be-
tween the reading choice of some laborers and their intellectual, physi-
cal, and social degradation: "I have noticed in Lancashire, where the 
odies of the children are debilitated by the factory exertions of labour, 
with their inflamed eyes and shrivelled frames, and to whom a few hours 
in Sunday-school has brought the faculty of reading, that they crave 
nothing but the wildest kinds of fiction in pictures and little books, feel-
ing and acting as if they themselves were creatures of another world, and 
a blotch on this" (*Gauntlet* 3). To Carlile, fiction blinds such laborers to 
oppression and thus allows that oppression to happen. In short, fiction
paralyzes all society, and each class perpetuates an unfair political system by encouraging fiction writers.

The solution, of course, is to substitute good reading for bad. In the *Gauntlet* essay Carlile offers himself as a savior to smash the political stasis caused by novels: “I throw down the gauntlet against this state of things, and will strive mightily to make literature of more importance than to fashion fiction” (3). Obviously, Carlile feels that Britain would be a far better place if the aristocratic dolls and suffering factory children alike threw away their *Ivanhoe* and penny dreadfuls and began to read *Lion* or *Gauntlet*. Like Cobbett, Carlile sees his writing as a model, not simply for the rising working class of his day but for the society of the future. He offers a vision of the literature of this new society in the *Lion*, a society in which fiction has no place: “After purging the country of its political errors and its superstition, an order of literature and arts will arise, exceeding any that has hitherto existed or even been contemplated” (612). This statement is syntactically confusing; it is unclear exactly what or who purges the country in this way. It is clear, however, from Carlile’s statements about literature and from his life’s work, that he is proud to place himself prominently among the purging forces.

**Later Views: The Uses of Fiction**

When Carlile published his last full attack on fiction, in the *Gauntlet* in the early thirties, he was not alone in his views about the genre. Others echoed his criticisms and developed new ones. Two writers in particular, one in the journal partially edited by Owen himself, the *Crisis*, and another in the hotly radical *Destructive* see nothing but physical and social dangers in fiction reading. The *Crisis* article, “On the Late Sir Walter Scott,” begins as a study of Scott but soon becomes an attack on novels, charging that they are psychologically ruinous to their readers: “Persons whose minds are filled with works of fiction, frequently make serious mistakes in their calculations of real life, and are often swamped, stranded, or wrecked. Their wrecks should inspire succeeding voyagers with caution. We know some persons who became comparatively useless, and now hang and are likely to hang burdens on their friends, from incessantly reading works of fiction.” This writer, one A. B. C., believes that a nation of such derelicts “can be formidable to nothing but their own welfare,
and serviceable to none but their own enemies”—a statement with class implications as well as national ones, for the poor especially suffer from this genre, “which diverts the mind from the distress which requires relief” (20 Oct. 1832: 131–32).

The Destructive carried a long excerpt from Thomas Macconnell’s Lectures. Macconnell lashes out at the “Sweet Nonsense” of fiction, again attacking the genre by attacking Scott and presenting novel readers as useless social drop-outs: “The intellect of all novel readers will be found stunted, dwarfish, debilitated, and indolent. Such persons cannot take the pains to think, and are consequently disqualified from forming any sound or stable opinion upon any important public matters, which require public opinion for their adjustment” (Destructive 13 Aug. 1833: 243).13

One criticism that these two essays and others make is that novels are by nature effeminate, and that they feminize society. Criticism of women as the principal readers of a useless genre is as old as is the novel itself (Taylor 52–86). Among working-class critics, Cobbett, Carlyle, and Carlile’s correspondent Epicurus all take this sexist approach. The essays in Crisis and Destructive take this point a step further by arguing that novelists prize “feminine” qualities of beauty and imagination and care little for the “masculine” qualities—reason, factual knowledge, and understanding—that are to be found in more sober literature. Celebrating and indulging the feminine, fiction writers divert readers from, and even destroy, the masculine; they “emasculate the intellect, and disqualify it for deep thought and laborious investigation” (Crisis 13 Oct. 1832: 132). A writer in the Artizan’s Miscellany, or Journal of Politics and Literature (1831), a mildly reformist Edinburgh paper conducted by “several members of the Working Classes,” bemoans “this effeminate and novel-hunting age,” about which he wonders “whether the he animal does not pay more devotion to the novel than [does] the other sex, thus entailing, as it does, a disgrace upon us, and ridiculing our pretensions to nobler and more masculine ideas, or to a better knowledge of human nature” (25 June 1831: 39).14 Macconnell likewise declares that he has no doubt that such is indeed the case, and such a feminization of letters endangers the national literature, the individual novel reader, and the public in general:

The once masculine character of our national literature has been very seriously injured by this effeminate species of writing, which can only
proceed from the pens of she-men; and, which if the public mind was in a high energetic and healthy tone, would have none but she-men and children for its readers. But it is lamentable to be obliged to acknowledge that it can boast its thousands and tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands of male readers; and hence, we have so many pigmies [sic] in understanding, and giants in imagination; so many capitalists in ignorance, and paupers in knowledge. (243)

Besides scorning women and femininity, these critics show their dread of inactivity and leisure, which they see as particularly feminine behavior. The many movements the working class supported in the thirties found their power in relentless activity and agitation. In the eyes of these spokesmen, to give in to diversion or inactivity—to read fiction—was tantamount to class betrayal.

Just as the number of working-class periodicals increased considerably in the early 1830s during the “War of the Unstamped,” so did instances expressing the views they held about fiction. Seen in the context of the many other working-class writings about fiction of this time, the antinovel pronouncements of A. B. C., Macconnell, and the writer for Artizan’s Miscellany seem a rear-guard action. During the 1830s most working-class journalists and editors began to accept fiction and to use it themselves to serve working-class ends.

This change necessarily involved a major shift in critical technique. Working-class journalists before and into the thirties refused to separate fiction writers from the genre of fiction, and their reviews are almost always simultaneous attacks on one writer, usually Scott, and on fiction. From the thirties on, however, most journalists clearly separate individual writers of fiction from the genre and recognize that fiction is not generically bad, but rather that individual works of fiction can be good, bad, or indifferent. To put it another way, they began to realize that fiction need not always be a romantic flight far removed from class reality. Moreover, these journalists realized that their readers were now readers of fiction as well. The thirties saw the development of cheap reprints of novels and part publication, and an explosion of inexpensive magazines publishing fiction (Altick 273–80). Journalists could not simply reject a genre that was becoming more and more a part of the everyday life of the working man and woman.

Two reviews of Scott’s work illustrate these changes. The first, from
the radical and literary Edinburgh Schoolmaster, was written on the occasion of Scott's death and is one of the few essays in any working-class periodical that effusively praises Scott. The article is an incredibly far-fetched attempt to rehabilitate a writer—to shape that writer's beliefs to fit a radical creed. According to this article, Scott's biggest mistake was in believing himself to be a Tory: "If Sir WALTER SCOTT has gone to his grave in the belief that he is a Tory writer, no man was ever the dupe of so gross self-delusion" (29 Sept. 1832: 132). The essay argues that Scott consistently holds the peers, lawyers, "country gentry," and especially the monarchy in contempt: "Has the railing of the most violent Radical, or the strongest arguments of Paine, struck a more fatal blow at monarchy than the popular narratives of Scott?" (132). To the writer of this essay, Scott's heroes are all of the working class:

It is among them, the poor or the unregarded, that we are taught to look for shrewdness, intelligence, generosity, fidelity, disinterested attachment, religion that is not hypocrisy or mummery, and patriotism which is not ambition in flimsy disguise. We have from among the very offscourings of the degraded castes, spae-wives and gaberlunzies, who, by the grandeur of their elementary character, their generosity, eloquence, and enthusiasm, make gentle and nobles look small in comparison. There is no need to run over the catalogue of poor schoolmasters, post-boys, fish-wives, idiots, and such rag-tag, whose prepossessing qualities, steady virtues, and redeeming points, it is the study and delight of this truthful writer to bring out. (132-33)

This view of Scott as a champion of the working class could not be more opposed to the view in an article in one of the earlier and better-known Chartist journals, the Chartist Circular. Scott is the first of many subjects of that periodical's long-running series called "Literary Sketches," and is the only one that the writer of those sketches attacks relentlessly. The thesis of the essay is that Scott enslaves the working class.

I do not know any great modern author, whose writings have a stronger tendency—by the fascinating charm they throw around the knights and dames of olden times, and the obloquy they contemptuously heap on the people, degraded by serfism and vassalage—to increase and prolong the feelings of veneration, which his genius artfully excites in young minds, for aristocratic deeds, and makes them bow their knees with slavish awe, and admire the bold feats of noble desperadoes,
This writer believes that Scott heaps praise upon titled characters simply because they are nobly born, and has nothing but contempt for the working class:

The minor machinery, composed of the people, he metamorphoses into “Cuddy Headriggs,” and “Doogald Creatures,” with a sheeplike train of “Goose Gibbies” and fanatical “Kettledrummels,” including serfs and slaves, and contumaciously describes them as a cringing, fawning, creeping, half-crazed vermin, executing the despotic will of their masters, without compunction, or like “Burley,” gloating over the deeds of blood, which he recklessly performed in the guise of puritanical fanaticism. (305–6)

The enormous differences between the two essays are of course striking, but the similarities, when compared to the earlier attacks on Scott by Wooler, Carlyle, and other genre bashers, are equally striking. Neither of these writers makes a criticism of Scott that is also a criticism of fiction in general. Indeed, there are no statements at all in either article about fiction as a genre; Scott’s strengths and weaknesses are his alone, and not those of his medium. In both articles it is Scott, not fiction, on trial, tested both for literary quality and, more important, for political propriety. In the Schoolmaster, Scott passes all tests (in spite of what he might have thought he was doing). In the Chartist Circular, he fails all tests miserably, but his failure is not the failure of fiction. The many stories published in that periodical make clear that fiction had its place there. In neither article does the fact that Scott chose to write fiction disqualify him as a writer from the start. Both articles show a belief that fiction could tell the truth if its writers properly directed their talents to serve humanity, and especially to serve suffering humanity.16

The leap that these two working-class critics, and most of the others of the 1830s and beyond, make from the earlier critics is enormous and indicates a number of changes. For one thing, the working-class journalists from the 1830s on had far less reason to fear that fiction of any kind threatened to divert laborers from reading their own periodicals. From 1830 to 1836, during the “War of the Unstamped,” the working-class press proved itself able to survive and even thrive under the most oppres-
sive conditions. O’Brien and Hetherington, the editor and publisher respectively of the Poor Man’s Guardian, were so confident that fiction offered no threat to their sales that they even sold magazines such as the Parterre (1834–37), which contained, according to an irate correspondent who bought a copy from Hetherington, “empty tales, devoid of sound and sense, [that] fetter the understanding and delude the people with a show of words.” Unashamed, O’Brien agreed with the correspondent that such tales are useless, but felt that such periodicals as the Guardian have nothing to fear from them and that “the gloomy mists of mystery and fiction will shortly dissolve before the rising sun of political and moral science” (Poor Man’s Guardian 20 Sept. 1834: 262). 17

This flourishing of a working-class press meant that the working class as a whole had a larger amount of reading matter to choose from, and that working-class editors could (and, to survive, should) diversify. Moreover, the many periodicals published by members of the middle class for a working-class audience—for example, Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal—provided models of variety for these journalists. Much more common at this time than the one writer, one- or two-essay political periodicals of Cobbett or Wooler were journals featuring a number of writers and several departments: political leaders, useful knowledge, excerpts, poetry, and sometimes prose fiction.

By the early thirties, fiction as a genre was changing, too, and many working-class journalists recognized this. No longer did most working-class critics hold, as did Carlile, that realism had no place in fiction. Dickens, Bulwer, William Ainsworth, and many others could offer a kind of fiction very different from the romances of Scott: or, as a critic in Northern Star stated retrospectively in 1845, “Charles Dickens and others like him have effected a revolution in novel writing. It is the many, not the few, who now form the materials from which are quarrried the heroes and heroines of fiction” (11 Jan. 1845: 3). That Wooler, Carlile, and many other working-class writers simultaneously directed their criticisms both at Scott specifically and at fiction in general demonstrates the dominance of Scott and the romantic over fiction in the eyes of these men. Works of the early thirties, such as Bulwer’s Eugene Aram and Martineau’s A Manchester Strike (both published in 1832), forced these journalists to reappraise such beliefs (see below). New writers were writing a new sort
of story. A writer in Johnstone’s Edinburgh Magazine (1833–34) writes of this
new fiction in his aptly titled “New Novels for 1834”:

The true, the natural, the probable, if not yet eagerly sought after, are
already more valued when they come in the way. The Dynasty of the
Bandit and the Bravo, with all their terrific tributaries and illegitimate
descendants, is wearing to a close. The Corsair can scarcely be longer
pronounced sea-worthy. . . . One begins to look for something in a
story, which shall, whether faintly or more vividly, resemble the real his-
tory and ordinary goings-on of the men and women of this strange
work-a-day world in which we find ourselves placed, to suffer and
endeavour, along with them. (Jan. 1834: 319)

In the thirties for the first time, for most working-class reviewers good fic-
tion was equated with truthfulness. The new task for the critic was to
guide rather than condemn out of hand, to point out which works were
truthful and which were not, and to dissect individual works, separating
fact from fancy.

One of the earliest working-class periodicals that criticized works of
fiction individually and not simply as indicators of a completely corrupt
genre is the aptly titled Literary Test. Although the Test lasted only five
weeks, from the beginning to the end of January 1832, it helped pioneer
a critical stance that would become commonplace later, especially in
Chartist periodicals. In both his prospectuses (to be found in the Poor
Man’s Guardian [1 Oct. 1831: 104; 31 Dec. 1831: 231–32]) and in his first
“Review of Books” (1 Jan. 1832: 2–4), the editor of the Test states his in-
tention to revolutionize literary criticism. The traditional aim of all writ-
ers should be “to instruct and improve, by light and interesting means,
the condition of their fellow creatures” (2). Surveying society, however,
with all its political and social abuses, the editor concludes that most writ-
ers have only been hirelings and entertainers of the rich, and have done
little to correct “this fearful perversion of nature and right,” and that
most critics, under the control of publishers, authors, and advertisers,
have been even more slavish than the writers they have criticized.

The editor’s response to this state of letters is to turn the Golden
Rule into a critical tenet, noting “that I ‘do unto others as I would that
others should do unto me’” (1). That idea controls every critical article
in the *Test*. The writers in the periodical (there seem to be several, each one designated by a separate letter of the alphabet) all infuse that saying with a strong working-class sensibility. Indeed, the periodical seems so concerned with working-class political causes that Joel H. Wiener describes the *Test* as “a literary miscellany that features radical political comment in the guise of literary and theatrical views” (*Finding List 27*). This is misleading. The writers in the *Test* attempted to disguise neither their literary nor their political views. The linkage the *Test* makes between the political and literary is not very different from the political/literary editorial stances of the quarterlies—the Whig *Edinburgh*, Tory *Quarterly*, and middle-class radical *Westminster* reviews. Close readings of individual literary works on the basis of political propriety as well as literary merit were far from new at this time. What was new was that members of the working class were reading in this way.

One work that the *Literary Test* dissects is Bulwer’s *Eugene Aram* (7–14 Jan. 1832: 17–22, 37–39). The critic, identified as B., attacks the then anonymous author of that work for misrepresenting or insulting the working class both in his style and in his plot. Stylistically, Bulwer may be a good writer, even “very superior to most of his fraternity,” but B. feels that Bulwer is guilty of one “fault of the worst description”:

the one of *pedantry*—and pedantry, too, of the most insulting kind: not a character does he introduce, but he makes him quote a something or other, at the same time . . . adding insult to offence, by prefacing it with “Every one knows what Cicero has said,” or, “all persons are acquainted with” this, or with that, thereby conveying by it an imputation of ignorance to all persons, who may not have wasted so much valuable time, as the author, in making themselves acquainted with a whole library of almost obsolete and useless literature, which, however interesting to the book-worm, was never intended for the nineteenth century. (19)

Bulwer’s “pedantry” narrows his audience, excluding with its “every one” and “all persons” almost all of the working class; any laborer can only approach such a work as an illegitimate intruder.

In his criticism of *Aram*’s plot, B. attacks Bulwer’s distortions of class. Analyzing a scene in which Aram meets a prince and in which Bulwer presents Aram’s “native dignity” on an equal level with the prince’s “royal dignity,” B. observes that only the former sort of dignity has any value: “A
man, possessed of one tenth part of a mind with which Eugene Aram was
gifted, could look upon no person with reverence or humility; and in-
deed, there are few 'princes of the blood' on whom such a man could
look otherwise than with a most sovereign contempt" (39).

By far Bulwer's greatest fault, to B., is that he completely misrepre-
sents the poor in his story. B. lashes out at Bulwer's apparently inten-
tional use of fiction to distort truth, citing Bulwer's comment in his
preface that "With the facts on which the tale of EUGENE ARAM is
founded, I have exercised the common and fair licence of writers of fic-
tion: it is chiefly the more homely parts of the real story that have been
altered" (18). Bulwer's idea of the license of fiction is very similar to
Nathaniel Hawthorne's idea of the license of romance in his preface to
The House of the Seven Gables (9); it is exactly this connection between
romance and fiction that B. finds so reprehensible. Bulwer's "altered" parts
serve only to give the working class "credit . . . for a great many of the bad
and vindictive feelings, which belong to a state of barbarism;—and sel-
dom making them appear, except in rather an objectionable light . . .
and if, alas! he could say no good for the poor, the weak, and the op-
pressed, there was not the least occasion for him thus gratuitously to ac-
commodate his rich reader with additional reasons and excuses for
treating them with unkindness and persecution" (18). B. feels that
Bulwer may have distorted his narrative because "the author may have
felt himself incompetent to the task of depicting a class to which he him-
self did not belong," though he feels that Bulwer is a good enough writer
to present an undistorted view if he wished. More likely, B. maintains,
Bulwer restricts his audience to the few and writes to please those read-
ers, "keeping out of their way whatever objects they might deem objec-
tionable." Truthful depictions of the working class are "too humble, too
common, too natural,—not sufficiently exotic to flatter the pampered, re-
finied—the hothouse senses of 'society'" (18).

B. even criticizes Bulwer's dedication (to Scott) because dedications
imply writing for an individual rather than for the public (18). In every
respect, B. writes the review from the outside looking in; Bulwer's novel
is a middle- and upper-class fantasy that he and the class he represents
cannot directly engage in. However much B. dismisses Bulwer and his
type of novel, though, he does not attack the genre itself. The fact that B.
gives a particular novel this kind of close reading demonstrates that
novels are not all class-exclusive romances and cannot be dismissed out of hand, as they were by people such as Carlile. Fiction may be badly in need of reforming before it can serve the working class, but B. shows that working-class critics were beginning to understand that the genre was important enough to deserve reformation.

Before B. dissects *Eugene Aram*, he examines the political opinions of its author. Using only textual evidence (for, at the time B. wrote, there were only rumors about Bulwer's authorship, which B. discounts), B. concludes that “the author . . . is a Whig, approaching more toward the Radical” (17). Such an analysis is an integral part of the review as a whole and not a digression; to this writer, a test of the work on literary and political grounds is a test of its author. The review indicates the large distance in political thought between the working-class radical B. and the middle-class Whig/Radical Bulwer. B. deplores Bulwer’s halfhearted radicalism in his depiction of the poor and his ideas about class; though B. assumes that Bulwer must feel he has been “very original and startling” in his equating the prince’s dignity with Aram’s, B. believes that that kind of lukewarm political sensibility leads only to a false sense of reverence and a further tyranny of rank.

Such a textual reading of an author’s political views, and a corresponding class advocacy on the part of the critic, is common in the *Test*. The writer of a slashing review of *The Opera* (1832), one of Catherine Gore’s “silver fork” novels, mounts an attack on the type of elitist fiction the book represents, the class that reads it, and the authors who write works like it. “It is one of those sickening fictions which the authors of the day are compelled to invent for the amusement of the idle and luxurious, who have rendered real life too unnatural and miserable to afford an interesting description, and who would find a picture of things as they ought to be, too dangerous and revolutionary to suit their views or interests” (21 Jan. 1832: 58). “Real life” here takes on a sense of working-class reality, and real truths are “dangerous and revolutionary” working-class truths. Gore, unaware of such life and truth, is useless to this critic.

Even a rare positive review of a novel in the *Test* shows that the critic recognizes the distance between the author and the working class. *Newton Forster; or the Merchant Service* (1832) is written by “a humane man, who has risen above a great many of the prejudices and follies of that class of society, to which he evidently belongs:—he is an officer in the Navy, and
has seen the cruelties which are inflicted there with a kind and piti
eye” (14 Jan. 1832: 39). Frederick Marryat, the author of the novel, may be aware of the cruelties inflicted, but to this critic, he is above them. In all the works reviewed in the Test, as in the review of Eugene Aram, working-class critics seem eavesdroppers; at best they can hope for sympathy from novelists, but they can find no direct advocates.

It is important to remember the cultural context of the Literary Test. The year in which it was published was the year that the first Reform Bill passed, and its critics show cultural aspirations similar to the political aspirations of working-class leaders. The opportunity for political and social equality seemed for the first time a possibility; such equality necessarily called for a new cultural orientation. In criticizing Bulwer’s pedantry, his misinformation, and his (and Gore’s) narrow appeal to a pampered audience, the critic is protesting working-class exclusion from what other classes see as the ranks of the literate. These criticisms make it clear that working-class agitation at this time was far more complex than a simple clamor for the vote and was in fact also a struggle for literary and cultural authority. In all its reviews the Test anticipates the critic who, speaking several years later for another working-class movement, cried out “Where is the Bulwer of Chartism?” (Labourer Aug. 1847: 94). 20

The Test’s way of reviewing is similar to that found in many working-class periodicals of the thirties, forties, and fifties. An excellent example of this continuing tradition can be found in the Northern Star. For ten weeks in late 1844 and early 1845, Harney, the editor of the literary page, carefully analyzed with painstaking thoroughness the first third of Disraeli’s Coningsby. 21 Just as B.’s reviews of Bulwer are essentially a working-class radical’s literary battle with a middle-class Whig/Radical, so these articles amount to a literary duel between a leading Chartist and the then leading exponent of the Tory/Radical Young England movement. Harney praises the few points, such as the call for universal suffrage and a dislike of Castlereagh, on which most Chartists and Disraeli would agree. Most of his comments, however, are combative; he disputes, for example, Disraeli’s favorable views of George Canning, his ludicrous presentation of Manchester as a “Lancashire Eden” (22 Feb. 1845: 3), and especially the obvious relish with which Disraeli and Young England view feudalism: “It is not to the vaunted ‘wisdom of our ancestors’ we must look for political or social remedies for present wrongs and
sufferings. The 'good old days' are a pleasing illusion; nothing more. It is equality, not feudalism, that is the hope of the many; and though that hope will not be all at once accomplished, onward we must march. The 'golden age' is before, not behind us; and only through the triumph of democracy may we hope to hasten its reign" (14 Dec. 1844: 3). We have here, as in the review of Eugene Aram, an analysis that is largely political, that sorts the good from the bad, and that shows a novel—even a mostly bad one—to be worth careful attention. There is a major difference between the 1832 review and this one, however. Harney writes with far more confidence and with the perception that he and his audience are and should be part of the readership of Coningsby. B. speaks for a class outside the genre, wanting in. Harney speaks with the authority of a member of a well-organized movement; he tests his movement against Disraeli's, and finds his own much more sensible and viable. B. seeks a position of power; Harney writes from one.

Working-class critics of fiction in the thirties, forties, and fifties never unanimously supported any established writer as the “Bulwer of Chartism” or of any other working-class movement. They alternately praised or found fault with Bulwer, Marryat, Ainsworth, and other storytellers, largely basing their opinions on how close those writers came to meeting working-class standards. Although in A Manchester Strike Martineau, as Catherine Gallagher writes, “left . . . an ambiguous legacy, for she had at once ennobled workers and bound them in chains of necessity” (61), a critic for the Manchester Poor Man's Advocate found enough realism and sympathy for the working-class in that novel to write “certainly have we rarely met with a book which has afforded us more delight, or so completely riveted our attention. Every incident of the tale is drawn from real life” (29 Sept. 1832: 5). Several months later, however, a critic in Cobbett's Magazine (1833–34), edited by William Cobbett’s son, John, argued—quite rightly—that Martineau’s views about the unpopular poor laws in her Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated are sheer propaganda; she is guilty of perverting the genre, of “the employment of fiction in the cause of Doctrinaire government” (Jan. 1833: 10).22

Even Dickens was not seen by all as the worker’s advocate. He, too, was subject to a literary test with each serialized installment he published.23 He may be called by Harney in the Northern Star the “poet of the poor” (21 Dec. 1844: 3), but another critic in that periodical calls
Dickens's romantic *Haunted Man* "the latest (would that we were sure we might say the last) volume of trash coined from the muddled brains of Dickens" (10 Feb. 1849: 3). Yet one more critic, William Maccall, calls Dickens "a writer whose genius is not of the first order" who "is brave enough in attacking vices which no one cares to defend" (*The People* 11 Sept. 1852: 293–94). The best praise a critic in the *People's Paper* can muster for a collection of stories by Dickens is that he "has appeared this time with less pretension than usual" (20 Jan. 1855: 5). This comment is even more insulting than it first appears because the critic fails to notice that, in *The Seven Poor Travellers*, Dickens wrote only the first and last tales, and the stories the critic praises the most were not even written by him. Again in that periodical, perhaps the same critic complains that "the ever self-repeating Boz . . . exaggerates [and] gives caricatures of humanity for the sake of appearing original" (25 Nov. 1854: 8)—a harsh accusation from a critical perspective that valued "real life."

Most Chartist literary critics clearly demanded that established writers approach Chartist views to earn any praise. The closer Dickens seemed to come, the greater the praise lavished upon him. During the last two weeks in 1844, in a Christmas version of the *Northern Star*’s literary page, the "Christmas Garland," Harney copiously summarized and reviewed the previous year’s *A Christmas Carol* and the present year’s *The Chimes*. Harney agreed with Dickens that *The Chimes* was "a great blow for the poor;"24 and sensed in that work a class sympathy unlike any Dickens had exhibited before:

In the *Chimes*, expressing views of man and society far more comprehensive than he has before put forth, Mr. DICKENS enters the public arena, as the champion of the people! Wellerisms, however happy, would be out of place in a work of this description. The masses are the victims of undeserved suffering; their case is a solemn one; and solemnly, with an eloquence that was never excelled; in "thoughts that breathe and words that burn," Mr. DICKENS pleads that cause against the cruel, canting, unnatural, blaspheming doctrines and actions of the ruling classes of society. (*Northern Star* 4 Jan. 1845: 3)

Harney did not ignore the several faults of *The Chimes*: "in plot and construction, we think it decidedly inferior to any other production of Mr. DICKENS's pen." Plot and construction were less important than
political character to Harney; in that respect The Chimes “is decidedly the best work Mr. Dickens has produced” (3). That an influential working-class critic in the most influential working-class periodical of the nineteenth century can argue that Dickens’s best work is The Chimes is a strong sign that political character, not author, style, or story, was a work of fiction’s primary test. No established author passed that test all the time.25

Copiously summarizing and then analyzing Dickens’s Christmas stories was a tradition for the Northern Star; the Star treated The Cricket on the Hearth in 1845 and The Battle of Life in 1846. Considering the prohibitive price of Dickens’s Christmas books for many of the working class, the lengthy summarizations in the Northern Star, Chartism’s most popular paper, and the several dramatizations of those books must have been the media through which a huge segment of the working class first connected Dickens with the spirit of Christmas. But the Star was not always effusive about Dickens’s Christmas books. The vehemence with which a critic attacks The Battle of Life (while dutifully summarizing it at length), calling it a “thorough failure,” as well as the abrupt dismissal of The Haunted Man (above), make it clear that the gushing praise for The Chimes is not simply because of an excess of Christmas cheer on the Star’s or Harney’s part.

Harney’s generic views show a far greater sense of class power than those of Carlile or other early working-class critics. The early journalists not only feared fiction but feared that the class they wrote for would be unable to withstand the evils of that genre. Harney, on the other hand, believed in the ability of his class to cope with bad fiction. He wrote with a confidence that his class had achieved cultural and political awareness equal to, if not greater than, that of any other class. He perceived that any fiction worthy of the name not only could but must serve his class.

Fiction Published in Working-Class Periodicals

The fiction that working-class journalists chose to publish indicates as clearly as their critical articles that through time they gradually acknowledged fiction as a genre of potentially great value, and shows as well that they assumed a growing literacy and sophistication on the part of their audience. Early periodicals published next to no fiction, and those of the late twenties and early thirties published little; the Chartist periodicals of
the late thirties, the forties, and the fifties published a vast amount of fiction by a great number of writers, native and foreign, working-class and otherwise.

Wooler never published fiction. Carlile, curiously enough, considering he denounces fiction more loudly than any of his contemporaries, does carry one story in his *Republican*: Voltaire’s “Story of Bababec and the Fakirs” (9 June 1826: 711–13). The simple free-thought moral of the tale—that matters of this world deserve more attention than those of the next—must somehow have raised the story above the lies of fiction in Carlile’s eyes. Whatever the case, Carlile, the arch fiction hater, has the distinction of being one of the very first British working-class editors to publish fiction.

Most of the tales that found their way into the working-class periodicals of the late twenties and early thirties were, like Voltaire’s story, simple tales with simple and explicit morals or, very often, fables. Cobbett used the form in the last years of the *Register*. In 1831 he published one fable by Aesop, “The Fox and the Eagle,” with the moral, provided by Mrs. Trimmer, that “the rich, though ever so highly exalted, should beware how they provoke the poor by injuries.” In introducing this fable, Cobbett explains that he had just read Aesop “in preparing a Spelling-Book, as an introduction to my Grammar.” He published that work, *Cobbett’s Spelling Book*, and Carlile responded by publishing a broadside attacking Cobbett’s use of fables (*Political Register* 28 May 1831: 527–28; Wiener, *War* 160). Cobbett, however, was unrepentant. Several years later he referred to another fable to make a point about Parliament (26 Apr. 1834: 203). In one instance he adopted Aesop’s form and published his own fable, “The Wolves, the Zealous Hound, and the Perfidious Hunters,” in which he obviously presents himself as the zealous hound, beset on all sides (30 July 1831: 310–11).

Co-operative writers, especially, used fables to teach. A writer in the *Co-operative Magazine*, reviewing a Co-operative allegory called *The Revolt of the Bees*, while deploring much of fiction allows that it can elevate and notes that “writers in the line of fable have been probably as useful in teaching the best rules of life, and impressing moral conduct, as even our best preachers and sermon-writers” (Apr. 1827: 126). *The Revolt of the Bees*, incidentally, should not be confused with Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, its “in many respects . . . very different predecessor” (126).26 The
Co-operative Crisis, which carried A. B. C.'s tirade against all fiction, contains several fables, all of which consist of a short narrative and, just in case the reader has not the literary acumen to derive the proper meaning from the text, a stated moral. That moral could be almost as detailed as the fable it explications. For one fable, "The Ocean and the Mountain Stream," by Allen Davenport, the moral is fully half as long as the fable itself (18 May 1833: 151). For another, a fable about the conflict between workers and drones in a beehive (a favorite subject for Co-operationists), the writer offers a moral that conflates allegory with political reality, making the lesson more confusing than the allegory it is supposed to explain:

Working men—follow the example of the Working Bees, and if the Rich will not give up the honey they unjustly possess—do ye commence making fresh honey, and consuming it,—to obtain this object, form yourselves into Associations and no more sell your labour, but Exchange it for Equal Labour with your brother workmen: and by these honest means you will be enabled to enjoy the entire value of what you produce, and the Drones of Society can no longer consume what they do not produce—leaving you, the producers, with your unfortunate wives and children in want of the common comforts of life. (9 Feb. 1833: 40)

The condescending tone and sometimes silly attempt at one-to-one allegorical correspondence in this passage and in the entire fable suggest that the writer doubts strongly the ability of his reader to understand any but the simplest text.27

Fiction other than fables in early journals is rare, and likely represents an attempt to imitate publications of other classes or—though space in working-class periodicals was generally precious—to fill space, rather than to publish fiction that would rival in worth political essays. John Cobbett, in publishing in parts a portion of The Marauder of Mitford: An Historical Tale of the Year 1317 throughout Cobbett's Magazine, seems to be joining the ranks of Scott's imitators. Doherty published part of a story called "The Gridiron" for two weeks in Poor Man's Advocate and then wisely dropped it; it is a tale that goes nowhere and says nothing, very slowly (7 July 1832: 198–200; 14 July: 207–8). Many of the major working-class periodicals of the early thirties—Poor Man's Guardian, De-
structive, Carpenter's Monthly Political Magazine (1831–32), and British Labourer's Protector, and Factory Child's Friend, among others—carried no fiction at all.

It was in Chartist periodicals that fiction first found a secure place. Many of the Chartist periodicals are as stuffed with fiction as they are with reviews of fiction. The published fiction takes several forms: excerpts from longer works by established British writers, extracts and whole works from foreign writers, and, most common and most important, the first working-class fiction.

In publishing extracts of fiction, Chartist editors generally had the same ends in mind as they did in their reviews: to point out the best of the writers of the middle and upper classes, or to promote Chartist points by non-Chartist writers. Linton extracts Fielding, Sterne, and Defoe (twice) in his National: A Library for the People. The Chartist Circular excerpts Tristram Shandy and Gulliver's Travels. Northern Star extracts from Dickens, Ainsworth, Bulwer, Thackeray, and many others, sometimes prefacing extracts with titles such as "Common Crimes in Polite Society" (for an extract from Thackeray's The Newcomes, 4 Apr. 1840: 3), or sometimes providing introductions that emphasize the Chartist meaning of an extract, as, for example, the introduction to a long excerpt on the Eatanswill elections from Pickwick Papers arguing that such corruption is no more and that Chartism has changed British election practices for the better (31 July 1847: 3). Mostly, however, extracts in the Star are left una Introduced and untitled; readers were assumed able to draw their own morals from fiction.

Chartist editors reviewed and excerpted American and European fiction writers and also, unhindered by copyright laws, published whole stories by them. People's Paper was especially enamored with American fiction: a long-running section called "American authors" carried, abridged, Edgar Allen Poe's "A Tale of the Maelstrom" (8 May 1852: 7) and other tales by Poe, and published quite a lot by Hawthorne, including parts of The House of the Seven Gables, "one of the most splendid expositions of the human heart written" (17 July 1852: 3). The section also devoted eight weeks in 1853 to offering six stories from Harriet Beecher Stowe's The Mayflower. Another periodical, The People: Their Rights and Liberties... (1848–52), extracted selections from Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance (21 Aug. 1852: 265–66) and carried the whole of Hawthorne's

As for European fiction, Chartist editors showed a marked preference for French authors. In 1845 Northern Star, “in accordance with the universal rage at the present time” (25 Jan. 1845: 3) reviewed and extracted at least four different works by Eugène Sue, whose Mysteries of Paris alone, according to the reviewer, guaranteed the “sterling” quality of all his writing (4 Jan. 1845: 3). For this reviewer (or these reviewers), Sue unerringly promoted a radical viewpoint that spoke as clearly to the British working class as to the French. One review, for example, highly approves of Sue’s sympathetic depiction of the poor, citing, for example, a chapter in Thérèse Dunoyer that describes, “in touching, nay, even sublime simplicity, the sufferings of the industrious poor—and that accompanying ‘soul of goodness,’ which, animating thousands of the heroic children of labour, prompts them to feel for the sufferings of others, inducing them to succor the wretched, at the expense, to themselves, of a deprivation of the commonest necessaries” (29 Mar. 1845: 3). Sue’s Matilda, or the Memoirs of a Young Woman, on the other hand, “is an index of fashionable life and the impurities which spring from it—of society as it is, not as it should be” (25 Jan. 1845: 3); and Sue’s Wandering Jew attacks “priestcraft” (2 Feb. 1845: 3).

Ten years later, Sue’s Janet and Louisa was proudly translated “for the [Northern] Tribune exclusively.” The Chartist press published other French writers as well. Northern Star carried an extract from Victor Hugo in 1838 (26 May: 7). Chartist Circular serialized Alexandre Dumas’s “A Legend of Peter the Cruel” (beginning with 9 Apr. 1842: 551–52); a short part of his Count of Monte Cristo found its way into the People’s Paper (18 Dec. 1852: 6).

Working-class journalists’ new awareness of foreign writers, particularly those who clearly sympathized with their class, and their intent to broaden the literary base of their readers cannot be attributed to lower costs and lack of copyright protection alone, but surely indicates a sense of class solidarity that transcended nations as well as a growing awareness of foreign political movements.

This growing connection between foreign politics and foreign fiction can be seen in the treatment later Chartist editors accorded George Sand. Northern Star was the first to notice Sand, in 1847, writing of her
Consuelo: “For its intrinsic merits, and as the production of a woman’s pen, this is a singular and interesting work; displaying greater power of reasoning, more knowledge of life and human character, and far greater boldness of utterance, than often characterize the writers of romance. The plot is not so well constructed as it is brilliant and original . . . breathing throughout the spirit of truth” (2 Oct. 1847: 3). The events of 1848, which raised Sand to political importance as a propagandist for France’s new provisional government, also brought her to the notice of several Chartist editors. In 1848 Linton, representing one group of Chartists, traveled to Paris in support of the provisional government; he used the opportunity to interview both Sand ("a handsome matronly woman") and Hughes de Lamennais (F. B. Smith 73). George W. M. Reynolds, a latecomer to Chartist leadership (in 1848), himself a novelist with strong class sympathies, regularly devoted the opening pages of each issue of his Reynolds’s Political Instructor (1849–50) to profiling important English or European proletarian figures and devoted the front page of his 5 January 1850 issue to Sand—the only fiction writer of any nation to earn that distinction. The first paragraph of that article promotes Sand as both novelist and political thinker, maintaining that she is more closely linked to a British working-class audience than many British writers are.

George Sand, or to use a more correct appellation, Madame Dudevant, has acquired for herself a reputation, that has spread into every corner of the civilized world. Her writings in no way resemble the trashy productions of our own fashionable authoresses, but are in every respect above the general standard of the popular modern romances. Instruction is carefully blended with entertainment, and a profound current of politico-philosophical sentiment and reasoning pervades every book to which the name of George Sand is affixed. Mawkish love-tales, with strained and uninteresting scenes of fashionable life, so much admired by aristocratic readers, are not to be found in the pages written by Madame Dudevant. Her language is powerful, eloquent, and enthusiastic; her ideas grand, philanthropic, and far in advance of the present age. Those that are willing to appreciate depth of thought, humanity of sentiment, and a thorough knowledge of the defects existing in the social and political relations of Europe, will read the works of George Sand with unfeigned delight and derive vast instruction from their perusal. (65)
In 1850 Harney began to publish Sand's *Consuelo* in weekly installments in his *Friend of the People*, prefacing the serialization with an introduction to Sand by Guiseppe Mazzini. In the same periodical, earlier in the year, Harney was the first to publish Marx's and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* in English. Such a combination is no accident, of course; Sand, Mazzini, Engels, and Marx, in Harney's mind, all offered British workers a vision of social, political, and personal improvement that most British writers simply could not.

In Chartist periodicals the British writers who could offer the best fiction to a British working-class audience were usually Chartist themselves. Most Chartist journals either offered their editors a means to publish their own fiction or provided laborers with their only opportunity to have their stories published. Linton, in his *National*, shows that the simple moral tale is not dead in Chartist periodicals; his series "Records of the World's Justice" offers scenes of poverty "combined with allegorical characters and plots. The characters act out their parts (Honest Age, Corrupt Parson, Faithful Child, etc.) to formula, leading to a Chartist moral" (Vicinus 116). The *Chartist Circular* printed at least eighteen stories, some long serializations, by working-class writers. The names alone of many of these tales—"The Basket-Maker: A Tale for Aristocrats and Non-Producers," "Don't Enlist," *The Revolutionist* (by Ernest Jones), *Albert, or the Spirit of Freedom*, for example—demonstrate that these stories offer a clear alternative to any other fiction written at this time.

The *Northern Star*, usually a trendsetter in literary matters, lagged surprisingly behind other Chartist periodicals in printing working-class fiction. In 1847, late in its run, it offered a number of "Tales written expressly for the *Northern Star*," some by Chartius, and some unsigned, perhaps by others. Still later it published a serialized novel, *Sunshine and Shadow* (1849–50), by Thomas Martin Wheeler, who in a dedication to Fergus O'Connor complains that "the fiction department of literature has been neglected by the scribes of our body." To Wheeler, such a lack is politically dangerous, for "the opponents of our principles have been allowed to wield the power of imagination over the youth of our party, without any effort on our part to occupy this wide and fruitful plain" (31 Mar. 1849: 3).
Most other Chartist periodicals, however, were open earlier to working-class fiction. The Ten Hour’s Advocate, the People, the Labourer, Notes to the People, and People’s Paper all offered working-class short stories and serialized tales. Jones, co-editor (with O’Connor) of the Labourer and editor of both Notes to the People and People’s Paper, apparently had ambitions to be a writer and poet long before he became a Chartist, and did more than any other Chartist, as both an editor and a writer, to bring Chartist fiction to a proletarian audience. In every one of the several periodicals he edited or helped edit, and in others as well, he disseminated his politics through both essays and fiction. In the preface to his DeBrassier (also called The History of a Democratic Movement), published in parts in Notes to the People, Jones argues that fiction can be much more powerful than other forms of writing: “I do not see why Truth should always be dressed in a stern and repulsive garb. The more attractive you can make her, the more easily she will progress. Let the same moral be conveyed in a tale, and preached in a sermon, the former will make ten proselytes, when the latter will secure but one (10 May 1851: 19).” Chartist doctrine, the most solid and important for a working-class audience, needed its Bulwer, or rather, needed a writer who could present their truths in a way a Bulwer could not. Jones is probably the critic who asks “Where is the Bulwer of Chartism?” and he, more than Cooper, with his once-famous Chartist poem, The Purgatory of Suicides; more than Linton, with his stories or “Hymns for the Unenfranchised,” indeed more than any other Chartist, fills that role and is, in the words of a writer in the Northern Star, “as original in his sphere as Boz” (6 Jan. 1844: 2). In all his periodicals, but especially in the last, the long-running People’s Paper, he elevated fiction of all kinds, especially that of the working class, to a higher importance than it had ever had in a working-class periodical. In the pages of the People’s Paper there were, as we have seen, reviews and summaries of Dickens and others and serializations of Stowe; there was an enormous amount of working-class fiction as well. Much of that fiction was written by writers other than Jones; Wheeler is one of the few contributors who is actually named, but the paper is filled with fiction by pseudonymous and anonymous writers. In terms of sheer bulk, however, most of the fiction in the People’s Paper was written by Jones himself, in long serializations; he published Lovers and Husbands; or the Wrongs of Man from late 1853 into 1854
and *The Maid of Warsaw* and *The Serf Sisters* in 1854 and 1855. The last two novels show a different kind of international awareness; they were timely attacks on Russian tyranny written during the Crimean War.

The change in attitude toward prose fiction in working-class journalism from Cobbett, Carlile, and Wooler to the writers for Chartist periodicals like the *Northern Star* was a sweeping one. A critic in the *People's Review of Literature and Progress*, noting the change, maintained that: “novel writing has long been elevated to the level of an Art, and it will ere long be raised to the level of a Power. It is one of the weapons of the fourth estate, that heterogeneous compound of intellectual forces which recruits its rank and file from all classes and from all castes” (“Recent Novels,” Mar. 1850: 84). Such a statement would have been ridiculous thirty years before. Within just a generation, working-class journalists had helped expand the audience for all fiction to include the working class. Their views about fiction show clearly that their readers were not simply class conscious but were also culturally class proud.