Finding Readers behind the Text:
Readers’ Letters in Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* as a Reflection of Fern’s Reading Audience

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In her sketch “Male Criticism on Ladies’ Books,” dating back to 1857, Fanny Fern related to a quotation from the New York Times, which said,

Courtship and marriage, servants and children, these are the great objects of a woman’s thought, and they necessarily form the staple topics of their writings and their conversation. We have no right to expect anything else in a woman’s book. (Fern 285)

In response to this, Fern wrote,

Is it feminine novels only that courtship, marriage, servants and children are the staple? [...] Would a novel be a novel if it did not treat of courtship and marriage? and if it could be recognized, would it find readers? (Fern 286)

The “feminine novel,” as Fern calls it, flourished in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, since then attracting the close attention of numerous critics. In her book Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870, Nina Baym, one of the leading researchers in this field, defines “woman’s fiction” as necessarily meeting three main requirements: “they are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women” (22). Fanny Fern’s novel Ruth Hall, which will be the focus of this paper, was published in 1855, which allows us to examine whether or not it belongs to what Baym calls “woman’s fiction.” To be sure, Sara Payson Willis Parton, known as Fanny Fern, was a woman; her novel does tell a story of a female protagonist; however, the third prerequisite of the genre, that is, the issue of her audience, is not that straightforward.

Some critics, represented, for example, by Mark Canada, explain Fern’s success by “the match between her audience and subject matter [since] most of the people who read the literary weeklies were women” (1). Canada argues that “[w]hat unifies [Parton’s writings] is [her] strong sense of her audience: ordinary women who at times feel oppressed and at other times are merely depressed, wives and mothers who worry about losing their children and about managing
their *skirts* in rainy weather” (1, emphasis added). Nathaniel Hawthorne, Fern’s contemporary, despising most women novelists except for Fern, had quite an opposite view of her production; according to Hawthorne, *Ruth Hall’s* strength is exactly in the way she “throw[s] off the restraints of decency, and come[s] before the public *stark naked*” (qtd. in Warren xxxv, emphasis added). For sure, the fact that women “increasingly exempt from the responsibilities of domestic industry […] were becoming the prime consumers of American culture” (Douglas 7) is undeniable; yet, agreeing largely with Hawthorne, this paper will show that aligning Fern’s *Ruth Hall* with novels first and foremost intended for women is, at the very least, superficial. In other words, this paper will show how in her writing, Fanny Fern manages to indicate that her novel as well as Ruth’s *Life Sketches*, just like Fern’s own *Fern Leaves*, are not aimed solely at a female audience.

Proving that Fanny Fern’s sketches and her autobiographical novel were not at all oriented toward exclusively female addressees will allow us to proceed to the second issue of this paper, which will deal more closely with Fern’s audience itself. In chapter 9 of his book *The Fall of Public Man*, entitled “The Public Men of the 19th Century,” Richard Sennett discusses two figures that inhabited the public realm of the time: the actor and the spectator. According to Sennett, the “spectator did not participate in public life so much as he steeled himself to observe it [being himself a figure] passive in public still believing in public life” (195). In his book *Cultures of Letters*, Richard Brodhead shares this view of the nineteenth-century spectator. In the chapter named “Veiled Ladies: Toward a History of Antebellum Entertainment,” where he deals mainly with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, Brodhead argues that in Hawthorne’s novel, Miles Coverdale represents the audience of the female artists. Just like Sennett, Brodhead describes “the spectator [as a figure] passive in person [for whom] eye-life has become his way of *having* life” (60-61). Since Brodhead himself draws the parallel between the Veiled Lady, an actor, or rather an actress, and “another group of entertainers who emerged into mass visibility
at just the same time: the women novelists” (52), this paper will draw a similar parallel between the consumers of these two kinds of art: the spectator and the reader. Moreover, passivity, which both Sennett and Brodhead ascribe to the spectator, can be attributed even more to the reader, due to the nature of reading itself. Contrary to the spectator, who has to leave his home in order to consume the art of an actor, the reader needs maximum privacy, and thus public passivity, to consume the art of a writer. Using *Ruth Hall*, this paper will prove that the consumers of arts, whether spectators or readers are more complicated figures than passive individuals retreating from the public sphere.

In the third and last part of the paper, I will combine these two arguments, that Fern’s audience was bi-gendered and that her readers are actively included in her writing, in order to show how they determine the novel’s composition. For this purpose, I will briefly address reader-response theory and ask the same question as Reed Way Dasenbrock asks in his essay, namely, “Do we write the text we read?” (7). As Dasenbrock puts it, quoting Stanley Fish, “Interpreters do not decode [texts]; they make them” (7). This statement is of course too assertive to be blindly applied to any text, in general, or to *Ruth Hall*, in particular; however, we cannot ignore the significance that Fanny Fern attributed to her readers. In other words, the fact that men constituted a part of Fern’s active readership invites a re-reading of the novel, given that Fern had received her readers’ letters before she wrote *Ruth Hall*, so that she knew who was reading her sketches and who would read her novel. In the preface, explicitly addressed to the reader, Fern writes,

> Whether you [the reader] will fancy this primitive mode of calling, whether you will like the company to which it introduces you, or – whether you will like the book at all, I cannot tell. Still, I cherish the hope that, somewhere in the length and breadth of the land, it may fan into a flame, in some tried heart, the fading embers of hope, well-nigh extinguished by wintry fortune and summer friends. (3)

However, it is clear that by the time Fern began writing her *Ruth Hall*, she was already familiar with some of her readers’ opinions, and most likely wrote the novel having them in mind.
Since the novel is recognized by most, if not all, critics (Baym, Kelley, Wood, Temple, Berlant and others) as undeniably autobiographical, before proceeding to its analysis it might be worth while to look at Parton’s own biography. Sara Payson Willis Parton, born in 1811, was the daughter of Nathaniel Willis who, living in Boston, established a religious newspaper and founded The Youth’s Companion. Sara was educated at the famous Beecher seminary. At the age of 26, she married Charles Eldredge, a bank cashier, with whom she lived happily until 1846, when he died, soon after Sara's mother and the eldest of their three daughters. After her husband’s death, Parton unsuccessfully struggled to support her two daughters by sewing and teaching and had to give up one of them to her late husband’s parents. Finally, she decided to try writing short sketches for newspapers, appealing for help to Nathaniel P. Willis, her brother and a successful editor. Even though N. P. Willis did patronize other women writers, such as Fanny Forrester, for example, and could help his sister, he refused to do so, advising her to pursue “unobtrusive employment” (Fern 116). Despite his discouraging refusal, Fanny Fern (the pseudonym that Parton took) became so popular that in 1853, when she collected her sketches into her first collection, entitled Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio, it became an instant bestseller both in America and in England. Earning ten cents per each of 100,000 copies of the collection and $100 a week for her column, Fanny Fern became one of the most successful columnists of her time. Ruth Hall, the protagonist of the novel bearing her name, becomes Parton’s mirror reflection. In Warren’s terms, “Fanny Fern had based the story of Ruth Hall on her own life, using real models for many characters” (xvii). In this respect, Ruth Hall is both autobiographical and metafictional, telling Parton’s own story and describing a writing woman’s thorny road to success.

As a woman writer, Fanny Fern wrote weekly sketches for newspapers and published two novels, Ruth Hall, with which we are dealing, and Rose Clark, printed in 1856. In this

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1 The following account of her life is based on the information provided in the introduction to the present-day edition of the novel by Joyce Warren.
In Reading in America: Literature and Social History, Cathy Davidson describes the middle of the nineteenth century as the era of “reading revolution” (14). For instance, mid-nineteenth century is not infrequently labelled as the “golden age of magazines” (Haveman 11). As Heather Haveman informs us in a study of the American magazine industry from 1741 to 1861, approximately 2600 magazines were founded between 1825 and 1850 and 1500 more magazines between 1850 and the outbreak of the Civil War, compared to only 844 magazines established between 1795 and 1825 (11). At the same time, as early as in 1827, the North American, referring to “floods” of novels, described the period as an “age of novel writing” (Baym, Novels 26). Some fifteen years later, in 1843, the same review characterized novel reading as “the most common recreation in civilized lands” (Baym, Novels 29). In a study of nineteenth-century readers, to which we will return in detail later, Ronald Zboray reports that out of 302 identifiable items read by the Childs, the family he uses as an example, 47 are magazine and newspaper articles, and 48 are novels, both exceeding the number of recorded items of any other genre (“Reading” 294). That is to say, as a writer Fern worked in the framework of the two most popular and readable genres that inhabited the realm of literary production in Antebellum America. In other words, she chose to practice in such literary genres that guaranteed her maximum profit and the largest readership.

As stated, fiction, written by women constituted a separate category of novels and flourished in the nineteenth-century America; as Baym puts it, “this fiction was by far the most popular literature of its time” (Woman’s Fiction 11). According to Baym, “most of the American authors were middle-class women who needed money” (Woman’s Fiction 30); likewise, the heroine of their novels is usually a young girl who has to earn her own living being deprived of male financial support, whose story ends with a marriage as a symbol of achievement of her undertakings and solution to her problems. In Baym’s own terms, “The many novels all tell,
with variations, a single tale” (*Woman’s Fiction* 11); moreover, behind them, we find a more or less similar story of a writer in need. In “No Happy Woman Writes,” Mary Kelley studies biographies of several women-writers, such as Sara Parton, Maria McIntosh, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Caroline Lee Hentz; a study which leads Kelley to the conclusion that all these women “began writing for publication only after their families or they, as single individuals, were in need of money” (144).

Of course, the protagonist of autobiographical *Ruth Hall* becomes a writer because Fanny Fern was a writer herself. At the same time, the very fact that Fern became a popular author means that “[women] authors were product of, as well as stimulus to, the changing condition of women” (Baym, *Woman’s Fiction* 31). As Brodhead argues, focusing his attention on the entertainment aspect, “[The Veiled Lady] embodies the suggestion that the same contemporary cultural processes that worked in one direction to delimit women to dephysicalized and deactivate domestic privacy also helped open up an enlarged publicity that women could inhabit in the entertainment field” (53). In terms of this paper, Ruth’s writing is seen less as a means of entertaining her readers than as a way of gaining influence over them. Before Ruth begins her literary career, she tries to earn money performing other kinds of work, namely, sewing and teaching, both perceived as more womanly at that time. However, the only thing she finds out is that nobody wants to hire a middle-class woman “who had seen better days” (Fern 81). Baym remarks that needlework and teaching were not professions of the same order; she rather connects school teaching with authorship in opposition to needlework precisely “because of their greater involvement of mental powers and their opportunity for control of oneself and influence over others” (*Woman’s Fiction* 31, emphasis added). That is to say, for a woman writer, like Ruth Hall, being an author meant not only “wealth [and] prestige” (Brodhead 55), allowing control of herself, but also power and way to influence her readership.
Ruth Hall being largely autobiographical, the events of the novel and Ruth’s literary achievements actually refer to the success of Sara Parton, for whom Ruth Hall becomes another pseudonym along with Fanny Fern. Canada’s explanation of Fern’s success might be true if we concentrate on the subtitle of the novel, *A Domestic Tale*. Only if we admit that the novel is about domesticity, as the subtitle suggests, if we agree that “sentimental discourse served as […] a feminine counterpublic sphere whose values remained fundamentally private” (Berlant 210), only then can we agree that the novel addresses female readers first and foremost who worry about their children and clothes. However, as we scrutinize more carefully the close association of Canada’s comment with the notion of domesticity, it becomes unconvincing.

The Cult of Domesticity, meaning “fulfilment for women in marriage and motherhood” (Baym, *Woman’s Fiction* 26), related to the Cult of True Womanhood. As Barbara Welter reports, “the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, [which] promised [her] happiness and power” (152). Yet, as Mary Ryan suggests, “Contrary to common assumptions that women’s place in the nineteenth-century America was in the home, it is not difficult to locate Victorian women […] in the public arena” (3). In her book *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, Ryan argues against “the presumption that social space is divided between the public and the private and that men claim the former while women are confined to the latter” (4). Nina Baym makes a similar claim, arguing that while domesticity is oftentimes associated with “entrapment” for women authors of the nineteenth century, “it meant something else. Their fiction is mostly about social relations, generally set in homes [as well as in] other social spaces” (*Woman’s Fiction* 26). In other words, in “woman’s fiction” of that period, domesticity did not mean total separation of the female world from the male one, but rather their interaction in “social relations,” set in “social spaces.” Amassing together men and women, that is, the public sphere,
associated with the former, and the private sphere, linked to the latter, takes us directly to the first part of this paper’s argument, which is that Fern’s (and Ruth’s) writings do not address exclusively a female audience.

Before looking in detail at the evidence provided by the novel itself regarding its readers, let us examine the readership of nineteenth-century literary production in general. In her study of reading practices in America, Cathy Davidson emphasizes that “authors and publishers were not the only participants in the communications circuit. Readers (both general and professional) play a crucial role as judges who, on some level, also help to determine what kinds of books will be published” (20). Similarly to current literary critics, writers of the nineteenth century have paid close attention to their reader. As James L. Machor informs us, already in 1844, the Southern Literary Messenger wrote, “it becomes of especial importance that we should examine the peculiarities of the reader, with the same care with which we determine the characteristics of the writer” (3). In their study of the readers of that period, Ronald and Mary Zboray acknowledge that “most of the informants [the readers who responded to what they read] were women, the wives or daughters of prominent professionals or businessmen. […] Much of the time they read – or listened to others read – while performing tasks such as sewing and cooking” (“Have You Read?” 1). Yet, in another study of a particular case of one reading family – Daniel and Mary Child – the same researchers note that according to the diaries of the Childs, “Mary seldom read and Daniel almost always did, [while] a little over half his reading was aloud” (“Reading” 290). The Zborays do not argue generally that the Childs should be seen as typical representatives of the American readers of the nineteenth century; however, they do argue that the “analysis of the diary of one Boston couple has suggested in several ways the multivalent nature of reading in antebellum America” (“Reading” 304). In both of the mentioned studies, Ronald and Mary Zboray observe that reading was seen as an issue for interpersonal communication involving men as well as women and treat reading as “one
integrated piece of the larger matrix of personal, familial, social and cultural activity” (“Reading” 287).

Let us look at the role of the male reader in Fern’s own writings. Although according to some critics, such as Nancy Walker, Barbara Zaczek, Susan Harris and Joyce Warren, “Ruth is able, consequently, to achieve emotional and financial independence from men” (Temple 156), this paper tends to question this independence. In reality, “a writer is never alone. There is always the public with him” (Woolf 332). Fern’s novel definitely has a powerful message to women stressing the importance for them of finding financial independence as a means of asserting identity and power. As Ruth says,

“I can do it, I feel it, I will do it, […] but there will be a desperate struggle first […] there will be scant meals, and sleepless nights, and weary days, and a throbbing brow, and an aching heart; there will be the chilling tone, the rude repulse; there will be ten backward steps to one forward. Pride must sleep! But-” and Ruth glanced at her children—“it shall be done. They shall be proud of their mother. Hyacinth shall yet be proud to claim his sister” (Fern 116).

This message becomes especially audacious by the end of the novel, when Ruth is satisfied with the financial independence achieved through writing and with the freedom that it allows from marital bond. As Baym puts it, “conventional novels permit women to enter professions in which they may acquire fame and wealth, but carefully indicate […] that in itself fame can never provide satisfaction to a woman” (Woman’s Fiction 253). Showing Ruth at the end of the novel as free from marriage and not thinking of a new matrimonial union, Fern violates the rules of “the orthodox sort of novels, beginning with a family at home, and ending with wedding-time” (Machor 6). “Living in a man’s world,” Baym continues, “Ruth realizes that success is possible to her only if she plays the man’s game” (Woman’s Fiction 253). Yet, what seems even more remarkable is how, in her novel, Fern suggests that men were not only her implied readers, but also constituted an active part of her actual authentic audience. In this respect, Ruth cannot gain full independence from men, nor should she want to, since then her books will not be bought. In Baym’s terms, she realizes that “the rules of the man’s world are not artificial structure, but
express the realities of human nature” (*Woman’s Fiction* 253), a realization, which results in her taking male responses into consideration while writing *Ruth Hall*.

In the second part of the novel, Fern makes known that Ruth received sixteen letters from her readers; as Richard Brodhead puts it, she “prints sample fan mail” (59). Taking into account that “the novel itself is perhaps the most fully and directly autobiographical piece of writing amid the welter of [...] literary domestics’ quasi-fiction” (Kelley 138), the letters that Ruth receives from her audience can be read as real letters that Fanny Fern received from her readers. The fact that, throughout her career, Fern “was deluged with fan mail far beyond the expectations for any writer of the period” (Warren xxxi) comes to support this speculation. In the article “The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentimentalism,” presenting an alternative reading of Fern’s novels and essays as a sharp critique of “oppressive practices” (206), Lauren Berlant writes that Fern “provid[es] a formal structure of identification through the example of her own ‘personal journalism’” (218). However, in the novel, we do not find a single example of Ruth’s sketches; thus, the fan mail can be seen as the only reference to Fern’s “personal journalism.” Moreover, in “How I look,” a sketch published in the *New York Ledger* in 1870, Fern relates to one of the letters that she has received from her reader: “A correspondent inquires how I look? Am I tall? have I dark, or light complexion? and what color are my eyes” (Fern 368). This sketch is actually a direct reference to Kitty’s letter from *Ruth Hall*, which reads, “I wish I could see you. How do you look? I guess you look like mamma; mamma has got blue eyes, and brown hair, and her mouth looks very pleasant when she smiles” (Fern 189). Thus, letters quoted in *Ruth Hall* can indeed be interpreted as those that Fanny Fern received from her own readers throughout her literary career.

Women sign only four out of these letters, whereas other twelve belong to men. In *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, Baym argues that besides gender classification, novel readers of that time can be categorized according to their education, class, age and family membership (49). In
this respect, the letters that Fern introduces in the course of the novel reflect judgments of all these groups. According to the content of these letters and to their language, their authors belong to different social and age categories: from John K. Staples, “a poor devil, and worse editor” (Fern 182) to Reginald Danby whose “family […] was founded by Sir Reginald Danby […] in the year 1066” (Fern 154); from Billy Sands, apparently a young boy as he ”did n’t play marbles for a whole week” (Fern 164) to William Stearns “Prof. of Greek, Hebrew, and Mathematics, in Hopetown College, and author of ‘History of the Dark Ages’” (Fern 166). By quoting these letters, Fern defies Canada’s image of her readership. If we admit that the letters offer statistical evidence concerning Fern’s audience, three fourths of the active readers in the novel, that is to say, readers who respond to Ruth’s sketches, are men. Moreover, these representatives of male audience are influenced by “Floy’’s articles to such an extent that they write letters to her, although most of them are presumably “not used to writing or talking to ladies” (Fern 135). Hence, although Ruth Hall might be seen as another sentimental domestic novel, written for women, by the book itself, and particularly by the letters that she quotes, Fanny Fern shows that Ruth Hall’s Life Sketches as well as her own Fern Leaves are not designed exclusively for the female audience. Already while writing the novel, it is as if Fern foresees such comments as those made by Canada and uses letters from male readers to discredit them. Most probably, Temple’s assertion that “[i]n Ruth Hall, [the] sense of private authenticity is established […] through Ruth’s readership, which provides her with anonymous epistolary sympathy and support” (134) is somewhat overstated, since not all of the quoted letters are sympathetic and supportive. Yet, these letters undoubtedly play an important role in indicating that in her writing, Fanny Fern, and Ruth Hall, addressed men as well as women.

At this stage, we will proceed to the second issue of the paper, namely that Fern’s readers are not the passive figures described by Sennett and Brodhead. Critics have already made
similar claims in relation to the broad image of American readership. In the introduction to her book, Cathy Davidson mentions Rolf Engelsing’s *Leserevolution*. She writes,

> Engelsing’s thesis is that changes [in printing and publishing] were so momentous that the nature of reading itself […] was transformed as a result of the new availability of books. […] In modern world of mass production, readers are deemed to read “extensively,” [which means that] books, in postindustrial society, dwindle to commodities; formerly engaged readers become passive consumers. (16, emphasis added)

Davidson, however, summarizes Engelsing’s theory only in order to undermine its applicability to American readers. Based on a number of case studies, she argues that many families were not only careful readers, but also competent critics; she also remarks that “certain books were read *intensively* even in settings in which books had become abundant” (Davidson 16, emphasis added). Haveman supports this claim in relation to magazines’ readers, juxtaposing involved mid-nineteenth century audience to the “indifferent audience” (5) of the preceding century. In “‘Have You Read…?’: Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region,” Ronald and Mary Zboray examine the diaries of a number of Bostonian middle-class families, who recorded their responses to reading. The Zborays investigate different types of responses and are finally able to conclude that in the diaries as well as in interpersonal communication, as it is reflected in the studied entries,

> the discussion moves from most common and basic reactions (e.g., “interesting” or “amusing”) to more intricate ones: the “usefulness” of a text, its “veracity,” comparisons with other texts, and its emotional instrumentality (e.g., how did it make the reader feel, or how did it express the sentiment of the reader?). (1)

In other words, these studies, investigating those readers who were Fern’s potential audience, attribute to them an active role in literary exchange of the time.

In “Veiled Ladies,” Richard Brodhead analyzes the forces that stand behind the mid-nineteenth century artistic women. Hawthorne’s Priscilla, argues Brodhead, “wins celebrity not by herself but through her bond to Professor Westervelt” (56), her manager and producer. “Having contracted for the rights to Priscilla as an entertainment property, [Westervelt] has
made her *into* the Veiled Lady, has created a public identity for her and created public attraction *to* this identity” (56). In general terms, “a Westervelt creates a Veiled Lady and thereby produces a Coverdale, and by extension a literary mass market as well” (Brodhead 63). Both John Walter, who employs Ruth Hall, and Robert Bonner, who provided work for Fanny Fern, function as “a Westervelt.” The power that Brodhead invests in this manager-producer figure is possible only when “the public personality” dominates “the silent spectators” (Sennett 196). In *Ruth Hall*, however, the audience is not a silent one; Ruth’s readers actively express their attitudes to her production, which gives them influence, and turns them into rightful participants of literary production.

Although in *The Blithedale Romance*, Priscilla, Brodhead’s “Veiled Lady,” is not an author, Brodhead, as we have already mentioned, associates her with women writers saying that “[t]he Veiled Lady might also find likeness in another group of entertainers who emerged into mass visibility at just the same time: the women novelists who attained to a new degree of popularity right at *The Blithedale Romance’s* moment” (52). Brodhead discusses Priscilla as a performer in connection with Miles Coverdale, the consumer of her art. What is more, according to Brodhead, “Coverdale is […] the spectator *constituted* by the Veiled Lady’s version of spectacle” (60). Undoubtedly, the emergence of such women as Fanny Elssler, a dancer, Fanny Fern, a writer, and Jenny Lind, Priscilla’s possible prototype, changed and molded their consumers. What is more dubious, however, is that Coverdale, an urban passive voyeur, is seen as a typical representative of their general audience. As opposed to Brodhead, in *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, Nina Baym asserts that “[i]n the broadest sense, everybody read [novels], from the most cultivated and leisured classes on down” (47). In her novel, Fanny Fern shows awareness of this diversity. The letters that she includes in *Ruth Hall* are the expression of the same audience that Brodhead talks about. The content of these letters and the language they are written in, indicate that they were composed by representatives of different social groups. Some
of them are of Coverdale’s type: “cultivated, discreet, intelligent, educated, tasteful, and thoughtful readers” (Baym, Novels 47), whereas others stand for other layers of American population, reflecting its multifaceted essence.

“Floy”s readers are men and women, children and grown-ups, Northerners and Southerners, professors and students, rich and poor. Their range becomes evident from the letters themselves. The letter by Billy Sands, a boy wearing “round jackets” (Fern 165), still too young to go to college, is written in a language completely different from that of Reginald Danby, a poor aristocrat. Whereas Billy makes many mistakes in his short letter, written in simple, childish words, Reginald Danby’s letter is written in a highly structured language, full of stylish words, such as “leniency,” “unimpeachable,” “copious and irrefragable,” “perusal,” “pecuniary,” “voluminous,” and “opinionated” (Fern 154-55). In one of the first letters that we encounter in Ruth Hall, “Victor Le Pont,” a Southern owner of “one hundred negroes,” makes a marriage proposal to Ruth, promising her “the sunny South, the land of magnolias and orange blossoms [where] she should have a box at the opera, a carriage, and servants in livery” (Fern 153). This letter shows that Ruth’s sketches published in an urban Northern newspaper reach as far as Southern plantations. The attention that Le Pont pays to Ruth and her sketches is echoed in the letter of Thomas Pearce, “guardian to a young Southern lady (an orphan) of large fortune,” the author of which remarks that his protégée, Miss Le Roy, “is as great a favorite with [Ruth] as she is with the multitude who have paid tribute to her genius” (Fern 181-82). Whereas Miss Le Roy “has just completed her education” (Fern 181), Hal. Hunnewell has just been “sent up to [the] academy” (Fern 188), which he hates. Additionally, Ruth receives letters not only from college students, but also from college professors. Whereas one of them asks “for her autograph for himself and some friends” (Fern 152), the other one, William Stearns, sends her “a few plain words,” arguing that she is not “a genius,” as opposed to Shakespeare, Milton and himself, admitting that “now and then, there’s a gleam of something like reason in [her] writings,
but for the most part they are unmitigated trash – false in sentiment – unrhetorical in expression” (Fern 166). All these people are Ruth Hall’s and apparently, Fanny Fern’s readers and their letters reflect how different they are in geographical, age, gender and class terms.

As mentioned, four out of sixteen letters that Ruth Hall receives are signed by women; they are written by Mary Andrews, Mary R., Sara Jarmesin, and Kitty, a little girl. Except for Kitty’s letter, all the rest do betray the emotional distress of their authors: Mary R. feels lonely in her “sick chamber” (Fern 136); Sara, a schoolteacher, has recently been betrayed by her lover (Fern 164); and Mary Andrews, having an alcoholic husband and no one to rely on, does not hope to survive childbirth (Fern 165). Whereas none of these women writes about changes that Ruth Hall’s literary activity brought into their lives, (is not it what Brodhead expects from the performers?) two of them actually encourage Ruth to write: Sara asks Ruth to “write out [her] story” (Fern 164), and Kitty wants “Floy” to write more stories that “end well” (Fern 189). On the one hand, we cannot know how Ruth reacts to their requests, since the author does not expose us to Ruth’s sketches; on the other hand, we do know that as if in response to Kitty, in her “later collections for adults [Fern] included few sentimental articles [and wrote] three collections for children” (Warren xix). What the letters show is that Ruth’s female audience does not always consume her literary production in silence, and not infrequently actively expresses its opinions and preferences.

The letters written by male readers serve as additional evidence proving the same point: they show that “Floy”’s sketches successfully bring her own values to a mass audience, touching both female and male readers. For example, in his letter, M. J. D. acknowledges that he has become “a better son, a better brother, a better husband, a better father, than [he] was before [he] commenced reading [Ruth Hall’s] articles” (Fern 183). Moreover, male letters show that her writings turn them into active participants of the “actor – spectator” relationships discussed by Sennett and Brodhead. The very first letter, introduced in chapter 65 and signed by John Stokes,
is an amazing example of the active part that Ruth Hall’s audience plays. In his letter, Stokes suggests that Ruth “ought to make a book of [her sketches], so that [her] readers may keep them” (Fern 135), a suggestion that Ruth for the present declines with laughter and that will later become the culmination of her literary success. Similarly to Sara Jarmesin and Kitty, John Stokes pushes Ruth Hall to produce literary writings. The same request is repeated in several other letters that Ruth receives from her readers. They ask her to create texts that differ in length, depth and meaning: compositions for Hal. Hunnewell (Fern 188) and an epitaph on Fido’s grave (Fern 165), the history of the Danby family (Fern 155) and “a little dialogue to be repeated by two little girls” (Fern 188). What unites all these requests is that “Floy”’s readers are eager to see more of her writings; in other words, their letters provide feedback to what has already been written and thus shape Ruth Hall’s further writing, turning the readers themselves into active participants of the literary creation.

The fact that the letters turn Ruth’s readers into active inhabitants of the sphere of literary production is opposed to Sennett’s statement that “the public man as passive [consumer] was a man released and freed” (212). On the contrary, these letters show that their authors become active, and not passive, readers exactly in hope for release, if not relief, found in self-assertion, as in the case of William Stearns, or that of confidence in her baby’s future, as in Mary Andrews’s case. Moreover, even before these readers write to Ruth, reading entails interpersonal communication, both as the Zborays’ study suggests and as Ruth’s readers – John Stokes, Kitty and “a Professor of some College” (Fern 152), who remains unnamed – explicitly tell her. Ronald and Mary Zboray treat reading in family circle as labor; in their own terms, “Mary [Child] did needlework or performed other manual chores while her husband read – gendered, but time-efficient division of labor [in which] Daniel’s reading was certainly as much a chore as Mary’s handiwork” (“Reading” 291). Family reading, taking place while other household tasks were performed, needed to be set in that part of the house, which was shared by the whole
family. For example, as John Stokes writes in his letter to Ruth, “When we’ve all done work, we get round the fire on an evening, while one of us reads your pieces aloud” (Fern 135).

In “Divided Plots,” Milette Shamir deals with the separation of the nineteenth-century house’s “interior into feminine and masculine domains” (431). In Shamir’s analysis, contrary to the “female” parlor, the study “designed for silence,” was a man’s private territory, “sealed from the interference of women, children, and servants” (446). Shamir observes that the study helped the man to set the boundaries “between his private self and his public persona” (446). As opposed to the study, an exclusively male domain, the parlor, mostly associated with women, in reality was designed for both men and women “to gather in familial intimacy or social enjoyment” (439). In the context of our analysis, family reading and the parlor become parallel to Fern’s version of “woman’s fiction” itself. Being initially intended for women, it attracts the attention of both sexes. Knowing from her readers’ letters that her sketches were read in family circles, “not silently, but aloud” (Fern 250), Fern wrote her novel, bearing the opinions of her male readers in mind, in such a way as to keep the man in the parlor, outside of the privacy promised to him in the study. In other words, just like any book, which is “both meaning […] and the vehicle by which meaning is conveyed” (Davidson 1), Ruth Hall is a creation both resulting from the letters that Fern received from her readers in response to her sketches and causing further changes in the realm of private-public and male-female dichotomies.

As we have previously stated, letters turn Fanny Fern’s readers into active participants in her literary creation. Similarly to “most [literary historians who] have attempted to construct an image of the reader from the text itself” (“Have You Read?” 1), this paper suggests looking at Fern’s novel in order to examine her readership. The difference, however, between our case and others is that, in Ruth Hall, we have responses from Fern’s real audience. In other words, Fern’s readers, as the novel reflects them, are not only “typical readers” (Machor 1), but are individual representatives of Fern’s audience. This distinguishing between typical and real readers is one of
the differentiations made by reader-response theory. Reader-response criticism, studying readers’ responses to literary texts and readers’ role in creation of the text itself, operates with several terms, which are of particular interest for this paper. Peter Rabinowitz makes a distinction between three types of hypothetical readers: narratee, the implied reader, and the intended reader. According to Rabinowitz’s account, narratee is the one whom the narrator is addressing in the text. The implied reader’s moves are charted out by the literary work, him- or herself embodying the tendencies and values of the text that are necessary for the text to affect its meaning. Finally, the intended reader can be discovered by looking at the text in its socio-historical context. All these types of hypothetical readers can be deduced either from the text itself or from its context. Fern’s case is different, however, in that her readers are not imaginary. They are real readers, whose responses the author receives before she begins writing *Ruth Hall*. In other words, Fern’s readers are not mere receivers of the text created by the writer; using Reed Dasenbrock’s question “Do We Write the Text We Read?” we can say that Fern’s readers did write the text they read, but even before the text itself was produced.

The fact that Fern’s readers belonged to both sexes and that her male readers were not passive consumers of her work allows a re-reading of the novel, taking into consideration that Fern was informed of their judgments. One of the essays in Davidson’s book observes that novels of American Antebellum women writers are either “subversion or conservative reinforcement of the cult of domesticity” (201). It seems that Fanny Fern belongs to the first group of novelists, who reject patriarchal conventions. Yet, on the other hand, Ruth, Fern’s mirror reflection, is not a “monster of perverted femininity” (Huf 28). Ruth is not only an irreproachable wife and a true mother, she also becomes an author only because she must, arguing that “No happy woman ever writes” (Fern 175). What is more, prior to taking serious decisions, Fanny Fern (Ruth Hall) still turns to Robert Bonner (John Walter) for advice: “‘Oh, thank you,’ said Ruth, ‘I was just wishing that I had some head wiser than mine, to help me
decide on a business matter’” (Fern 162). As a result, there are critics who do not consider Fern “a writer of the first rank [exactly because] she did not kill the ‘Angel in the House’” (Huf 35).

Linda Huf’s analysis of Fern’s writing leads her to the conclusion that Fanny Fern was both a “womanly,” that is to say conventional, woman and an “unwomanly,” irreverent, one (33). Because of this internal duality, Fern “never killed the Angel in the house [and] never squelched the Devil in her” (Huf 35). In terms of this paper, Fern’s duality can be explained by the fact that, as a consequence of her readers’ feedback, in *Ruth Hall*, Fern aimed at a bi-gendered audience. On the one hand, she addressed women who read books promoting the idea that “women have the opportunity and responsibility to change their situation” (Baym, *Woman’s Fiction* 19); on the other hand, she wrote for men who she wanted to buy her book and who, even though enjoying her sketches, undoubtedly wanted her to convey a more conventional message. Thus, the novel becomes Fern’s own answer to her question quoted in the very beginning of this paper and an attempt of writing a novel that does not “treat of courtship and marriage [and still] find[s] readers” (Fern 286).

The letters that Fanny Fern chose to print in her autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* serve as a portrayal of Fern’s own real readership. Fanny Fern was obviously aware of the conventional expectations that most of the readers had of what Baym calls “woman’s fiction,” and used these letters to indicate that she expected a different kind of reading. As Fanny Fern has recapped herself,

> When we take up a woman’s book, we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and that lovely reliance on the patronage of … [the male] sex which constitutes a woman’s greatest charm – we do not desire to see a woman wielding the scimitar blade of sarcasm. (qtd. in Wood 4)

What is more, these letters reflect not only Fern’s intentions concerning her novel, but also the actual audience of her previous writings. From the letters that she received from her readers and that she deliberately included in *Ruth Hall*, she knew that her literary production was read by men as well as by women and that men constituted an extensive percentage of her audience. At
the same time, the letters included in *Ruth Hall* reflect the complexity of Fern’s audience. The content of the letters and the language they are written in show that their authors, consumers of the female art and magazine- and novel-readers, are different people and that, in contrast to Richard Brodhead’s suggestion, not all of them are of Miles Coverdale’s type. They also reveal the role of the audience in its relationships with the artist. Contrary to what Richard Sennett and Richard Brodhead argue about “the spectator,” Fern’s readers, both men and women, do not “move in silence, in isolated protection from each other” (Sennett 196); on the contrary, as John Stokes and Kitty indicate in their letters, they discuss Fern’s sketches and inform the author of their opinions. That is to say, if in her sketches, “Fern […] aims not to change the lives of her audience, but to change their relation to what their minds can do – no longer in retreat from the world, but engaging actively in acute analysis of it” (Berlant 218), *Ruth Hall* finally shows that she succeeds in this undertaking. In the novel (as well as in the sketches), Fanny Fern combines unconventionality in respect to the principles of the genre with more conservative womanly elements exactly because she knew that she did not address women only. Thus, the fact that Fern was aware of her audience’s diversity explains the ambiguity of the novel.
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