

Loom and Spindle

Harriet Hanson Robinson

Introduction

****Please do not freak out about the page numbers. I included a lot of footnotes for clarity. Don't freak out, and don't skip this source if you're planning on doing well on the final exam.**

Lowell, Massachusetts started as a company town for the Boston Manufacturing Company's textile mills established in 1815. You remember, of course, that the boycott of British goods during the War of 1812 caused an urgent need for domestic manufacturing. By the 1820s, Lowell consisted of 15 mills and factories employed hundreds of workers. Initially, Lowell Mills recruited young women ages 15-25 from farm families throughout New England with the promise of respectable employment and close supervision of their daughter's activities outside of work. The young women were commonly called "mill girls" or (factory) operatives. Many people found the presence of women in the workforce, especially the industrial workplace, inappropriate and a threat to "traditional values." Many young women yearned for the freedom employment provided, yet often their wages went sent back to their families to help with expenses. For many "mill-girls," the educational opportunities available in Lowell were the main reason they worked in the mills.

Harriet Hanson (Robinson) started working in the Lowell textile mills in 1845. Her father died a few years earlier, leaving her mother with three children and a sizable debt. Mrs. Hanson found employment running a boarding house for the "mill girls", and Harriet, age 10¹, went to work in the mills. She participated in the mill-girls' strike in protest of wage cuts, and moved her way up to a highly skilled position at the mills. Hanson worked until she married William Robinson in 1848. In 1898, Robinson published *Loom and Spindle*, about her childhood at the mills. Below are chapters 4&5, "Characteristics of the Early Factory Girl."²

Primary Source

When I look back into the factory life of fifty or sixty years ago, I do not see what is called "a class" of young men and women going to and from their daily work, like so many ants that cannot be distinguished one from another; I see them as individuals, with personalities of their

¹ Harriet was two years younger than Richard Frethorne, the indentured servant from colonial Virginia, when she started working in the mills.

² Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle, or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, 1898. [Full source is believed to be in the public domain](#). This copy was owned by Robinson herself and includes her book plate (inside cover), and her photo.

own. This one has about her the atmosphere of her early home. That one is impelled by a strong and noble purpose. The other, - what she is, has been an influence for good to me and to all womankind. Yet they were a class of factory operatives, and were spoken of (as the same class is spoken of now) as a set of persons who earned their daily bread, whose condition was fixed, and who must continue to spin and to weave to the end of their natural existence. Nothing but this was expected of them, and they were not supposed to be capable of social or mental improvement.

That they could be educated and developed into something more than mere work-people, was an idea that had not yet entered the public mind. So little does one class of persons really know about the thoughts and aspirations of another! It was the good fortune of these early mill-girls to teach the people of that time that this sort of labor is not degrading; that the operative is not only "capable of virtue," but also capable of self-cultivation. At the time the Lowell cotton-mills were started, the factory girl was the lowest among women. In England, and in France particularly, great injustice had been done to her real character³; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self-respect. In the eyes of her overseer she was but a brute, a slave, to be beaten, pinched, and pushed about. It was to overcome this prejudice that such high wages had been offered to women that they might be induced to become mill-girls, in spite of the opprobrium⁴ that still clung to this "degrading occupation."

At first only a few came; for, though tempted by the high wages to be regularly paid in "cash," there were many who still preferred to go on working at some more genteel employment at seventy-five cents a week and their board. But in a short time, the prejudice against factory labor wore away, and the Lowell mills became filled with blooming and energetic New England women. They were naturally intelligent, had mother-wit⁵, and fell easily into the ways of their new life. They soon began to associate with those who formed the community in which they had come to live, and were invited to their houses. They went to the same church, and sometimes married into some of the best families. Or if they returned to their secluded homes again, instead of being looked down upon as "factory girls" by the squire's or the lawyer's family, they were more often welcomed as coming from the metropolis, bringing new fashions, new books, and new ideas with them.

In 1831 Lowell was little more than a factory village. Several corporations were started, and the cotton-mills belonging to them were building. Help was in great demand; and stories were told all over the country of the new factory town, and the high wages that were offered to all classes of work-people, - stories that reached the ears of mechanics' and farmers' sons, and gave new life to lonely and dependent women in distant towns and farmhouses. Into this Yankee El Dorado⁶, these needy people began to pour by the various modes of travel known to those slow old days.

³ Manchester, England, and Roubaix, France were the leading textile producers in the world before Lowell Mills, and like Lowell, mostly employed young women at low wages.

⁴ It will take you 2 seconds to look it up.

⁵ Good sense.

⁶ El Dorado has a few origins. In short, the vernacular refers to a mythical city of gold. Yankee is a nickname for New Englanders.

The stage-coach and the canal-boat came every day, always filled with new recruits for this army of useful people. The mechanic and machinist came, each with his home-made chest of tools, and oftentimes his wife and little ones. The widow came with her little flock and her scanty housekeeping goods to open a boarding-house or variety store, and so provided a home for her fatherless children. Many farmers' daughters came to earn money to complete their wedding outfit, or buy the bride's share of housekeeping articles. Women with past histories came, to hide their griefs and their identity, and to earn an honest living in the "sweat of their brow." Single young men came, full of hope and life, to get money for an education, or to lift the mortgage from the home-farm. Troops of young girls came by stages and baggage-wagons, men often being employed to go to other States and to Canada, to collect them at so much a head, and deliver them at the factories.

A very curious sight these country girls presented to young eyes accustomed to a more modern style of things. When the large covered baggage-wagon arrived in front of a block on the corporation, they would descend from it, dressed in various and outlandish fashions, and with their arms brimful of bandboxes containing all their worldly goods. On each of these was sewed a card, on which one could read the old-fashioned New England name of the owner. And sorrowful enough they looked, even to the fun-loving child who has lived to tell the story; for they had all left their pleasant country homes to try their fortunes in a great manufacturing town, and they were homesick even before they landed at the doors of their boarding-houses. Years after, this scene dwelt in my memory; and whenever anyone said anything about being homesick, there rose before me the picture of a young girl with a sorrowful face and a big tear in each eye, clambering down the steps at the rear of a great covered wagon, holding fast to a cloth-covered bandbox, drawn up at the top with a string, on which was sewed a paper bearing the name of Plumy Clay!

Some of these girls brought diminutive hair trunks covered with the skin of calves, spotted in dun and white, even as when they did skip and play in daisy-blooming meads⁷. And when several of them were set together in front of one of the blocks, they looked like their living counterparts, reposing at noontide in the adjacent field. One of this kind of trunks has been handed down to me as an heirloom. The hair is worn off in patches; it cannot be invigorated, and it is now become a hairless heirloom. Within its hide-bound sides are safely stowed away the love-letters of a past generation, - love-letters that agitated the hearts of the grand- parents of today; and I wonder that their resistless ardor has not long ago burst its wrinkled sides⁸. It is relegated to distant attics, with its ancient crony, "ye bandbox," to enjoy an honored and well-earned repose. Ah me! when some of us, its contemporaries, are also past our usefulness, gone clean out of fashion, may we also be as resigned, yea, as willing, to be laid quietly on some attic shelf! These country girls had queer names, which added to the singularity of their appearance. Samantha, Triphena, Plumy, Kezia, Aseneth, Elgardy, Leafy, Ruhamah, Lovey, Almaretta, Sarepta, and Florilla Avere among them⁹.

Their dialect was also very peculiar. On the broken English and Scotch of their ancestors was ingrafted the nasal Yankee twang; so that many of them, when they had just come down spoke a

⁷ Meadows filled with daisies.

⁸ *Love letters that agitated the hearts of grandparents...* what a lovely sentiment. This whole paragraph is moving.

⁹ These names are old Puritan names and thus, also old New England names.

language almost unintelligible. But the severe discipline and ridicule which met them was as good as a school education, and they were soon taught the "city way of speaking." Their dress was also peculiar, and was of the plainest of homespun, cut in such an old-fashioned style that each young girl looked as if she had borrowed her grandmother's gown. Their only head-covering was a shawl, which was pinned under the chin; but after the first payday, a "shaker" (or "scooter") sunbonnet usually replaced this primitive head-gear of their rural life¹⁰. But the early factory girls were not all country girls. There were others also, who had been taught that "work is no disgrace." There were some who came to Lowell solely on account of the social or literary advantages to be found there. They lived in secluded parts of New England, where books were scarce, and there was no cultivated society. They had comfortable homes, and did not perhaps need the money they would earn; but they longed to see this new "City of Spindles," of which they had heard so much from their neighbors and friends, who had gone there to work.

And the fame of the circulating libraries, that were soon opened, drew them and kept them there, when no other inducement would have been sufficient. The laws relating to women were such, that a husband could claim his wife wherever he found her, and also the children she was trying to shield from his influence; and I have seen more than one poor woman skulk behind her loom or her frame when visitors were approaching the end of the aisle where she worked. Some of these were known under assumed names, to prevent their husbands from trusteeing their wages. It was a very common thing for a male person of a certain kind to do this, thus depriving his wife of all her wages, perhaps, month after month. The wages of minor children could be trusteeed, unless the children (being fourteen years of age) were given their time. Women's wages were also trusteeed for the debts of their husbands, and children for the debts of their parents¹¹. As an instance, my mother had some financial difficulties when I was fifteen years old, and to save herself and me from annoyance, she gave me my time. The document reads as follows: -

"Be it known that I, Harriet Hanson, of Lowell, in consideration that my minor daughter Harriet J. has taken upon herself the whole burden of her own support, and has undertaken and agreed to maintain herself henceforward without expense to me, do hereby release and quitclaim unto her all profits and wages which she may hereafter earn or acquire by her skill or labor in any occupation, — and do hereby disclaim all right to collect or interfere with the same. And I do give and release unto her the absolute control and disposal of her own time according to her own discretion, without interference from me. It being understood that I am not to be chargeable hereafter with any expense on her account. (Signed) Harriet Haxson. July 2, 1840."

It must be remembered that at this date woman had no property rights. A widow could be left without her share of her husband's (or the family) property, a legal "incumbrance" to his estate. A father could make his will without reference to his daughter's share of the inheritance. He usually left her a home on the farm as long as she remained single. A woman was not supposed to be capable of spending her own or of using other people's money¹². In Massachusetts, before 1840,

¹⁰ [A shaker sunbonnet looks like this.](#)

¹¹ Powerful. And unfortunately, still relevant.

¹² Most women still needed their husband's or father's signature to get a credit card until **1974** when Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. Some banks discounted a woman's wages up to 50 percent, thus lowering

a woman could not legally be treasurer of her own sewing-society, unless some man were responsible for her. The law took no cognizance of woman as a money-spender. She was a ward, an appendage, a relict. Thus it happened, that if a woman did not choose to marry, or, when left a widow, to re-marry, she had no choice but to enter one of the few employments open to her, or to become a burden on the charity of some relative. In almost every New England home could be found one or more of these women, sometimes welcome, more often unwelcome, and leading joyless, and in many instances unsatisfactory lives. The cotton-factory was a great opening to these lonely and dependent women. From a condition approaching pauperism they were at once placed above want; they could earn money, and spend it as they pleased; and could gratify their tastes and desires without restraint, and without rendering an account to anybody. At last they had found a place in the universe; they were no longer obliged to finish out their faded lives mere burdens to male relatives¹³.

Even the time of these women was their own, on Sundays and in the evening after the day's work was done. For the first time in this country woman's labor had a money value. She had become not only an earner and a producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time. And thus a long upward step in our material civilization was taken; woman had begun to earn and hold her own money, and through its aid had learned to think and to act for herself. Among the older women who sought this new employment were very many lonely and dependent ones, such as used to be mentioned in old wills as "incumbrances" and "relicts," and to whom a chance of earning money was indeed a new revelation. How well I remember some of these solitary ones! As a child of eleven years, I often made fun of them - for children do not see the pathetic side of human life —and imitated their limp carriage and inelastic gait. I can see them now, even after sixty years, just as they looked, - depressed, modest, mincing, hardly daring to look one in the face, so shy and sylvan had been their lives. But after the first pay-day came, and they felt the jingle of silver in their pockets, and had begun to feel its mercurial influence, their bowed heads were lifted, their necks seemed braced with steel, they looked you in the face, sang blithely among their looms or frames, and walked with elastic step to and from their work. And when Sunday came, homespun was no longer their only wear; and how sedately gay in their new attire they walked to church, and how proudly they dropped their silver fourpences into the contribution-box!

It seemed as if a great hope impelled them, - the harbinger of the new era that was about to dawn for them and for all women-kind. In passing, let me not forget to pay a tribute, also, to those noble single and widowed women, who are "set solitary in families," but whose presence cements the domestic fabric, and whose influence is unseen and oftentimes unappreciated, until they are taken away and the integral part of the old home-life begins to crumble. Except in rare instances, the rights of the early mill-girls were secure. They were subject to no extortion, if they did extra work they were always paid in full, and their own account of labor done by the piece was always accepted. They kept the figures, and were paid accordingly. This was notably the case with the weavers and drawing-in girls. Though the hours of labor were long, they were not over-worked; they were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of, and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty

their available credit. Why? Because women were always categorized as wives and mother first, not professionals. Banks claimed women were serious workers, they were just waiting to return home where they belonged.

¹³ This whole paragraph. On point.

minutes at a time. They were not driven, and their work-a-day life was made easy. They were treated with consideration by their employers, and there was a feeling of respectful equality between them. The most favored of the girls were sometimes invited to the houses of the dignitaries of the mills, showing that the line of social division was not rigidly maintained.

Their life in the factory was made pleasant to them. In those days there was no need of advocating the doctrine of the proper relation between employer and employed. Help was too valuable to be ill-treated. If these early agents, or overseers, had been disposed to exercise undue authority, or to establish unjust or arbitrary laws, the high character of the operatives, and the fact that women employees were scarce would have prevented it. A certain agent of one of the first corporations in Lowell (an old sea-captain) said to one of his boarding-house keepers, "I should like to rule my help as I used to rule my sailors, but so many of them are women I do not dare to do it." The knowledge of the antecedents of these operatives was the safeguard of their liberties. The majority of them were as well born as their "overlookers," if not better; and they were also far better educated. The agents and overseers were usually married men, with families of growing sons and daughters. They were members, and sometimes deacons, of the church, and teachers in the same Sunday-school with the girls employed under them. They were generally of good morals and temperate habits, and often exercised a good influence over their help. The feeling that the agents and overseers were interested in their welfare caused the girls, in turn, to feel an interest in the work for which their employers were responsible. The conscientious among them took as much pride in spinning a smooth thread, drawing in a perfect web, or in making good cloth, as they would have done if the material had been for their own wearing. And thus was practiced, long before it was preached, that principle of true political economy, - the just relation, the mutual interest, that ought to exist between employers and employed.

Those of the mill-girls who had homes generally worked from eight to ten months in the year; the rest of the time was spent with parents or friends. A few taught school during the summer months. When we left the mill, or changed our place of work from one corporation to another, we were given an "hoornable discharge." Mine, of which I am still quite proud, is dated the year of my marriage, and is as follows: -

"Harriet J. Hanson has been employed in the Boott Cotton Mills, in a dressing-room, twenty-five months, and is honorably discharged."¹⁴ (Signed) J. F. Trott. Lowell, July 25, 1848."

The chief characteristics of the early mill-girls may be briefly mentioned, as showing the material of which this new community of working-women was composed. Concerning their personal appearance, I am able to quote from a magazine article written by the poet John G. Whittier, then a resident of Lowell¹⁵. He thus describes, -

¹⁴ Military terminology. Interesting.

¹⁵ John Greenleaf Whittier was a poet, publisher, and abolitionist. Whittier's poetry wasn't that great, but he was an active, well-known member of the Boston Literary scene. He also actively fought against slavery, especially in his writings. His first essay was published in William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper (before the *Liberator*). Whittier was a quintessential New Englander and wrote many essays about New England life and identity. Whittier was also a direct descendant of Susanna Martin, one of the women tried and executed during the Salem Witch Trials (you remember Susanna Martin, right?) One of Whittier's more interesting poems was about Susanna Martin, [*The Witches Daughter*](#), 1857. Robinson's excerpt is from his essay describing his visit to Lowell Mills. Whittier's

"THE FACTORY GIRLS OF LOWELL.

*"Acres of girlhood, beauty reckoned by the square rod, —or miles by long measure!
the young, the graceful, the gay, - the flowers gathered from a thousand hillsides and
green valleys of New England, fair unveiled Nuns of Industry, Sisters of Thrift, and are
ye not also Sisters of Charity dispensing comfort and hope and happiness around
many a hearthstone of your native hills, making sad faces cheerful, and hallowing age
and poverty with the sunshine of your youth and love! Who shall sneer at your calling?
Who shall count your vocation otherwise than noble and ennobling?"*

Of their literary and studious habits, Professor A. P. Peabody, of Harvard University, gives his opinion in an article written not long ago in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He says,

"During the palmy days of The Lowell Offering I used every winter to lecture for the Lowell Lyceum. Not amusement, but instruction, was then the lecturer's aim...The Lowell Hall was always crowded, and four-fifths of the audience were factory-girls. When the lecturer entered, almost every girl had a book in her hand, and was intent upon it. When he rose, the book was laid aside, and paper and pencil taken instead; and there were very few who did not carry home full notes of what they had heard. I have never seen anywhere so assiduous note-taking. No, not even in a college class, ... as in that assembly of young women, laboring for their subsistence."¹⁶

To introduce a more practical side of their character I will quote an extract from a letter received not long ago from a gentleman in the Detroit Public Library, which says, "The factory-girls went to Lowell from the hills of Vermont when I was a boy, numbers of them from every town in my county (Windsor); and it was considered something of a distinction to have worked for 'the corporation,' and brought home some hard cash, which in many and many cases went to help lift a mortgage on the farm, or to buy something needed for the comfort of the old folks, or to send a younger brother or sister to the Academy. I knew several of these girls who brought home purses from Lowell which looked big in those days, and I recall one who is still living in my native town of Pomfret."

It may be added here, that the majority of the mill-girls made just as good use of their money, so newly earned, and of whose value they had hitherto known so little. They were necessarily industrious. They were also frugal and saving. It was their custom on the first day of every month, after paying their board bill (11.25 a week), to put their wages in the savings-bank. There the money stayed, on interest, until they withdrew it, to carry home or to use for a special purpose. It is easy to see how much good this sum would do in a rural community where money, as a means of exchange, had been scarce. Into the barren homes many of them had left it went

contemporaries included David Thoreau (we will read his essay, *Civil Disobedience*, in a few weeks); Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote *Self-Reliance* and is considered the definitive voice of Young America ("Young America" should be in your notes), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, best known for *Paul Revere's Ride*, (1861) "listen my children and you will hear/ of the midnight ride/of Paul Revere."

¹⁶ Several points. Andrew Preston Peabody descended from one of the original families of Massachusetts and served as university minister at Harvard University where he taught Christian Morals from 1860 to 1881. Peabody was a popular speaker throughout his career and frequently gave lectures in Lowell on a variety of topics. He printed a collection of his Lowell lectures in the book, [*Christianity, the Religion of Nature*](#).

like a quiet stream, carrying with it beauty and refreshment. The mortgage was lifted from the homestead; the farmhouse was painted; the barn rebuilt; modern improvements (including Mrs. Child's "Frugal Housewife" - the first American cook-book¹⁷) were introduced into the mother's kitchen, and books and newspapers began to ornament the sitting-room table¹⁸. Some of the mill-girls helped maintain widowed mothers, or drunken, incompetent, or invalid fathers. Many of them educated the younger children of the family, and young men were sent to college with the money furnished by the untiring industry of their women relatives.

Indeed, the most prevailing incentive to our labor was to secure the means of education for some male member of the family. To make a gentleman of a brother or a son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of a great many of these provident mill-girls. I have known more than one to give every cent of her wages, month after month, to her brother, that he might get the education necessary to enter some profession. I have known a mother to work years in this way for her boy. I have known women to educate by their earnings young men who were not sons or relatives.

There are men now living who were helped to an education by the wages of the early mill-girls. In speaking of this subject, Mr. Thomas Wentworth Higginson¹⁹ says, - "I think it was the late President Walker who told me that in his judgment one-quarter of the men in Harvard College were being carried through by the special self-denial and sacrifices of women. I cannot answer for the ratio; but I can testify to having been an instance of this myself, and to having known a never-ending series of such cases of self-devotion." Lowell, in this respect, was indeed a remarkable town, and it might be said of it, as of Thrums in "Auld Licht Idyls," "There are scores and scores of houses in it that have sent their sons to college (by what a struggle), some to make their way to the front in their professions, and others, perhaps, despite their broadcloth, never to be a patch upon their parents." ²⁰

The early mill-girls were religious by nature and by Puritan inheritance, true daughters of those men and women who, as someone has said, "were as devoted to education as they were to religion;" for they planted the church and the schoolhouse side by side. On entering the mill, each one was obliged to sign a "regulation paper" which required her to attend regularly some place of public worship. They were of many denominations. In one boarding-house that I knew, there were girls belonging to eight different religious sects. In 1843, there were in Lowell fourteen regularly organized religious societies. Ten of these constituted a "Sabbath School Union," which consisted of over five thousand scholars and teachers; three-fourths of the scholars, and a large proportion of the teachers, were mill-girls. Once a year, every Fourth of July, this "Sabbath School Union," each section, or division, under its own sectarian banner, marched in procession to the grove on Chapel Hill, where a picnic was held, with lemonade, and long speeches by the ministers of the different churches, - speeches which the little boys and

¹⁷ Lydia Maria Child was an early women's right activist, abolitionist, writer, and all-around amazing woman. Robinson references one of Child's earliest books, [*The Frugal Housewife, 1844*](#). If you are looking for a recipe for calf's hoof jelly or whortleberry pudding, definitely check it out.

¹⁸ *Godey's Ladies' Book* should be in your notes.

¹⁹ Unitarian minister, Harvard graduate, abolitionist, and frequent speaker at Lowell.

²⁰ Thrums is a fictional Scottish hamlet in J.M. Barrie's *Auld Licht Idyls*, published in 1888. The quote references the same issue in Lowell as Thrums - women sacrificing their own education and mobility so the men in their lives can have the same. J.M. Barrie, by the way, wrote *Peter Pan*, published in 1904 and also set in Scotland.

girls did not seem to think were made to be listened to. The mill-girls went regularly to meeting and "Sabbath-school;" and every Sunday the streets of Lowell were alive with neatly dressed young women, going or returning therefrom.

Their fine appearance on "the Sabbath" was often spoken of by strangers visiting Lowell. Dr. Scoresby, in his "American Factories and their Operatives," (with selections from *The Lowell Offering*) holds up the Lowell mill-girls to their sister operatives of Bradford, England, as an example of neatness and good behavior.²¹ Indeed, it was a pretty sight to see so many wide-awake young girls in the bloom of life, clad in their holiday dresses, - "Whose delicate feet to the Temple of God, Seemed to move as if wings had carried them there." The morals of these girls were uniformly good. The regulation paper, before spoken of, required each one to be of good moral character; and if any one proved to be disreputable, she was very soon turned out of the mill. Their standard of behavior was high, and the majority kept aloof from those who were suspected of wrong-doing. They had, perhaps, less temptation than the working-girls of today, since they were not required to dress beyond their means, and comfortable homes were provided by their employers, where they could board cheaply. Their surroundings were pure, and the whole atmosphere of their boarding-houses was as refined as that of their own homes. They expected men to treat them with courtesy; they looked forward to becoming the wives of good men. Their attitude was that of the German Fraulein²² who said, "Treat every maiden with respect, for you do not know whose wife she will be." But there were exceptions to the general rule, - just enough to prove the doctrine of averages; there were girls who came to the mill to work whom no one knew anything about, but they did not stay long, the life there being "too clean for them."

The health of the girls was good. The regularity and simplicity of their lives, and the plain and substantial food provided for them, kept them free from illness. From their Puritan ancestry they had inherited sound bodies and a fair share of endurance. Fevers and similar diseases were rare among them; they had no time to pet small ailments; the boarding-house mother was often both nurse and doctor, and so the physician's fee was saved. It may be said that, at that time, there was but one *pathy* and no "faith cures" nor any "science" to be supported by the many diseases "that flesh is heir to."²³ By reading the weekly newspapers the girls became interested in public events; they knew all about the Mexican war, and the anti-slavery cause had its adherents among them. Lectures on the doctrine of Fourier were read, or listened to, but none of them were "carried away" with the idea of spending their lives in large "phalansteries," as they seemed too much like cotton factories to be models for their own future housekeeping. The Brook Farm

²¹ *The Lowell Offering* was a literary magazine written and published by the "mill girls," and widely circulated during the 1830s and 40s. Many prominent writers and academics celebrated the magazine as an example of the culture of Lowell mills and the capability of women to think and write (seriously). Dr. William Scoresby was a British scientist, minister, and academic. He wrote about many subjects throughout his career, including a study of women working in the mills in England. After he lectured at Lowell in 1844, he published [*American Factories and their Female Operatives*](#) in 1848.

²² Unmarried woman in German, the equivalent of Miss. This is paragraph is something.

²³ "Pathy" means feeling or emotion. In medical terminology, pathy denotes suffering and/or disease. The final quote of the sentence should be familiar to anyone who knows their *Hamlet*: *To be or not to be/that is the question/whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/or to take arms against a sea of emotions/and by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep/no more - and by a sleep to say we end/the heartache and the thousand natural shock that flesh is heir to...*

experiment was familiar to some of them; but the fault of this scheme was apparent to the practical ones who foresaw that a few would have to do all the manual labor and that an undue share would naturally fall to those who had already contracted the working-habit.²⁴

Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, one of the early pioneers of the dress-reform movement, found followers in Lowell; and parlor meetings were held at some of the boarding-houses to discuss the feasibility of this great revolution in the style of woman's dress²⁵. *The Lowell Journal* of 1850 states that on the Fourth of July a party of "Bloomerites" walked in the procession through the public streets, and the *London Punch* embellished its pages with a neat cartoon, a fashion-plate showing the different styles of the Bloomer costume. This first attempt at a reform in woman's dress was ridiculed out of existence by "public opinion; "but from it has been evolved the modern bicycle costume, now worn by women cyclers. It seems to have been the fashion of the mill girls to appear in procession on all public occasions. Mr. Cowley, in his "History of Lowell," speaks of President Jackson's visit to that city in 1833. He says: "On the day the President came, all the lady operatives turned out to meet him. They walked in procession, like troops of liveried angels clothed in white [with green fringed parasols], with cannons booming, drums beating, banners flying, handkerchiefs waving, etc. The old hero was not more moved by the bullets that whistled round him in the battle of New Orleans than by the exhilarating spectacle here presented, and remarked, 'They are very pretty women, by the Eternal!'".

One of the first strikes of cotton-factory operatives that ever took place in this country was that in Lowell, in October, 1836. When it was announced that the wages were to be cut down, great indignation was felt, and it was decided to strike, en masse. This was done. The mills were shut down, and the girls went in procession from their several corporations to the "grove" on Chapel Hill, and listened to "incendiary " speeches from early labor reformers. One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down the wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell, and the event caused surprise and consternation among her audience. Cutting down the wages was not their only grievance, nor the only cause of this strike. Hitherto the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week towards the board of each operative, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay the sum; and this, in addition to the cut in the wages,

²⁴ The Mexican-American War, 1846-48; Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier was a French mathematician and scientist; a phalanstery was a building designed for utopian communities where they could live communally – Brook Farm was such a community, established by Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson outside of Boston. Members of Brook Farm were expected to do manual labor, even Emerson and Thoreau.

²⁵ Bloomers were a new style of women's dress created by activist Amelia Bloomer in the 1840s. Bloomer lived in Mount Vernon, Ohio from the 1840s until her death in 1894. Bloomers replaced the cumbersome fashion of the early nineteenth century requiring restrictive corsets and iron dress hoops covered in several layers of heavy petticoats with another layer of undergarments below the hoop. Women could not raise their arms all the way above their heads or kneel down while wearing a corset and metal hoop skirts. The dresses dragged on the ground, and since dirty dresses were unacceptable, women constantly had to lift up the heavy skirts to simply move through the world. They were expected to be in full dress all day, even when they were cleaning the house. Amelia Bloomer saw this restrictive clothing as a health hazard, and another method of keeping women from entering the workforce. [Bloomers](#) were essentially pantaloons for women, i.e., short pants that allowed women to actually move and work. Of course, people (most men) were very concerned that women wearing pants would lead to loose morals. Women would talk back to their husbands or turn into prostitutes or refuse to get married or demand the vote or any number of things women weren't supposed to do. Women in pants were too threatening. In fact, there are still plenty of professions and businesses that require women to wear dresses or skirts.

would make a difference of at least one dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs, a favorite (but rather inappropriate) one being a parody on "I won't be a nun." "Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I - Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die? Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave, For I'm so fond of liberty That I cannot be a slave."

My own recollection of this first strike (or "turn out" as it was called) is very vivid. I worked in a lower room, where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed; I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at "oppression" on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, "Would you?" or "Shall we turn out?" and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, "I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not;" and I marched out, and was as followed by the others.

As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since at any success I may have achieved, and more proud than I shall ever be again until my own beloved State gives to its women citizens the right of suffrage. The agent of the corporation where I then worked took some small revenges on the supposed ringleaders; on the principle of sending the weaker to the wall, my mother was turned away from her boarding-house, that functionary saying, "Mrs. Hanson, you could not prevent the older girls from turning out, but your daughter is a child, and her you could control." It is hardly necessary to say that so far as results were concerned this strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out, and though the authorities did not accede to their demands, the majority returned to their work, and the corporation went on cutting down the wages. And after a time, as the wages became more and more reduced, the best portion of the girls left and went to their homes, or to the other employments that were fast opening to women, until there were very few of the old guard left; and thus the status of the factory population of New England gradually became what we know it to be today²⁶.

Some of us took part in a political campaign, for the first time, in 1840, when William H. Harrison, the first Whig President, was elected; we went to the political meetings, sat in the gallery, heard speeches against Van Buren and the Democratic party, and helped sing the great campaign song beginning : - "Oh have you heard the news of late?" the refrain of which was: "Tippecanoe and Tyler too, Oh with them we'll beat little Van, Van, Van is a used-up man," And we named our sunbonnets "log-cabins," and set our teacups (we drank from saucers then in little glass tea-plates, with log-cabins impressed on the bottom. The part the Lowell mill-girls took in these and similar events serves to show how wide-awake and up to date many of these middle-century working-women were. Among the fads of those days may be mentioned those of the "water-cure" and the "Grahamite." The former was a theory of doctoring by means of cold water,

²⁶ By the 1850s, immigrant families (French Canadian and Irish) had replaced the mills girls. They were paid significantly less than the earlier female workers, despite the fact that the entire family worked in the factories. There was no need to maintain the same level of respectability for immigrants.

used as packs, daily baths, and immoderate drinks. Quite a number of us adopted this practice, and one at least has not even yet wholly abandoned it. Several members of my mother's family adopted "Professor" Graham's regimen, and for a few months we ate no meat, nor, as he said, "anything that had life in it." It was claimed that this would regenerate the race; that by following a certain line of diet, a person would live longer, do better work, and be able to endure any hardship, in fact, that not what we were, but what we ate, would be the making of us²⁷. Two young men, whom I knew, made their boasts that they had "walked from Boston to Lowell on an apple." We ate fruit, vegetables, and unleavened or whole-wheat bread, baked in little round pats ("bullets," my mother called them), and without butter; there were no *relishes*. I soon got tired of the feeling of "goneness" this diet gave me; I found that although I might eat a pint of mashed potato, and the same quantity of squash, it was as if I had not dined, and I gave up the experiment. But my elder brother, who had carried to the extremist extreme this "potato gospel," as Carlyle called it, induced my mother to make his Thanksgiving squash pie after a receipt of his own. The crust was made of Indian meal and water, and the filling was of squash, water, and sugar! And he ate it, and called it good. But I thought then, and still think, that his enjoyment of the eating was in the principle rather than in the pie. A few of the girls were interested in phrenology; and we had our heads examined by Professor Fowler, who, if not the first, was the chief exponent of this theory in Lowell. He went about into all the schools, examining children's heads. Mine, he said, "lacked veneration;" and this I supposed was an awful thing, because my teacher looked so reproachfully at me when the professor said it. A few were interested in Mesmerism; and those of us who had the power to make ourselves en rapport with others tried experiments on "subjects," and sometimes held meetings in the evening for that purpose²⁸.

The life in the boarding-houses was very agreeable. These houses belonged to the corporation, and were usually kept by widows (mothers of mill-girls), who were often the friends and advisers of their boarders. Among these may be mentioned the mothers of Lucy Larcom; the Hon.

²⁷ Sylvester Graham was a Presbyterian minister who advocated for a disciplined diet, notably no meat or alcohol. Graham's followers, the Grahamites, created several new products based on Graham's diet plan, the best-known being Graham crackers. Graham was very concerned with the sexual appetites of young people and believed sex should only be for procreation. He also believed a disciplined diet would help with bodily control in general (no masturbating either).

²⁸ Orson Fowler promoted phrenology, a pseudoscience claiming that physical characteristics determined ability and intellect. Phrenologists like "Doctor" Fowler (he was not an academic or medical doctor but called himself one anyway) believed that skull size in particular was a sign of intelligence. The slope of your forehead, width of your lips, width of your nostrils, and chin size were all indicators of whether a person was advanced or inferior. Many white Americans embraced phrenology as a scientific explanation for white supremacy and a justification for slavery and segregation. In fact, phrenology is commonly called "scientific racism." People also embraced phrenology to justify gender inequality. As women entered the workplace, demanded the vote, wore pants, and went to school, many people saw an urgent need to scientifically prove why women must be subordinate to the men. By the way, "veneration" means great respect or reverence. "Dr." Fowler basically told Robinson the size of her skull indicated that she has a rather dull mind.

Mesmerism was another pseudoscience, created by German doctor Franz Mesmer, based on his idea of "animal magnetism." He believed every living being has a natural magnetic force that can be harnessed through behaviors and habits. Mesmer advocated the "laying on of hands" to channel the magnetic fluid racing through bodies. "Laying on of hands" is a religious term for symbolic practices like baptisms, ordainment, blessings, and other rituals involving touch. While it's possible Mesmer intended the phrase in a religious context, it's interesting to note the phrasing in general: animal magnetism, laying on of hands, rush of fluids, and transference of this magnetism between people. The opposite of the Grahamites, but same broad theme: grave concern for young peoples' sex life. What else is new?

Gustavus Vasa Fox, once Assistant Secretary of the Navy, John W. Hanson, D.D.; the Rev. W. H. Cudworth; Major General B. F. Butler; and several others. Each house was a village or community of itself. There fifty or sixty young women from different parts of New England met and lived together. When not at their work, by natural selection they sat in groups in their chambers, or in a corner of the large dining-room, busy at some agreeable employment; or they wrote letters, read, studied, or sewed, for, as a rule, they were their own seamstresses and dressmakers. It is refreshing to remember their simplicity of dress; they wore no ruffles and very few ornaments. It is true that some of them had gold watches and gold pencils, but they were worn only on grand occasions; as a rule, the early mill-girls were not of that class that is said to be "always suffering for a breast-pin."

Though their dress was so simple and so plain, yet it was so tasteful that they were often accused of looking like ladies; the complaint was sometimes made that no one could tell the difference in church between the factory-girls and the daughters of some of the first families in the city. Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, in *The Lady's Book*²⁹, in 1842, speaking of the impossibility of considering dress a mark of distinction, says: "Many of the factory-girls wear gold watches and an imitation at least of all the ornaments which grace the daughters of our most opulent citizens." The boarding-houses were considered so attractive that strangers, by invitation, often came to look in upon them, and see for themselves how the mill-girls lived. Dickens, in his "American Notes," speaks with surprise of their home life³⁰. He says, "There is a piano in a great many of the boarding-houses, and nearly all the young ladies subscribe to circulating libraries." There was a feeling of esprit de corps among these households; any advantage secured to one of the number was usually shared by others belonging to her set or group. Books were exchanged, letters from home were read, and "pieces," intended for the Improvement Circle, were presented for friendly criticism.

There was always a best room in the boardinghouse, to entertain callers in; but if any of the girls had a regular gentleman caller, a special evening was set apart each week to receive him. This room was furnished with a carpet, sometimes with a piano, as Dickens says, and with the best furniture, including oftentimes the relics of household treasures left of the old-time gentility of the house-mother. This mutual acquaintanceship was of great advantage. They discussed the books they read, debated religious and social questions, compared their thoughts and experiences, and advised and helped one another. And so their mental growth went on, and they soon became educated far beyond what their mothers or their grandmothers could have been.

The girls also stood by one another in the mills; when one wanted to be absent half a day, two or three others would tend an extra loom or frame apiece, so that the absent one might not lose her pay. At this time the mule and spinning-jenny had not been introduced; two or three looms, or spinning-frames, were as much as one girl was required to tend, more than that being considered "double work." The inmates of what may be called these literary households were omnivorous readers of books, and were also subscribers to the few magazines and literary newspapers; and it was their habit, after reading their copies, to send them by mail or stage-coach to their widely scattered homes, where they were read all over a village or a neighborhood; and thus was current

²⁹ Sara Hale should be in your notes next to your notes about *Godey's Ladies' Book*.

³⁰ British writer, Charles Dickens, who wrote several very important literary works like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Christmas Carol*. He also wrote many essays about industrial society, including the two-volume [*American Notes for General Circulation*](#), published in 1842 after his visit to Lowell.

literature introduced into by and lonely places. From an article in *The Lowell Offering* ("Our Household," signed H.T.," I am able to quote a sketch of one factory boarding-house interior. The author said, "In our house there are eleven boarders, and in all thirteen members of the family. I will class them according to their religious tenets as follows: Calvinist Baptist, Unitarian, Congregational, Catholic, Episcopalian, and Mormonite, one each; Universalist and Methodist, two each; Christian Baptist, three. Their reading is from the following sources: They receive regularly fifteen newspapers and periodicals ; these are, the *Boston Daily Times*, the *Herald of Freedom*, the *Signs of the Times*, and the *Christian Herald*, two copies each; the *Christian Register*, *Vox Populi*, *Literary Souvenir*, *Boston Pilot*, *Young Catholics Friend*, *Star of Bethlehem*, and *The Lowell Offering*, three copies each. A magazine, one copy. We also borrow regularly the *Non-Resistant*, the *Liberator*, the *Lady's Book*, the *Ladies' Pearl*, and the *Ladies' Companion*. We have also in the house what perhaps cannot be found anywhere else in the city of Lowell, - a Mormon Bible."

The "magazine" mentioned may have been in *The Dial*, that exponent of New England Transcendentalism, of which *The Offering* was the humble contemporary³¹. The writer adds to her article: "Notwithstanding the divers faiths embraced among us, we live in much harmony, and seldom is difference of opinion the cause of dissensions among us."

Novels were not very popular with us, as we inclined more to historical writings and to poetry. But such books as "Charlotte Temple," "Eliza Wharton," "Maria Monk," "The Arabian Nights," "The Mysteries of Udolpho," "Abellino, the Bravo of Venice," or "The Castle of Otranto," were sometimes taken from the circulating library, read with delight, and secretly lent from one young girl to another. Our religious reading was confined to the Bible, Baxter's "Saints' Rest," "The Pilgrim's Progress," "The Religious Courtship," "The Widow Directed," and Sunday-school books.

It was fortunate for us that we were obliged to read good books, such as histories, the English classics, and the very few American novels that were then in existence. Cheap editions of Scott were but just publishing; "Pickwick," in serial numbers, soon followed ; Frederika Bremer was hardly translated; Lydia Maria Child was beginning to write; Harriet Beecher Stowe was busy in her nursery, and the great American novel was not written, - nor yet the small one, which was indeed a blessing³²! There were many representative women among us who did not voice their thoughts in writing, and whose names are not on the list of the contributors to *The Offering*. This was but one phase of their development, as many of them have exerted a widespread influence in other directions. They graduated from the cotton factory, carrying with them the results of their manual training; and they have done their little part towards performing the useful labor of life.

Into whatever vocation they entered they made practical use of the habits of industry and perseverance learned during those early years, and they have exemplified them in their stirring and

³¹ *The Dial* was a literary magazine edited by Margaret Fuller (if we haven't read her essay, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* yet, we will soon), and published all of the Transcendentalist writers like Thoreau and Emerson. Having a copy of the *The Dial* in your house meant you were educated and well-read.

³² Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, considered one of the great American novels of the nineteenth century. Her second "little" book, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, was published in 1856. Both books focus on the horrors of slavery.

fruitful lives. In order to show how far the influence of individual effort may extend, it will be well to mention the after-fate of some of them. One became an artist of note, another a poet of more than local fame, a third an inventor, and several were among the pioneers in Florida, in Kansas, and in other Western States. A limited number married those who were afterwards doctors of divinity, major-generals, and members of Congress; and these, in more than one instance, had been their work-mates in the factory. And in later years, when, through the death of the bread-winner, the pecuniary support of those dependent on him fell to their lot, some of these factory-girls carried on business, entered the trades, or went to college and thereby were enabled to practise in some of the professions. They thus resumed their old-time habit of supporting the helpless ones, and educating the children of the family. These women were all self-made in the truest sense; and it is well to mention their success in life, that others, who now earn their living at what is called "ungenteel" employments, may see that what one does is not of so much importance as what one is.

I do not know why it should not be just as commendable for a woman who has risen to have been once a factory-girl, as it is for an ex-governor or a major-general to have been a "bobbin-boy."³³ A woman ought to be as proud of being self-made as a man; not proud in a boasting way but proud enough to assert the fact in her life and in her works. All these of whom I speak are widely scattered. I hear of them in the far West, in the South, and in foreign countries, even so far away as the Himalaya Mountains³⁴. But wherever they may be, I know that they will join with me in saying that the discipline of their youth helped to make them what they are; and that the cotton-factory was to them the means of education, their preparatory school, in which they learned the alphabet of their life-work. Such is the brief story of the life of everyday working-girls; such as it was then, so it might be today. Undoubtedly there might have been another side to this picture, but I give the side I knew best, -the bright side.

³³ Young boys who did the same jobs as young girls in the mills.

³⁴ Where are the Himalayan Mountains, or, where is Mount Everest?