Readers of novels: The reception of *Les Mystères de Paris* in the 19th century

Louise H. Pavan (IC)

Abstract

On June 19th, 1842, Eugène Sue published in the *Journal des Débats* the first chapter of his novel, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-1843), which would become one of the most popular of its time. Portraying a social class seldom discussed in the genre, the poor and the victims of the French systems have a leading role in the novel that reflected the historical reality. The repercussions of the novel are expressed in numerous letters that aid the comprehension of the relationship established between author and reader and the appropriation of the literary text for the reflection on its own reality.

Key words: *Les Mystères de Paris*, readers, French novel.

Introduction

Despite the fact that Eugène Sue initiated his career as an author of sea novels, he achieved great success writing serial novels. When *Les Mystères de Paris*, his first serial novel, appeared at the *Journal des Débats*, it had a great impact in France. Published between June of 1842 and October of 1844, the novel not only received many critiques, but also originated a long correspondence between Sue and his readers. Through the reading of the 402 letters, compiled by Jean-Pierre Galvan, we aimed to enhance the comprehension of the relationship established between the readers of *Les Mystères de Paris* and Eugène Sue as well as the social context of readers of novels in the 19th century Paris.

Results and Discussion

Despite being considered immoral by many critics, *Les Mystères de Paris* provided a description of the French society by portraying characters that represented specific social classes and thus revealed social systems that were corrupt and inaccessible to the poor. So, many readers felt empathy with the characters and the situations they lived in the novel, since they themselves were members of those lower social classes and recognized events of their own lives in the novel, such as abuses of power, misery and legal injustice.

Hence, many readers sent letters to Eugène Sue, seeing him as a confidant, to whom they could expose all the issues of their existences, sometimes worse than the ones represented in the novel. This correspondence was possible only due to the fact that the author was often associated with the main character of the novel, Rodolphe, Prince of Gérolstein. The righteous Rodolphe would wander around the Paris' bas-fonds searching for honest miserable people that still had good principles despite being in the middle of a perverse environment. Therefore, readers would transfer that righteous image from the main character to the author and would ask for his aid as a benefactor or even for financial support.

Other readers used the correspondence to reflect on the issues of the French society, which were discussed on the premises of the reality portrayed on the novel. The penitentiary, health and judicial systems, its problems and possible solutions were topics of many letters. People from all social classes felt empathy and the need to be in touch with the author, who, in some cases, utilized the events narrated by his readers to continue his novel.

Further, some letters are evidence of the influence of the novel that inspired the creation of poems, songs, and later *The Mysteries of London* and *The Mysteries of Germany*.

Conclusions

The letters provide an important documentation on the reception of the novel and the perception of French society by the readers in the 19th century. They show the public discussions on political and social issues, as well as the participation of the readers in the composition of the novel. The correspondence reveals the idealized way in which the novelist was figured by his readers, and besides, the letters prove the reason why *Les Mystères de Paris* achieved such an immense amount of success.

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