

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: SELF-FASHIONING (IM)POSSIBILITIES:
A LITERARY TAPESTRY OF WOMEN AT WORK IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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This dissertation investigates representations of women's work and the construction of identity in texts written by women between 1840 and 1877. I focus on the literary construction of workingwomen's struggle to find their place in a culture that valorizes women who selflessly devote themselves to family and community. These authors show that while work empowers women who are privileged by race and class, work oppresses women who are defined by the material conditions of their lives.

Focusing on working women whose life chances are circumscribed by class and gender in *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel *The Story of Avis*, the first chapter illuminates the stasis inherent in the lives housekeepers, cooks, laundresses, and babysitters, women whose labor supports the middle-class. In Chapter Two, the complex web that intersection of race, class, and gender create informs my analysis of the fictional autobiographies *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson. The legally sanctioned theft of humanity from the protagonists in these texts necessitates that work be redefined as the process of constituting personhood through the intellectual work of outwitting the enslaver. Chapter Three analyzes the public persona nineteenth-century female factory workers construct for themselves through fictional letters, stories, and essays published in *The Lowell Offering*, a newspaper edited by blue-collar workingwomen, and in the extended poem, *An Idyl of Work*, a retrospective account of factory experience written by former operative Lucy Larcom. Mired in the ideologies of class and gender, these writers attempt to bridge the social and economic chasm that separates workingwomen from ladies of leisure by offering altruistic protagonists who work to support others instead of themselves. The fourth chapter investigates the representation of dehumanization and impossibility in the lives of female textile laborers in *Rebecca Harding Davis's* novella, *Life in the Iron Mills* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel, *The Silent Partner*. Davis's workingwoman, Deb

Wolfe, and Phelps's female factory worker, Sip Garth, are products of their labors and lack the potential to change their lives because they have no perception that they can escape the meanness of their existence.

SELF-FASHIONING (IM)POSSIBILITIES: A LITERARY TAPESTRY OF WOMEN
AT

WORK IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

by

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In memory of
Mary Elizabeth Buckingham (1905-1980)
and
In honor of
Tucker Ronald Dorsey
And all who follow

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Introduction

Do your work and you shall reinforce yourself.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

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.

—Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*

Well, I don't see anything left for her to do, but to earn her living, like some other folks.

—Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall*

In an article published in *Harper's* in 1867, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps asserted that “Whether for self-support, or for the pure employment's sake, the search for work—for successful work, for congenial work, is at the bottom of half the feminine miseries of the world” (qtd. by Buhle and Howe in Afterword to *The Silent Partner*). While perhaps women were, as Phelps indicates, beginning to recognize the importance of having access to rewarding work, few nineteenth-century women worked for wages. In fact, as Alice Kessler-Harris reports, “only 20 percent of all women over fourteen were in the paid labor force at any one time” (18). Perhaps one of the reasons women were not well represented as salaried workers is because, as Nina Baym maintains, between 1820 and 1870 in America “there were virtually no satisfying and well-paid occupations for women” and further, that “women did not turn to work for self-fulfillment in this period partly because no such work existed for them” (30).

Despite the fact that women had limited access to meaningful work in mid-nineteenth-century America, many female writers of the period began to speculate about the desire of and the necessity for women to enter the workplace and earn an independent living. These authors often struggled to establish a literary middle ground between the nineteenth-century cultural imperative that a woman abdicate her own wishes in order that she might fulfill her duty to family and the portrayal of women who asserted that they had both the right and the obligation to claim autonomy. Joyce Warren succinctly outlines the cultural divide that authors delineating women working outside the home were forced to navigate. Warren explains that “although many women worked for wages, the need to work was usually regarded as an unfortunate (and, it was hoped, temporary necessity—by the society and the women themselves” (147). A significant amount of critical attention has been focused on ideologies that define women as naturally inclined to a life of service within the domestic sphere and on the ways that women tacitly acceded to or resisted gender prescriptions. Insufficient attention has, however, focused on how women attempted to create agency through paid labor.

This study complements previous scholarship centered around nineteenth-century women’s domestic writings by bringing together texts that show women seeking independence through work and that interrogate the attitudes of the women themselves as well as culture and society toward their work. Analyzing the ways in which the texts in this study grapple with the tension between what women do, their work, and who they are, their identity, as well as the role that class plays in women’s access to meaningful work more clearly illuminates the difficult choices that women seeking independence had to make. This study defines meaningful work as any activity that is emotionally and

intellectually satisfying and that offers women the potential to claim a self-authorized “I.” The aim of this study is not simply to show, as has previous criticism, the obstacles that women encountered when they sought access to self-authorizing alternatives. Instead, a critique of the insidious role that class plays offers insight into the ways that class privilege enhances opportunities for those who seem to succeed because they are highly motivated while the stasis of other women who are equally motivated and work as hard is all but ensured because of their lower-class status. Included in this project are authors whose experiences and contributions to literature are diverse, yet each of these authors similarly gives voice to women’s frustration over women’s lack of access to agency. Placing these authors in conversation with each other shows that the values and aspirations of their heroines and the perception of women’s relationship to work are diverse and divergent because of the impact that class has on women’s access to self-authorizing alternatives. Focusing on class affords the opportunity to see that the experiences of workingwomen are multifarious, that the definition of work is ever shifting, and that access to work does not necessarily guarantee independence or create agency.

Middle-class women who are oppressed by the limitations of gender but who can reap the benefits of class privilege are often able to find work that is rewarding both financially and emotionally. For women who labor under the weight of both class and gender or bear the burden that the intersection of race, class, and gender place on them, however, work most often reproduces the very conditions they are trying to escape to the end that they risk becoming participants in their own oppression. Access to agency then is not nearly as available as the successes of nineteenth-century middle-class heroines

might suggest. Middle-class women who slip into economic insufficiency do not lose class status; they lose income and material comfort—temporarily—but they are often endowed with resources, education, a network of well-connected acquaintances, and, perhaps most significantly, a vision of their own potential to succeed, that empower them. Their choices are limited, but they are not nonexistent. Theirs are not, as feminist critics often claim, rags-to-riches stories as much as they are stories that demonstrate that the middle-class will always be able to take care of itself.

None of the texts in this study provide readers a portrait of a poverty-stricken, uneducated and uncultured woman who economically, personally, and professionally remakes herself. This is a mold that seems to have been reserved for nineteenth-century heroes like Alger's street-wise orphan Ragged Dick and Howell's farmer-turned-paint mogul Silas Lapham. Women who succeed in their quest for self-empowerment begin and end in the middle class while those who begin their journey to self-sufficiency at the lowest end of the social hierarchy are rarely able to effect any substantive change in their standing. For these women, hard work offers no guarantee, not the guarantee of upward mobility, not even the guarantee of a subsistence, because the disabling effects of their lower-class status are all but inescapable. Women who labor with their bodies rather than their intellect find that the class lines drawn in nineteenth-century America are not easily crossed and are never erased. They are considered lower class because they labor with their bodies, yet, paradoxically, they labor with their bodies because they are of the lower class and lack the resources that could open doors to any kind of work that would help them move out of the lower class.

Although there are not likely two more different literary characters than Fanny Fern's middle-class heroine Ruth Hall and Rebecca Harding Davis's textile laborer Deb Wolfe, their stories sparked my interest in representations of the link between what a woman does and who she is. Haunted by Davis's stark and unrelenting delineation of Deb Wolfe as a "like a limp, dirty rag" (46) since first reading *Life in the Iron Mills* more than fifteen years ago, my feminist sensibilities awakened when it appeared that Davis, in her literary zeal to offer readers a realistic portrait of the human toll that poverty exacts, had dehumanized Deb. Continuing to read and teach this perplexing story, I began to see that the objectification of Deb Wolfe is embedded in her status as a workingwoman, a woman who through fate is disadvantaged by both gender and class, a woman defined as less than human by an economically stratified culture that depends on her cheap labor but that has no use for her as a person. Deb Wolfe never escapes the poverty of her life because as a wage slave, both her self-perception and society's perception of her are products of the work she must do to survive. Deb Wolfe is an exemplification of Marx's premise that the mode of production is a "definite form of activity . . . a definite form of expressing . . . life, a definite *mode of life* (566 emphasis in original). Though Deb does not choose to express herself through her work, this is the only means of self-expression available to her; both she and her culture read her as a product of her work and her environment. She is more product than person.

Reading *Ruth Hall* for the first time several years after first reading *Life in the Iron Mills*, I, like most critics, celebrated the fact that finally a nineteenth-century author portrayed a woman who could succeed as a result of her own industry. Ruth is not bedraggled and dejected as is Deb Wolfe or Crane's Maggie. She does not swoon and

die when life gets too hard as Wharton's Lily Bart does. She actively resists the inequities she encounters when she tries to make a living for herself and her daughters. Buoyed by her boarding-school education and her status as Harry Hall's widow, Ruth Hall learns to manipulate the cultural mandates that attempt to tell her who and how a woman should be, and she shapes an identity for herself that that allows her to claim both independence and respect. Ruth Hall's escape from tenement living and her seeming rags-to-riches success is as spectacular as Deb Wolfe's failure is dismal.

Ruth Hall's ability to work her way out of poverty contrasted with the determinacy that Davis posits for her woeful protagonist raise the questions that animate this study of texts about women who work. Why is work ennobling for some women and dehumanizing for others? Why are women like Ruth Hall able to maintain the precarious balance between their identity as a lady and their status as successful workingwoman when other hard-working protagonists are nearly bereft of any semblance of humanity? Why does Ruth Hall's experience with poverty engender a fierce sense of independence and the will to resist oppression when others like Deb Wolfe are powerless to alter the course of their lives? Why do those like Ruth Hall appear to be self-fashioned when the life of Deb Wolfe and those like her "coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce" (Marx 566)? Additional nineteenth-century texts by women raise similar questions and the available scholarship on both *Ruth Hall* and *Life in the Iron Mills* revealed that the missing analytical piece of this puzzle is class. Critical analysis that focused on the texts in this study as stories about the relationship between women and their work most often offered a gender analysis because "conceptions of gender . . . shape our perception of what constitutes work, or who is

working, and of the value of that labor” (Boydston xviii). That perspective, however, is limited because gender and gender are inextricably intertwined.

My analysis builds, therefore, on critics who have pointed out the limitations that gender imposes. Women’s access to well-paying or intellectually fulfilling work is severely circumscribed because of notions of what constitutes “woman’s” work and what work is appropriate for a woman who does not want to risk public censure. Many workingwomen, however, are destitute and do not have the privilege of weighing whether or not a job is conducive to femininity. For these women, any job that generates an income is acceptable. Using only gender to critique representations of women at work provides a limited perspective of the experience of women, a perspective that is too often the perspective of a middle-class woman like Ruth Hall. However, reading women’s struggle for independence as an experience of class allows us to see the layering effect of multiple oppressions and to recognize that the category “woman” is not all encompassing but rather is multifariously represented. Gender is an obstacle. When, however, class and gender intersect and fuse, they create an immovable barrier.

Middle-class women who have had privilege of education and have known at least some measure of security—both financial and personal—recognize that they have an inherent right to be self-defined and are aware that access to meaningful work is the key to autonomy. For these women, work is a means of self-expression and a way to achieve economic and intellectual freedom. They have many attributes that set them on the path to self-sufficiency; they are limited only because they are women. For women with no resources other than the ability to labor, work is the means by which they attempt to ensure their survival. These workingwomen labor under no delusion that they will

work their way out of poverty. They are hardened to their hardship and do not expect their lives to improve. They hope to get by but harbor no false sense of optimism about their chances of escaping dependency.

Women who labor with their bodies often hover unnoticed in the background in novels that highlight the limitations that gender imposes on a woman's right to be self-authorized. These women are the cooks, laundresses, nannies, and housekeepers. They may come to the forefront in nineteenth-century literature that warns of the encroachment of industrialization, but middle-class authors are often unable to distinguish the woman from her work and, as a result, the workingwoman portrayed more nearly resembles the machine she tends than a woman with an independent identity. In stories about women who work for a living, the middle-class woman is never far from achieving her goals while the women of the laboring class are never far from losing their humanity. Class analysis sheds light on workingwomen in fiction who are often neither seen nor heard and offers insight into the lives of women who are so thoroughly dehumanized by their creators that readers often fail to recognize that these protagonists are both human and woman.

Focusing primarily on the workingwomen whose life chances are circumscribed by class and gender in *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel *The Story of Avis*, Chapter One adds to existing scholarship that analyzes only the successes and failures of the middle-class protagonists in these texts. Both authors illuminate the ways that the ideologies of the Cult of True Womanhood limit well-educated, articulate women who are forced to work to support their families. Using standpoint epistemology as a critical frame illuminates the limitations of Fern and Phelps's critique of gender

prescriptions and offers insight into the lack of agency available to housekeepers, cooks, laundresses, and babysitters, women whose labor facilitates the often overlooked privileges of middle-class status.

In Chapter Two, the complex web that intersection of race, class, and gender create informs my analysis of the fictional autobiographies *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson. Many scholars have asserted that, because the protagonists in these texts own neither their bodies nor their labor, freedom is contingent on rescuing themselves from slavery and establishing themselves as full participants in the market economy. However, the legally sanctioned theft of humanity from Jacobs's protagonist, Linda Brent, and Wilson's, Frado, necessitates that work be redefined as the process of constituting personhood. Brent and Frado quickly learn that they cannot work their way out of slavery and that self-ownership depends not on manual labor but on the intellectual work of outwitting the enslaver.

Chapter Three is a class-based analysis of the public persona nineteenth-century female factory workers construct for themselves through fictional letters, stories, and essays published in *The Lowell Offering*, a newspaper edited by these blue-collar workingwomen, and in the extended poem, *An Idyl of Work*, a retrospective account of factory experience written by former operative Lucy Larcom. Very few scholars have looked at the out-of-print Larcom poem, and analyses of *The Lowell Offering* have inadequately considered the influence of class on these glamorized literary portraits of wage-earning women. Mired in the ideologies of class and gender, these authors fail to acknowledge the great social and economic chasm that separates blue-collar

workingwomen from ladies of leisure or the deleterious effects of these ideologies on women who earn their own daily bread.

The fourth chapter departs from scholarship that focuses on the wasted potential in the life of the male iron worker Hugh Wolfe in *Rebecca Harding Davis's* novella, *Life in the Iron Mills*, and the frustration of the economically and socially privileged but idle Perley Kelso in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel, *The Silent Partner*. This study instead focuses on the literary representation of dehumanization and impossibility in the lives of the female textile laborers. Davis's workingwoman, Deb Wolfe, and Phelps's female factory worker, Sip Garth, are products of their labors, their identity as "hands" indelibly etched onto their bodies and into their personhood. These protagonists are what they do and, more significantly, they lack the potential to change their lives because they have no perception that they can escape the meanness of their existence. When these middle-class authors attempt to expose the greed and corruption of industrialization, they sacrifice the humanity of their workingwomen and relegate them to a role of passive acceptance of their fate.

Still-Born Identities: The Subaltern in *Ruth Hall* and
The Story of Avis

Merciful is the fate that hides from any soul the prophecy of its
still-born aspirations.

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Story of Avis*

I imagine Providence meant that women, as well as men, should
have a right to their own lives.

—“Legal Murders,” Fanny Fern

Fanny Fern, in her 1854 novel *Ruth Hall*, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in *The Story of Avis*, a novel published in 1877, critique the paralyzing effects of nineteenth-century gender prescriptions that impede women’s access to work that provides economic self-sufficiency and intellectual and emotional fulfillment. Resourceful and determined, Ruth Hall circumvents the powerful strictures of gender and ultimately succeeds as a newspaper columnist. Unlike Ruth Hall, however, Phelps’s protagonist, Avis Dobell, forfeits both her independence and her lifelong dream of a career as an artist when she assumes what to her are the all-confining responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. Ruth Hall’s career success when compared with Avis Dobell’s resignation to a life of domesticity suggests that women who, “like men,” are endowed with sufficient cunning and determination, can empower themselves and overcome nearly insurmountable odds to achieve self-sufficiency. However, when Avis Dobell finally concludes that because she is a wife and a mother she cannot pursue a career as an artist, she appears to lack the same resourcefulness and motivation that enable Ruth Hall to realize her goals.

Critiquing representations of women whose manual labor facilitates the relative ease of the struggling protagonists in *Ruth Hall* and *The Story of Avis*, however, problematizes any reading of these texts that concludes that a woman's access to economic independence depends on her ability to undermine or dismantle the complementary forces of patriarchy¹ and gender. When Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell encounter gender inequity, they are perplexed, frustrated, and temporarily economically disadvantaged. However, both Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell are surrounded by workingwomen whose life chances are limited and whose economic and social stasis is all but ensured by the intersecting and oppressive ideologies of race, class and gender. These ideologies, I argue, are significantly constitutive of social and political subjectivity and, therefore, mark subjects for specific kinds of work, whether an artist, an author, a cook, or a laundress. At the same time, the work that subjects perform (re)produces subjectivity, whether lady or laborer, served or server. In their representation of the working women of the lower class, Fanny Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps show that nineteenth-century class boundaries delineated by an individual's social and economic status both of which have the potential either to enhance or to limit access to power are

¹ Both Fern and Phelps's discussion of the ways in which women's opportunities are circumscribed by a society organized for the benefit of men exemplify Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy: "relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (Hartmann qtd. in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 464). Carol A. Kolmerten explains that patriarchy is an ideology, "a set of ideas about the way the world is organized. As an ideology, patriarchy hides within the consciousness (or subconsciousness) of women and men at the same time that it informs the social and political structuring of the society as a whole. It permeates everything, functioning through unconscious gender training that infuses all of a culture's institutions. Most individual men and women accept its traditions, customs, and inevitable divisions of labor as 'natural'" (2)

more rigidly defined and defining than the oft-heralded rags-to-riches sagas of the heroes of nineteenth-century American fiction suggest.

Overlooking the privileged subject positions of Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell, twentieth-century critics frequently contend that the plight of these fictional women speaks for all women, that their challenge to patriarchy sends a universal message of empowerment to all who experience gender oppression. Carol Farley Kessler, editor of the 1995 edition of *The Story of Avis* and Phelps biographer, argues, “Avis becomes Everywoman who aspires to goals that her society has set apart for men and who then finds her striving steps hedged in” (*Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* 87). Kristie Hamilton asserts that *Ruth Hall* is a novel of advocacy or a “political novel” (96) that crosses class lines as it deconstructs the “middle-class ideal of love and marriage as promised sanctuary for women” (96). Similarly, in one of the few favorable contemporaneous reviews of *Ruth Hall*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton concludes that “the great lesson taught in *Ruth Hall* is that God has given woman sufficient brain and muscle to work out her own destiny unaided and alone (*The Una*, Feb. 1855, qtd. in Warren, *Fanny Fern* 140). These analyses suggest that “woman” is a generic category that is broadly applicable to all women regardless of social, political, or economic standing.

But such readings fail to consider Fern and Phelps’s portrayal of the community of workingwomen who support their protagonists, and it is these representations that incisively demonstrate that the category “woman” is multifariously experienced. To assert, as Joyce Warren has, that the key to women’s independence is economics, “not the economics of class—but the economics of gender” (*Fanny Fern* 131), renders the community of subaltern women in these texts invisible. Housekeepers, laundresses,

children's nurses, seamstresses, and cooks provide essential services that the middle-class. Equally as significant, the women who bear the responsibility for household and family maintenance serve as a counterpoint for the literary construction of both Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell.

According to these novels, read with attentiveness to the significance of class, the life chances of the women who work for other women instead of for themselves are decidedly not that of "everywoman." Analyses that critique the protagonist's experience of gender oppression without interrogating the representation of race and class in these novels fail to acknowledge the privilege inherent in the middle-class subject position of Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell and, at the same time, the lack of privilege or powerlessness that informs the lives of the workingwomen. In other words, appreciation for Ruth Hall's success as a newspaper columnist and dismay over Avis Dobell's withering artistic aspirations must be contextualized by an equally insistent critique of the lives of the workingwomen, because, as Yanagisako and Delaney argue in their discussion of the insidious nature of power, "celebrations of social mobility can simultaneously naturalize inequality" (21). Analyzing the parallel subjectivity of the heroines and the underclass of women in *Ruth Hall* and *The Story of Avis*, I argue that the process of constructing middle-class subjectivity is, in fact, dependent on the presence of an underclass—on inequality. Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell's access to privilege does not occur in a vacuum. Women lower than they in the social, economic, and political hierarchy facilitate the construction of these subjects of middle-class privilege. Analyzing the ways that the intersecting ideologies of race, class, and gender limit the life chances of workingwomen

in these texts demonstrates, I argue, that these tales of gender oppression do not speak to or for “Everywoman.”

In her critique of Gareth Stedman Jones’s analysis of the relationship between class and language, historian Joan Scott argues that class is not, as Jones contends, simply a “cultural system” or an “objective category of social analysis” (59). Rather, Scott explains, class is “an identity historically and contextually created” (59). Scott notes that the flaw in Jones’s thinking is that he has overlooked the way “meaning is constructed through differentiation . . . positive definitions depend on negatives, indeed imply their existence in order to rule them out” (59). Fern and Phelps clearly articulate this dichotomy through Ruth and Avis’s project of reifying themselves as middle-class subjects, a project which necessitates a parallel project of containment of the subaltern community that facilitates and exemplifies Ruth and Avis’s position of privilege. Scott further clarifies her argument, explaining, “the universal category of class, like the universal category of worker, secured its universality through a series of oppositions” (60). In other words, because class is a social phenomenon, reading class onto any subject necessitates the presence and intersection of communities whose access to power and social and economic opportunity is divergent.

Adhering to that precept, Fern and Phelps establish the class positions of their subjects by surrounding them with individuals whose life chances and lifestyles are markedly different. Ruth’s rise from tenement poverty to economic independence is starkly contrasted with the lack of mobility available to the subaltern women in the text. Ruth’s self-authored success suggests that anyone with the need to succeed will succeed. The subaltern, whose position remains static, are, however, constructed as a class that

lacks not the opportunity but rather the desire to reinvent themselves. Avis Dobell, like Ruth Hall, also has significant social and economic privileges not available to working-class women. She, however, ultimately recognizes that gender oppression has the potential to level the playing field, casting women of diverse social and economic backgrounds into positions where the demands of and privileges accorded patriarchy rob them of the power to direct their own lives and doom them to failure.

Some critics have recognized the economic and social privileges that Ruth Hall enjoyed before her ill-fated descent into poverty that all but ensure that Ruth will climb out of economic despair. Kristie Hamilton highlights the interconnectedness of Ruth Hall's subject position and her achievements when she argues perceptively: "After all, Ruth's independence was won in the field of professional writing, where relatively few such opportunities were available" (102). Similarly, Joyce Warren, Fern biographer and editor of *Ruth Hall*, explains that although Ruth was "almost wholly without opportunities to help herself" she was fortunate that "she was a talented writer, but not all impoverished widows are able to use their writing talents to support themselves" ("From Widowhood to Independence" 71). While Ruth Hall endures poverty and even homelessness at one point, Fern's heroine is never without hope that she will eventually right the economic and social wrongs that befell her when her husband died and left her penniless. However, Fern offers a stark portrait of the social and cultural distance between Ruth Hall who is able to capitalize on her boarding-school education to achieve success as a writer and uneducated women who work as domestics. These women accept the inevitability of their own position on the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder and look forward to nothing more than a lifetime of work that will reward them

with little more than enough to survive. As a middle-class daughter of privilege, on the other hand, Ruth Hall is continually energized by the prospect of upward mobility.

Like Ruth Hall, Phelps's heroine, Avis Dobell, has enjoyed significant financial and social advantages. Encouraged by her aunt to acquire the skills necessary for maintaining a household, Avis reminds her aunt that cooking is servant's work (27) and, therefore, work that she, an artist trained by the best European masters, will have no part of. Although Avis is never reduced to abject poverty as is Ruth, her inability to succeed as an artist allows her to see that gender oppression limits the potential of women in all classes. Avis eventually recognizes that "servant's work" is, in fact, woman's work and that the expectation that women find fulfillment within the domestic sphere devalues all women whether their aspirations are as grandiose as her own or as modest as her Aunt Chloe's. In spite of the numerous advantages Avis has, she does not succeed as an artist because she accepts the fact that the work of a wife and mother must take precedence over any ambitions a woman may have to achieve fulfillment beyond domesticity. Avis learns too late that opportunities for female artists are not simply limited or difficult to access but are nonexistent, but, more significantly, she learns that all women must climb a very steep hill when they choose or are forced to support themselves and their families.

Initially, Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell's middle-class status is established through their ties to patriarchy. Supported by men, fathers and later husbands, who manipulate money and produce knowledge to support their families, these protagonists have numerous economic and social advantages. Ruth's father, "comfortably ensconced in his counting-room," (Fern 123) describes his Benjamin-Franklin-like humble origins and his financial success to a visiting clergyman. Congratulating himself, Ellet says, ". . .

though I came into Massachusetts a-foot, with a loaf of bread and a sixpence, and now,—well, not to boast, I own this house, and the land attached, beside my countryseat, and have a nice little sum stowed away in the bank for a rainy day” (123). Although Ruth’s husband, according to his mother, “has his fortune yet to make” (19), he too has a “counting room” (24), and he has “seen more ledgers than corn” (36).

Avis Dobell’s father is a professor of “Ethics and Intellectual Philosophy” (Phelps 20) at Harmouth College, and though he has been less enriched by the machinations of capitalism than Ruth Hall’s father, Hegel Dobell does have the financial wherewithal to send his daughter to Europe to study art and to employ servants who assist his widowed sister in pampering Avis. Avis’s husband, also a professor at Harmouth, loses his job because of lack of attentiveness to the position, but when he is ill and the bills are mounting, Avis taps into some money her mother willed her and sends her husband on a restorative jaunt to Europe.

Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell are clearly not members of the “working class,” a category which, as early as 1820, was “defined by its dependence on manual work” (Scott 11). The subaltern community that peoples each of these texts is, in stark opposition to the heroines and their families, clearly delineated as a population that “possesses nothing and so must sell its labor on the market” (Scott 66). Fern and Phelps mount their attack on patriarchy by describing the obstacles that prevent their heroines from achieving economic independence and intellectual fulfillment, but they also offer a glimpse of women whose survival depends on selling their labor. Their stories, their lack of upward mobility, argue that we cannot talk about gender without also talking about race and class. The life chances of women with diminished social status are limited and

limiting. Fern and Phelps project no upward mobility for those who labor in near anonymity behind heroines who, with the privileges accorded their middle-class subject position, rail against the oppression of gender.

Bridget, a housemaid hovering imperceptibly in the background of young Ruth's paternal home is the first indication that Ruth Hall nee Ellet is not a heroine for "Everywoman" and that Fern's diatribe against gender is class specific. The narrator notes that Ruth is considered "odd" and "queer" because she prefers being alone and that visitors to the home wonder if Ruth will "ever make anything" of herself. Ruth, however, describes the housemaid, the woman who provides the labor essential for maintaining the Ellet household, as "stupid" (14). Fern immediately establishes a social and intellectual gap between Ruth, who enjoys a "sweet strain of music, or a fine passage in a poem" and the housemaid who is merely "stupid" (14). As a young woman, Ruth has already assimilated an identity of entitlement, an identity that recognizes that those who are "stupid" are destined to serve and those who "thrill" to music and poetry will be served. While Bridget is mentioned only once in the text, her presence is essential as an initial "negative reference point" (Bourdieu 57) against which Ruth will be defined by "successive negations" (57) as she matures into middle-class subjectivity.

Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, feminists Catherine Belsey and Theresa de Lauretis identify the impact of ideology on subjectivity. Belsey explains that, in capitalism, education is the primary purveyor of ideology because through history, social studies, and literature, children are prepared "to act consistently with the values of society by inculcating in them the dominant versions of appropriate behavior" (594). Further supporting the work of ideology, Belsey contends, are family, laws, media, and the arts,

which promulgate “myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation” (594). As a result of these processes, individuals are “interpellated” as subjects, which, as defined by de Lauretis, is the “process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary” (12).

Fern’s representation of the relationship between Ruth Hall and her children’s nurse, Biddy, exemplifies the pivotal but often unnoticed role that ideology plays in identity formation. For example, while Ruth Hall’s mother-in-law questions the leisurely lifestyle afforded Ruth by the presence of a housekeeper and a children’s nurse, neither the nurse nor the housekeeper ponder the incongruity of their position in relationship to Ruth’s apparent life of ease. After Ruth’s husband dies leaving her with no money, Biddy offers to work for Ruth without pay because, as Biddy reminds Ruth, “you can’t do it, my leddy; you are as white as a sheet of paper” (65). Biddy accepts what to her is obvious—that she is responsible for the care of both Ruth and her children and that Ruth is entitled to the “tender care” (65). Ruth, on the other hand, tells Biddy she no longer has a job not because Ruth believes that she can or should shoulder responsibility for self and family, asserting only that she “*must*” (65 emphasis in original), but because she can no longer pay Biddy’s wages.

The irony of Ruth and Biddy’s situation is that after the death of the patriarch both women face a similar fate—loss of income and loss of home. The prospect of poverty could have the effect of least blurring the social fault line that separates Ruth Hall and her dedicated employee. But Fern never lets her readers forget that life chances

and economic opportunity determine social class more than economic circumstance which can fluctuate. Because of the middle-class privileges she has enjoyed up until the death of her husband, Ruth Hall is never without economic opportunity. Well educated, Ruth has the potential to improve her circumstance; Biddy, however, does not. She is dependent on the success or failure of those who employ her for her financial survival.

Biddy, however, sees no injustice in the fact that her economic well-being is tied not to her ability and willingness to work but to the financial fortune or misfortune of her middle-class employer. The only injustice Biddy recognizes is that inflicted on Ruth Hall who will now have to care for her own children. Cursing the relatives who refuse to help Ruth, Biddy charges, “May the souls of ‘em niver get out of purgatory,” and then goes “sobbing through the door, with her check apron over her broad Irish face” (65). Biddy’s unmistakable brogue solidifies the perception that there is an unbridgeable social gap between this dedicated employee and employer. Though both Ruth and Biddy face comparable bleak futures, with neither woman knowing quite where she is going, Fern asks her audience to sympathize only with the middle-class heroine who is suddenly cast out of a life of ease into a life of uncertainty, thereby reproducing rather than critiquing the effect of class. Yet Biddy, as do all women who must earn a salary to support themselves, exists in perpetual uncertainty since she works at the will of a “leddy.”

Fern has shaped Biddy’s relationship with Ruth so that each acts as a social mirror for the other, effectively suggesting the mutual dependence of privilege and social and economic powerlessness. The self reflected in this mirror is, however, a distorted self since both Ruth and Biddy believe themselves to be autonomous, self-directed individuals, neither woman recognizing that she is dependent on the other for her

identity. In other words, Bidy believes she is in a position of power because the services she provides are essential for Ruth and her children's survival and because Ruth, a lady, is powerless to care for herself. Ruth, on the other hand, employs Bidy because her husband said she "was too feeble to have the care of the child" (27). Ruth, once the tomboy who romped through forests and over fences, accepts her husband's suffocating protectiveness that projects the nebulous physical condition of being "feeble" onto her once-strong body. However, Ruth's identity as a woman beset with illness is possible only because her husband has the financial wherewithal to hire a nurse and because the nurse, Bidy, agrees that it is Ruth and not she who is "feeble."

Rebecca Aanerud, in her exploration of role of whiteness in texts that are not overtly about race, explains that the hierarchal systems of race, class, and gender "are read onto our bodies, and we in turn interpret and are interpreted through our understanding and misunderstandings of them" (36). Class and gender are the ideological culprits that cement the relationship between Bidy and Ruth. Bidy's acceptance and even the celebration of the significance of her position as a nurse for Ruth Hall's children depend on "misunderstanding" the gulf that class creates between her and Ruth. Bidy accepts without question that Ruth is a "leddy" and Ruth's husband is "Masther" (65); she also accepts the social rather than medical diagnosis that Ruth is too frail to care for her children, Bidy reminding Ruth that "Masther used to say you must walk every day, to keep off the bad headaches" (65). Bidy, therefore, sees herself, in opposition to the illness-plagued "leddy," believing that she is strong and independent and that she "chooses" to care for Ruth's family not because she needs work but because she is able when Ruth is not and because the family needs her. In other words, Bidy

believes that the Hall family is dependent on her; she chooses not to see that, in reality, her survival depends on earning the salary paid by the Halls.

Biddy's well-intentioned attempt to coddle her grief-stricken employer is an unwitting attempt to perpetuate the paternalism Ruth enjoyed in her marriage. Fern offers no direct critique of Ruth's utopian marriage, but Biddy's insistence that she can and must assume the responsibilities that Harry shouldered until his death cracks the literary façade Fern previously provided of the younger Hall's idyllic marriage. Sheltered by the all-powerful protective arm of her husband, Ruth is physically disempowered; to be a "leddy" necessitates accepting her husband's diagnosis that she is frail. Ruth is also financially disempowered. Without her husband's economic support, Ruth no longer has the means to support her frailty, a significant loss in that she loses her only social and economic asset, her identity as a lady. After Harry's death, Ruth is frequently referred to as Harry Hall's widow, but that social designation offers her no protection and provides no income.

While Fern is busy calling attention to Ruth's loss as a result of having been cast out of her domestic paradise, she sheds little light on the ways that Biddy, a woman whose subservient position is an essential counterpoint to the social construction of Ruth as a woman of privilege, is disempowered by the wholesale acceptance of her role as Ruth's caretaker and, as a result, her dependence on Ruth. Ruth's dismissal of Biddy because she cannot "keep her" causes an identity crisis for Biddy because she believes not that she is being kept but that she is "keeping" Ruth. Yet Ruth never sees herself as "being kept," either by the financial support of her husband or by the physical support Biddy provides. Biddy considers herself an essential component of Ruth's life and, as a

result, volunteers to work without pay. But Ruth can no longer afford to be frail, a fact she poignantly acknowledges when Bidy tells her she “can’t do it” (65), and Ruth responds, “I *must*” (65 emphasis in original). Neither Ruth nor Bidy is able to discern the misreadings projected onto each other by class and gender.

In the representations of women’s work in *Ruth Hall* and *The Story of Avis*, subjects accept the inevitability and the naturalness of their social and economic position to the end that, for example, Bidy and others like her who serve the middle class, have no aspiration to escape the working class because they are convinced that they are, in the words of Voltaire’s *Candide*, in the best of all possible worlds. Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell, however, cannot tolerate powerlessness and poverty because they believe in the inevitability of their positions of privilege. Both Fern and Phelps offer insights into the lack of economic and intellectual opportunity for middle-class women. While Phelps exemplifies the distinct social differences among women of differing classes, she does suggest that the potential for poverty is an equal-opportunity affliction. In *Ruth Hall*, on the other hand, Fern offers readers a glimpse of a society where working-class women can survive but never succeed and where middle-class women have the potential not only to work their way out of poverty but also to create economic independence for themselves and their families.

Never does Fern more sharply delineate Ruth’s position of privilege than when she describes Ruth’s relationship to her housekeeper, Dinah, and Ruth’s social positioning as a destitute widow forced to wash her own clothes bent over the same washtub as her cousin’s housemaid, Gatty. Dinah and Gatty are the Africanist presence in this text, a presence that, as Toni Morrison contends, is strategically used “to define the

goals and enhance the qualities of white characters” (53). Although they are free blacks working in the north, Dinah and Gatty, as described by Fern, are not far removed from the stereotype² of the southern plantation mammy. In her discussion of representations of women, blacks, and poor whites in antebellum Southern literature, Susan J. Tracy concludes these texts portray blacks who have so thoroughly internalized the racism inherent in slavery that they believe the master is their “unequal friend” (58). Tracy also asserts that, in order to further exemplify the master-friend relationship, pre-Civil-War literature of the South depicts “blacks who are rarely involved with the crises of their own families, but are always involved with those of the planter family; who work cheerfully and industriously with only a word of encouragement; and who are loyal and faithful servants” (58). Dinah and Gatty recreate this “southern tradition” of cheerful service for Fern’s northern audience and, in doing so, reinforce the perception that Ruth Hall is entitled to more than a begrudging patriarchal society is willing to grant her. On the other hand, Dinah and Gatty accept their lot in life, apparently either immune to or oblivious of the oppression of gender that seems to weigh so heavily on middle-class white women and the oppressions of race and class that insure their marginal social and economic status.

Fern’s African-American women have an incentive to “work cheerfully and industriously” (Fern 32) since they are free, a fact that Dinah, a “tidy, respectable-looking black woman” (32) points out to Ruth’s querulous mother-in-law who criticizes Ruth’ for her lack of interest in housekeeping. Referring to herself in the self-effacing third person,

² bell hooks explains that stereotypes are a “fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken—are not allowed.

Dinah acknowledges that she has “plenty to do . . . and willin’ hands to do it. [But] Dinah don’t care how hard she works, if she don’t work to the tune of a lash³ (Fern 33). Dinah’s “ebony face shine[s] with good humor” (32) as she greets Mrs. Hall, offering further evidence that a successful black woman in antebellum America is a woman who has escaped the scourge of slavery and who has steady employment serving an middle-class northern family. Dinah’s affection for Ruth offers reassuring evidence that whites and blacks to co-exist peacefully and that there is a place in America for freed blacks, a place where they are contented yet contained. Dinah has no aspirations beyond the Hall kitchen; she is only too happy to be where she is doing everything she can to insure that nary a smudge of household grime mars Ruth’s cheek. Dinah assures Fern’s audience that those like her with “woolly locks” and “ebony face[s]” (32) and those like Ruth, who, as her mother-in-law describes her, has “pale, golden hair, and . . . blue-gray eyes” (18) can co-exist harmoniously in the north, that gender and not race is the social evil that limits human potential.

Dinah’s presence as the contented, racialized “other” is essential for situating Ruth as a woman of leisure, a woman who, when her husband dies leaving her penniless, is particularly vulnerable and pitiable because her fall from social and financial security is especially dramatic. Because Dinah keeps the household running, Ruth is free to read and write poetry (32), to ramble in the woods with her daughter and to climb fences (33). Susan Tracy concludes that Southern literature shows that the planter’s paternalistic

³ My argument here is not meant to dismiss or mitigate the importance of freedom to African-Americans since, as Roediger reports, 86.8 percent of African-Americans were slaves in 1820 and 89 percent were slaves in 1860 (56). My intent is to demonstrate how Dinah, reifies the position of freed Blacks as noncitizens whose life chances are severely limited.

relationship with his slaves instilled a sense of inferiority in slaves (58) to the end that slaves “would identify themselves as members of the master’s extended family, and would see in their prime exploiter, the master, their unequal friend” (58). The relationship between Ruth and Dinah is so thoroughly imbued with paternalism that, on the surface, there appears to be a role reversal. Dinah, determined to protect the “Missis” from work that is unpleasant or physically challenging, has assumed the role of protector, a role she boasts of when Ruth’s mother-in-law wonders if Ruth irons her husband’s shirts. Dinah tells the inquisitive, intrusive elder Mrs. Hall, “She? s’pose dis chil’ let her? When she’s so careful, too, of ol’ Dinah’s bones?” (Fern 33). Dinah makes it clear that she will not allow her “Missis” to bear the heavy burden of ironing, but, at the same time, she acknowledges that her desire to protect Ruth emanates from appreciation for Ruth’s protection of her. Even though Fern offers no specifics as to how Ruth protects Dinah’s “ol’ bones,” Dinah is portrayed as a “naturally” grateful for their relationship and, even more, Dinah makes the argument that she has an affinity for housework that Ruth lacks.

Dinah has, as did Southern slaves according to Tracy, assimilated the values of the “master class” (58), in this instance, the values of her employer, the Halls. Dinah, however, has done more; she believes that she and Ruth have changed roles, that, as the housekeeper, she has the power to protect and direct. Dinah feels responsible for defending Ruth against her mother-in-law’s criticism and for physically protecting Ruth from the rigors of housework so that Ruth, a superior human being, can enjoy the leisure her husband’s social and economic position affords her. In reality, however, as the employee, Dinah is powerless to direct and protect. She cannot choose not to iron; she

cannot leave the ironing for Ruth. She can only choose to justify her subservient position in the household by asserting that she protects Ruth by choosing not to “let” Ruth iron.

Though Ruth Hall has no voice in the first third of the novel, the narrator, her mother-in-law, and Dinah clearly delineate Ruth’s middle-class subject position as an independent, self-directed woman who can at will accept or reject the responsibilities of domesticity. Dinah, on the other hand, is self-constructed as a subject who has significance only in relationship to her work for her “Missis.” Referring to herself as “dis chil” (33) and “dis nigger” (43), Dinah makes it clear, however, that she is not self-defined; Dinah does not possess a volitional, first-person “I.” Dinah assimilates the ideology of the dominant culture that asserts that she is an inferior human being who has the mentality of a “chil” and who bears the social stigma of being a “nigger.”

Ruth, however, is marked as a woman who is too fragile to endure the rigors of housework and is, therefore, destined for a life of ease. Analogies Fern uses to describe Ruth point to her value. Her husband compares her hair to “threads of gold” (39) while Jim, a coarse tenement dweller who ogles Ruth when her ill fortune makes them neighbors, says that Ruth is “porcelain” (73), a fragile, decorative rather than functional substance. Dinah, with her limited intellectual and cultural capital, is constructed as a woman who is “naturally” suited to a life of service and, more importantly, a woman whose identity is dependent on and wholly defined by those whom she serves. While Ruth has numerous identities—wife, mother, poetess, one who entertains Dinah by “singing about the house so that it makes time fly” (33)—Dinah’s identity is the product of the work that she performs. As portrayed by Fern, Dinah’s status as a free black does little to enhance her life chances. According to Faye Dudden, the economic marginality

of antebellum free blacks forced them into service not just temporarily but permanently unlike their white counterparts who often worked under the pretense of “obliging” an employer, contending that the employer was indebted to them as they were to the employer (27, 34). For Dinah, who she is and what she does are indistinguishable; yet Dinah revels in the immutable facts of her life as a serving woman because, as a free black in antebellum American, she has no choice and no future other than that which economic necessity dictates. Fern forcefully challenges the impervious ideologies of gender. At the same time, however, she reifies not only ideologies but also stereotypes of race, and Dinah is the literary victim of the elision of the oppression of race.

Dinah’s acceptance of the stasis of her subservient position meshes well with the goals of capitalism as defined by Immanuel Wallerstein who argues that a “a capitalist system that is expanding (which is half the time) needs all the labour-power it can find, since this labour is producing the goods through which more capital is produced, realized and accumulated” (33). At the same time, capitalism depends on minimizing the cost of production in order to maximize profits. According to Wallerstein, “racism is the magic formula that reconciles these objectives” (33). Racism depends on creating links between the past—in Dinah’s instance, with the horror of slavery—and with a “present-oriented flexibility in defining the exact boundaries of these reified entities we call races . . .” (34). “Present--oriented flexibility” allows the constant redrawing of boundaries to the end that racism selects its victims according to the needs of the marketplace. Those whose life chances are limited by racial ideologies may be free blacks or escaped slaves in one historical moment; they may be Irish immigrants or illegal immigrants from South America in another. Wallerstein maintains that “they are always there and always ranked

hierarchically, but they are not always exactly the same. . . . But there are always some ‘niggers’. If there are no Blacks or too few to play, one can invent ‘White niggers’” (34).

Racism, Wallerstein explains, serves capitalism in three ways: It allows flexibility according to need in increasing or decreasing the numbers available for the “lowest paid, least rewarding roles” (34); it creates communities that prepare their children to play the roles assigned their group; and, because the system is not merit based, it “allows a far lower reward to a major segment of the work force than could ever be justified on the basis of merit” (34). Dinah, the children’s nurse Bidy who is an Irish immigrant, and Gatty, a free black I discuss below, are interpellated as subjects whose “natural” role in life is to serve the middle class. Their wholesale acceptance of their positions insures that there will always be cheap labor available to serve nineteenth-century America’s rising middle and upper classes. Of course, at the same time that the subaltern women think that they are receiving more from life than they ever deserve because of the grim circumstances under which they existed prior to entering service, middle-class women likewise believe it is inevitable that there are women who are physically and intellectually destined to shield their fragile bodies and their superior intellects from the rigors of household maintenance and child rearing. As a result, neither group questions her relationship to the other or her status in society. While Fern mounts a vociferous attack on the antics women perform as they attempt to adhere to gender prescriptions, she offers no similar critique of the limitations imposed on women by capitalism. To the contrary, Ruth Hall’s economic success is dependent on American society’s ongoing investment in the ideology that capitalism offers unlimited opportunity for all.

Though Gatty, a free black serving Ruth's cousins, the Millets, challenges the inequities that exist between the wealthy Millets and Ruth, their poverty-stricken cousin, Gatty never questions her lack of access to the riches the Millets enjoy. Gatty is certain that Ruth deserves more consideration than her cousins begrudgingly give her, but Gatty speaks only on behalf of Ruth and not on her own behalf or that of other women in her position. By contrasting Ruth's status as a poverty-stricken widow with Gatty, a free black, Fern insures that aura of entitlement that clings to Ruth Hall will not be diminished by the penury she endures after her husband's death. To that end, Gatty serves the literary function of defining not herself but rather Ruth, the pitfully pale white lady whose reduced circumstances force her to do her own laundry. Toni Morrison contends that literary critics need to study the ways in which "an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness" (52). While it is certainly more than coincidence that Dinah and Gatty are black and Ruth Hall is, as her children's nurse Biddy cautions, "white as a sheet of paper" (Fern 65), I argue that Dinah and Gatty are part of Fern's project to "limn out and enforce the invention and implications" of Ruth Hall's class position since the subaltern community against which Ruth's access to privilege is juxtaposed includes both blacks and whites. While Fern goes to great lengths to mark African-American characters as different both through physical descriptions and their use of dialect, in her representations of class, she does not distinguish between those at the bottom of the social ladder. In Fern's literary world, race and class form indiscriminate intersecting webs of oppression that contribute to the experience of life with no probability of upward mobility. At the same time that Fern contends that gender is the great evil that limits women's potential, she reproduces and

reifies ideologies of race and class that preclude any possibility of escaping economic oppression or of achieving self-actualization for many women.

Gatty works alongside Betty, a housekeeper specifically marked as white and therefore at least marginally superior because, contrasting Dinah and Gatty who speak in dialect, Betty speaks English that reflects a knowledge of grammar and syntax on a par with the narrator and the well-educated protagonist herself. Betty refers to herself in the first person, while, Gatty, like Dinah, identifies herself as “dis chil” (82, 83) and “nigger” (83). Betty, in fact, points out her superiority when she corrects Gatty’s stumbling attempts to recount “de parabola of Dives and Lazarus” (83). Because of her mispronunciation of “parable,” Betty accuses Gatty of being “as ignorant as a hippopotamus” (84). Despite Fern’s portrayal of Betty as Gatty’s intellectual superior, their position as serving women in the Millet household has an amazing leveling effect—both bend over the same washtub, and both further Fern’s project of establishing the inherent unfairness of a social and economic system that doesn’t protect a middle-class white woman from hard work and economic insufficiency.

Fern’s critique of the lack of financial security for women who depend on men to support them and of the lack of opportunity for women to seek their own wealth is, as the example of Betty and Gatty suggest, race and class specific. Ruth’s economic vulnerability is especially grievous because she is white and because she is a “lady.” Fern fails to extend this critique to point to the ways in which women who are susceptible to the oppressions of race and class as well as gender because that would level the playing field, would argue that *all* women are entitled to seek economic independence, and that is an argument Fern does not make. Gatty’s role is not to claim economic and

intellectual freedom for all women—only for Ruth Hall. Gatty’s inability to see that her life and Ruth’s are similarly limited by gender and further to see that her life chances are even more severely circumscribed than Ruth’s because of the impact of race and class furthers Fern’s project of comfortably containing the subaltern at the same time that she rails against the ways that gender discrimination limits the opportunities of her heroine.

Fern does not, however, consider every job appropriate for Ruth Hall. Fern makes it clear that while serving women are an essential presence in an middle-class household, no matter how destitute, her heroine will not earn her living as a housekeeper or laundress. Through the voice of and by comparison with the serving class, Ruth is once again constructed as a woman with a body not able to endure physical labor. Betty recalls the horror of seeing “Poor Mrs. Ruth” (83) “shoulder[s] that great big basket of damp clothes and climb[s] up one, two, three, four flights of stairs to hang them to dry in the garret” (83). Employed to serve the Millets, Betty and Gatty cannot, like Dinah, relieve Ruth from the burden of laundry. They can, however, reaffirm Ruth’s identity as a “lady” who is physically not up to the onerous task of housework or even of self-maintenance. Her tender hands, according to Betty, were not destined for the washtub and, as a result, “the blood started from her knuckles” (82) when she was forced by circumstance to rub out her and her children’s clothes. Ruth is again described as a woman who lacks color and vigor. Carrying the clothesbasket left her “looking pale about the mouth and holding on to her side” (83).

The irony of Gatty and Betty’s lament concerning Ruth’s precarious health is that those chores that endanger Ruth’s well-being are the same chores that Gatty and Betty perform not for self maintenance or for their own families but for the maintenance of the

Millet family. Gatty and Betty, however, speak not of their own oppression but of Ruth's. Work that enables the leisure of the middle class and oppresses the "lady" who has been forced out of the leisure class by the death of her husband is the same work that provides subsistence wages for the serving class. Gatty and Betty do not have the economic wherewithal to be frail; their survival depends on being physically up to the tasks assigned. They can, however, choose to bemoan Ruth Hall's pallor as an indication of Ruth's oppression.

In her discussion of the intersections between Black women's standpoint and theories that interpret Black women's ideas and experiences, Patricia Hill Collins explains that "an oppressed group's experience puts its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult" (26). Gatty and Betty exemplify Collins' conclusion in an odd yet striking manner. Both women are sufficiently intuitive to recognize the power that accompanies the privilege of having "fine clothes" and a "grand house" (Fern 82), and Gatty is bold enough to acknowledge her subservient position in the household, telling Betty, "niggers musn't see noffing, not dey, if dey wants to keep dere place" (83). Yet their critique of the inequality of power is not an expression of a "self-defined standpoint" but is rather a Ruth-Hall defined standpoint. They complain not about the Millets' treatment of them even though Betty hints that the Millets' are not especially generous or forgiving employers when she reprimands Gatty for overcooking the steak, telling her "won't you catch it when you take it into breakfast" (84). Though Betty and Gatty speak and Ruth does not, they speak not for themselves but for Ruth. Like Dinah, Betty and Gatty are not self-authoring; they

do, however, author Ruth Hall. Their role is to limn out the delicate character of Ruth Hall, and, with this literary sleight of hand, Fern empowers Ruth Hall, reifying her significance as a literary character whose economic woes expose the oppression of the ideology of gender.

By refusing to acknowledge that work which is too oppressive for Ruth Hall also oppresses Gatty and Betty, Fern erases from her literary landscape and her social critique these women whose lives are relegated to performing the work necessary for household and bodily maintenance. Therefore, while Gatty and Betty are, as Collins explains, in a position to “see things differently,” Fern, author of the text, controls the “ideological apparatuses” and those apparatuses contend that gender oppression is class specific, that those of the lower class can see the inequities that exist among members of the dominant class but do not recognize the inequities between classes or as a result of race that limit their own life chances. And if these folks are unable to identify class oppression, they are, in the society Fern constructs, similarly blind to gender oppression. In other words, Gatty and Betty’s inability to recognize the fact that they are overburdened far more than “Missis Ruth Hall” (83) is yet another example of the construction of the subject through misrecognition and reveals the ways that victims of oppression participate in their own victimization. By assuming that Ruth deserves better treatment than she is receiving without ever questioning their own status in the Millet household, Gatty and Betty accept the fixity of their identity as women who will forever serve the middle class. Ruth Hall’s foray into the world of washtubs and clotheslines, however, is transient simply because she is “Mrs. Ruth,” the widow of businessman Harry Hall.

Once Ruth is relegated to the tenement and, therefore, without a serving class hovering nearby, the narrator assumes the task of protecting Ruth's middle-class identity by marking the social distance between Ruth and the immigrants she observes from the window of the tenement house. Kristie Hamilton contends that Fern places Ruth Hall "in a number of locations and situations from which the protagonist may not only learn of, but also share the same plight and 'quarter of the city' with" (100) immigrants so as to position Ruth "on an economic plane with other women who were struggling week by week to survive by the work of their hands" (100). Hamilton points to the irony of Ruth's status in the tenement community in that Ruth is indeed on an "economic plane" with the workingwomen. However, no matter how ill the winds of Ruth's financial fortune blow, Fern emphatically argues that her heroine is not on the same social plane as the immigrants she observes and objectifies.

In her description of the immigrants who pass by Ruth's window but never enter her world, Fern uses a well-worn stereotype that conflates poverty with moral degradation. No doubt Fern employs this stereotype to proffer the argument that abject poverty has debilitating emotional and material consequences, particularly for women and children. However, Fern's treatment of Ruth's ability to cope with the effects of poverty offers a stark contrast to that of the immigrants, a contrast that leaves little doubt that Ruth deserves to and will eventually escape the tenements while the immigrants will not. Although, as Ruth well knows from her brief experience living in the tenements, the immigrants have little to sing about, the narrator notes that Ruth hears "never a laugh, never a song—but instead, ribald curses, and the cries of neglected, half-fed children" (90). The immigrants, lacking the social refinement of Ruth who was educated in

Madame Moreau's boarding school, are so vulgar and rude that they curse their lot in life instead of suffering quietly and occasionally tearfully as Ruth does. More importantly, because she hears the cries of the children, Ruth assumes that they are "half fed" and "neglected."

Yet, Ruth herself faces the prospect on a day-to-day basis of not having enough food for her own child, Nettie, who "vainly plead[s]," "*Some more supper, please, Mamma*" (125 emphasis in original). And when Nettie is ill, Ruth, with no money to pay a doctor or buy medicine, wonders, "Must Nettie die for want of care?" (126). Ruth's neighbors might believe that Nettie is "neglected" and assume that Nettie is "half-fed" should they hear her moaning as she lay in bed with pain (146). Poverty, lack of medical care, and meals that consist of bread and milk (113) do not, however, interfere with Ruth's ability to parent as they apparently do with the underclass. The narrator is quick to affirm Ruth's affinity for motherhood, noting that when Nettie is ill, Ruth "lifts the little creature in her lap, rocks her gently, and kisses her cheek" (146)—"but still Nettie moans" (126).

Neither Ruth nor her immigrant neighbors has the power to change the economic realities of life in the tenements, but Ruth, unlike her neighbors, does have the power to mitigate the effects of poverty on her child. By offering contrasting portraits of Ruth hovering tenderly over her illness-plagued daughter with that of "neglected" immigrant children, Fern suggests that the ultimate adversary of success is the lack of will. In other words, Ruth Hall's response to her circumstance, her refusal to allow the meanness of tenement life to compromise her ability to fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood, shows that the individual can control her environment. On the other hand, the

immigrants' inability to parent is a clear indicator that their failure to escape the tenements will be the result of a lack of resourcefulness. In her effort to portray Ruth as a victim of the inequality of gender prescriptions, Fern perpetuates the stereotype that the individual makes her own luck, that failure is indeed an option and not a mandate even in what appears to be a wholly deterministic environment.

Fern contrasts the stereotype of immigrants whose failure to succeed is the result of the inability to manipulate their environment to their advantage when Ruth's gaze falls on the only window which she "did not shudder to look at" (90). This window is adorned with flowers planted by a "large but *thrifty* German family" (90 emphasis added). When musing over the fate of the immigrants as a group, Ruth blames "rapacious landlords" and greedy Jewish merchants who reap all the profits from the immigrants' labor (90) for her neighbors' miserable existence. Against what appear to be insurmountable odds, however, the Germans' "love of flowers had taken root even in that sterile soil" (90). In a sterile environment, one nearly incapable of supporting life, success is still possible; the only variable in the equation is the tenacity of the individual. The German family, living in the same tenement as the seemingly forsaken collectivity "immigrants" is a bright spot on Ruth's horizon because they have the personal attribute of thrift and because they have chosen not to succumb to the potentially destructive forces inherent in tenement living. Their thriving shrubs, "foreign" to this environment, are a tribute to the potential of the human spirit because they show "with what tenacity the heart will cling to early associations" (90). Fern offers Ruth Hall's inability to support herself and her daughters seemingly as an example of the ways that the inequities of nineteenth-century social, political, and economic mores limit human potential. Fern, however, tenaciously clings

to early associations of the privilege of class and, through her representations of immigrant life, ultimately resorts to the well-worn argument that the will to succeed is all that is needed to succeed.

Fern stops just short of blaming the victim when she exposes Ruth to the nameless, faceless immigrants. When Ruth's gaze falls on the house of prostitution one short block away from her building, however, Fern's critique of the economics of poverty slips into a critique of moral poverty. Ruth notices the ostentatious display of wealth in a nearby house and wonders how it is that "people who could afford such things should live in such a neighborhood" (90). Ruth is curious about the "throng of visitors" (90) who frequent the "pretentious-looking house" (90) but begins to sort out the pieces of this puzzle when she sees women at the windows. The descriptions of the faces Ruth sees parallel those the serving class used to describe Ruth. These women are young and fair, sometimes wan (91); in other words, they, like Ruth, are fragile and vulnerable. However, one telltale physical attribute clearly separates the women at the window from Ruth: they are "haggard" (91). More importantly, their faces are marked with "the stain that the bitterest tear may fail to wash away, save in the eyes of Him whose voice of mercy whispered, 'Go, and sin no more'" (91). The indelible stain on the faces is not that of hunger or illness but of sin.

As with the immigrants, Fern's attitude toward the prostitutes is conflicted. On one level, Fern's heroine understands that both she and the prostitutes have been forced into the market economy because "those who make long prayers and wrap themselves in morality as with a garment" (91) refuse to help them. Economically, Ruth and the prostitutes face a similarly grim future, a future not of their own making and a future with

limited choices. The narrator initially asserts that Ruth has experienced and, therefore, understands the isolation and hopelessness that might drive women to prostitution, but the common ground between Ruth and the prostitutes quickly disintegrates when Fern resorts to religious absolutisms to distance her heroine from the prostitutes. Ultimately, Ruth concludes that prostitution is a sin, separation from God rather than forced separation from economic self-sufficiency. Ruth claims that prostitution is the result of a “heart . . . [that] may wreck its all in one despairing moment on that dark sea, if it lose sight of Bethlehem’s guiding-star” (91). So while prostitution as an institution may be a response to society’s failure to offer economically viable alternatives for women who must depend on themselves, a woman *chooses* prostitution because she lacks religious and moral fortitude; she is a sinner.

Fern’s acknowledgment of and, at the same time, the seemingly contrary disavowal of the plight of prostitutes is a significant negative reference point through which she establishes subjectivity for Ruth Hall. One of the rallying points against nineteenth-century women’s demand for entry into the wage-earning workforce was the charge that women who either eschewed or were deprived of the protection of the domestic sphere were apt to fall into moral ruin. Analyzing discussions of women’s quest for independence in mid nineteenth-century France, Joan Scott explains that commentaries on women seeking an independent living asserted that wages paid for women’s work were insufficient for self-support and, as a result, wage-earning women would eventually be forced to resort to prostitution to survive. As if that claim did not offer sufficient warning to women seeking work, a second assertion suggested that

women's independence led to "vanity and the desire to glitter in sumptuous clothing" (142), a lifestyle that could only be supported through the wages of prostitution.

Fern's prostitutes cover both bases—the accoutrements that make their dwelling stand out from others in the tenement signify a desire to gratify the senses with material wealth, and the "haggard" faces of the women at the windows signify the despair that comes from having exhausted all traditional, i.e., moral, means of earning a living before "falling" into sin. In order to place her heroine on a career path and have her avoid the pitfalls that lead to moral degradation and in order to sustain sympathy for a heroine who is about to enter the male-dominated marketplace, Fern provides her heroine with a moral compass that will not fail. Ruth Hall can only succeed in her critique of patriarchy's unwillingness to open wage-earning opportunities to women if the readers are assured that Ruth Hall can indeed become a public woman without losing her femininity. Ruth Hall's ability to sympathize with the plight of the prostitutes and then quickly disavow this life choice as a moral failing demonstrates that she will be able to straddle the precarious line between the public and domestic sphere. Ruth Hall will not be guided by capitalistic greed but rather by "Bethlehem's star," and her example of being able to avoid the dangers that public life pose for a "lady" serves as both a cautionary tale and as inspiration for women faced with the necessity of balancing an ethical life and economic exigency. Ruth Hall's ability to feed herself and her child on a scant portion of bread and milk each day rather than fall into immorality and her success as a newspaper columnist demonstrate that a "lady" always has a choice and that goodness can prevail.

Goodness does not, however, prevail in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' novel *The Story of Avis*. Published twenty-three years after *Ruth Hall*, *The Story of Avis* portrays a young

woman determined to resist marriage and the responsibilities of family life so that she can paint pictures all her life (33). Despite the fact that Avis's father, Hans Dobell, cautions her against filling her "head with any of these womanish apings of a man's affairs" (33), Professor Dobell accedes to Avis's pleas and supports his daughter's study of art in Europe for six years. Shortly after returning to the United States, Avis's career goals are jettisoned when she succumbs to the incessant wooing of Philip Ostrander and marries him. Despite Ostrander's promise that it will be the passion of his life to help Avis realize her dreams of success (69), Avis's aspirations are "emaciated" (206) by her husband's demands and the needs of their two children. At the end of the novel, Avis, bereaved by the death of her son and her husband, wonders what might have been "if her feeling for that one man, her husband, had not eaten into and eaten out the core of her life . . ." (244). Her only consolation is that it will be easier for her daughter, Wait, "to be alive, and be a woman, than it had been for her" (247). Whereas Ruth Hall does establish herself as a successful newspaper columnist achieves economic self-sufficiency which is symbolized by the acquisition of a ten thousand dollar bank note, Avis Dobell is ultimately forced to acknowledge that the choices she made were not consistent with her desire to become a renowned artist.

While Phelps and Fern differ in their portrayal of the potential for women's self-fulfillment in a society structured by and for the advantage of patriarchy, their heroines and the challenges they face are more alike than different. Both Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell, are motherless, yet, as young women, they are sheltered from the necessity of participating in household maintenance. The "stupid" maid Bridgett waits on Ruth and her family; Avis is coddled by her widowed Aunt Chloe and a small staff Aunt Chloe

directs. Ruth Hall is educated at a private boarding school, and Avis attends Harmouth Female Academy and studies art privately.

Marriage lures both protagonists into a “domestic paradise—which proves to be a fool’s paradise” (Warren “An Independent Woman” 133). Ruth’s utopian idyll in domesticity is disrupted by the death of her husband and the resultant poverty that dislodges her and her daughters from the comfort and security Harry’s success with ledgers provided. Avis never fully realizes the ease of the “domestic paradise” Philip Ostrander promised when he courted her. Immediately after returning from their honeymoon, Avis encounters the harsh reality of marriage to a self-centered husband and faces the fact that, for a woman with career aspirations, self-fulfillment within the domestic space is a myth established and perpetuated by and for the benefit of men.

Avis and Ruth begin on a comparable social and economic plane of privilege. Phelps and Fern clearly construct a society where the heroines’ position in the middle class depends on the presence of a subaltern community. To that end, each author constructs a class of women who provide essential labor that facilitates a life of leisure for her protagonist. More importantly, through careful juxtaposition against the privileges Ruth and Avis possess as women who are well educated and schooled in the social graces necessary for garnering respect in the public sphere, working-class women in each text are portrayed with an identity that allows readers to make the all-important distinction between women whose privilege entitles them to more than society is willing to grant them and those women who have more than they can or should ever hope for.

But there are subtle differences in the portrayal of the subaltern women in each text. Published fifteen years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation

Proclamation and twelve years after the end of the Civil War, *The Story of Avis* replaces Fern's African-American serving women with Irish immigrant women, and the relationship between the protagonist and her serving women evolves from the affectionate paternalism in *Ruth Hall* to expressions of disdain that Avis voices toward women assigned the unenviable task of serving the Ostrander family. Avis's Aunt Chloe functions as a paradigm of domesticity as does Ruth Hall's mother-in-law, but Chloe, unlike the elder Mrs. Hall, does not criticize Avis's disinclination for domesticity. Instead, Chloe agonizes that she will not have fulfilled her responsibilities if Avis does not learn to make "good Graham bread" (35). Additionally, Phelps offers no nameless, faceless prostitutes as the moral yardstick for women forced to support themselves in the public sphere. Instead, she offers a sympathetic picture of wife battered by her alcoholic husband.

Fern's project necessitates forging a path in the masculine-dominated public arena for a woman who is a reluctant breadwinner. Ruth Hall repeatedly reminds herself that she writes only to feed her children, and, when daughter Nettie asserts that when she becomes a woman she will write books, her mother counters, "God forbid . . . no happy woman ever writes" (175). To maintain her heroine's feminine identity, Fern draws a clear line between Ruth Hall and the subaltern women in the text. These women support Fern's project, but there is no affinity between them and her heroine.

Phelps, on the other hand, suggests that as differently located in the social hierarchy as Avis and the working women in the text are, they are similarly oppressed by gender, and Phelps does not look away when the women who facilitate Avis's identity of privilege are multiply oppressed by the intersection of class and gender. While Ruth Hall

must remain aloof from the lower classes so as not to distant her from nineteenth-century middle-class readers, Phelps begins her project by presenting a heroine who is already foreign to many of her readers. Avis not only chooses, she demands the right to turn her back on all things “womanly” by pursuing self interests rather than the interests of family, community, or nation. Phelps’s narrator acknowledges as much when she explains to the readers, “women upon whom domestic details sit with a natural, or even an acquired grace, will need to cultivate their sympathies with this young recoiling creature” (123). Phelps recoups her recalcitrant heroine, who tells her Aunt that she hopes she “never, never, never should” “grow gentle and womanly like other girls” (31), by demonstrating that there is a kinship between women of all classes who are oppressed by gender. Avis’s identity as an middle-class woman is never in doubt and, as with Ruth Hall, the subaltern women are the backdrop against which Avis’s status is exemplified. But, while Avis’s plight is not that of “everywoman,” Phelps does demonstrate that gender oppression has the potential to at least blur the lines of class distinction, that while gender oppresses differently depending on the social location of a woman, oppression in any form limits human potential.

Twentieth-century feminist authors, Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen, offer diverse perspectives on the ways that class impacts the experience of gender oppression. Each author writes about the presence of an “angel” in the life of a female artist. From Woolf’s perspective, the angel takes the form of psychic self-doubt that thwarts a woman’s progress. From Olsen’s working-class point of view, the angel is the person who enables an artist’s creativity by relieving the artist of responsibility for housework and childcare. In a paper read to the Women’s Service League in 1942, Woolf

acknowledged that her greatest nemesis was “The Angel in the House,” that part of her that was “intensely sympathetic,” “immensely charming,” “utterly unselfish,” and that “excelled in the difficult arts of family life” (1346). Woolf explained that this phantom angel filled her with self-doubt about her commitment to her art and her fitness to participate in the male-dominated craft of writing and continually berated her for devoting time and energy to writing instead of family.

Olsen admittedly appropriates Woolf’s concept of the “angel in the house,” but Olsen contends that behind every successful writer there is an “essential angel” who assumes “the physical responsibilities for daily living, for the maintenance of life” (*Silences* 34). Olsen explains that, for the most part, this angel “has dwelt in the house of men” and, on occasion, in the house of women writers in the “privileged class” (34). This essential angel is, according to Olsen, rarely represented in literature with the result that little awareness of the “human-wasting drudgery” (35) of housework exists. Woolf’s angel impedes an artist’s success; Olsen’s angel, conversely, facilitates the creative process.

Phelps is writing almost a century before Woolf and Olsen, but her fictional representation of the dilemma facing creative women anticipates both Woolf’s psychic angel and Olsen’s liberating angel. Phelps is especially insistent that her readers see the toll that a psychic angel, the psychology of motherhood and marriage, exacts on women’s talent. Immediately after her marriage, Avis puts her husband, Philip’s, career ahead of her own, adopting the self-defeating mantra “Wait,” which, as the narrator explains, “Women understand—only women altogether” (149): “The picture must wait—now—a while” (144); “I must wait a little” (149); “life waits; and art is long” (155). Having

“waited” what seemed like a lifetime as she nursed her sickly son and then her dying husband, Avis returns to the studio to paint after Philip’s death. But after one year, Avis admits to her father that psychic angel of maternal guilt that cajoled her into putting family ahead of career had defeated her. She laments that nobody wants her paintings now because “they tell that my style is gone. . . that I work as if I had a rheumatic hand” (244).

The erosion of Avis’s talent and the dissolution of her career goals during her marriage support Carol Kessler Farley’s conclusion that Phelps’s argument in *The Story of Avis* is that “marriage for a woman ends her growth, and for the artist blocks her development” (xvii). But, as Tillie Olsen argues, the growth and development of women in the working class is blocked because not only must they wrestle with the ever-present psychic angel that demands penance for time spent pursuing creative endeavors, but, more importantly, because they struggle without an “essential angel” to provide the freedom necessary for developing their talents.

Phelps’s audience never loses sight of grievous wrongs inflicted on Avis by the institutions of marriage and motherhood; readers do, however, often lose sight of the “essential angels” in *The Story of Avis* against whom Avis’s middle-class identity is constructed. As in *Ruth Hall*, these subordinate women struggle in the shadows, and their tales seem to have significance only in relationship to Avis’s frustration with her lack of success as an artist. Yet it is precisely because the subordinate women gain significance only in relationship to what they can do for Avis that we must pay attention to them. For as their textual positioning just slightly below that of Avis makes evident, they have not simply limited opportunity but rather no opportunity for self-actualization.

Looking at the lives of the subaltern in *The Story of Avis* once again establishes that we cannot talk about gender without also talking about race and class.

Avis's essential angel is Aunt Chloe, a paradigm of domesticity who, prior to Avis's marriage, makes it possible for Avis to avoid responsibility not just for house and family but also for herself. While Avis, wholly focused on her art, isolates herself in the garden studio, Chloe frets over lilies that were to have been planted, cows in the corn-patch, newspaper covering the wisteria, Julia's ability to cook perfect dumplings, and dust in Professor Dobell's study (56). Avis is not one of those heroines who wear "white dresses that never need washing" (Olsen 35) of whom Rebecca Harding Davis complained, but it is Chloe and not Avis who sees that the laundry is done, the food is prepared, and the dust removed.

Chloe is not, however, positioned in this text simply to highlight Avis's status as a young woman of privilege. There is not a great social or economic divide separating Avis and her aunt. Though Chloe bustles busily about the Dobell household and Avis retreats without care to the solitude of her studio, theirs is not a servant-mistress relationship as is that of Ruth Hall and Dinah. Chloe is the domestic thorn in Avis's side, forever prodding Avis to accept the inevitability of the gendered roles women are expected to assume as wives, mothers, and housekeepers and to recognize that, for a woman, art may be an avocation but it can never be her vocation. Avis, on the other hand, is a never-ending vexation to her aunt as she repeatedly asserts, "No, auntie, I do not expect to marry" (97). While neither Avis nor her aunt valorizes the life choices either makes or the identity either constructs for herself, Phelps shows through the diverse points of view of Avis and Chloe that across the proverbial generational gap there is a kinship that is gender specific.

At one point in her life, Chloe too had aspirations beyond kitchen and garden, and, as a result, she well understands both the lure of independence and the inescapability of nineteenth-century prescriptions of heteronormativity. In other words, whereas Avis is determined to resist settling for a “career” of domesticity, Chloe acquiesces because she believes women do not have a choice.

Chloe’s presence in the text bolsters Avis’s contentious position in two different ways. In the first place, Chloe, as the Dobell family’s maven of domesticity, offers a detailed portrait of the never-ending responsibilities placed on a woman’s shoulders when she answers the call to maintain the domestic sphere as a haven for the salaried breadwinner. As such, Chloe provides realistic insights into the stark choices women face. Nineteenth-century housekeeping as portrayed by Phelps is not part-time work, and, though the addition of a support staff may reduce the physical burden on the lady of the house, it also necessitates a concomitant increase in the amount of time necessary for organizing and supervising that staff. Chloe’s commitment to care for the Dobell household offers solid evidence that women’s work in the domestic sphere is all consuming and leaves little time or energy for pursuing self-interests.

Although Chloe’s admonitions to Avis argue for the necessity of women’s acceptance of the social position tradition has carved out for her, Chloe is also an ironic character who argues forcefully for the necessity of and fulfills every traditional role assigned to women. At the same time, she admits that she too once had aspirations beyond the kitchen walls. While furiously engaged in the very middle-class, feminine pastime of knitting stockings for orphaned children, Chloe reminds her recently and reluctantly betrothed niece that, for a woman, marriage is an all-consuming commitment,

that “When a—woman becomes—a wife . . . her husband’s interests are enough for her” (114). Yet when Avis asks the very probing question, “did *you* never in all your life want to be any thing else but my uncle’s wife?” (114 emphasis in original), Chloe at first demurs, saying, “We will never tell” (114). Finally she concedes:

My dear Avis . . . I suppose all of us have times of thinking strange thoughts, and wishing impossible things. I *have* thought sometimes—if I could begin life over, and choose for my own selfish pleasure, that I would like to give myself to the culture and study of plants. I should be—a florist, perhaps, my dear; or a botanist” (114 emphasis in original).

Chloe succinctly summarizes the paradox of being a woman, and as such, more than Avis, speaks to and for Phelps’s nineteenth-century middle-class female readers who are caught in the emotional tug-of-war between self and selflessness. But Chloe is also the nagging conscience that will forever keep these women from pursuing self-interests when these interests detract from family interests.

While Avis is a well-educated, single woman of twenty-six who had the privilege of studying art in Europe, Chloe, as the essential angel, is the selfless mother figure who makes much of this possible. Few of Phelps’s readers would have identified with Avis and her access to privilege, but many would recognize themselves in Chloe. However, while Chloe acknowledges that she dreams of tending a garden beyond the fences that enclose the Dobell property, she cautions Phelps’s readers that to do so would be to “choose for [her] own selfish pleasure” (114). Chloe contends that the mandate against a woman’s choosing “selfish pleasure” is not only gender specific but also, drawing on

Biblical authority, preordained or “natural.” “Women,” Chloe admonishes her niece, “are *not* men. God made us” (114).

The paradox of Phelps’s Chloe is that at the same time that she acknowledges that it is inevitable that women will aspire to more than house and family, she also maintains that it is inevitable that women must forego the pursuit of self interests because they are “*not* men.” Chloe’s final admonition to Avis and to Phelps’s readers is not simply that to seek personal fulfillment beyond the hearth is “impossible” but that it is “strange.” In other words, women like Avis who want to establish an independent identity through a career are “strange”; they are not normal; they are not as God made them; they are not women.

Phelps astutely positions Aunt Chloe as a counterpoint to Avis to mollify an audience that may reject Avis because of her seemingly “unnatural” strivings to choose career over marriage and motherhood. In doing so, however, Phelps foreshadows Avis’s failure as an artist. Avis will not succeed precisely because she is attempting to do that which is “unnatural”—combine marriage, motherhood, and career—to, in twentieth-century lingo, have it all. Because she has pointed out that Chloe, like Avis, has unfulfilled aspirations, however, Phelps also demonstrates that Avis’s failure is Chloe’s failure, is “everywoman’s” failure.

If there is a success story in *The Story of Avis*, it is that of Avis’s long-time friend Coy Rose. Portrayed as a woman wholly dedicated not simply to her husband and children but also to her husband’s work, Coy is the antithesis of Avis who initially refuses Ostrander’s marriage proposal by asserting, “Marriage . . . is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work” (71). While Avis appears to be selfish

because of her determination to pursue a career that allows her to capitalize on her talents and training, Coy is the epitome of selflessness because, as a minister's wife, she "married the profession with the man" (156). Coy happily scurries "from the nursery to the prayer-meeting, from the mission-school to the Commencement dinner, from the church fair to the Italian class . . ." (156). She admits that her life might be easier if her husband were not out of town during numerous family crises or upheavals in the church and community; but, overall, Coy cannot imagine a better life than that of a wife, mother, and volunteer. Whereas Avis seeks an identity grounded in self-expression, Coy constructs an identity based on her relationship to family and church, an identity she believes is and always has been an inherent aspect of her being.

Just as Aunt Chloe asserts that God established a different path in life for women than for men, Coy asserts that she is happy because she is following "nature." After learning of Coy's engagement, Avis ponders the impenetrable gulf that Coy's announcement created between them. Aware of but not understanding Coy's evident happiness, Avis comments, "How natural . . . how natural it must seem to be so happy!" (88). Coy answers, "It is as natural as life" (88). Years later, after Ostrander's death and the dissolution of Avis's dream to dedicate her life to art, Coy and Avis contemplate the inexplicability of life. Coy explains her contentment, saying, "It is nature! . . . Explain it how you will" (249). Avis's feeble response, "But I . . . I am nature, too. Explain me, Coy" (249), offers little insight into the tragedy of Avis Dobell, a woman who has lost her husband, her son, and her creative energies. Coy provides no explanation, but the narrator reminds Phelps's audience that "it was to be expected that Avis should be more or less unintelligible" (249). The irony of this plaintive exchange between Coy and Avis

is that Phelps's argument is that Avis is decidedly not "unintelligible" and Coy is emphatically not "natural."

Coy is, in fact, the unnatural "true woman" that Phelps satirizes in an October 1871 newspaper article. In this article, Phelps explains that, according to tradition, a "true woman"⁴ is apolitical, eschews public life, finds contentment and self-expression in "household life" with her children nearby, and "instinctively merges her life—social, political, commercial—in that of her husband" (269). Phelps caustically reminds readers, however, that this "true woman" is a fiction "patched up by men, and by those women who have no sense of character but such as they reflect from men" (269). Phelps further charges that the idealized "true woman" is an "enormous dummy" and "the gauntest scarecrow ever posted on the rich fields of Truth to frighten timid birds away" (269).

It is not, therefore, "natural" or an inherent aspect of Coy's "nature" that she should find fulfillment in marriage and family; neither is it "unnatural" that Avis cannot. Rather, Phelps asserts, women like Coy are so "effectually bewildered on the subject of her own traits and aptitudes that she is largely unaware of any distinction between man's direction and her destiny" (271). For example, though Coy had never been considered religious before her marriage and finds it necessary to ask her husband "precisely" what a minister's business is, immediately after marrying, she commits herself to "our work," "our people," "our pulpit," and "our salary" (156). As Phelps's critique of society's

⁴ Feminist historian Barbara Welter identifies the basic tenets of the nineteenth-century ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood as "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity." Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Columbus: U of Ohio Press, 1967. 21-41. See also Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* 63-70, 128-35; Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1990), 63-79; Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982).

idealized “true woman” points out, however, Coy unwittingly assimilates her husband’s values as her own not because they are an essential aspect of her nature but because she has been taught, as Aunt Chloe asserts, that God intended for women to play this role.

If, as the narrator suggests, Avis is unintelligible, Coy is all too knowable because she is the stereotypical “true woman,” a social construct, as Phelps argues, designed to “regulate the position of women by conformity to an established ideal of womanly character” (Phelps 270). Phelps points out, however, that not only is the ideal untenable, but, more importantly it places women in an economically dependent position. Though seemingly very contented with the roles of homemaker, mother, and volunteer, Coy confides to Avis: “There is one thing I must admit: I do *not* like to ask John for money. There! But that is all, Avis” (248 emphasis in original). Coy considers herself a partner in her husband’s ministry; yet, although she bears full responsibility for household and family maintenance, she is financially subordinate to her husband—she must *ask* for money.

Through Coy, a character who seems to epitomize the “normalcy” Avis’s quest for independence challenges, Phelps forces her audience to confront yet another of the realities of women’s subordination. Coy’s diligent efforts on behalf of her family and as a volunteer contribute essential yet unpaid labor to John’s employer, the church. John is free to go to Philadelphia because Coy is home caring for their sick children. In John’s absence, Coy copes with “deacon Bobley out on a heresy-hunt, and the American Board” (248), which chooses that moment to dun the church for a sizable contribution. Coy is the minister’s wife, and, in his absence, she must, without receiving a salary, act in his stead. Not only can the church pay John less than “subsistence wages” because of his

wife's unpaid labor which is essential for maintaining their house and family, but additionally the church can avoid hiring additional employees because Coy willingly assumes her husband's responsibilities when he is unavailable and because she contributes valuable skills to numerous committees that keep the church running.

In her discussion of the ways women's unwaged labor within the domestic sphere contributed to subsistence living for antebellum working classes, historian Jeanne Boydston points out that women's labor "represented a substantial economic benefit—both to their families and to the employers who paid their husbands' wages" (9). Boydston explains that housework "added several hundred dollars a year to the value of working-class subsistence—several hundred dollars which the employer did not have to pay as a part of the wage packet" (22). Boydston concludes, "because of her need for access to cash, the wife's dependence on the wage-earner within the family was particularly acute" (19). Phelps does not dwell on Coy's financial dependence on her husband or the essential contribution that Coy's unpaid services make to the well-being of her family and her husband's success or to the church and the community. Coy's reluctant admission does, however, offer cogent evidence that women who must "ask" for money are not equal partners in a marriage. Rather, their financial relationship with their husbands parallels that of a parent and child. John Rose does not offer money to his wife; she must *ask* for money. Coy obviously recognizes that her husband's control over the family coffers places her in a subservient position since she confides in Avis that she doesn't like to ask for money, but she does not challenge the inequity or the precariousness of that position.

Coy's dependence may be, as Boydston notes, "particularly acute," but Coy, ever the "true woman," has assimilated an identity that necessitates submissiveness because submissiveness is a virtue. Avis, however, refusing to bear what she believes to be the burden of true womanhood, finds that society's refusal to acknowledge women's need for self-expression and independence limits opportunities for women to support themselves. Phelps offers no easy answers to this dilemma. Coy's child-like dependence on her husband for money may be emotionally debilitating, but there is no hint that Coy's needs are not being met. Avis, on the other hand, becomes the primary breadwinner for her family shortly after her marriage when Ostrander loses his job. Avis cannot ask her husband for money; she has to generate income for the family and, at the same time, care for her husband and children's needs. These complex responsibilities overwhelm Avis physically and emotionally to the end that she cannot paint and she is a frustrated, distraught mother. By juxtaposing Avis and Coy and offering no middle road between the true woman and the independent woman, Phelps argues that society must offer women different choices because, as Avis explains to Ostrander, "I do not think we know what was meant for women" (70). Avis does know, however, that women are not meant to be forced into a patriarchal box with only two compartments—suffocating submissiveness or debilitating independence.

As she accompanies John Rose on a ministerial visit to the tenements, Avis encounters Susan Wanamaker Jessup, a woman whose marriage to an abusive, alcoholic husband forces her to straddle the line between suffocating submissiveness and debilitating independence. Because Susan is married to a "drunken husband," (160), her survival depends on eking out a living selling books, yet the physical abuse her husband

inflicts on her limits her ability to support herself. Rose tells Avis that Susan 's business is "falling behind" because she cannot "get about" (160). Susan's explanation for her disability is that she fell, but Rose notes that it is "surprising how insecure of foot women with drunken husbands, as a class, are found to be" (160).

Susan's plight compared to Coy who complains about having to ask her husband for money or Avis who copes with financial emergencies by selling some bonds (205) forces Phelps' audience to take yet another look at the injustices inflicted on women by gender discrimination. Not only can Susan not depend on her husband, she must defend herself against him. When she cannot pay the rent or buy groceries because she is injured, she cannot tap into financial reserves to cover the shortfall. Susan does not have the luxury of, as Aunt Chloe contends, choosing for her own "selfish pleasure." Choosing for the self is the only way that Susan can survive. Phelps' audience may be impatient with the privilege that Avis has to whine about not fulfilling her dream of being a great artist or her complaints that the household help is not doing enough to relieve her of the burden of her children. Readers may overlook Coy's niggling concern about having to "ask" for money. And many readers may agree with Chloe's assertion that many of the complaints Phelps levels against patriarchy are moot because women are, in fact, not men. But readers cannot help but be shocked into the reality of a society so structured to benefit men that it offers women who are victims of abuse no recourse.

Susan is not merely in a subservient position in her marriage; she is, according to law and custom, subhuman. Susan visits Avis to tell her that she is leaving Harmouth with her husband who has come home and "taken the notion to go to Texas. The law compels me to go with him, as if I were a horse or a cow" (161). Susan's extreme

example demonstrates that, even if women have work and can support themselves, they by law cannot claim independence; they are owned by their husbands as if they were chattel. Through Susan, Phelps adds yet another layer to her argument for the imperative to recognize a woman's right to claim herself. Women who are economically, intellectually, socially, and, in fact, legally controlled by men are not sheltered or protected from the vicissitudes of fate by the strong arm of patriarchy. Instead, they suffer irreparable physical and emotional trauma. Susan's plight encapsulates that of all women whose right to claim a self has been stolen by law and by the ideology of gender.

Few women could be more differently positioned socially than Avis and Susan Jessup, yet Phelps demonstrates that class neither protects a woman from nor makes her more vulnerable to the effects of gender oppression. In Phelps's fictional society, gender discrimination finds women wherever they are located with the end result being that the many paths that women travel eventually meet at the wall of resistance patriarchy maintains to prevent women from latching onto the power to direct their own lives. In other words, though Avis wants to distance herself from the "moan of human famine" (160) in the tenements, she is unable to escape the haunting reality of Susan's stark existence or the "uncomfortable sensation of having been once familiar with" (160) Susan's eyes which "were the color of cold coal when it is in shadow" (160). Although Avis initially "shrank instinctively" (160) as she stood in the "stifling entry-way" (160) to Susan's apartment, she does not judge Susan or her meager circumstance. A scar on Susan's forehead and eyes that are remarkable "because of their deadness" (160) are further evidence that Susan's social position is as distant from that of Avis Dobell or Coy Rose as Ruth Hall's is from the immigrants or the prostitutes, but Phelps refuses to allow

the ill-fortune that Susan experiences as a result of her disastrous marriage define her. John Rose explains to Avis that Susan is a “respectable woman, from the country” (160), and, later, when Susan visits Avis, the housekeeper tells Avis that their visitor is “not so much a peddler . . . as a lady . . .” (161). Avis recognizes in Susan a “certain dignity that held itself through her meagre [sic] dress, as well-developed muscles do through obedient tissue” (161). While Avis bears invisible emotional scars as a result of her inability to thrive in her ill-begotten marriage, Susan’s body provides physical evidence of men’s power to control and destroy a woman’s life.

Despite her battered appearance, however, Susan commands respect. She, as are Avis and Coy, is a “lady” with “dignity,” and the fact that she is married to “a brute” (163) is an unfortunate fact of her life but is not a moral failing and does not define her. A woman may be the wife of a self-centered college professor, a drunken brute, or a minister, but, while society may label a woman based on her relationship with a male or her impoverished circumstances, Phelps contends that a woman is entitled to claim her own identity. Laws may make it impossible for a woman to own her person, but laws cannot dictate who that person chooses to be. Phelps, unlike Fern, separates the woman from her experience, and, in doing so, sends a universal message of empowerment to all women. The circumstances in which women find themselves are not indicative of moral weakness or of lack of initiative. Rather, women’s circumstances are the result of social forces over which they have no control. In Phelps’s worldview, a lady retains the title of lady even if lack of opportunity and poverty relegate her to the tenements.

Phelps offers a brief glimpse of the Irish immigrant serving women in the Ostrander household. While it would be difficult to pin the label of “lady” on these

working-class women, their presence is not designed simply to highlight Avis's cultural and intellectual superiority as the housekeepers in *Ruth Hall* do for Fern's protagonist. Through Avis's frustrations with her staff and the staff's exasperation with the impossibility of the work expected of them, Phelps makes an emphatically political statement that when women attempt to fulfill all the gendered expectations heaped upon them, success is nearly impossible and identities are fractured. Phelps offers no pretense that Avis can cook, do laundry, or sew; her heroine is thoroughly and of choice unschooled in the domestic arts. Avis depends on her staff to do work she cannot and does not want to do. She also naively believes that the "political economy of any intelligent home implied a strict division of labor, upon which she was perfectly resolved not to infringe" (140). But Avis underestimates the amount of work required to run a house and is unprepared for the demands her self-centered husband places on her and the housekeepers.

Avis learns that her housekeeper, Julia, can identify problems in the household but cannot solve them, and that she, Avis, wholly unprepared for and uninterested in housework, must find a solution for a clogged drain, the lack of groceries in the house, and a hole in the pantry window that lets rain in the flour barrel. While Julia frets over these deficiencies, she adds that Mr. Ostrander has invited four guests to dinner and that they do not have sufficient steak for the meal. Avis quickly realizes that burden of work that is oppressing Julia is her burden as well, that as women, she and Julia are expected to dedicate themselves wholly to providing a harmonious environment for the patriarch. Avis decides that while Julia scurries to the grocery store to buy steak, she can watch the potatoes, answer the door-bell, watch the jelly straining, dress for dinner, and wonder

how the ironing will get done. Phelps sarcastically notes that while Avis is fretting over jelly and potatoes, her husband is in the parlor discussing Greek sculpture with his guests. Phelps's sarcasm gathers the disparate strains of this chaotic household moment into a vituperation of the leisure Ostrander enjoys at the expense of the women in the household. Overwrought by the demands of meeting the needs of unexpected guests, neither Avis nor Julia chastises Ostrander for imposing on their time and energies, but Phelps's narrator does not let Ostrander off the hook so easily. A sarcastic one-sentence, seemingly innocuous assertion that Ostrander is enjoying a leisurely pre-dinner chat with his guests provides a strident critique of Ostrander's self-absorption and resultant sense of entitlement. The domestic pandemonium that reigns in the Ostrander household, according to the narrator, is a product of the unreasonable demands of the patriarch and not Avis's lack of aptitude for domesticity or Julia's inability to coordinate a multitude of tasks.

Avis's desire to claim an identity as a renowned artist fades further and further into the background as the responsibilities of housework and caring for her children overwhelm her and as her identity as Ostrander's wife becomes more controlling each day. Though Avis is well aware that her husband expects more than is reasonable of her and Julia, when he asks her if she is tired, Avis declines to answer because "her husband's greater physical delicacy had already taught the six-months' wife the silence of her own" (141). In just six months of marriage, Avis has learned to put her husband first, has learned that the wife's responsibility is to create a domestic haven for the breadwinner regardless of the physical and emotional toll it exacts on her.

Avis's fantasy that a harmonious home moves itself like a star in its orbit and that the service of a home is a kind of blind intelligence (140) was shattered with this onslaught of domestic crises. She knows that to be Philip Ostrander's wife is, contrary to his prenuptial promise, to be his housekeeper. She also knows that neither she nor Julia have the potential to escape the domestic roles assigned to them, that the society in which they live has determined that women shall assume sole responsibility for a "harmonious home" and that this responsibility is underpaid or unpaid and underappreciated.

Ostrander attempts to mollify the strain evident in his wife's face after her unexpected descent from the artist's easel to the ironing board by telling her, "I am sorry to have you concerned so much in this domestic *flurry*" (141 emphasis added). The narrator notes that Avis attributes Ostrander's glib dismissal of her sacrifice for him to a "dulnesses [sic] of the masculine fancy" (141), but through this metacommentary on the word "flurry" for the masculine attitude toward domesticity Phelps emphatically asserts that domesticity robs all women, not just those who are middle class, of their dignity.

Phelps succinctly summarizes her argument on enforced domesticity when she writes: "But let us not forget that it is under the friction of such atoms, that women far simpler, and so, for that yoke, far stronger, than Avis, had yielded their lives as a burden too heavy to be borne" (140). Once again, Phelps contends that a woman's lack of access to work that is intellectually, emotionally, and financially rewarding results in still-born aspirations. For to be unable to choose one's work is to be unable to direct one's life is to be unable to create an independent self. A society that withholds opportunity from its members based on the dichotomy of male/female is a society that oppresses women

whether they are of the serving class or of the middle class. Gender oppression, Phelps argues, effectively and insidiously refuses to grant privilege based on class affiliation.

As Phelps delineates the distinct classes of women—the matriarch Aunt Chloe, the striving Avis, the true woman Coy, the downtrodden wife Susan, and the harried housekeeper Julia—she weaves a tapestry of oppression that takes on many different hues depending on the woman’s social position but no woman escapes the restrictive forces of gender. Phelps asks her readers to look not simply at the ways that Avis Dobell’s quest for the privilege of directing her own life is impinged on by society’s unwillingness to grant women the same freedoms that men have. She demonstrates that patriarchy has the power to limit women’s ability to direct their own lives wherever women are located.

In her attempt to demonstrate the inequities inflicted on Ruth Hall by men intent on protecting their own self interests, Fern suggests that, as a result of race and class, women are more different than alike and, are, therefore, differently entitled. Although the class position of the women in *The Story of Avis* is less sharply divergent than that of the women in the society Fanny Fern constructs and although race barely finds its way into Phelps’s text, Phelps does offer a composite of women in different social and economic positions. Instead of having the diverse women act as the backdrop for the heroine as Fanny Fern did, however, Phelps shows that sympathies between women at opposite ends of the social and economic hierarchy are essential if women are to achieve gender parity.

From Working Capital to Working Woman: Transforming Identities in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*

Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants.

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

“Stop!” shouted Frado, “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you:” and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.

—Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig*

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.

—Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Harriet A. Jacobs, in her novelized autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, first published in 1861, and Harriet Wilson in the 1859 fictionalized autobiography, *Our Nig*, offer a portrait of a woman’s quest for and relationship to work that extends the critique of gender oppression Fannie Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps provide and that illuminates the effects of layered oppressions on women’s access to autonomy. Jacobs’s pseudonymous self, Linda Brent, and Wilson’s young protagonist, Frado, are unique in that their life work is the never-ending process of asserting ownership over their bodies, their emotions, and their intellect. In addition to gender oppression, these heroines struggle under the weight of legally sanctioned racism that marginalizes them and that

insists that because they are black women they are object rather than subject. Exploited by the ideologies of class and race as well as gender, Linda Brent and Frado own neither their bodies nor their labors, and work for them is a dehumanizing force because it marks them as a valuable commodity.

In these texts written about the plight of black women disempowered by race, class, and gender, the task of constructing a self that can survive the physical and emotional degradations of enslavement⁵ takes precedence over philosophical or political musings about the rights of women or women's role in society. Historian Deborah Gray White delineates the abject social position of racialized women like Brent and Frado in nineteenth-century America:

They were slaves because they were black, and even more than sex, color was the absolute determinant of class in antebellum America Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans. (60)

Brent and Frado, caught in the double bind that White delineates, teeter on the brink of economic disaster and social limbo not because they lack access to work as did Ruth Hall or because the work of sustaining their families interferes with commitment to career but because they lack ownership of themselves. Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell embark on a process of self-actualization; Linda Brent and Frado, however, undertake a project that necessitates self-reclamation before the process of self-actualization can begin.

⁵Although Frado is legally an indentured servant, I concur with those critics who contend that Wilson intended that the text be read as a slave narrative. See Carby (44), Gates's Introduction to *Our Nig*, Foreman (315), and Stern (441).

In her discussion of the process by which Linda Brent constructs an autonomous self, Angelyn Mitchell concludes that because ongoing oppression depends on the erasure of individual identity, Brent must realize and acknowledge her selfhood before being in a position to resist her captivity. Mitchell explains, “In other words, individualism precedes agency: *I am* precedes *I can*” (26 emphasis in original). Mitchell’s conclusion succinctly highlights the dilemma confronting both Linda Brent and Frado, and her insightful juxtaposition of the necessity of agency preceding action also marks the stark social distance that separates Ruth Hall and Avis Dobell and Linda Brent and Frado. Hall and Dobell envision a future where they will finally be able to assert “I am” and then move forward to confront the ideologies of gender that impede the free expression of the individual “I” through the “can” stage. Brent and Frado, however, are still in the process of constructing an autonomous “I” when their literary journey ends. Theirs is not simply an adult project of seeking meaningful work but rather a lifelong project of reconfiguring the “I” by distinguishing between work that is exacted of the body by the master or mistress and work that is the means by which the object of abuse becomes a subject of her own life script.

In their representations of antebellum black women, Jacobs and Wilson contend that a necessary link in the plan to escape servitude is having the power to reject the identity derived from forced labor. Historian Jacqueline Jones points to the necessity of constructing an alternative definition of work for enslaved women when she writes, “If work is any activity that leads either directly or indirectly to the production of marketable goods, then slave women did nothing *but* work. Even their efforts to care for themselves and their families helped to maintain the owner’s work force and to enhance its overall

productivity” (14 emphasis in original). Literary critic Nicholas K. Bromell offers an analysis of the relationship between a slave and her work that expands on that of Jones. Bromell begins with the question, ”But do slaves work? (178), and then offers opposing answers to his question:

On the one hand, slavery appears to be the very essence of work, what work becomes when it is not relieved or adorned by any mitigating circumstances or conditions (178). . . . On the other hand, slavery can be regarded as the ontological opposite of work. Work regarded as a blessing is the world-building activity through which humans most truly are and become themselves (179).

Ultimately Bromell concludes that “work that contains within itself no element of freedom is not ‘work’ at all but something else—slavery or something very close to slavery” (179). Any labor that Brent and Frado perform can be appropriated by and for the benefit of the dominant culture, and there can, therefore, be no sense of self, of freedom, or of self-expression in their day-to-day labor. Jacobs and Wilson offer protagonists who are resourceful, ambitious and goal-oriented, but they are beaten down by the politics of race, class, and gender that force them to devote their lives and energies to claiming their humanity rather than to claiming their rightful share of all that American democracy purports to offer those who are willing to work.

These heroines are in no position to wrestle with lofty notions of self-actualization or access to meaningful work when they are denied the basic right of self-ownership. Their trek from object to subject is one of incremental steps as they struggle for neither wealth nor public recognition but simply for the opportunity to construct an independent

identity that is worthy of self-respect and that commands the respect of others. Maurice Wallace succinctly summarizes the task that Brent and Frado face when he writes “. . . that the slave’s struggle for political freedom is also an effort to be freed from the condition of social and cultural nothingness” (241). In other words, escape from legal and physical bondage is predicated upon the concomitant re-invention of the self. Because the power to direct their own lives has been usurped by gender ideologies, by legally sanctioned racism, and by the greed of capitalism, Linda Brent and Frado will never work their way out of “nothingness” and into personhood. Rescuing themselves from their enslavement necessitates not more work, but a different kind of work—the intellectual work of self-empowerment. And for these enslaved women, the work of empowering the self can occur only when they are able to separate themselves from their daily labors. The times, therefore, that Brent and Frado appear to be the least productive are, in fact, the moments when they reap the greatest rewards from the serious labor of reconstituting a self.

Numerous critics have argued that Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson base their critique of human bondage on economic domination, or in essence, the theft of wages from the oppressed. Thomas B. Lovell concludes that Jacobs and Wilson demonstrate “that wage labor [is] the best method of constituting and securing the boundaries of the self” (18). Lovell acknowledges that, in her precarious position as a slave, Linda Brent recognizes the “economic unpredictability” (11) of the relationship between work and the reward for that work; yet Lovell also asserts that in “the marketplace for free labor, as Jacobs sees it, money is power” (12). In a similar vein, Lovell contends that Frado finally summons the courage to threaten to stop working if she is further abused when she

comes to the realization “that her contribution to the household has far outweighed any benefit she has received, and that the physical abuse that Mrs. Belmont administers has been an additional burden for which no compensation can be offered” (23). John Ernest argues that Wilson’s “task was to transform herself from an object of charity to a laboring subject in an economy apparently designed to exclude or delegitimize her labor” (431). And Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editor of the 1983 edition of *Our Nig*, concludes that poverty is the great evil in Wilson’s narrative (Introduction xlvi).

These assertions that the lack of economic opportunity disempowers Linda Brent and Frado accurately highlight the economic fragility of these heroines once they finally secure their freedom. Important to keep in mind, however, is that Jacobs and Wilson locate the source of their heroines’ oppression in the ideologies of race, gender, and class and that economic insufficiency is a byproduct of these primary oppressions. In the racially stratified environment delineated by Jacobs and Wilson, access to paid rather than forced labor offers limited potential for the realignment of power relations. Racism⁶ is the “great evil” that creates the impoverishment from which Brent and Frado never completely escape. Brent and Frado cannot overcome poverty or the powerlessness inherent in their marginalized position as women and members of the lower class because they can neither change nor reject the cultural inscription of race on their personhood. Poverty is but an obstacle on the path to self ownership; racism, however, is a socially and legally sanctioned barrier to selfhood.

⁶ In his discussion of the tension between class and race in the nineteenth-century, Clarence E. Walker dismisses arguments that deemphasize the impact of race on life chances and focus instead on class conflict, Walker asserts that “white racism was an utterly pervasive element of southern society before and after the Civil War, one which effectively blocked the way toward social, economic, and legal equality for blacks” (24).

As a child, Wilson's heroine Frado learned from her white mother, Mag Smith, that it is nearly impossible for women oppressed by class and gender to work their way into subjectivity or to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Mag, a poor, working-class white woman, encounters insurmountable obstacles when she attempts to support herself and her daughters and to work her way out of poverty and culturally assigned inferiority. Neither Mag nor Frado ever know anything but poverty, and they have few, if any, expectations of rising above it. The harshness of Wilson's critique of the social position Mag and Frado occupy lies not in the fact that they are poor, a situation that is tolerable and can sometimes be remedied, but in the fact that the power to change their lives has been usurped by the dominant culture's insistence on maintaining socially constructed hierarchies of value that protect and further its own economic interests at the expense of those relegated to the underclass.

Mag Smith strives diligently to escape the emotional and economic deprivation of her youth, but she makes a series of missteps that make it appear that if she had chosen differently her life could have been dramatically better. In other words, Mag's hard lot in life appears to be the result of her own poor choices—an illicit affair love affair and the resulting unplanned pregnancy, an interracial marriage, and the abandonment of her daughter. But Mag is not the victim of a lack of character, ambition, intellect, or even poor judgment. She is the victim of the lack of choice inherent in her status as an unmarried, working-class woman, a position that insures that Mag's return on her contribution to the economic well-being of society will always be slightly less than what she needs to survive.

While Mag is able and anxious to work to support herself, poverty is the only reward she can expect to reap from the low-paying, intermittent work available to her, and she quickly realizes that poverty is neither ennobling nor empowering. Mag, therefore, falls prey to the lure of class mobility and financial security that she believes will be the reward of a liaison with a lover who has more to offer than she could ever earn for herself. “Unprotected, uncherished, uncared for” (5) and believing “she could ascend to him and become an equal” (6), Mag enters this relationship as she might have any self-improvement project. The promise of upward mobility, of becoming her lover’s “equal” simply by virtue of association, weighs heavily in Mag’s decision to forfeit her virginity to “her charmer” (6). Mag’s charmer takes the only thing of value she has to offer and then abandons her when she becomes pregnant because the cost of their relationship is greater than the reward he can reap.

Wilson neither apologizes for nor justifies Mag’s apparent lack of rectitude; instead Wilson fuses the language of romance with economics and sociology as she describes Mag’s seeming affront to the gendered mores of nineteenth-century culture. Mag is smitten not so much by love as by the potential for class mobility when the “music of love . . . whispered of an elevation before unaspired to; of ease and plenty her simple heart never dreamed of as hers. She knew the voice of her charmer, so ravishing, sounded far above her. It seemed like an angel’s, alluring her upward and onward” (5-6).⁷ When Mag hears the “music of love” and the angelic voice of her “charmer,” she

⁷ As both Claudia Tate and Julia Stern point out, the details of Mag Smith’s life provided by Frado must be fictional since Frado’s last contact with her mother was at the age of six. Tate asserts that Frado’s “fictive maternal discourse” (34) is an attempt to allay Mag’s “responsibility for abandoning her child” (35). Stern argues that the elaborate construction of Mag Smith’s history originates in Frado’s “fantasy of maternal care that

responds out of her destitution rather than passionately or emotionally. In her socially and economically precarious position, Mag hears not wedding bells but the comforting jingle of coins in her pocket and a crackling fire in a warm parlor. She dreams of “elevation before unaspired to,” of moving up the social ladder, and of “ease and plenty,” freedom from want and freedom to choose. Mag well recognizes that her standing in the community is beneath that of her lover, but her only hope of escaping her position as mere flotsam hanging on to the fringes of society is to believe that class is not an immutable fact of life but rather that through association she too can climb “upward and onward” into the middle class.

Mag yields to her lover’s entreaties just as she might, if given the opportunity, choose a job that pays more money and offers more reliable employment. Mag is motivated not by love or greed but by the determination to survive in a culture where doors of opportunity are not yet even ajar for women in her position. Mag Smith eagerly grasps at what appears to be a one-way ticket out of the slums, taking the only path available to her claim a new identity that will, she believes, provide access to the security, ease, and legitimacy of the middle class. Naively believing that gender can trump class, Mag Smith applies for a job as the wife of a middle-class patriarch. Mag understands that this job pays better and offers more opportunity than any she had before, but she does not understand that when gender and class collide, she is guaranteed to fail. And the price Mag pays for failing in this venture of the loss of the self. She cannot even reclaim

her own history belies” (445). I do not believe that Wilson is necessarily attempting either to recuperate or castigate Frado’s absent mother but rather that she is exposing and offering a critique of ideologies that make it impossible for Mag Smith or Frado to succeed as workers or mothers.

her identity as a struggling workingwoman; she now carries the stigma of a woman who forfeited her “priceless gem” (6).

 Laboring for a less-than-subsistence wage on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder, Mag Smith well knows that her only chance of escaping poverty is by taking a chance on the only invitation she will ever receive—the invitation to exchange her virginity for possibility of moving into the middle class. The affair is the inevitable consequence of Mag’s lack of access to self-authorizing alternatives. She is simply traversing the path society has provided for her, fulfilling her own expectations and those of her culture. Although Mag’s failed efforts to elevate herself through paid labor had taught her that access to the middle class is a cash-only proposition, she had yet to learn that this privilege is also class specific as well. Mag is unaware that she missed the opportunity to join the middle class on the day she was born to parents who were unable to provide her with opportunities for socio-economic ascendancy. When Mag “chooses” a lover, she is not in reality making a choice but is instead committing herself to a project of survival. Mag Smith’s descent into infamy begins not with the siren call of a faithless lover but with the thud of the locked door to economic opportunity.

 Throughout the account of Mag’s fall from social grace, Wilson editorializes, and, in the final analysis, appears to attribute Mag’s inability to support herself not to her moral transgression, not on the lack of community support, and not on the loss of her job but on inertia. Employing the language of sentiment, Wilson establishes Mag as a sympathetic character. Wilson describes Mag as “lonely” (5) and as one who “was left to guide her tiny boat over life’s surges alone and inexperienced” (5) and condemns the “holier-than-thou’ of the great brotherhood of man” (7) who refuse to extend a helping

hand or words or encouragement to the seduced and fallen woman. Wilson notes dispassionately that Mag was for a time self-supporting but that this effort failed when cheaper foreign labor replaced her. Wilson, however, does seem to criticize Mag's refusal to defy the condemnation heaped on her by the community. Just before she introduces Mag's future husband, Jim, Wilson offers the following insight into Mag Smith's plight:

Occasionally old acquaintances called to be favored with help of some kind, which she was glad to bestow for the sake of the money it would bring her; but the association with them was such a painful reminder of by-gones, she returned to her hut morose and revengeful, refusing all offers of a better home than she possessed. Thus she lived for years, hugging her wrongs, but making no effort to escape. (8-9)

Mag Smith is not friendless or without resources as "old acquaintances" attempt to help and there are "offers of a better home," but she seems unmotivated to improve her lot. Hawthorne asserts that "Fate and fortunes" set Hester Prynne free and that "Shame, Despair, Solitude!" (176) were Hester's teachers and made her strong (176). Mag Smith, unlike Hester, appears unable to make the best of her bleak situation, choosing instead to "make no effort to escape."

Wilson is not, however, condemning Mag for her unwillingness or inability to march into town to confront her past and re-engineer her life after a series of disappointments. Mag is the victim of a faithless lover, an intolerant community, and her inability to reject the scorn of her society. However, what appear to be Mag's ill-fated choices and her stubborn refusal to accept a helping hand are effects of the absence of

agency. The events that define Mag Smith—the illicit affair, her seeming lack of motivation to escape the hovel, her marriage to Jim, and the desertion of her daughter—are consequences or effects of social and economic circumstances over which Mag has no control. Mag does not become a victim because she makes the wrong choices; she is always already a victim because she lacks choice.

To assert that Mag could have rejected the attentions of her middle-class lover or sidestepped the social freefall that resulted from her marriage to Jim would be to assume that opportunities for self-improvement through education and employment were available to nineteenth-century single women and that Mag could have climbed the social and economic ranks through her own initiative. Historically, however, Mag's plight is not unique in that nineteenth-century American society offered limited avenues for women to achieve independence and embark on the path to upward mobility. Public schools in America were closed to girls until the 1830s and, thereafter, the emphasis of education for girls was socialization and not vocational preparation (Kessler-Harris 56). Nineteenth-century author and social critic Helen Campbell maintains that, even though women were eagerly seeking work, female workers made up only seven percent of the entire population in 1860 (18). According to Campbell, inadequate training for the job market and men's refusal to grant women access to employment made it nearly impossible for women to be self-sufficient. Additionally, Campbell contends, women who did find work were often paid less than a living wage because “. . . it is naturally and inevitably taken for granted that every woman who seeks work is the appendage of some man, and therefore, partially at least, supported” (22). As unskilled laborers, women, Campbell reports, traditionally find work in the needle trades where “mere

existence is to a large extent all that is possible” (22-23). Lacking skills or education, encountering gender bias, and poorly compensated for their work, nineteenth-century women who chose or were forced by circumstance to support themselves were more likely to fail than to succeed in the marketplace. Mag Smith’s literary plight is indicative of the all-too-real dilemma that confronted many nineteenth-century women who sought independence.

For a time, Mag does scratch out a meager existence through piece work, but Mag’s viability as a wage earner disappears when “foreigners who cheapened toil and clamored for a livelihood” (8) pushed her out of the job market. Once again, Mag’s plight reflects the reality many nineteenth-century American women encountered when they entered the job market. As Wilson notes, the influx of foreign labor into the United States exacerbated an already existing problem for women seeking economic self-sufficiency through paid employment. Historian Kessler-Harris provides statistics from an 1845 edition of the *New York Daily Tribune* that exemplify the challenges facing nineteenth-century women who attempted to earn a living as a seamstress. According to Kessler Harris, in 1845 there were “probably about twice as many women seeking work as seamstresses as would find employment at fair wages. These 10,000 women . . . constituted an oversupply of workers who could not possibly earn enough to keep themselves alive” (65). Uneducated, minimally skilled, and barred from less-than-subsistence employment by a glut of desperate female workers, women like Mag Smith had few resources on which to rely for survival; the allure of financial security that a fortuitous marriage could provide offered one of the few viable alternatives to a life of penury. Mag slips and falls over a moral precipice because she is economically

disadvantaged and lacks the power to choose the unrealistic path of morality mandated by a culture that refuses to acknowledge that unemployment, poverty, and homelessness are social ills and not moral failings.

To aver that Mag could refuse to “hug her wrongs” and reject the moral precepts by which society judged her would be to assert that Mag had the insight to recognize the limitations the ideologies of gender and class placed on her and, more importantly, the power to circumvent those limitations. But Mag is a self-sustaining, poor workingwoman. She has neither the leisure to analyze nor the political clout to challenge or change the gendered and class-based hierarchy that oppresses her. Nina Baym explains that in nineteenth-century women’s literature “domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society” (26). Mag, however, is far removed from the domestic sphere. Without a male provider or protector, Mag is forced to eke out an existence for herself in the public sphere, a place “dominated by money and market considerations” (Baym 26).

As a result of heredity and not choice, Mag Smith possesses none of the attributes of True Womanhood. She can claim neither “piety, purity, submissiveness, or domesticity” (Welter 152). She is powerless either to accept or reject the prescriptive precepts of nineteenth-century womanhood. Wilson asks her audience to take a hard look at the hard woman who abandons her child and recognize that Mag Smith sat hugging her wrongs because she could do no other. As Dana Nelson explains, “Like a female slave, the destitute Mag can neither define nor control the conditions of her life” (15). In order to survive, Mag has to work; in order to change her social and economic status, however,

she has to marry well. The work dries up because cheaper foreign labor takes her job. The marriage proposal from the well-positioned lover never materializes because Mag is the wrong woman.

Mag succumbs not to poverty but to the dominant culture's assessment of her as an inferior human being. Julia Stern locates the source of what she identifies as Mag's "maternal abjection" (447) in Mag's "sexual victimization" (447). Stern argues that because she is "caught in the interstices of a culture steeped in the double standard, Mag falls from purity, setting into motion a transformation of status with harsh and unjust economic consequences" (447). Mag does indeed incur a "transformation of status" that intensifies her lifelong struggle to earn a living. However, if all Mag had lost were "status," she could have recuperated herself. The transformation that seals Mag's fate is, however, the loss of self and of hope.⁸ Mag internalizes the scorn of her community and, as a result, is consumed by self-contempt and self-hatred (West 27). She moves through life numbly yielding to the social and economic poverty that mark her existence because she believes that she deserves no better.

Nowhere is Mag Smith's lack of agency and despair more starkly apparent than when she marries Jim. In exchange for Jim's promise that he will take care of her, Mag agrees to the interracial marriage and sacrifices the last scrap of humanity she had salvaged from the disastrous affair with the opportunistic lover. Mag had naively

⁸ Twentieth-century American scholar and activist Cornel West argues that the nihilism, which he defines as the "loss of hope and absence of meaning" is the greatest enemy of black survival in America. West asserts that "without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle" (23). West is referring specifically to the black experience in the United States, historically and at present, but as Wilson's account of Mag Smith's loss of self indicates, nihilism can be a powerful force in the lives of any marginalized individuals.

allowed herself to believe that romance would help her escape poverty and overcome the social inferiority associated with her lower-class status. In this instance, however, she is well aware of the price she will pay for marrying Jim. Whereas she took a somewhat calculated risk when she attempted to claim a slot in the middle class, Mag intuitively knows that a bi-racial marriage will further disgrace her and will be the “climax of repulsion” (15). In other words, Mag is well aware that this marriage will give the community further evidence of her moral insufficiency. Wilson makes it clear, however, that Mag does not choose to marry Jim but that Jim prevails (13) because Mag has no choice: she can either “beg” her living or “get it from” (13) Jim. Mag’s inability to earn a living wage is the sole impetus for the socially unsanctioned marriage to Jim. Considering that Mag is already a pariah, the additional stigma she will bear as a result of the marriage is an insignificant burden when the only alternative is begging for alms from the community that rejected her.

Wilson directly addresses her readers, cautioning them against judging Mag because “want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher” (13) than sermons. But Wilson also acknowledges that the community will not understand Mag’s plight and that as a result of her marriage to Jim, Mag “has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy” (13). Society, Wilson contends, will not forgive Mag for violating the taboo against interracial marriage. Of course, what society really will not forgive Mag for is being poor. Mag’s eroded concept of self is the product of her circumstance, of the lack of choice embedded in her struggle to survive. Mag is a pragmatist as she attempts to cope with her powerlessness, yet every effort she makes to alleviate her poverty elicits a moral

judgment that further reduces her ability to help herself and further convinces her of her inherent worthlessness.

Well before she abandons six-year-old daughter Frado at the Belmont house, Mag thoroughly internalizes the community's disdain for her and accepts the inevitability of her destitution. Mag sees herself as the offender instead of the offended and is, therefore, unable to resist her descent into ignominy and penury. Believing that she has caused her own misery, Mag rejects and disassociates from herself instead of the society that scorned her or the lover that abused her. Because of the dissolution of her personhood, Mag becomes an unwitting partner with the community that shuns her. Wilson explains that Mag "ceased to feel the gushings of penitence; she had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscience. She had no longings for a purer heart, a better life. Far easier to descend lower. She entered the darkness of perpetual infamy" (16). Mag offers little resistance to her social and economic freefall, but she does not choose "perpetual infamy." A maelstrom of poverty and hopelessness envelop her after her husband Jim dies and she is left with no resources to support herself and two daughters. Mag "ceased" to pummel herself with the unrealistic demands of "penitence" or an "awakened conscience" because providing the necessities of life for herself and her children allowed little time or energy for reflection on or kowtowing to the mores of her culture.

While Wilson offers a detailed account of Mag Smith's inability to create an autonomous identity as a working adult, she only hints at the impact the circumstances of Mag's youth may have had on her self-perception. Wilson explains only that Mag had been "early deprived of parental guardianship, [and] far removed from relatives" (1).

When she delineates the childhood and adolescence of Mag's mulatto daughter, Frado, however, Wilson constructs a detailed, nightmarish narrative of unmitigated child abuse that had the potential to effectively efface any sense of an independent spirit Frado may have possessed. Frado's mistress, Mrs. Bellmont, is unrestrained in her fury and vindictiveness as she physically and verbally attacks Frado, as she denies the child adequate nourishment, and as she forces Frado to provide all of the labor necessary for maintaining the family home. Frado works unceasingly in a futile attempt to mitigate the wrath of her mistress, but Frado refuses to succumb to the Bellmont family's never-ending efforts to commodify her.

Although Frado continually questions her self-worth, she, unlike her mother, is able to capitalize on the limited resources she has and resist the cultural imperative to allow the material circumstance of her life to define her. Frado's success in claiming personhood is not the result of overcoming poverty, for she never succeeds in that arena, but rather is born of the steadfast belief that "black nigger" is a label and not an identity and that she is "capable of elevation" (124). Frado does not convince her abusers of her humanity and is unable to escape the physically destructive toil required of her, but she is able to work her way out of emotional and intellectual captivity and claim a self capable of rejecting the impulse for self-loathing that emanates from the never-ending barrage of abuse to which she is subjected. Using intellect and wit, Frado confounds attempts to reduce her to a laboring black body and constructs an assertive and autonomous self by stepping outside the drudgery of her existence and assuming the lead role in a series impromptu dramas of resistance and self-empowerment. In other words, instead of retreating from the public eye as her mother did, Frado places herself squarely in the

center of the ongoing debate over her personhood, using what appear to be childhood pranks to undermine the dominance and authority of Mary and Mrs. Bellmont as she clings to a belief in her own humanity.

Frado begins the process of taking back the self in the classroom she shares with Mary Bellmont, a setting that provides Frado with access to literacy and a receptive audience. Frado toils for the Bellmont family, but the classroom is the workshop where she rescues herself from the potentially irreversible theft of her personhood. During the three years that Frado attends school, she learns to read and spell and is introduced to basic grammar, arithmetic, and writing (41) and, equally as important, temporarily escapes Mrs. Bellmont's "tyranny" (41). Wilson all but glosses over the acquisition of literacy and the respite from abuse in her otherwise detailed account of Frado's brief stint as a student, however. Frado's successes in asserting both her humanity and her intellect occur not within the confines of the structured learning environment but rather within the context of unsanctioned extracurricular activities that the impish child initiates. Frado is powerless to stop the abuse inflicted upon her in the Bellmont household, but her classroom escapades provide an environment where she secures the emotional and psychological freedom necessary for the acquisition of self-esteem and an independent identity.

The classroom is the stage on which Frado begins the experiment with enacting the drama of her own life and moving away from reliance on the Bellmont family for her concept of self. Her trek to autonomy begins when she assumes the unlikely role of class clown, earning acceptance and respect by making her peers laugh. In the company of her classmates, Frado is no longer the dancing puppet whose strings are pulled by Mrs.

Bellmont. Frado is an independent actor who is not only directing her own life but, for a brief moment, is also taking her peers with her. Instead of withdrawing from her classmates who determine after seeing her with “scanty clothing and bared feet” (31) that they will not play with her, Frado performs for them, forcing them to notice her, to interact with her, and finally to acknowledge her humanity.

Initially shunned by her classmates because they see only the “nigger” (31) in her, Frado quickly topples her peers’ stereotypical expectations to become the class wit whose “speeches often drew merriment from the children . . . “ (33). On one occasion, Frado fills the drawers of the schoolmaster’s desk with smoke by using a supply of cigars and “puffing, puffing away at the crack of the drawer, had filled it with smoke, and then closed it tightly to deceive the teacher, and amuse the scholars” (39). When the unsuspecting teacher opens a drawer, “out poured a volume of smoke” (38), whereupon he “screamed” “Fire! Fire!” (38). The students are thoroughly amused, and the teacher, embarrassed by his overreaction, makes no effort to find the culprit. Although Wilson claims that Frado’s classroom antics are “far beyond propriety” (38), she also reminds her audience of the camaraderie Frado establishes with her classmates who are willing to “suffer wrongfully to keep open the avenues of mirth” (38).

After delineating the unmitigated degradation that Mag Smith suffers and the cruelty that Frado endures, Wilson provides comic relief through her portrait of young Frado’s playfulness. But Frado’s antics are more than mere child’s play. They are essential intellectual work of a child who, in order to survive, must become self-authoring and self-authorizing. Frado learns that she can entertain but, more importantly, she realizes that she can make independent choices and influence others. Frado eventually

understands that, as her teacher's example demonstrates, it is possible for human beings to 'lay aside all prejudice and vie with each other in shewing [*sic*] kindness and good-will to one who *seems* different from you" (32 emphasis added).

Through these lighthearted scenes in the classroom, Wilson challenges the myth that race and class are indicative of human potential. While Frado initially "seems" to be different because she is a "nigger" and because she is dressed like a pauper, Frado proves to be more like her peers than Mary Belmont who is "self-willed, domineering; every day reported 'mad' by some of her companions" (33). Mary Belmont, the privileged daughter of the family that owns the "two-story white house, north" (title page *Our Nig*), a child who does not have to toil for her daily bread, a child who "seems" to have every advantage, is vindictive and irascible. Frado, a child who has "no mother, no home" (46), not even a last name, a child who carries the taint of race in her blood, a child is forced to justify her existence by way of toil, is affable and entertaining. Frado's free will reigns benevolently over her classmates as she exemplifies the very real difference between what "seems" and what is. Through her project of self-construction, Frado reshapes the attitudes of her academic community.

In yet another foray into the realm of the theatrical, Frado enacts a drama of role reversal with the "willful leader" (54) of the flock of sheep she tends. This particular sheep "always persisted in being first served, and many times in his fury he had thrown down Nig" (54). Frado decides to "punish" the intractable sheep. She lures him toward her with the promise of food and jumps aside when the sheep gets close so that the sheep falls down a bank into a stream. The sheep swims safely to the other side of the stream but remains isolated from the flock until night. Mr. Belmont and some laborers witness

this escapade, and, although initially concerned about Frado's wellbeing, they "lay down, convulsed with laughter at the trick" (55) when the deed was complete. While Frado handily outwits the sheep and amuses Mr. Bellmont and his employees, she is not merely dueling with a sheep or performing. Wilson asserts that the men "guessed at once" (55) the "object" of the trick, but she leaves it to her readers to draw their own conclusion concerning the "object."

The object of this adventure is the same as the comedy she enacts for her classmates: Frado is asserting her humanity. But in this instance, Frado is appropriating the workplace to her advantage. She well knows that any direct challenge to Mrs. Bellmont's dominance will result in a brutal physical assault, and she, therefore, strives to fulfill the unreasonable and ever-increasing labor burden placed on her without protest. Frado can only assert her autonomy by role-playing the tragedy of her life outside the confines of the domestic sphere that Mrs. Bellmont controls. The cantankerous sheep is, of course, a stand-in for Mrs. Bellmont. In this brief re-enactment, Frado triumphs over her persecutor. Instead of meekly accepting the sheep's aberrant, Frado administers an effective punishment. Frado is producer, director, and audience for this production. She sees the once powerful sheep fly by her in its fury and fall to the bottom of the stream, and, at the same time, she sees a glimmer of hope that she may one day rescue herself from the damnation which Mrs. Bellmont has assured her is her lot in life simply because she is black.

This seemingly insignificant account of Frado's challenge to the unruly sheep is a digression in a chapter that details the gradual dissolution of the emotional support Frado has received at various times from James, Jane, and Jack Bellmont, all of whom leave the

Bellmont family home within a short span of time. This digression, in a chapter devoted to what appears to be Frado's increasing isolation from even the limited consolation the Belmont siblings offer, is yet one more argument that the only work Frado can perform that will have meaning is the work that will convince her of her own self-worth and of the necessity of becoming self-reliant.

Frado finds meaning in the work of maintaining the Belmont family only to the extent that she is able to manipulate the tasks imposed on her either to entertain the possibility of or to experiment with the potential for resistance and empowerment. The narrator remarks somewhat cryptically that it is "strange, one spark of playfulness could remain amid such constant toil; but her [Frado's] natural temperament was in a high degree mirthful, and the encouragement she received from Jack and the hired men, constantly nurtured the inclination" (53). But it is more than the "inclination" toward "playfulness" or "mirth" that survives in Frado, for if this were Frado's only asset, Mrs. Belmont would have, as she had intended, beaten these qualities out of the child well before the first year of Frado's servitude ends. Wilson, however, offers a portrait of a child who is more complex, a child who has an intuitive sense of the wrongs being inflicted on her and a child who, therefore, nurtures in herself the will to claim the right of self-government. Through her antics in the classroom and in the field with the sheep, Frado challenges not just the abuse heaped on her by Mrs. Belmont and Mary but also the ineffectual and disempowering paternalism of the Belmont men who sympathize with but ultimately objectify her as they encourage not self-reliance but rather goodness (50) and jollity.

Frado's success at outsmarting the sheep is far distant from the danger inherent in a similar contest of wills with Mrs. Bellmont, yet her success in the field sets the stage for a comedy Frado enacts in the family dining room that issues an ominous and unmistakable challenge to Mrs. Bellmont's dominance. Frado, assisted by her "faithful friend Fido" (75), plays the part of the fool, a lowly subservient character who ridicules and exposes the moral and intellectual insufficiencies of a powerful character who is her social superior. Frado is the casting director for this drama as she and Fido eagerly assume roles appropriate to their mean station. Frado casts Mrs. Bellmont into an uncharacteristic role of passivity as Frado blatantly insults Mrs. Bellmont, who is powerless to respond because of the presence of her sons.

Invited to eat in the dining room with the family by James, Frado settles into Mrs. Bellmont's chair and reaches for a clean plate. Mrs. Bellmont does not challenge Frado's boldness in assuming the seat reserved for the matriarch of the household, but she does order Frado to eat from the plate she used. "Put that plate down; you shall not have a clean one; eat from mine" (71), Mrs. Bellmont orders. Frado is momentarily vexed as she searches for a way to further the intended affront to her mistress's authority and, at the same time, comply with the edict given. Frado calls Fido to "wash" the plate, "which he did to the best of his ability; then, wiping her knife and fork on the cloth, she proceeded to eat her dinner" (71). While Mrs. Bellmont is "insulted" and "full of rage" (71), she uncharacteristically demands that her husband or James defend her honor by whipping Frado. Wilson carefully notes that Frado is emboldened by and also, for the moment, protected by Jack's presence in the dining room but that Mrs. Bellmont retaliates against Frado by beating her as soon as she is able to isolate her young charge.

Additionally, Mrs. Belmont silences Frado by threatening to “cut her [Frado’s] tongue out” (72) if she tells James. The little comedy Frado enacts has a tragic ending. Mrs. Belmont is neither enlightened as to her own depravity nor subdued in her wrath and, perhaps most significantly, Frado has finally been cowed.

Frado’s silence is, however, indicative only of defeat, not of conquest. Frado continues to enact a drama of resistance by way of an interior monologue that deconstructs Mrs. Belmont’s claims to ownership of her body and mind and that empowers her to differentiate between a self-constructed identity and an identity based on stereotypes and racism. Frado, now fourteen, wrestles with the identity foisted on her, wondering why she was made and what she has to live for and questioning the contention that she has value only in relationship to her labor (75). She accurately assesses her place in the Belmont household and its relationship to race when she laments, “Work as long as I can stand, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up. No mother, father brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger—all because I am black! Of, if I could die!” (75). But Frado is also aware of the difference between good and evil and begins to contest Mrs. Belmont’s assertion that she is evil simply because she is black and that Mary and Mrs. Belmont’s light skin is evidence of intellectual and spiritual superiority even though their deeds belie any sense of charity or humanity.

At the center of Frado’s extended monologue over her personhood is an ongoing theological debate. By ferreting out the inconsistencies between professed religion and her own lived experience, Frado begins to recognize the significance of her contribution to the Belmont family. Mrs. Belmont may be a professor of religion (104) and claim

that “religion was not meant for niggers” (68), but Frado becomes an astute theologian. She develops her own exegesis of Christian precepts that weakens Mrs. Bellmont’s psychological stronghold on her and strengthens Frado’s belief in her own humanity and her resolve to continue the process of constructing an independent identity. Although James and Mr. Bellmont’s sister, Aunt Abby urge Frado to seek consolation through faith in a loving and forgiving God and the promise of “an immortality of happiness” (69), according to the gospel of Frado, religion is only relevant if it empowers in this life.

When Aunt Abby reminds Frado that Christians are required to do “good to those that hate us” (81), Frado concludes that she must be the epitome of goodness since her life has been forcefully committed to doing “good” for Mary and Mrs. Bellmont, both of whom espouse nothing but hate for her. Frado compares Mary Bellmont to the “cross sheep . . . that [she] ducked in the river” (80) and dares to hope that Mary never returns from a visit to her brother Lewis, a desire that Aunt Abby interprets as a wish for Mary’s death. Aunt Abby admonishes Frado for these unchristian thoughts, but Frado is quick to distinguish between thought and deed, reminding Aunt Abby: “Didn’t I do good . . . when I washed and ironed and packed her old duds to get rid of her, and helped her pack her trunks, and run here and there for her?” (81). Frado admits that she has an ulterior motive, to “get rid of her,” but she is also well aware that her labor, though coerced, is a model of Christian service. Frado sings in a “clear voice” with “joyous notes” (81) after Mary leaves because, for the first time ever, she realizes that she can profit from her toil. She has, by doing what is demanded of her, achieved a brief respite from one of her tormentors. More importantly, she has seen, as she did with the sheep, that she can direct her energies and manipulate her environment to benefit herself.

Frado wins a small victory when she realizes that a life of selfless service and not skin color is indicative of humanity, but she moves even closer to claiming autonomy by directly challenging the viability of a theology that is preached but not lived. Initially, Christianity is a source of anguish to Frado as she doubts that there is a “heaven for the black” (85), as she “mourn[s] over her unfitness for heaven” (99), and as she strives to “cast off the fetters of sin” (86) as admonished by the local minister. But after Mrs. Belmont threatens to beat her to death if she “did not stop trying to be religious” (104), Frado rejects the Christianity preached by those of the ilk of her oppressor.

Once again, Frado is silent in the face of the threat of punishment but, through a dialogue with herself, she strategizes an empowering retort, arguing: “her mistress was a professor of religion; was *she* going to heaven? then she did not wish to go. If she should be near James even, she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching her ascending path” (104 emphasis in original). Frado accepts the fact that Mrs. Belmont is a “professor of religion,” but she challenges any claim that this label is a guarantee of eternal life, and she sees nothing else in Mrs. Belmont’s life that will earn her this reward. Frado casts further doubt on Mrs. Belmont’s salvation when she provides the only physical description of Mrs. Belmont included in the entire narrative. Mrs. Belmont has “fiery eyes,” eyes that could only belong to a devil. Finally, Frado renders any further discussion of Mrs. Belmont’s potential to conquer death moot when she determines not that religion was not “meant for niggers,” but that she, a young black woman, has too much value as a human being to squander even one day in eternity with Mrs. Belmont. For Frado, it’s not that she cannot “ascend” but that she chooses not to.

If religion has the potential to unite her with her abusers in the afterlife, then Frado chooses the independent path of finding salvation in this life.

The comedic performances in the classroom, in the pasture, and in the dining room and the interior monologue through which Frado reappropriates and deconstructs the tenets of Christianity are the dress rehearsal for a culminating one-act drama of self-reclamation. Mr. Bellmont, unwilling to intervene to protect Frado from his tyrannical wife, puts Frado in charge of her own safety, telling her “when she was *sure* she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid if it she could” (104 emphasis in original). Having just determined that she does not intend to sit by Mrs. Bellmont’s side in heaven, Frado capitalizes on Mr. Bellmont’s advice. After being sent for wood and not returning as quickly as expected, Frado once again finds herself about to be beaten. For the first time, however, Frado’s resistance is overt as she assumes the lead role in the drama of the battle over her personhood. Frado shouts: “Stop! . . . strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you” (105). Wilson explains that Frado threw down the wood she had gathered and “stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts” (105). In actuality, Frado had been experiencing the “stirring” of independence well before this confrontation, but she had acted on those stirrings in other arenas, testing both her resolve and her sense of autonomy in less threatening environs. Only because she moved incrementally from object to subject is she now able emphatically and effectively to negate Mrs. Bellmont’s claim to her. Frado will continue to work, but it will be on her terms.

Wilson mingles the language of defeat with that of triumph in the paragraph that outlines the sudden role reversal that Frado’s pronouncement effects. Mrs. Bellmont

“dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement,” and followed Frado to the house, carrying the wood she had sent Frado to fetch. Frado leads the way, realizing that she has “power to ward off assaults” (105) and quietly celebrating her liberation as she sees Mrs. Bellmont “enter the door with *her* burden” (105 emphasis in original). Mrs. Bellmont’s obvious burden is the bundle of firewood she carries, but Wilson’s emphasis on “her” suggests that Mrs. Bellmont is carrying a far greater burden as she trudges into the house. When Frado shouted at her, Mrs. Bellmont “dropped her weapon,” a stick she had snatched from the stack of wood Frado carried. But Wilson is emphatic that when Mrs. Bellmont drops the stick, she experiences the loss of all power she previously exercised over Frado.

Mrs. Bellmont’s greatest burden as she enters the house is the realization that Frado has claimed and asserted her autonomy and that Frado will now establish the boundaries of their relationship. She is all too aware that now that Frado “had learned how to conquer” (108), Frado can choose to offer or withhold her services, and she can negotiate the terms of her association with the family. In her discussion of the ways that Wilson blurs the lines between nineteenth-century sentimental literature and black autobiography, Debra Walker King highlights the impact of Frado’s stand against Mrs. Bellmont on her quest for self-ownership. King explains:

This new ‘power’ gives Frado freedom of choice and command of her own existence. No longer does she accept her desires and emotions as signs of disobedience. Frado can now define herself, assert her rights, and make her own decisions. She has learned the importance of self-

possession, a lesson she did not learn through submission and self-denial.

(39)

The weight on Mrs. Bellmont's shoulders as she carries the firewood into the house is the realization that Frado has rescued herself and that, as a result, Frado can and will stop working if she is ever threatened or abused again. Frado's *coup de main* at the woodpile is the final act in the drama of self-reclamation.

Distinguishing between labor that is coerced and work that is self-empowering, Frado devotes her entire youth to forging an autonomous identity that will enable her to control the circumstances of her life and eventually to secure gainful and meaningful work that will provide the opportunity for self-determination. Buoyed with a hard-won belief in herself and her capabilities, Frado finally leaves the Bellmonts at the end of "her period of service" (109) with the modest goal of having the ability to "provide for her own wants" (121). But this goal forever eludes Frado because after years of maltreatment at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont, Frado's body is broken, and she is "feeble" (117) and often unable to work. As a result, Frado is frequently forced to depend on what Debra Walker King appropriately identifies as the "cold arms of public charity" (42).

Wilson's critique of the class-stratified culture that relegated Frado's mother to a lonely hovel and a racist society that tolerated the attempted theft of Frado's spirit and the destruction of her body has come full circle. Mag Smith refused the few offers of assistance that came her way, whereas Frado accepts charity but keeps her eye fixed on a future where she can earn her own living. Frado, unlike her mother, clings to the belief that she can conquer the past and that industry will produce economic independence, but

eventually Frado is confronted by the same stark reality that defeated her mother. The few jobs available to ambitious women who lack education and vocational training do not provide an income sufficient for self-maintenance, and there are no social or economic safety nets for women whose efforts at independence do not meet with immediate success.

In the final analysis, Wilson asserts that Frado's resolve to elevate herself (130) has little impact on the mountain of social and economic disparity created by the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender. And, to that end, Wilson concludes her narrative with an appeal for "sympathy and aid" from the "gentle reader" of her text. Wilson is, of course, appealing for financial support for the text, but she is also asserting that the plight of Frado and Mag Smith is the plight of every woman forced to fend for herself because she lacks the social buffers that could provide economic security. Wilson's call for sympathy is also a call for action—action that will dismantle the hierarchies that force marginalized women to devote their energies to claiming the right of self-government instead of asserting the authoritative, autonomous "I" which should be their birthright.

Born to parents who were slaves, Linda Brent realizes as a child that her only birthright is a life of bondage and that, as a result, the most important work that she will ever do is the intellectual work of constructing an autonomous "I." From the example of her father and grandmother, however, Brent learns early on that in a culture where the dynamics of power are racially configured, neither access to capital nor the privilege of class guarantees autonomy or has the potential to empower or liberate. Linda Brent's father was a skilled, entrepreneurial carpenter who earned sufficient income to provide a

“comfortable home” (5) for his wife and two children, but he was also a slave who was unable to rescue his children from bondage even though he “several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose” (5). Similarly, Linda’s grandmother, Martha Horniblow, also a slave, works after hours baking and marketing crackers to the white community, clothing herself and her children from the profits in return for permission from her owner to devote her evening hours to improving the lot of her own family. Though Horniblow, like Brent’s father, saved diligently to purchase her children, her youngest son Benjamin was sold when he was five and the remaining four children were “divided among her master’s children” (6). After she is freed, Horniblow does purchase her oldest son, Phillip, for eight hundred dollars (26), but she is powerless to protect Benjamin from the abuse his owner inflicts on him as retaliation for escaping (23), and her only surviving daughter, Nancy, is a slave until the day of her death (145).

Brent’s father and grandmother are models of the American capitalistic ideal. They are inventive, dedicated to self-improvement, and frugal. Yet, after years of industry and thrift, neither has access to the fundamental American dream of providing a better future for his or her children. Each has, in the entrepreneurial spirit, created his or her own economic opportunity, yet each is barred from reaping the benefits of that success because he or she is a slave, and they are slaves not because they are unskilled and, therefore economically disadvantaged, but because they are black. Race, not economics, determines the future of Brent’s father, her grandmother, and their children and grandchildren. Brent’s father and her grandmother successfully alter their economic condition; but no matter how hard they work or how much money they save they cannot alter their race or that of their children, and they, therefore, cannot change the future they

or their children face. Horniblow and Brent's father's inability to secure the freedom of their children despite their economic success is a forceful argument against any optimistic or romantic reading of *Incidents* that suggests that economic independence is a panacea for the oppression of racism or the key that will unlock the iron fetters of slavery.

Some critics contend that Martha Horniblow's self-proclamation on the auction block is an example of the way that her independent economic endeavors facilitate her liberation. Thomas Lovell argues that Horniblow's boldness results in her freedom "because the townspeople recognize her as an economic agent, as someone who can produce goods that they are willing to pay for, [and] she no longer exists as a good that might be purchased" (13). Carol E. Henderson concurs with Lovell and adds that Horniblow succeeds because she commercializes her reputation through her willingness to *publicly* challenge the conditions of her enslavement (54 emphasis in original). Henderson concludes that Horniblow's boldness in the public sphere is the vehicle through which she "reasserts her claims to personhood by symbolically reappropriating her labor and thus securing her own self-construction of autonomy" (54). Henderson does, however, concede that the "free agency" that Horniblow obtains is "limited in many regards" (54).

Given that Brent repeatedly asserts that she is unwilling to consider herself a commodity (151, 187,199), Brent as narrator is hardly celebrating her grandmother's self-proclamation as a marketable commodity as an appropriate or efficient or even effective vehicle for escaping slavery. Brent certainly champions her grandmother's stubborn refusal to allow her owner, Dr. Flint, to sell her quietly. But Brent's account of Horniblow's unique strategy of resistance offers more insight into the impervious nature

of racism and the powerlessness of those oppressed by race than it does into a slave's potential for uprooting the power vested in slave owners. Once again, Brent shows that a slave cannot work her way out of servitude and that money is an ineffective weapon in the battle to reconfigure the balance of power in a culture where race is the ultimate determinant of social status.

The crowd that witnesses Flint's thwarted attempt to sell Horniblow privately does protest her sale, but the outcry from Horniblow's supposedly benevolent customers is skewed not toward liberation or the interests of Horniblow but toward self interest, a lament perhaps that Horniblow's sale will interfere with their ability to obtain the quality products she provides. Horniblow's patrons call out, "Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell *you*, aunt Marthy? Don't stand there! That is no place for *you*" (11 emphasis in original). They recognize that Horniblow does not belong on the auction block, but they make no assertion that she should be free, suggesting only that she should not be sold. The folks assembled for the auction are obviously aware of Horniblow's contribution to their well-being; they are less aware, it seems of Horniblow's humanity. Brent explains that the crowd is aware of her grandmother's "long and faithful service in the family . . . and the intention of her mistress to leave her free" (11), yet the crowd does not cry out, "Free Aunt Marthy." Instead, they ask incredulously, "Who is going to sell *you*, aunt Marthy?"

Furthermore, while no speculator bids for Horniblow, the fact remains that she is sold as chattel and secures her freedom only because her purchaser, the sister of Horniblow's deceased mistress, "had a big heart overflowing with human kindness" (12). Brent does not offer the account of her grandmother's transition from slave to free

working woman to claim that the respect her grandmother's entrepreneurial energies garnered or her economic success somehow translate into a weapon capable of winning a war against Flint or the institution of slavery. The poignancy in Horniblow's escape from servitude lies in the fact that no matter how much money she accumulated, no matter how much respect she earned as a result of her after-hours industry, she does not "have the right to possess common humanity" (151). Horniblow remains a commodity, and she is *sold* to the highest bidder. Horniblow's public challenge to Flint's authority and the benevolence of Flint's sister-in-law are, however, evidence of Brent's argument throughout her narrative that cunning and cooperation from sympathetic whites are a slave's best allies in the struggle for freedom.

Once Horniblow is free, her entrepreneurial endeavors expand, and she begins to accumulate some of the trappings of middle-class life, yet these tangible accomplishments offer no immunity to the vulnerability inherent in her status as a black woman. Horniblow acquires a "snug little home, surrounded with the necessaries of life," a "grand big oven" (17) that provides products for her customers as well as treats for her children and grandchildren, "some silver spoons . . . [and] an old fashioned buffet" (66). While Horniblow's economic success provides material comforts for her and her family, it is a mistake to assume, as some critics have, that Horniblow has worked her way out of "cultural nothingness" into the middle class when, in the antebellum environment Jacobs delineates, class is subsumed by race. Carol E. Henderson appropriately asserts that Horniblow's home is a site of "subversion and resistance" (54), but I am not as optimistic as Henderson about the effectiveness of Horniblow's resistance.

Pointing to Brent's vivid description of the backlash against African Americans after the Nat Turner rebellion, Henderson concludes that Horniblow escapes the fate of those whose houses were "pillaged and burned to the ground" (55) because of her "class relationship with certain members of the surrounding white community who came to her aid" (55). As Henderson notes, Brent is very careful to inform her readers that the white men who invaded the homes of the African Americans searching for contraband were "low whites" (64) kept "in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation" (64) by the same power structure that oppressed Blacks. Moreover, Henderson admits that Horniblow's inability to shield her home from the marauding whites "underscores the complex nature of social class mobility for virtually all African Americans as the social, political, economic, and legal boundaries between those individuals bond and free collapses under the weight of the pervasive presence of slavery" (55). Despite this assertion, Henderson curiously comes to the conclusion that Horniblow "circumvent[s] these boundaries by transforming her home into a recognizable symbol of economic freedom and, hence, a recognizable symbol of empowerment and control" (55).

Brent does, as Henderson suggests, assert that her family fared better than many African-Americans in that her family lost only some wearing apparel (66), and Brent seems to attribute the avoidance of more serious consequences to the presence of a "white gentleman" (65) who stayed in the house until the search was over. These equivocations on Brent's part, however, are far from asserting that her grandmother's home is a "symbol of empowerment and control" (Henderson 55). To the contrary, Brent claims that *despite* the fact that her grandmother preserved fruit "for many ladies in the town"

and prepared “suppers for parties” (66), Horniblow could not prevent the “low-class” whites from tramping through her house at will.

The limited dialogue between the white intruders and Horniblow offers explicit evidence that neither class nor economic achievement compensates for the vulnerability inherent in cultural inscriptions of race. Upon opening a large trunk filled with bedding and tablecloths, the intruders wonder incredulously, “Where’d the damned niggers git all dis sheet an’ table clarf?” (65). Marking the intellectual gap that separates her from the low-whites, Horniblow responds sarcastically to their mangled diction in impeccable English: “You may be sure we didn’t pilfer ‘em from *your* houses” (65 emphasis in original). Although Horniblow’s sarcasm is surely lost on her auditors, Jacobs’ northern white readers would not have missed the irony in the fact that the speech pattern of Horniblow, a black woman, is standard English, marking her as white, and the dialect of the marauding intruder, a lower-class white, more closely aligns him with the disenfranchised slave population. Furthermore, the household linens Horniblow, a freed slave, acquired as a result of her industry are finer than any that might be found in the houses of those whose claim to intellectual and cultural superiority is based solely on the difference in skin color. Horniblow’s quick retort and the incongruity in the speech patterns shows the intruders and Jacobs’ readers that both race and class are cultural constructs, based on perception and not reality. But while Horniblow is adept at verbally outwitting the intruder, she has no weapon that allows her to circumvent the unwarranted invasion of her home or to challenge the racial epithet hurled at her and her family. Horniblow’s racial identity and the powerlessness inherent therein are immutable facts of

life. Through her own industry, Horniblow changes the economic circumstances of her life; she cannot, however, alter her racially designated social position.

Jacobs highlights Horniblow's rhetorical superiority and her success in providing material comforts for herself and her family, but she makes no claim that these achievements are the means by which African-Americans can access power. The mere fact that Brent includes this "incident" in her narrative points directly to the racial oppression African-Americans encounter when they attempt to capitalize on their industry and intelligence in order to gain control over their own destiny or to create an autonomous "I." Horniblow engages in a verbal repartee with the marauders, but she never challenges their right to invade her home without cause, and she cannot stop them when they "rudely" push the door open and tumble in "like a pack of hungry wolves" (64). And while Brent asserts that the presence of the "white gentleman who was friendly to us" (65) "emboldened" her grandmother, the white gentlemen is a passive entity. His presence may, as Brent implies, have averted further calamity, but he does not intercede on behalf of the family; he simply stands by and watches the invasion. This gentleman may be "friendly"; he may recognize Horniblow's contribution to the community, but he takes no action to insure the sanctity of Horniblow's home, her person, or her family. He is silent as the intruders insult Horniblow by calling her "Mammy," and he remains mute as these men search through trunks, coin boxes, and cupboards purportedly looking for evidence that might link the inhabitants of this house to slave uprisings. But this scavenger hunt in reality does nothing more than provide the lower whites an opportunity to show this spirited black woman that, because of her race,

she is even more powerless than they are and can do nothing to protect her property and her family from the power vested in the dominant white culture.

Contrary to the American patriarch Benjamin Franklin who touted “Industry as a Means of obtaining Wealth and Distinction” (64), Jacobs challenges the ideology that “industry” plays a significant role in establishing subjectivity. Brent’s master, Dr. Flint, is a wealthy plantation owner and a member of the ruling class not because he is industrious but because he, like Franklin, is a white male in a society where access to privilege and power is race and gender specific. Martha Horniblow, on the other hand, is a productive and frugal entrepreneur, but she will never achieve “wealth” or “distinction” because she is a black female. For Horniblow, race creates an impassable barrier between her economic success and access to the privileges accruing to nineteenth-century America’s burgeoning middle class. From her grandmother’s experience, Linda Brent learns that money will not move the racial, social, and political boulders that block the road to freedom and citizenship. In the racially stratified environment Linda Brent and Martha Horniblow inhabit, identity is not the product of what the individual accomplishes by the sweat of her brow but rather is an inherited characteristic. Subjectivity is a social assignation based on skin color or at least the perception of skin color, and neither luck nor pluck offers much leverage in the struggle to circumvent or overcome the racial hierarchy that limits the potential for self actualization.

Brent, therefore, recognizes that she must carve out an alternative path to personhood. Recognizing the futility in attempting to work her way out of bondage either through merit or through labor for wages and, furthermore, refusing to offer even one dollar of her own or her grandmother’s hard-earned cash to purchase her humanity,

Brent develops “cunning ways” that allow her to control the limited resources available to her to achieve physical, intellectual, and emotional freedom. Instead of being faced with the prospect of earning her daily bread in order to achieve independence, Brent’s success or failure in the quest for self-sufficiency hinges on her ability to reconstitute her subjectivity. Linda Brent’s physical, personal, and psychological journey from working capital to working woman depends not on getting a job or on getting the “right” job but on not working—on separating herself from slave labor. Using mental acuity, Brent takes the raw materials of her bondage and forges a proactive self. Because neither class nor capital offers Brent any leverage in her quest for freedom, Brent takes advantage of intuition and intelligence as she wages war against societal claims that she is, as her brother Benjamin explains to her, little more than a dog, football, cattle, everything that’s mean (210). Brent succeeds rather than succumbs because she capitalizes on her intellect and her will, the labor of her mind and not the labor of her body to outwit Flint.

One of the ways that Brent consistently outwits Flint is by making herself unavailable for labor. Harriet Wilson’s young protagonist Frado literally does nothing but work, but Harriet Jacobs’s narrative is striking in that her heroine is practically divorced from the world of work. In fact, Jacobs insistently refuses to allow Linda Brent to be identified as a laboring black body. Inverting the paradigm that Fanny Fern established when she relegated her African-American characters Dinah and Gatty to the washtub and the kitchen, Jacobs belabors the point that Linda Brent will shoulder none of the identities stereotypically reserved for slaves. Although Jacobs never lets her audience forget that Brent is a slave who is subject to the whim and will of her master, Jacobs is also emphatic that Brent is neither a domestic drudge nor a masculinized field hand

because the success of Brent's quest for the privilege of self-authorship depends on her ability to shed both her legal status as a slave and her culturally assigned identity as the slaver's chattel.

Through a series of pre- and post-partum illnesses, Brent removes herself from the culture of forced labor, establishing boundaries between herself and her owner and eliminating any possibility that Flint will profit from her labor. Flint, the only doctor permitted to treat Brent, is initially called to check on Brent's deteriorating health before the birth of her first child, Benjamin. Although Brent asserts that she had been unable to leave her bed for weeks and that she was "very weak and nervous," as soon as Flint enters the room, she "began to scream" (60). Brent's family explains to Flint that her "state was very critical" (60); Brent adds that Flint "had no wish to hasten me out of the world, and he withdrew" (60). Dr. Flint, called by the family to treat his slave, responds in order to protect his investment. Yet he leaves without examining Brent or offering a diagnosis because she screams and because her family tells him that she is "critical."

Although Brent is too sick to leave her bed, too ill to work, her screams are sufficiently vociferous to fend off Flint's efforts to diagnose her illness. Brent's illness appears to render her irrational as her violent reaction to Flint's presence eliminates the possibility that she will receive much-needed medical care. In her weakened, seemingly irrational state, however, Brent accesses power previously unavailable to her. When she convinces Flint that his presence may "hasten" her "out of the world" and that he can best protect his financial stake in her by staying away from her, Brent learns that she can manipulate her enslaver and begins the process of self-determination that eventually leads her out of enslavement. While Ruth Hall's culturally assigned frailty disempowers her,

Linda Brent accesses power through her frailty. Brent's illness allows her to gain the upper hand in the relationship with her master as she forces Flint to realize that any demands he might make on her will decrease her economic value to him. As a result of her poor health, Brent takes control of her body and, to a degree, of Flint's finances.

Enshrouded by the undiagnosed ailment, Brent passively refuses Flint's claim to her body, rejects his efforts to define her extrinsically, and capitalizes on her illness as a vehicle for defining the self. Following Benjamin's birth, Brent remains in bed for "several weeks" and for a year thereafter experiences "chills and fever" (61). During this lengthy period of recuperation, Brent is apparently unavailable for service to the Flint household since, as she explains, "Dr. Flint continued his visits, to look after my health" (61). As a result of her illness, Brent cannot, of course, work. Her inability to work separates her from her enslaver and any expectation that she bear a slave's burden and enables her to begin the process of chipping away at the wall of oppression around her.

This lengthy confinement affords Brent a small but significant opportunity to spar with Flint over access to her body, her intellect, and her emotions. As long as Brent is too fragile to return to the Flint plantation, she and not Flint sets the boundaries of the master-slave relationship. Flint cannot force Brent to return to work since he obviously recognizes that compelling the frail woman to return to work could result in her death, thereby decreasing his stock of slaves. And although Brent in her weakened condition is less able than ever to resist Flint's never-ending sexual advances, Flint is powerless to take advantage of Brent's vulnerability since he well knows that rape could result in pregnancy and pregnancy could further weaken Brent and cause her death.

Defined by her illness, Brent is a slave in name only as her disorder, not her owner, determines the direction of her life. Too ill to work and too frail to attract a lucrative bid on the auction block, Brent momentarily eclipses Flint's domination over her because she has no value as a slave and can, therefore, no longer be considered merchandise. Lying in her sick bed, Brent refuses to accede to Flint's demands by refusing to accept any of the stereotypical identities often used to justify the abject position of women in bondage. Brent will be neither a laboring black body nor her master's whore nor the mother of her master's children. She is unable to serve her master in any way; her master is unable to profit from his ownership of or investment in her. Brent's body suffers under the weight of her illness, but her sense of self as a woman who can direct her own life increases dramatically as illness allows her to master the master.

Her newly claimed identity as a woman beset with illness is a potent ally in her quest for subjectivity as she learns that Flint has no weapon against passive resistance. Protected by the disabling effects of her illness, Brent realizes that in order to do battle with Flint, she simply has to withdraw from the confrontation because the work of claiming the freedom to define the self depends on neither brawn nor force but rather on outwitting the enslaver. Brent's illness debilitates her, but it paralyzes Flint. Flint is well aware that, for the moment, he has no power over his illness-plagued female slave, but he is unaware that, while Brent is too frail either to work for or actively resist him, she is purposefully engaged in the intellectual work of constructing a self.

Throughout the narrative, Jacobs repeatedly asserts that the process of self-reclamation necessitates incrementally redrawing the boundaries around the socially constructed self. Brent refuses to be identified with or to derive her sense of self from

either forced labor or from aggressive resistance to her enslavement. Flint never learns to respect Linda Brent, but he is forced to respect her illness and her delicate condition because of her economic value to him. As long as Brent remains in her sick bed, she maintains ascendancy over Flint by, without the use of force or violence, refusing his claim to her body. Jacobs makes no claim that Brent changes her identity as a slave or escapes the condition of slavery through the protracted confinement after the birth of her children, but illness is a weapon that Brent deploys in the war of self-reclamation she wages against Flint and the institution of slavery. The dis-ease that weakens Brent's body provides the first glimmer of hope that she can, even while enslaved, begin the process of asserting an independent "I."

Brent builds her argument for self-ownership not around the fact that Flint has usurped her labor in order to increase his wealth but rather around the process of dehumanization inherent in the institution of slavery. When Brent takes to her sick bed and when she walks away from the Flint plantation for the last time, she is not protesting the burden of work imposed on her by her owner; she is walking away from the cultural and legal inscription of inferiority that slavery imposes on her. Whether through illness or by hiding in an attic space, Linda Brent becomes adept at insuring that she will not be the "maid of all work" (93) for the Flints and that Flint will not win the war over the access to her body, but she well knows that these solutions to the lack of ownership of her person are in essence trading one prison for another, and she is determined to outwit the slaveholder and slavocracy to secure her freedom.

As a fifteen-year-old, Brent attempts to outmaneuver Flint to protect the integrity of her body by aligning herself with an "unmarried white gentlemen" who appears to be

sympathetic and who wishes to “aid” her (54). Using a mistaken tactic by appropriating the physical body instead of intellect, Brent sacrifices the very integrity she seeks to preserve. By forfeiting her virginity to Mr. Sands, Brent becomes the victim not only of Flint’s lechery and the institution of slavery but also of what she comes to believe were her immoral choices. Critics often point to Brent’s “choice”⁹ of a white gentleman as her lover (54-55) as an act of emancipation, an assertion of moral agency, or an effective strategy of resistance.¹⁰ My reading of this “incident,” however, more closely parallels that of Dana Nelson and Carla Kaplan who find little emancipatory potential in Brent’s account of her liaison with Sands. Nelson argues that Brent’s assertion that “it seemed less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (Jacobs 55) “ironically underscores the fact that her action only redistributes her bondage; she is in fact exploited by *both* men” (Nelson 135). Kaplan questions “describing a black woman’s ‘desperate’ plunge into an affair with a free white man an act of subversion” (287). As both Nelson and Kaplan contend, exploitation, desperation, and the loss of self are the only discernable results of this “choice.”

Brent’s keenly felt sense of moral degradation over having a child out of wedlock is a cost she had not anticipated and one which increased rather than diminished Flint’s

⁹ P. Gabrielle Foreman insightfully notes the complexity of and lack of agency inherent in Brent’s assertion that she “chose” her lover. Foreman concludes, “Brent, in being *forced* to ‘choose’ Sands, is on some levels corrupted . . . she is forced by Dr. Flint’s behavior to submit herself ‘willingly’ to Mr. Sands. Foreman also points out that Brent “never explains how her relationship with Sands precludes the possibility of continued sexual exploitation by her master” (322).

¹⁰ See Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*; Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember*; Jean Fagan Yellin, Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Mary Helen Washington, “Meditations on History: The Slave Woman’s Voice”; Carla L. Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s”; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*; Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*.

hold on her. Brent bleakly summarizes her feelings of devaluation and defeat when she describes her reaction to Flint's attempt to demean her after the birth of her son:

I felt humiliated enough. My unconscious babe was the ever-present witness of my shame. I listened with silent contempt when he talked about my having forfeited *his* good opinion; but I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable. There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life.
(76 emphasis in original)

Brent's own sense of shame and humiliation and not Flint's stinging rebuke diminish her concept of self. She loathes Flint and all that he stands for, but, even more, she loathes herself for sacrificing her self-respect (56, 58, 76) and for contributing two more children to Flint's stock of slaves (61). Jacobs is insistent, however, that her heroine does not freely "choose" this path of moral self-destruction but that it is forced on her by the institution of slavery. Brent is unable to risk, trade, or sacrifice an intact moral self because the institution of slavery denies her that self. The "poisonous grasp" of slavery and not youthful inexperience preclude the possibility that Brent will be "respectable" or "lead a better life."

The affair with Sands provides a first-hand lesson on the unrelenting grip that race and slavery have on Brent's personhood. It is a wrong turn on Brent's journey to self-reclamation and leads to a psychological dead end where she begins to reflect the mirror image of the dominant culture that insists that she is a commodity molded by and for the advance of capitalism. Brent attempts to use her body rather than her intellect to

undermine the power of patriarchy, capitalism, and slavery, and the end result is that she places herself in a position where her identity is derived from her relationship with two white men who claim ownership of her body—Flint as her enslaver, Sands as the father of her children. Law and custom afford Flint the opportunity to maintain his grasp on Brent’s personhood. Brent cedes that power to Sands, however, when she attempts to mitigate the stronghold that slavery has on her by “giving” herself to him.

The irony of Brent’s choice, however, is that her status as a slave precludes the possibility that she can give herself to anyone, even to the free-born carpenter she loves (37-40). Brent’s affair with Sands, therefore, is yet another mark of the improbability of utilizing socially sanctioned processes for constructing a self. Love, marriage, and motherhood are not avenues through which Brent can assert a volitional self. Any chance that Brent has for realigning the boundaries between self, slavery, and patriarchy lies in her ability to upset the balance of power through the use of “subterfuge” and “crooked ways” (165) because anything she produces with the labor of her body, even her own children, can and will, as the affair with Sands aptly demonstrates, be used to further entrap her and to diminish her agency. For Linda Brent, the work of claiming personhood is a process of performing contrary to the expectations of her enslaver, her community, and even her family. Moving forward in her project of self-creation, Brent contests normative prescriptions for race and gender by making them work for rather than against her. Brent becomes the author of her own life script by refusing to play either the socially scripted role of a slave or a marginalized and racialized woman, mother or granddaughter.

Though Brent stumbles and falls when she believes the profession of affection of the “eloquent and educated gentleman” (54), the subsequent account of her flight to freedom offers clear evidence that she becomes well schooled in the art of cunning. Describing her escape from the Flint household, Brent initially uses imagery that suggests fear and the potential for failure. She explains that it was so dark that she “could see nothing,” that the “darkness bewildered” her, and that she “groped” her way to the road (97). Stumbling blindly into the unknown, Brent appears to have no (in)sight into the journey that lies before her, appears to be little different from the impulsive, young naïf that plunged headlong into the affair with Sands believing he would deliver her to freedom.

As soon as she finds the road, however, a marked change in her vocabulary signifies an awakening to her own potential that she had not heretofore experienced. No longer groping in the dark, Brent “*rushed* towards town with almost *lightning* speed” (97 emphasis mine). Brent jumps out of a window at the Flint plantation into the dark, still carrying the fear and reticence of her youth on her shoulders, but she leaves inexperience behind and strikes out on the path to freedom as a wise and wary adult focused on reclaiming and recreating herself. The escaped slave running at “lightning speed” toward freedom now knows that she must liberate herself and that liberation depends on her ability to outsmart the enslaver.

Brent’s most effective strategy for taking back the self involves a series of role reversals, creating a confusing but empowering disparity between the role she is expected to play and the role she does play. For example, after her escape, Flint looks first for Brent at her grandmother’s because he assumes that, as a devoted mother and

granddaughter, her flight was motivated by the desire to be near her family. Brent does go directly to her grandmother's after walking away from the Flints', but she stops only long enough to look in on her children and to arrange for her clothes to be moved from her own trunk to that of woman who lives with her grandmother. Flint searches Horniblow's house early the next morning based on the assumption that, because Brent's children are with Horniblow, Brent "cannot be far off" (97). But the good mother cannot be found.

Flint is confounded by his belief that Brent's only motive for escaping is her children, but he continues to scour Horniblow's house looking for any hint of Brent's whereabouts. The evidence he finds, however, carefully orchestrated by Brent, leads him further astray. After discovering Brent's empty trunk, Flint concludes that she must be on a northbound ship, but a thorough search of all ships in port also fails to produce his property. Brent remains beyond Flint's reach by refusing to play the role of either a loving mother or a typical runaway slave. Not only is she not hovering over her children, she also did not carry them off with her. And although she ran away from her master, she apparently decided not to attempt to secure her liberty by traveling north to a nonslaveholding state.

Using this strategy, Brent effectively eludes Flint, but the roles that Brent are forced to adopt, that of an uncaring mother and that of a recluse in her own hometown, offer little leeway for mapping out the path to self ownership. Brent is barred from nurturing her children because they could easily become the bait the slave catcher uses to return her to bondage. On the other hand, Brent is a caring mother who cannot simply crawl into the belly of a ship heading north and sail to freedom leaving her children

behind. Although Brent is far from free, she has won the first round of this game of hide ‘n seek simply because she outfoxes Flint. Refusing to play the socially prescribed role of a loving mother and refusing to slip into the role of a runaway slave, Brent becomes that which will ensure her survival—the mistress of deception. Using disguise and deceit, Brent embarks on a path of self-reclamation and self-determination.

Placing herself beyond Flint’s reach is the first step toward freedom, but it is only a step as Flint’s zeal to recapture his prey forces Brent into the nether reaches of society. Devoting all of her resources to avoiding capture, Brent is in many ways still controlled by Flint. Because each day is filled with the terror that she may be discovered and returned to the plantation, Brent cannot begin to think about taking steps to achieve her goal of becoming “a useful woman and good mother” (133), but psychologically she is moving perceptibly away from victimization toward victory.

Brent inadvertently gains a small but meaningful victory over Flint via role reversal when a window in the attic where she is hiding is fortuitously situated so as to allow her to look down on Flint as he passes on the street below. Whereas heretofore Brent was at all times subject to Flint’s controlling and invasive gaze (28), now Brent can gaze on Flint with impunity. Securely ensconced behind a locked door, Brent lies on a “pile of feather beds” where she “commands a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office” (100). Brent admits that she is “anxious,” but she feels a “gleam of satisfaction” when she sees Flint pass, and she boasts that she had thus far “outwitted” him and “triumphed” over it¹¹ (100). Although locked in a cramped attic space with few

¹¹Brent provides no direct antecedent for the pronoun “it.” Perhaps she is making a politically bold claim that she has triumphed not simply over one man but also over hegemony or the entire institution of slavery.

comforts, Brent notes that she goes to sleep each night with the feeling that she is “for the present the most fortunate slave in town” (100).

To have the privilege of looking at Flint when he cannot react to or return her gaze empowers Brent. When Flint commanded her presence, she had the advantage of being able to “turn from him with disgust and hatred” (27) or “openly express [her] contempt for him” (32), but now Flint is powerless to respond to or deflect Brent’s controlling gaze. She looks down on him; he cannot look up and see her because he is blind to the fact that she is so near. At the same time that Flint is actively and aggressively searching for Brent, she has already found him. In a masterful and ironic role reversal, the slave has caught her enslaver, and he has no chance of escaping because he is unaware that he has been ensnared.

Although Brent gains no legal or political advantage as she sits in the attic watching the unsuspecting Flint, she acquires a decided personal and psychological advantage over Flint and the institution of slavery. The language that Brent uses to describe her experience in the attic is indicative of a woman who is gaining the upper hand in the battle to claim her personhood. Brent is subject rather than object as she “commands” a view, as she experiences a “gleam of satisfaction,” as she asserts that she has “triumphed” over and “outwitted” her persecutor, and as she declares that she is a “fortunate slave.” The language of conquest and optimism in this narrative shift indicates that Brent is leaving behind the woman who once believed that “death is better than slavery” (62). Brent is a long way from being free, but she has seized control of the relationship with Flint and, more importantly, her own life. Within the confines of this attic space, Brent moves closer to achieving her goal of becoming self-governing because

ironically while she is *not* working, Flint is working diligently to find her. Because a slave's value is dependent on her productive labor, Brent's lack of productivity, her ability to lie quietly and do nothing more than gaze out the window, becomes her greatest ally in the battle of wits with Flint. By not working, Brent diminishes her economic value to her owner and moves closer to the time when she will reap the economic rewards of her labors.

On two occasions, Brent's role-playing takes the form of a disguise that enables her to move from one hiding place to the next. In the first instance, Brent offers no description of the disguise that she wears when she leaves the home of a good friend to go to the attic of the white benefactress. She says simply, "I disguised myself, summoned up courage to meet the worst, and went to the appointed place" (100). While the disguise momentarily transforms Brent's appearance, the circumstance under which she is forced to move casts her back into the role of the fleeing slave who jumped out of the window and groped her way to the road when she left the Flints'. Brent describes the arrangements for her remove and her reaction to them:

I received a message to leave my friend's house at such an hour, and go to a certain place where a friend would be waiting for me. As a matter of prudence no names were mentioned. I had no means of conjecturing who I was to meet, or where I was going. I did not like to move thus blindfolded, but I had no choice. (100)

Not physically blindfolded but groping in the dark because she has no knowledge of the specifics of the plans crafted on her behalf, Brent becomes the willing but wary pawn of the cunning of others. Brent's friends, however, are as shrewd as she is. In a second

ironic plot twist, Brent, the runaway slave, is secured in the house of a white woman who owns a number of slaves in her own name and whose husband “held many slaves, and bought and sold slaves” (99).

Once again, defying logic but demonstrating an overabundance of shrewdness, Brent does the unexpected. Aided by the sympathetic mistress of this household, the mistress of deception hides in the last place Flint would think to look—the home of a man who makes his living buying and selling human flesh. Although Flint passes this house on the way to the office each day and although he visits the house to borrow money for a trip north to find Brent, he never asks to search the property and does not inquire to see if anyone has seen his runaway. Flint does not seek Brent at the trader’s house because he is searching for a runaway slave, but Brent is not simply running away from Flint. She is attempting to escape both her status and her identity as a slave. To escape her legal status, she need only strike out for northern territories. To escape the identity, however, necessitates transforming herself from a slave to a woman, a fete she accomplishes through a series of victories over Flint. In this instance, the closer Brent is to her enslaver, the farther away she moves from being a slave.

Brent’s next foray into the world of disguise and deception is a transitional moment that she playfully describes as an act of (re)creation. With the help of her friend Betty, Brent dresses as a sailor and strolls through her hometown in order to return to her grandmother’s house where she will cocoon in a cramped crawl space over a storage room for the next seven years. Before striking out on her brief journey, Brent receives a tip from Betty who tells her, “Put your hands in your pockets, and walk rickety, like de sailors” (112). Adapting quite handily to her new role, Brent remarks: “I *performed* to

her satisfaction” (112 emphasis mine). After venturing out on the first leg of her journey, Brent comments somewhat cautiously: “I passed several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise” (112). On the second leg of her journey, Brent enhances her disguise and moves with confidence. She “blackened [her] face with charcoal” (113) and went “*boldly* through the streets,” again passing several people she knew, and even more significantly, brushing against “the father of [her] children” who “had no idea who it¹² was” (113 mine).

It seems almost disingenuous for Brent to ask her audience to believe that with a change of clothes, a slight postural realignment, and a modified gait she is so artfully disguised that acquaintances no longer recognize her, that the much-sought-after runaway slave described in Flint’s handbill can now freely stroll through her community, that she has, as Lauren Berlant argues, become invisible (230). But that is exactly what she is asking as she once again attempts to convince her audience that life chances are determined not by aptitude or attitude but by race and gender. Brent plays with gender as she recreates herself as a man and immediately gains access to privileges that were heretofore unavailable to her. When Brent puts on the sailor’s uniform, she reaffirms her initial claim that slaves are made and not born, but she is reversing the process. She is carving out a cultural space where a slave can become a woman, but the irony of Brent’s argument is that she must become a man with a blackened face before she can re-establish ownership of herself as a mulatto woman. Berlant encapsulates the seeming irrationality of Brent’s rationale when she writes, “A juridically black woman whose

¹² Once again, Brent seems deliberately to use the nonspecific pronoun “it” to her narrative advantage as the sailor Sands encounters is neither “she,” Brent nor “he,” the male manifested by the clothing and the walk.

experience of slavery as a mulatta parodies the sexual and domestic inscription of whiteness moves away from slavery by recrossing the bar of race and assuming the corporeal shroud of masculinity” (230).

Brent mocks the ideologies of race and gender upon which her identity and her legal status have been situated, refusing both for one final time, and begins to experiment with identities that have more cultural cachet. The female slave who could not escape the lechery of her owner now “performs” as a male, and no one looks askance. The female slave who refused to be identified as a laboring black body adopts the persona of a wage-earning, free black male, and neither neighbor nor slave catcher ponders the similarities between the newly arrived, nameless sailor and Martha Horniblow’s granddaughter who recently disappeared from the Flint household.

Jacobs is not suggesting that the townspeople were overly gullible and therefore easily duped or that, at a time when Flint is offering a three-hundred-dollar reward for her return, this slaveholding community suddenly became sympathizers. She is arguing, however, that cultural inscriptions of femaleness and blackness are assigned and not innate and can, therefore, with sufficient shrewdness be refused or manipulated to one’s advantage. Although only a fleeting performance and not a transformation, Brent’s experiment with freedom is an integral part of the process of (re)creating or (re)claiming personhood. If Brent can “choose” to be a free, black male, even if only temporarily, then, no matter what hardships she must endure, she will “choose” to be a free, black female who works her way into subjectivity by refusing the legal or cultural identities that ideologies of race or gender inscribe on her and by constructing an alternative, self-fashioned “I.”

Although an unlikely venue, Brent's enclosure in the garret over her grandmother's storehouse provides fertile soil for the emergence of a self-authorizing woman who engages in purposeful, constructive activity. Prior to her retreat to the garret, Brent had limited choice in the direction her life took as all of her creative energies were funneled into crafting plans to avoid Flint and his henchmen. Once in the garret, however, Brent's security is assured because although Horniblow's house was the first place Flint looked for Brent immediately after her escape, the grandmother's house is now "the last place they thought of" (117).

In the relative safety of the garret, Brent makes strides toward achieving her goal of becoming both "useful" and "good" (133). She continues to work, but her activities are self-initiated and she owns the products of her labor. She reads and sews clothing for her children's Christmas, and she gains enough self-confidence to confront Sands and convince him to buy her children. Although she is not physically reunited with her children, Brent is comforted by hearing their voices and having a glimpse of them as they play and by visits from and conversations with uncle Phillip, aunt Nancy, and her grandmother.

Even though Brent's opportunity for self-actualization is severely circumscribed because legally she remains Flint's slave, her activities in the garret are self-directed and in many ways fulfilling because, when she works, she is working for herself. Carla Kaplan critiques liberatory or emancipatory readings of Brent's "self-imprisonment and living death in the coffin-like garret" (287). Kaplan asserts that "such conclusions risk suggesting that power is easily subverted and reversed . . ." and overlook Jacobs' argument throughout the narrative that Brent is unable to "'subvert' her status, 'assault'

her master's domination, wage '*effective combat*', or '*reverse*' the power structures that bind her" (287 emphasis in original). I agree with Kaplan that Jacobs offers no evidence that Brent is ever fully emancipated or liberated, certainly not when she is entombed in the garret and not even when she settles in the north where she works as a serving maid to Mrs. Bruce, a relationship that, as Nelson points out, is "one of hierarchy, not equality" (141). While in the garret, however, Brent has more autonomy and enjoys more intellectual freedom and emotional comfort than ever before.

Brent does not, as Kaplan points out, "reverse the power structures that bind her" (287), but she does gain a psychological advantage over Flint during her stay in the garret when she uses her newly claimed agency to undermine Flint's efforts to reclaim her. While in her retreat, Brent has the "satisfaction" of peeping (116) at Flint as he makes his way to the steamboat for yet another trip to the "Free States" to search for her. But she is no longer content to sit passively and gaze at Flint's folly as he passes to and fro; she begins to assert the newly found autonomy the confines of the garret guarantee her in order to further diminish Flint's hold on her.

Brent manufactures proof that she has fled to the north, thereby effectively convincing Flint to abandon his search for her in the south and, at the same time, making him reluctant to pursue her in the north. By writing letters to Flint and to her grandmother telling them that she is living in Boston and by having a friend mail them from New York, Brent stymies Flint's search for her and amuses herself with Flint's bumbling efforts to conceal his consternation over her obvious success at outwitting him. She revels in the "comedy" (130) she has orchestrated when she watches Flint expose

himself as a liar when he reads his rewritten version of one of her letters to her grandmother.

Brent's letters provide more than amusement however. They create a barrier between her and Flint that he cannot penetrate. Flint believes these letters offer irrefutable evidence that Brent has escaped the slave hunters' noose and is securely settled in the north; he will not, therefore, expend time and energy searching for her in the south. With a series of letters, Brent asserts her autonomy and takes control of, begins to direct, and ultimately thwarts her owner's search for her. While sitting passively in her grandmother's garret, Brent becomes the subject instead of the object of this hunting party by telling Flint where to find her, well knowing that he won't "*choose to go to Boston for her*" (129 emphasis mine).

Not only has Brent taken control of Flint's search for her, but the "delusion" (132) her letters create further diminishes Flint's power because it weakens his confidence in his ability to enforce his claim to her. Flint is unwilling to meet Brent on what he now believes is her own turf because he is afraid to confront the "damned abolitionists" (131) in Boston. He attempts to persuade Brent's uncle Phillip to make the trip and convince Brent to return, but Phillip only intensifies Flint's fear and the effectiveness of Brent's ruse when he tells the already anxiety-ridden slave hunter that "from what he had heard of Massachusetts, he [Flint] should be mobbed if he went there after a runaway slave" (130). Although Flint writes a letter to the mayor of Boston inquiring about Brent's whereabouts, Flint never travels to Boston to reclaim his property and Brent wryly notes that if she

had dated from New York, the old man would probably have made another journey to that city. But even in the dark region, where knowledge is so carefully excluded from the slave, I had heard enough about Massachusetts to come to the conclusion that slaveholders did not consider it a comfortable place to go to in search of a runaway (131).

Hiding in the last place Flint would think to look, Brent sends letters that taunt Flint by directing him to look in the last place he would go. Flint has become the hostage in this high-stakes game of freedom, but unlike Brent who was all too aware of Flint's control over her, Flint is unaware that he is now the object and his slave the subject of this chase. In other words, Brent is leading and Flint is following.

Brent takes advantage of her physical proximity to Flint to establish a psychological gulf between them, a gulf that ultimately he cannot bridge. Flint is blinded by the facts of the narrative Brent hands him in her letters. Unaware that Brent has psychologically eclipsed his domination of her by (re)claiming her personhood, Flint cannot imagine that Brent is no longer running from him, that she sees and knows all without being seen or known, that she is so near that were he more intuitive her escape would be impossible. Brent is beyond Flint's reach because she has psychologically manipulated him to convince him that she is hiding in a city that is hostile to his aims. In her discussion of the realignment of the distribution of power between Brent and Flint during Brent's seven-year stay in the garret, Michelle Burnham points out that Brent's "unexpected leverage over her master follows solely from her fortuitous habitation in the loophole. Her resultant access to agency is a circumstance of which Jacobs [Brent], it seems, becomes only gradually aware, and which she begins only cautiously to exploit"

(59). When Brent writes not one but a series of letters to Flint, she is beyond “cautiously” exploiting her agency; she is boldly asserting the limited freedom she has, freedom that allows her to capitalize on Flint’s fear of abolitionists.

Whether in the attic of the white benefactress or in the crawl space over her grandmother’s storeroom, Brent takes advantage of her invisibility to manipulate her enslaver. By raising the specter of the possibility of a confrontation with abolitionists, Brent insures that Flint will stay close at hand where she can monitor his activities. Brent does not reverse the balance of power, but she does destabilize it and, in the process, continues to make strides toward claiming autonomy.

Throughout her narrative, Brent continually renegotiates¹³ her relationship with Flint as a necessary part of the process of shedding her cultural identity as working capital and asserting a self-fashioned identity. While Brent becomes adept at manipulating Flint with the limited resources she has, the narrative resolution to her quest for personhood is problematic and complex. Jacobs, however, does not limit her critique of antebellum racism to Brent’s experiences in the south. She, in fact, forcefully argues that racial ideologies are as firmly entrenched in the north as they are in the south and that, as a result, Brent’s dream of becoming self-directed and self-sufficient is never completely fulfilled. Brent finally escapes to the north, but for many years she lives in fear as both Flint and his heirs relentlessly pursue her with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act on their side. And Brent is freed only after her employer successfully negotiates to purchase her from the Flint family.

¹³ Historian Ira Berlin explains that slavery was a negotiated relationship, as much a process as an institution. Berlin concludes: “Slavery was never made, but was instead was continually remade, for power—no matter how great—was never absolute, but was always contingent” (3).

Brent soon recognizes that legal freedom is not a panacea for the social and economic limitations born of northern racism. The north, Brent finds, is a place where “colored people are required to pay for the privilege” of riding in a “filthy box” behind the white people on a train (162), where her hardworking son is insulted and abused by fellow workers after they discover that he is “colored” (186), where “cruel prejudice . . . discourages the feelings, and represses the energies of the colored people” (176). In the north, racial prejudice and hatred take the place of slavery as the socially acceptable means of oppression and marginalization.

Brent worked tirelessly within the confines of her bondage to (re)claim her personhood, to, as Mitchell argues, become “self-defined as a person capable of choosing a course of action, of defining her role in life, of reclaiming control over her environment through her deliberate choice . . . “ (38), and, even after her escape, she continues to labor under the weight of northern prejudice. Brent works for a wage in the north, but the only position available to her is as a nurse to the children of a successful white family, and although she expresses great affection for her employer, Mrs. Bruce, Brent also somewhat sardonically notes that she is no longer forced to ride in the Jim Crow car because she is “*in servitude* to the Anglo-Saxon race” (176 emphasis mine). Although Brent had become adept at waging war against slavery, but she has no weapon for combating the prejudice of the free states.

In a scathing critique of both slavery and northern attitudes about race, Brent contends that she escapes her marginalized status only by traveling to England where, she asserts,

For the first time in my life I was in a place where I was treated according to my deportment, without reference to my complexion. I felt as if a great millstone had been lifted from my breast. . . . I laid my head on my pillow, for the first time, with the delightful consciousness of pure, unadulterated freedom. (183)

Through the examples of her grandmother and her father, Brent contends that slaves cannot work their way out of bondage. Her life work then becomes establishing herself as an independent entity capable of resisting the control her enslaver exerts over her. Brent becomes the mistress of deception and successfully outwits Flint. Brent's experience of race in the north, however, convinces her that no matter how much independence she asserts, she will never be able either to outwit or overcome socially acceptable and legally sanctioned racial prejudice.

Brent ends her narrative on a cautious note. She celebrates her hard-won freedom and that of her children but adds: "We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition" (201 emphasis in original). Brent now earns a salary for her work as a nurse, and she uses the money to clothe and educate her children and that is, as she admits, a "vast improvement" in her condition. But Brent is not particularly optimistic about the future of her country. In a country where slavery exists, none, not even the white people of the north, are free, and, although she has escaped bondage, she is concerned about the future of her children who are victimized by racial antipathies and denied access to education and employment. Brent argues that no matter how clever or cunning, women oppressed by race will never be able to claim a

space where access to work also provides access to economic self-sufficiency and social acceptance.

The success of work performed by nineteenth-century black women of necessity depended on the work the country needed to do to rid itself of ideologies of race and the prejudices inherent therein. Brent, like her grandmother and her father, successfully changes the circumstance of her life, but she is unable to alter or escape the cultural inscriptions of race that impede free expression of the independent “I” she so artfully crafted in the war with Flint. Brent concludes her narrative with the poignant lament that she has not yet realized her dream: “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble” (201). Brent is a free black living in the north, but she is not a free woman, for her racialized status will forever impinge upon the potential to make her dreams become reality. Brent escapes from slavery only to discover that there is no place in antebellum America where black women can experience “pure, unadulterated freedom.” The role that individual effort and merit play in the quest for personhood is circumscribed by the greed of capitalism, the stronghold patriarchy maintains to protect its power, and the ever-pervasive power of racism to marginalize human beings based on perceived inherent differences emanating from skin color.

Though Wilson and Jacobs endow their heroines with the attributes of an American self-made man, Frado and Brent fall short of matching the much-ballyhooped success of their male counterpart Frederick Douglass, who after he single-handedly wrests his manhood from the tightly clenched fist of slavery earns respect and accolades in America and abroad as an influential orator, editor, and essayist. Douglass escapes

physical and emotional oppression when he refuses to be cowed by overseer Covey.

Frado and Brent, however, never experience a similar epochal moment of taking back the self. Instead, their trek from object to subject is one of incremental steps as they struggle for neither wealth nor public recognition but simply for the opportunity to construct an independent identity that is worthy of self-respect and that commands the respect of others.

Laboring Ladies and Self-Fashioning (Im)Possibilities in
The Lowell Offering and *An Idyl of Work*

Next to the obligations which woman owes directly to her God, are those arising from her relation to the family institution. That *home* is her appropriate and appointed sphere of action there cannot be a shadow of doubt; for the dictates of nature are plain and imperative on this subject, and the injunctions given in Scripture no less explicit.

—Mrs. A. J. Graves, *Woman in America*

But this was waste,—this woman faculty / Tied to machinery, part
of the machine / That wove cloth, when it might be clothing hearts /
And minds with queenly raiment.

— Lucy Larcom, *An Idyl of Work*

The experiences and the social and economic status of the women Fanny Fern, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson delineate are diverse, and their successes and failures are mediated by an array of cultural forces. But their stories are in many ways cohesive as each challenges the subservient position of women in society and the resulting lack of access to autonomy and economic sufficiency. Through their protagonists, Fern and Phelps expose the suffocating impact of the cult of domesticity. With a supporting cast of workingwomen, Fern and Phelps reveal the insidious role that class plays in social typecasting and in limiting human potential. Jacobs and Wilson, on the other hand, show how the dominant culture manipulates race and gender to disenfranchise and dehumanize black women.

None of these authors accepts the status quo. Fern glosses over the role that class plays in facilitating the success of her heroine and in limiting alternatives available to the working-class women who hover helpfully behind Ruth Hall. But Fern's critique of gender prescriptions anticipates and complements the literary cacophony that Phelps, Jacobs, and Wilson create when their heroines refuse to accept the premise that social hierarchies are natural and inevitable. According to these authors, the societal mandate that women accept a position of self-sacrificial submission and dependence has the potential to cause permanent emotional and intellectual disfigurement so debilitating that it compromises a woman's ability to maintain herself and her children. Women, therefore, according to these authors, have an obligation to expose and topple the social constructs of race, class, and gender that foster dependence and unapologetically take control of their own destiny.

Contributors to *The Lowell Offering*, a collection of stories, fictional letters, essays, and poems published between 1840 and 1845, and Lucy Larcom, author of *An Idyl of Work*, an extended blank-verse poem, take a decidedly different approach to nineteenth-century ideologies of class and gender that impinge on women's access to an autonomous "I." Because the workingwomen delineated in these texts are unmarried, earn enough to be economically self-sufficient, and live in boardinghouses away from the watchful eye of father, brother, or mother, they have, in many ways, greater access to self-authorizing alternatives than either Ruth Hall or Avis Dobell and certainly more than Linda Brent or Frado. In their representations of America's first blue-collar females, however, contributors to *The Offering* and Larcom in *An Idyl* rely on the precepts of the Cult of True Womanhood and domesticity to provide the definitive answer to the

question of who and how a woman should be. These literary portraits suggest that for a woman to define herself other than by a calling to a life of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity is to define herself an unnatural. Furthermore, for a woman to admit that she is motivated by ambition or acquisitiveness or that work is means by which she will claim independence is to orchestrate her own social death.

The female textile factory worker that Larcom and writers for the *Offering* delineate aspires either to return to the domestic sphere or to enter self-sacrificial public service. Larcom and authors for *The Offering* remain so mired in the ideologies of class and gender that they are unable to acknowledge the great social and economic chasm that separates their workingwomen from ladies of leisure or the deleterious effects of these ideologies on women who earn their own daily bread. Both Larcom and contributors to *The Offering* are loath to admit that a workingwoman is just that—a workingwoman—as they attempt to convince the public that the life of the factory girl is one of privilege, a life defined by choices that the working girl in reality does not have.

The female operatives portrayed defend a female self premised on a middle-class ideal that has little relevance to the material circumstances and lived experience of themselves and their co-workers. Alice Kessler-Harris identifies the dilemma that faced female authors who sought to represent workingwomen in the face of nineteenth-century ideologies that asserted that respectable women did not work for wages. According to Kessler-Harris, as a result of industrialization and the cultural mandate that “respectable” women’s place was in the home, “more women than ever before aspired to display the attributes of the ‘lady’—elegant dress, servants, and the absence of an economic contribution to household maintenance. These requirements excluded from respectability

most women who had to work in the paid labor force and created for them a set of perhaps unattainable aspirations centered on the family” (53). Neither the *Offering* nor Larcom critique those “unattainable aspirations,” however, choosing instead to write the operative into middle-class respectability using the rhetoric of domesticity and sentimentality. In their zeal to show that the New England factory girl is no kin of the degraded female factory worker in Great Britain¹⁴ and that a woman can be both a wage-earner and a lady, the workingwoman these authors represent more nearly resembles a middle-class lady of leisure than an autonomous, self-sufficient breadwinner.

Both contributors to the *Offering* and Lucy Larcom were apparently very sensitive to and structured much of what they wrote as a refutation of nineteenth-century class-based prejudices that impugned women who worked for wages. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner explains that in the nineteenth century a woman could not be both a wage-earner and a lady. According to Lerner, “When female occupations, such as carding, spinning and weaving, were transferred from home to factory, the poorer women followed their traditional work and became industrial workers. The women of the middle and upper classes could use their newly gained time for leisure pursuits: they became ladies” (190). Similarly, labor historian Eric Foner, in his discussion of the impact of industrialism on the status of nineteenth-century women, maintains that a “lifestyle of genteel leisure became a status symbol and was held up as an ideal for all women” and that, as a result, “women of the growing wage work force” were “looked down upon for

¹⁴ Former operative and *Offering* contributor, Harriet H. Robinson, explained in a history of the mill girls published in 1898 that “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 character; she was represented as subjected to influences that could not fail to destroy her purity and self respect” (37).

having to work . . . (xxi). The “ideal” of a life of leisure is, of course, not realistic for women who work in a textile mill, but instead of focusing on the “real” that informs the life of a female operative, *An Idyl of Work* and *The Lowell Offering* attempt to claim ladyhood for the working girl by denying her working-class status.

Operative Sarah G. Bagley, a former contributor to *The Offering*¹⁵ and a vociferous critic of working conditions in the mills and abuses suffered by factory workers, condemned the *Offering* for its lack of relevance to the lives of workingwomen and for what she asserted was a decidedly pro-corporation stance. During a speech at a July 4, 1845, gathering of 2,000 workingmen and women from New England, Bagley complained that this magazine “was not the voice of the Operatives—it gave a false representation to the truth—it was controlled by the manufacturing interest to give a gloss to their inhumanity, and anything calling in question the factory system, or a vindication of operative’s rights was neglected” (qtd. in Foner 60). Bagley also charged that the *Offering* “neglected the operative as a working being” (qtd. in Eisler 40). Harriet Farley, editor of *The Offering*, responded to Bagley’s attack by explaining that the intention of the *Offering* is to “elevate[s] the character of the operatives, and remove[s] the unjust prejudice against them” (64). Farley further argued that although their tactics are different, both she and Bagley share the goal of “rais[ing] the operative” (65).

Farley and co-contributors to the *Offering* attempt to “raise” the operative by whitewashing their composite of the factory work so that it appears to be an industrial

¹⁵ Bagley’s 1840 article for the *Offering*, “Pleasures of Factory Life,” provided a very complimentary behind-the-scenes look of a textile mill and the life of its employees. By 1845, however, Bagley was “the editor of the most militant factory magazine, writing sarcastically about the lack of any pleasure for the operatives (Kolmerten 908). See analysis of “Pleasures of Factory Life” below.

utopia and by claiming that the female operative is motivated solely by altruism, but I do not believe, as Bagley charged, that the women who wrote for the *Offering* were co-opted by corporate politics or abandoned the truth in order to court the favor of management. Historian Ann Douglas explains that although Farley failed to mention in “autobiographical revelations sprinkled . . . amid her editorials” (70) that she was “extra-salaried by Amos Lawrence, one of the most influential shareholders in the Lowell operation . . . it is too easy to assume . . . that Farley was bought and sold” (70). Douglas adds that Farley was insistent that “her purpose had been to win respect for the class to which she belonged” (70).

Farley’s use of the word “class” in her explanation is the key to understanding the disparity between the glamorized representation of the factory girl as sentimental heroine in both the *Offering* and Larcom’s *Idyl of Work* and the glimpses of the stark reality that occasionally find their way into both texts. None of these authors had, as Douglas accurately contends, been “bought and sold” by the corporation. They had, however, been bought and sold by the ideologies of class and gender, by the belief that that “ladies” did not work for wages and that the only way to salvage the character of women who did work for wages was to deny their working-class identity and offer readers a glimpse of women whose values and lifestyle directly mirror those of the selfless, middle-class domestic maven.

Of course, the most significant difference between the Bagley and Farley or Larcom representation of the New England factory girl is that Bagley was an activist and her rhetoric is grounded in realism because she was politically motivated. Farley and Larcom, on the other hand, offer fictional representations and make no claims that they

are doing otherwise. Having analyzed the private letters that mill girls sent home, historian Thomas Dublin, pinpoints a significant disparity between what the authors of fiction offered readers and how the women explained themselves to their families. For example, while articles in the *Offering* persistently maintain that the operative's wages are destined to rescue her family from financial doom, Dublin shows that private letters offer convincing evidence that many of the operatives used their wages to improve their own lot—to save for a dowry, to buy clothes, to educate herself rather than her siblings. Dublin concludes that the writers for the *Offering* are “not entirely trustworthy” and that “the private letters of mill workers are more believable than the published showpieces” (23).

As Dublin claims, that private letters are likely to offer more realistic insights into the motivations of these early blue-collar women. However, the reading public did not have access to these letters and the mill girl the middle class got to know was the literary working girl. In her analysis of literature by and about working-class women between 1820 and 1870, Amahl Amireh identifies the cultural significance of the fictional mill girl: “Even though the images of seamstresses and factory workers we encounter in texts may not correspond to ‘reality’, they are nevertheless ‘real’ in the sense that they formed an integral part of the way writers and readers experienced their material reality” (xiii). Furthermore, as Amal Amireh points out, the literature in the *Offering*, written in the form of letters or tours through the factory, is particularly persuasive because the letters were “supposedly written” and the fictitious tours were purportedly conducted by factory girls themselves (14).

To dismiss these fictional portraits as Dublin does because they are “not trustworthy” is to minimize the power of literature to shape reality. My goal, in fact, in this chapter is to interrogate the relationship between representations of the mill girl within the pages of *The Lowell Offering* and *An Idyl of Work* with an eye on the pervasive role that gender and class play in these representations and the resulting ideologies surrounding the nineteenth-century social phenomenon “workingwoman.” The end result, I maintain, is that these literary efforts to recuperate the social standing of the female operative show that a workingwoman must choose between asserting her right to be self-authorized and being a lady and that a “good” girl will always choose to be a lady. As a result, the wage-earning women represented in these texts appear to be neither ambitious nor competitive and they are not motivated by the desire or the necessity for economic self-improvement. Work is, therefore, portrayed as a peripheral rather than central component of a woman’s life, unnecessary for either self-definition or of self-preservation.

In their attempt to rescue the operative from the swirl of negative publicity, contributors to the *Offering* begin by painting an all-too-obvious layer of whitewash over the setting for their tales of factory life, domesticating the workplace so as to make it conducive for preserving femininity. Articles in the *Offering* provide a bird’s eye view of the physical plant that belies any notion that that industrialization is a dehumanizing force or that these female wage earners are apt to suffer the same fate as Melville’s maids who are “pale-blue,” “blank-looking girls” “mutely and cringingly” enslaved to an “iron animal” (889) or become “living machines” that answer to the “clang of a bell” (*Offering* 160). Often the factory setting these authors describe is a place where the built

environment and nature exist in harmony, creating a pastoral Idyl that bears a striking and nostalgic resemblance to the operative's country home.

An editorial published in the *Offering* in 1840 entitled "Plants and Flowers in the Mills" shows that the factory setting, like the parental home, is structured to reinforce the female operative's natural inclination for piety and purity. The author of the editorial boasts that in the dressing room of the "Boott Corporation," there are "over 200 pots of plants and flowers!" (65) and encourages owners to make certain that "every room be generously supplied" (65) with these "children of nature" (65). The editorial adds that flowers "ornament the mills" (65) and suggests that corporate participation in a project of beautification "would confer a favor on the factory population, and indirectly benefit themselves" (66).

The benefit to the corporation is not, as might be expected, that the employees will be more satisfied with their work because their surroundings are pleasant and that the workers will, therefore, be more productive or more likely to make a long-term commitment to their company. The corporation will benefit, the editorial asserts, because plants in the factory are moral insurance that guarantees the working girl will not lose touch with her softer side, her uniquely female side that is naturally destined to care for others before she cares for herself.

Making sure that her readers understand that factory work has not transformed the female operative into an industrial automaton and that her capacity to nurture remains intact, the author claims not that the plants brighten the physical plant or lighten the laborer's load but rather that the vitality of the plants sheds light on the character of the operative. The author establishes a symbiosis between a workingwoman and horticulture

when she claims, “it is especially gratifying to behold them thriving beneath the kindly care of the female operatives in our factories” (65) and, further, that “it is especially gratifying to see them exalted to companionship in the sitting-room and parlor, when they most need shelter from the blighting frost” (65). Flowers, these “children of nature,” are an ever-present reminder both to visitors and to the operatives themselves that a woman’s life work is to nurture and that a woman can be a wage-earner without losing her maternal instinct.

Furthermore, even though the author is discussing the ways that flowers can transform the industrial environment, she cleverly points out that when frost threatens the flowers, the operatives remove them to a “sitting-room and parlor,” rooms that connote not the tight quarters of a corporate boardinghouse but rather a spacious middle-class home where ladies of leisure receive visitors. Thriving plants in the industrial setting are, according to the author of this editorial, added insurance that the power of the cult of true ladyhood will not be eclipsed by the power that financial independence offers women.

The symbolic relationship between the dependence of the plants on the operatives and the operatives’ dependence on the plants also complements the corporation’s role as *in loco parentis* because plants, the editor explains, “whether growing wild or receiving the fostering attention of man, are ‘apt to teach’; and the lessons they inculcate are of the purest and most pleasing character” (65). As the operative tends the plants and flowers, she will also “derive” lessons of “wisdom, purity, and holy trust” and she will “remember the love of [her] kindred and the joys of [her] childhood; and haply [her] thoughts will be in harmony with the teachings of the flowers as ‘the alphabet of angels’” (66). While the addition of plants to the industrial landscape may aesthetically enhance the work

environment, the operative who penned the editorial highlighting the importance of flowers and plants all but dismisses this aspect of the greenery.

Remaining true to the *Offering's* mission, this editorial shows critics of workingwomen that the potential impact of industrialization on women can be minimized if factories provide plant life that reminds the girls of their true nature and that reinforces those attributes that separate ladies from workers. Plants in the factory teach valuable lessons, none of which is related to enhanced productivity, safety on the job, or career advancement. There are many ways to nurture the seeds of piety, purity, and submissiveness planted by a culture that insists that an independent workingwoman is a hybrid that must be weeded out before her roots take too firm a hold on the social landscape. The editorial "Plants and Flowers in the Mills" cooperates in this project by showing that a touch of nature in the workplace is all the working girl needs to reinforce her natural inclination toward "wisdom, purity, and holy trust," thereby ensuring that her calling will be to the kitchen, the nursery, and the parlor and not to the economic, intellectual, and emotional autonomy that wage-earning work offers.

In a series of four letters written by Harriet Farley and published in the *Offering* during 1844 under the heading "Letters from Susan," the proverbial flowers appear once again. While the flowers described in Susan's letters receive scant attention, they are significant because they are evidence that the harsh factory environment can, in fact, enhance the wage-earning lady's ability to maintain the requisite aura of femininity. Writing to her sister, Mary, Susan points out that "plants in the windows, or on the overseer's bench or desk, give a pleasant aspect to things" (51). There are also, Susan explains, "many plants" in the dressing-rooms which are "kept very warm and are

disagreeably scented with the ‘sizing’, or starch, which stiffens the ‘beams’, or unwoven webs” (51). Though Susan writes that she chose not to work in the dressing-room because of the “closer air,” the environment is not entirely inhospitable since it is a “really good green-house” (51) for the plants. If, as Susan suggests, the dressing-rooms are “good greenhouses” for plant life, then surely these rooms are not too hot or stuffy for a lady. The environment in these rooms is conducive rather than detrimental to the vitality and beauty of plants; surely it has the same effect on the “tall girls” with “tall minds” (52) who work in this department. According to fictional letter writer Susan, like the author of the editorial “Plants and Flowers in the Mills,” flowers soften both the industrial environment and the industrial worker. Susan’s letters “raise” the operative by showing readers that ladies, like plants, will not only survive but will also thrive despite an abundance of humidity in the workroom and that public perception that the factory is not a fit place for a lady is a myth.

For *Offering* contributor Sarah Bagley, flowers in the factory bring the operative closer to God and erase any notion that there is a necessary connection between a workingwoman and a masculinized industrial environment. Indeed, according to Bagley, the abundance of flowers in the workplace belies any notion that capitalism or corporate owners and a board of directors have any impact on this operation. In “Pleasures of Factory Life” published in 1840, Bagley paints a vivid picture of the wonders of nature that surround the operative as she works:

In the mills, we are not so far from God and nature, as many persons might suppose. We cultivate and enjoy much pleasure in cultivating flowers and plants. A large and beautiful variety of plants is placed around the walls of the rooms, giving them

more the appearance of a flower garden than a workshop. It is there we inhale the sweet perfume of the rose, the lily, and geranium; and, with them send the sweet incense of sincere gratitude to the bountiful Giver of these rich blessings. And who can live with such a rich and pleasant source of instruction opened to him, and not be wiser and better, and consequently more happy. (64)

Bagley's effusive description directly counters the perception that Farley's fictional letter writer Susan identified when she wrote to her sister Mary explaining, "these mills are not such dreadful places as you imagine them to be. You think them dark damp holes; as close and black as—as the Black Hole of Calcutta. Now, dear M., it is no such thing" (56). These working ladies labor in neither workshops nor, worse yet, sweatshops. The room that Bagley describes more nearly resembles a church social hall where ladies gather for tea in the afternoon than the factory that operative Elizabeth Turner describes in her 1845 *Offering* article when she asks rhetorically if she is destined to spend her "days within these pent-up walls, with this ceaseless din my only music?" (136).

The operatives who work in the space Bagley describes seem to idle away the workday in an environment so aesthetically pleasing that it is more like a well-loved and carefully nurtured flower garden than an industrial hub of productivity. And contrary to Farley's harried fictional letter writer Susan who claims that she could tend two looms only if she "had eyes in the back part of [her] head" (52), the operatives Bagley delineates work at leisurely pace that allows them time to "cultivate" the plants in the workroom, to stop and smell the flowers, and to send heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving to God. Bagley assures critics of the female laborer that these textile workers do not leave their devotion to God at the front gate and that, in fact, this workplace increases rather

than diminishes piety because the abundance of flowers is a “rich and pleasant source of instruction” and the operative is, therefore, “wiser and better” and “more happy.” The young operative’s sense of self, according to Bagley, is firmly grounded not in her accomplishments as a skilled wage earner but rather in her relationship with God, and the factory setting is fertile ground for nurturing the seeds of faith.

In order to convince the reading public that a working girl is, in fact, a lady, the female textile worker’s journey from home to workplace, according to *Offering* authors who highlight the work that plants in the textile factory do instead of the work that women do, cannot be represented as an adventure in search of an autonomous self but must be a spiritual quest that reinforces the necessity of womanly dependence—dependence on God, dependence on mores that distinguish ladies from laboring women, dependence on the ideologies of class and gender that foster a well-ordered society. In this female world of work, respect is not a by-product of economic success and independence as it is for Alger’s hero Ragged Dick. Respectability is accorded or withheld based on a woman’s ability and willingness to comply with the precepts of the Cult of True Womanhood. Respect for a woman is based not on what she achieves but on her lack of achievement, on her ability to savor the beauty of nature and sharpen her devotion to God despite the din and clatter of looms and spindles in her ear. A lady’s self-worth is derived not from a job well done but from a persona well constructed within the metes and bounds of the prevailing ideologies of femininity. In these literary efforts to “raise” the operative, these authors are forced to negate the importance of wage-earning work for women by asserting that a workingwoman is a lady, that flowers in the factory are more important to a workingwoman than equitable

wages, workplace safety, or career opportunities because flowers help maintain the fiction that the wage-earning operative is a lady and not a laborer.

The representation of the textile factory as a place where pious young women demonstrate their devotion to God and family by cultivating plants is in many ways a blatant literary effort to claim middle-class status for blue-collar women. A more insistent and insidious ideology that contributors to the *Offering* perpetrate in defense of the working girl is the oft-repeated notion that the workingwoman has no interest in reaping the material benefits of her labor. These fictional textile workers work not for themselves but only to enhance the financial well-being of others. In a 1987 review of the Benita Eisler anthology of essays, fictional letters, and stories originally published in *The Lowell Offering*, Carol Kolmerten contends that the contributors to the *Offering* were ultimately unable to mediate a truce between the socially constructed lady of leisure and the wage-earning factory woman. Kolmerten asserts that these authors failed to capitalize on a unique opportunity to posit an alternate definition for womanhood based on the experiences of workingwomen. Kolmerten explains, “The inability of the *Offering*’s writers to fictionalize any reasons for working at the mills other than self-sacrifice is a revealing commentary on the pervasive acceptance of the self-abnegating True Woman, who apparently looked over the factory worker’s shoulders as closely as she did the middle-class matron’s” (908). Instead of celebrating the independence and access to self-authorizing alternatives that should accrue to a woman who has “for the first time in this country . . . become not only an earner and producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time” (Robinson 42), articles in the *Offering* portray women who neither live to work nor work to live but

rather who live and work so that they might better serve others. The working ladies that people the pages of the *Offering* are predominantly loyal and self-sacrificing daughters and sisters. Their careers are firmly grounded in service to others and not in service to self. Those who at first appear to be self-interested are rebuked by their peers and quickly realign their priorities. Within the pages of *The Lowell Offering*, a publication by and about workingwomen, wage-earning women are not a fact of life; they are an aberration. Before the operative can tell her story, she must justify herself and that justification involves either a complete denial of any self-interest or destitution, nothing less than total dependence on the moneys earned for survival.

While the heroines in the *Offering* often contend that, as a result of the challenges they face as workingwomen, they mature and acquire a more realistic view of what life holds for them, they are emphatic that the girl who sets out from the farm to earn a living remains the same despite the change in her circumstances. The world of work, they insist, simply reinforces the values they brought with them to the factory as they labor, sometimes discontentedly, to support a widowed mother and siblings. Although occasionally an article in the *Offering* will highlight the educational and social advantages available to factory girls after the workday is done, most authors offer little insight into what the job does for the girl, focusing instead on what the girl and her job do for her family. Writing for the *Offering* in 1842, operative Eliza J. Cate, offers a brief glimpse of the “Leisure Hours of the Mill Girls,” showing how some of the girls spend their leisure reading “silly novels” (99) while others enjoy an afternoon of mirth strolling through the town. Cate, for the most part, however, slips into a spate of didacticism as

she underscores the sacrifice that two operatives, Alice and Isabel, are making and the doleful effects of those sacrifices on these young women.

Alice is homesick, “only fit for the solitude of [her] chamber” (106). Attempting to explain her unhappiness to Isabel, Alice confides that her mother is a widow with two younger siblings at home. Although Alice maintains that she longs to return home, she explains that she cannot leave the mills because that would mean that her brother could not attend school “all of the time; and his heart would almost break to take him from school” (106). Obviously feeling the need to justify her presence in the mill and the salary that she earns, Alice asserts that both the money and the independence would be a burden to her if it were not her brother could reap the rewards of her efforts. Alice maintains that she does not need money or “riches” for happiness and wishes only to be “able to gather [her] friends all around” her” (106). Alice mourns the loss of her womanly dependence on her family and is unable either to recognize or to celebrate her own economic independence. Alice’s story of self-denial offers readers convincing evidence that economic and emotional dependence is not a social ill and that women who lose what they have been led to believe is the privilege of dependence are not at home with themselves. Wage-earning women, according to author and operative Eliza Cate, would joyfully march out of the factory and back to the country if their families were not wholly dependent on the moneys they earn in the factory.

Isabel’s tale of self-denial is every bit as mournful as Alice’s and demonstrates once again that no self-respecting girl works for wages unless compelled to do so by economic necessity. Isabel has “neither father, mother, sister, or home, in the world” (107). Isabel’s friends died, the family’s “large property” was lost, and her brother’s

health is “critical” (107). Despite his fragile health, Isabel’s brother is determined to graduate from college, and Isabel is dedicated to providing the financial support necessary for him to complete his education. As if to ensure that readers will not be misled into thinking that Isabel expects a reward for her sacrificial dedication to her brother, a co-worker, Ann, remarks admiringly that Isabel is “most like [her] mother” in that, despite her own trouble, Isabel is “always cheering others in their little, half-imaginary trial” (108).

Isabel’s identity is not derived from achievements in the factory that empower her to aid to her brother but from her ability to endure hardship without becoming morose and without forgetting her duty to nurture and support her fellow workers. Isabel admits that she is “laboring” (107) for her brother’s education, but the conversation focuses on the suffering of the girls in the boardinghouse and not on Isabel’s role as breadwinner. She is not like a father who provides the financial support for his family; she is like a mother who “never complains” and “does not rest” (107) until all around her are comforted and well. Isabel’s brother needs the money she sends him; Isabel herself, however, needs only God’s help to protect her from temptation and to keep her safe (109).

Isabel is the epitome of Christian charity and maternal self-denial. Her work in the factory is important to her only insofar as it assists her in perfecting these qualities. Operative and *Offering* contributor Eliza Cate apparently believes that the only way to raise the operative is to convince readers that the working girl, like Isabel, is dedicated not to raising herself but rather to defending and supporting family and community. Isabel is not a woman who needs money to achieve her goals; she is a woman who needs

God's strength to guide her. Isabel reminds Ann that their grieving friend, Alice, will find happiness when she learns to "think less of her own gratification, and more of that of others" (111). A happy operative is not a well-paid operative; a happy operative is an operative who depends on God to help her fulfill her duty to others.

The self-sacrificing sister or daughter makes many curtain calls in sentimental tales of self-denial published in *The Lowell Offering*. Numerous critics have analyzed the cultural impact of nineteenth-century women's domestic or sentimental fiction. Although Jane Tompkins realistically asserts that "sentimental novelists make their bid for power by positing the kingdom of heaven on earth as a world over which women exercise ultimate control," (*Sensational* 141), she also contends that the sentimental novel provided women with a forum for self-definition that allowed them access to power and status ("The Other Renaissance" 41). Arguing that these novels allow women to explore unsanctioned social spaces "beyond the real of approved female behavior" by disguising subversive discourse, Susan K. Harris calls these texts "exploratory" (20). Harris optimistically maintains that these formulaic novels test "women's possibilities for alternative modes of being" and "challenge social definitions of women's roles" (20-21). Ann Douglas straddles the line between critics who see women's novels as a form of capitulation and those who view them as a means for women to subvert the dominant culture. Douglas contends that "sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already capitulated" (12). Douglas concludes that American women learned to accept flattery in place of justice or equality" (75).¹⁶ For contributors to *The Offering* as well as Lucy Larcom, however, the sentimental heroine offers little challenge

¹⁶ For additional analyses of nineteenth-century sentimental literature, see also Cott *The Bonds of Womanhood* and Cutter *Unruly Tongue*.

to prevailing ideologies of womanhood. Rather, these protagonists are the literary link between workingwomen and the Cult of True Womanhood.

Harriet Farley offers readers a portrait of Hannah Felton, a suffering but uncomplaining operative whose reputation is tarnished because she receives an unidentified male caller at the boardinghouse. Of course, the gentleman is her brother, Orville, and Hannah turns her wages over to him so that he can properly court Olivia, a woman of privilege who holds all operatives in “contempt” (92). Orville is somewhat ashamed that he has used Hannah’s earnings to purchase “love-tokens” (92) for Olivia and that “he had sent for his sister to work in the mill, that the small pittance, she received from the remains of their father’s fortune, might be appropriated for his expense” (91). His sister, however, is uncomplaining because she is not being taken advantage of; she is simply fulfilling her duty. Hannah, the “lovely affectionate self-sacrificing sister” (92) in this sentimental tale of self-denial and redemption nearly dies, forcing both Orville and the haughty Olivia to recognize the error of their ways. As Orville and Olivia sit with Hannah during her lengthy recuperation, she tells them “gently, but truly, how much they had erred—how they had cherished the opinions and prejudices of the vain and fashionable, in spite of their own better judgment, and their own kinder feelings” (92). In addition to providing financial support for her brother, Hannah is also responsible for his moral well-being.

Although Orville thoughtlessly capitalizes on Hannah’s wage-earning labor, Hannah’s most important role in his life is not as a breadwinner but as a soul winner. Hannah, who “does not dress up” and who “spends so little money” (88) receives credit not for her frugality nor for her willingness to work for a salary that facilitates Orville’s

self-centeredness but because, as Olivia finally admits, “Her love has saved us all” (92). Hannah’s life-threatening illness that results from her willingness to compromise her health by working in the mills to help her brother move up the social ladder redeems the morally bereft Orville and Olivia. Hannah is not then the financial rock upon which this family stands, but she is the moral center of the family. She is lauded not because of her financial contributions to her brother’s well-being but because, without her bodily sacrifice, Orville would never have achieved moral sufficiency.

After Orville and Olivia are properly chastened, Farley digresses, offering readers a sermon that extols the “beautiful . . . love of a sister” (92) and asserts that sisters have the responsibility to reprove their brothers and, if necessary, “be willing to sacrifice her pleasures, comforts, and . . . her interests, for his sake” (93). A sister, according to Farley, has the onerous responsibility of “retain[ing] her self-respect, for by this means, and this alone, can she preserve his” (94). Hannah Felton derives her identity from her relationship to Orville—she is his sister. As Orville’s sister, she is expected to do whatever is necessary to promote his welfare even at the expense of her own. If that means that she must work for wages, Hannah will work in the factory.

Although Hannah labors in the textile industry, her life work is in service—service to her brother. Farley offers readers a heroine who is nearly “*damned to infamy*,” (187 emphasis in original) not because, as nineteenth-century social critic and author Orestes Brown claimed, she worked in a factory but because, “Horror of horrors! The unknown [gentleman] had his arm around Hannah’s neck, and she was looking into his face with a very sad and earnest expression” (88). Hannah’s moral being is intact, however, because the “gentleman” is her brother, and because she proves herself to be a

dedicated sister. Women need to work, according to Farley, only when it complements their role as sisters. Hannah Felton's moral, social, and economic responsibility is to her brother not to herself.¹⁷

While former mill girl and author Harriet H. Robinson asserts that as a result of becoming wage earners women took a "long upward step in our material civilization" and, with the "aid" of money "learned to think and to act for herself" (42), the fictional workingwomen in the *Offering* think and act not for themselves but on behalf of a gendered and economically stratified culture that depends on their sacrificial contribution to the well-being of family and community. In these texts, "true women" do not become "new women" simply because, as Robinson claims, 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" (42). Instead, these workingwomen pledge allegiance to the cult of domesticity, justifying their presence in the workplace with claims that factory labor "is but a temporary vocation" (*Offering* 181) and that "Money is their object—not for itself, but for what it can perform" (181). The heroines whose stories appear in the *Offering* blur the ever-tenuous line between fact and fiction as they offer readers convincing evidence that not only are the terms "blue collar" and "lady" not oxymorons but, more significantly, those cultural constructs are nearly synonymous

¹⁷ For additional stories of self-sacrificing female operatives delineated in *The Lowell Offering*, see "Evening Before Pay Day" (162-72) which highlights the sacrifice of Rosina, who, misunderstood by her roommates who accuse of her being "miserly," (171) sends her wages home to support her dying sister and her widowed mother. See also "Susan Miller" (172-82), the story of a young woman who reluctantly leaves mother and siblings as well as fiancé behind to take a job in the mills so that she can pay the debts left by her "degenerate" father thereby preservng the family farm (173).

because the mill girl's blue collar can expeditiously and at will be exchanged for the lace collar or jabot of the middle-class lady.

Thirty years after the demise of *The Lowell Offering*, former operative Lucy Larcom revisited the cultural conundrum "workingwoman" in her extended poem *An Idyl of Work*. Dedicated "to working-women" by "one of their sisterhood," *Idyl* is a nostalgic look at the life of an intimate group of factory workers who have all the attributes of true womanhood and all the trappings of a nineteenth-century sentimental heroine. Larcom, like the contributors to the *Offering*, makes a valiant effort to refute criticism that factory work coarsens a woman and destroys her femininity, making her unsuitable for either marriage or motherhood. Larcom provides an intimate portrait of the personal trials and tribulations of her heroines but little insight into their lives as workingwomen. Larcom's project of elevating the status of workingwomen necessitates obscuring the fact that these women do work for a living and refuting any notion that they actually need the wages they earn or, more specifically, that they intend to use their salary to secure their own financial and personal independence.

In an attempt to mediate the tension between the public perception of workingwomen as deviant and ladies of leisure as the ideal, Larcom sets the events in her poem outside the factory. Her heroines are workingwomen who never work either because a flood has stilled the "clatter" of the machines or because the women are enjoying an extended holiday in the country. "Mountain landscapes," "the picturesque beauty of the Merrimack" and "the grand background of the New Hampshire hills" (vii) are the backdrop for Larcom's protagonists as they struggle with the incongruity between their identity as workingwomen and the cultural mandate to be a lady. In her depiction of

the female textile workers, Larcom focuses not on their “mode” of working but on how workingwomen retain their feminine edge and remain unchanged by their experiences as female operatives. Larcom’s female operatives are more contemplative than productive and more affectionate than ambitious. Insisting, like contributors to the *Offering*, that “factory girls are not defined by their work” (Amireh 18), Larcom offers readers women who are forced by circumstance into wage-earning labor but who never lose sight of the God-given mandate to dedicate themselves to a life of selflessness and service to others.

In the introduction to *Idyl*, Larcom hints that her portrait of the mill girl is designed to reconfigure public perception of workingwomen. She acknowledges that “conditions and character of mill-labor are no doubt much changed since the period indicated”¹⁸ (vii), but she insists that it is an “absurd idea” to accede to the notion “that any work by which mankind is benefited can degrade the worker” (ix). Larcom concedes, however, that there is a danger that the character of a working lady can be tainted through “low associations and sacrifice of refinement” (ix), but these potential pitfalls, she maintains, are “no necessities of the toiler’s lot” (ix). Throughout the *Idyl*, Larcom shows how the “community of useful interests” formed by her heroines assists in the development of “stronger traits of character” and “higher sympathies” (ix). Although Larcom’s diction is effusive, her position is quite simple and directly parallels the stance adopted by contributors to the *Offering*: She has undertaken the task of convincing her audience that a woman can acquire a “degree of pecuniary independence” (vii) without

¹⁸ Eisler reports that in 1836 less than 4% of the 7,000 women operatives were foreign born, but, by 1860, 61.8% of Lowell’s workforce were immigrants (29). Strikes or turnouts occurring in the 1830s and the Ten Hour Movement in the 1840s were the operatives’ response to deteriorating conditions in both the mill and boardinghouses and an increase in the workday from eleven to thirteen hours.

losing sight of her pre-ordained role as keeper of the hearth of good works. But, paradoxically, Larcom ultimately concludes that the only “good works” are works for which there is no financial reward and that “pecuniary independence” is not, for a lady at least, either necessary or desirable.

As if to allay any anxiety among readers that *An Idyl of Work* is a polemic on behalf of nineteenth-century women who are clamoring for a fair wage, a ten-hour work day, or access to positions of power within the corporations for which they work, Larcom establishes her premise in the opening stanzas of the poem, informing readers that, although the heroines of this “idyl” work in a mill, they should not be counted among the blue-collar labor force. While standing before machines that had been stilled by the flood waters of the Merrimack, operatives Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel, still in “work-aprons” but “idle as queens’ ladies now” (12), ponder not how much time and, therefore, how much money they will lose as a result of the work stoppage but, instead, the weighty question, “‘Lady!’ Who defines / That word correctly?” (14).

Esther, the eldest of the three and apparently the more philosophical, answers the question by reciting “The Loaf-Giver,” a poem in which goddesses Juno, Minerva, and Venus interrogate the meaning of the term “lady.” The goddesses discuss an array of attributes typically associated with a “lady”: bonnets, French gloves and laces; unbroken ancestry; “no token of toil” and the good sense not to mix with “workfolk” (16). Dismissing each of these markers as superficial, the “sky-women” (18) in “The Loaf Giver” conclude that ladies are those folks destined to save society from itself by alleviating the dependence of others even if that requires sacrificing their own independence. Ladies, the poem maintains, “give[s] beggars their meat,” are educators

who spend “life, strength, and beauty” scattering “live seed!” as they work in “. . . thought-fields, / The starved soul to feed,” and they are farm wives who, “useful and helpful” (17) make bread. Ladies dedicate themselves to avocations that require both material and personal sacrifices; they commit their lives to work that necessitates giving more than they receive.

After Esther recites the last stanza of the poem where the goddesses conclude that the “Lady is loaf-giver . . . / Who stays the world’s hunger” (18), the operatives enter into their own debate. Covering the same territory as the goddesses—clothes, ancestry, association—and adding demeanor to the contested list of attributes, these ladies who work for wages determine: “She may wear / Dainty kid gloves, or wear no gloves at all / May work at wash-boards or embroidery-frames: / That is her mark,—she lives not for herself. / Out Lord has given us ‘Service’ for a badge. / True ladies, following him, seek not to be / Ministered unto, but to minister” (21). The burden of “living not for herself” may be an attainable ideal for a middle-class lady of leisure but, for women who work to support themselves and their families, it is an unrealistic and unachievable ideal, requiring more than a workingwoman has to give.

Larcom’s operatives fail to note that a commitment to “service” or unpaid work requires leisure and financial security, privileges a nineteenth-century operative did not have. Although Miriam Willoughby, the operatives’ hostess during their extended holiday in the country, “had place / In high society, nor toiled nor spun / More than the lilies” (107), she astutely recognizes the disparity between ideal and the real for a workingwoman. Comparing the life experiences of the operatives with her own more

privileged circumstance, Willoughby marvels not at their potential for financial independence but at their non-work-related accomplishments. Willoughby ponders:

. . . On the working-side
She had not stood, with working-girls, before.
She asked herself if she, in girlhood's dawn,
Would have striven through such hindrances, if she
Would not have yielded to despair, and drudged,
And only drudged, her daily fourteen hours,—
Their work-days' length, nor ever touched a book,
Or nursed an aspiration. (141)

As Willoughby points out, women who work in New England textile factories are confined to the workplace “daily fourteen hours,” a commitment of time and energy that surely minimizes opportunities to claim the womanly “badge of service.” Distraught over the plight of the laboring ladies, Willoughby acknowledges that necessity compels these ladies to wage-earning labor and that they have a financial calling to the factory that supersedes the call to selfless service. Determined, however, to rescue her visitors from ever having to return to the factory and collect a salary, Willoughby concludes, “She would help out of their entanglements / Into such freedom as she could, these girls” (142). Freedom, according to Willoughby, is not having an independent income but rather being independent of the necessity to earn one’s own keep.

Larcom’s poetic salvo designed to pry open the door to true ladyhood for workingwomen by demonstrating that a woman’s social standing should be determined by her character and not by what she does, what she wears, or what she claims to be, has

the exact opposite rhetorical impact. Ladies are chosen by the “Lord” and respond to the call to minister to others rather than to themselves. If the commitment to wage-earning labor helps a woman meet her obligation to “live for others,” her membership in the cult of true womanhood is secure. If, however, a workingwoman loses sight of her call to service and admits that she is working to secure “an independence”—either “pecuniary” as Larcom says or intellectual, political, and emotional—she forfeits her identity as a lady. As the sage Miriam Willoughby asserts, ladies must be rescued from the “drudgery” of work that commands a salary so that they have the freedom to dedicate themselves to service.

Larcom briefly acknowledges that significance of wage-earning work for workingwomen when she writes, “Means to one end their labor was—to put / Gold nest-eggs in the bank, or to redeem / A mortgaged homestead, or to pay the way / Through classic years at some academy; / More commonly to lay a dowry by / For future housekeeping” (34). Despite the fact that Larcom admits that workingwomen work both for themselves, either to accumulate a dowry or to secure financial independence, and for family in order to pay debts or to educate siblings, she curiously concludes that women who focus on these goals teeter eerily on the brink of losing their claim to gentility.

A workingwoman focused on the financial goals Larcom outlines, dedicated to constructing a self premised on her success as a salaried employee, has not the privilege of giving her life to self-abnegating service in the name of the Lord. She does, however, have the potential to become a self-authorized woman, one who has control of her labor and her leisure, her intellect and her income. But a self-empowered woman, both the

sacred goddesses and the workingwomen themselves agree, is a woman who tempts society to scrutinize both her femininity and her character.

Larcom, however, takes no chance that her fictional operatives appear to have journeyed from farm to factory crassly seeking independence or self-aggrandizement. Only one of her heroines, Minta Summerfield, a “schoolma’am in the summer-time” (18), chooses to work in the mills when she has no work as a teacher, but Minta labors in the mill only a short time before she returns to the tranquility of a country home that awaits her. None of the other members of this select group of operatives, however, chooses wage-earning labor. A tragic twist of fate forces them into the factory. While obtaining a well-paying job would for many destitute women be a cause for celebration, Larcom’s ladies are so socially well positioned before they enter the factory that finding work seems to compound rather than alleviate the injustice life has heaped upon them. They will not be rescued by factory work; they must eventually be rescued from factory work by divine guidance that leads them to work more befitting their class origins or their class aspirations. They will not, as Larcom asserts in her introduction, ennoble the work they undertake (ix). They will have the privilege of moving on to work that ennobles them.

With a heavy dose of pathos, Larcom transforms her working ladies into sentimental heroines who command sympathy rather than respect and who evoke tears for the injustice of having to work for a living rather than cheers for a job well done. In her defense of workingwomen, Larcom spends an inordinate amount of time making sure that no one mistakes her ladies for mere “hands” (142) instead of giving insight into the “toiler’s” lot.

Though faced with hard times, the operatives in *An Idyl of Work* are not hard women. Their spiritual leader, Pastor Alwyn, assures Dr. Mann, a first-time visitor to the factory town that, although circumstance may force ladies to work side by side with the “scum and dross” (53), “Character is not the stuff / That circumstances can spoil” (53). Pointing out that class prejudice is an attribute that protects discriminating ladies from being sullied by their labors and by association with laborers, Alwyn maintains that “New England women are what these girls are” (53). He reassures the visitor that these “daughters of our honest yeomanry, / Children of tradesmen, teachers, clergymen” (53) are in no danger of being spoiled since “like seeks like / In all societies, and therefore here” (53). Implicit in Alwyn’s claim is that the working ladies he shepherds are well bred and well educated and that, while their days in the textile mill will not affect their personhood, it is most lamentable that these ladies labor for wages.

Just as Alwyn laments the plight of the female operative, Larcom’s heroines themselves commiserate with each other over the fact that their time and talents are of necessity devoted to generating an income to support themselves. Each operative in *An Idyl* is sidetracked on her way to or from greater glory and is definitely out of place in the factory. Textile worker Eleanor Gray’s delicacy underscores the fact that she is far removed from the glory of her past and equally distant from the grandeur of her future. Her face is a portrait of uncontestable goodness that counters any stereotype of workingwomen as muscular, calloused, or depraved. No woman is more ill suited to labor among the “clatter of the looms / The grime, the dust, the heat, the dizzy din, / The

many faces!” (26) than Eleanor, who “Quite too much / Of the fine-lady look her pale face wears / For any working-girl” (19).¹⁹

Eleanor’s pale face among New England’s blue-collar workers is proof that some malevolent force rather than choice tears women away from the security and comfort of the patriarchal home and forces them to work for an hourly wage. Dr. Mann concludes as much when he learns that Eleanor is working in the factory because she is an orphan. When he first sees Eleanor, Mann immediately senses that “the best / Home-influences must be hers” because “the reserve of thoughtfulness / And culture stamp it [her face] visibly” (52), and he laments, “Such a menial life / Poorly befits her bearing” (52). Because Eleanor’s appearance unsettles Dr. Mann’s pre-conceived notions about “factory working-girls that had reached him through / Traditions of Old England” (52), he concludes that Eleanor is a victim of circumstance rather than a victor over circumstance.

Eleanor’s ability to rescue herself from dependency when the “only heirloom from rich ancestors / Was slow consumption” (13) is a significant accomplishment. Eleanor works not to buy the latest fashions or so that she can support local charities. She is in need of charity; the wages from her work are necessary for the maintenance of life—her life. Her ability to support herself, however, exemplifies not her resourcefulness or the fact that well-paying jobs empower women but rather the injustice

¹⁹ In her discussion of Dorothy Richardson’s representation of the working girl in 1905 novel, *The Long Day*, Cathryn Halverson explains that, for Richardson, “the bright eyes, pale skins, and delicate bodies created or enhanced by malnutrition, exhaustion, and sickness transform the working-class female body into a semblance of a middle-class one” (102). Similarly, Larcom uses what Halverson identifies as the “Cult of Female Frailty” to preserve the middle-class identity of her heroines, Eleanor and Ruth.

inherent in the fact that Eleanor has been forced to be self-supporting. Eleanor is not a *cause celebre* for women who depend on access to well-paying jobs. She is the victim of a personal tragedy that forced her out of her comfortable middle-class existence; she is a frail young woman who must be rescued from the jaws of industrialization.

As a literary heroine, Eleanor draws attention to the plight of women who must stand on their own rather than celebrating the position of women who *can* or *want to* stand on their own. Eleanor is, as Miriam Willoughby observes, “A flower of delicate birth and saintly-pure” (142), too fragile and too innocent to work for wages and certainly too demure to claim the right of self-authorization. The perils of wage-earning labor for one so delicate as Eleanor far outweigh any economic or political advantages that might accrue to her as a result of access to financial independence. She is not a woman who has potential but a woman who lost all potential when she became an orphan. Tied to the past, Eleanor cannot, therefore, reinvent herself as a workingwoman. Her identity as a lady who, though bereft of family and apparently poverty-stricken, is secure because the indelible marks of earlier class privilege that both Pastor Alwyn and Dr. Mann so easily discern protect her from the potential taint of “low associations” (ix) with her co-workers.

Death finally rescues Eleanor from the injustice of both her past and her present. But Eleanor’s death scene, every bit as maudlin as that of Stowe’s little Eva, incorporates no ode to workingwomen. Rather, Eleanor’s death merely recreates the portrait of Eleanor as a sentimental heroine, too pure and too pious not simply for work but for life. Death marks the end of Eleanor’s working days, but it signals the beginning of her life. In the waning moments of her life, Eleanor comforts her grieving co-workers with the assurance, “I do not die! / I fold my petals for immortal dawn!” (182). Eleanor’s life and

death do little to rally support for workingwomen or women's independence or to counter stereotypes about women who work for wages. To the contrary, it assures a wary public that no woman of "delicate birth" chooses to work in a factory and that, for a lady, death can be more ennobling than paid employment.

As the re-incarnation of the dutiful daughter so popular in *The Lowell Offering*, Ruth Woodburn, like Eleanor Gray, depends on the wages she earns in the mill. Ruth came to the factory to "save the homestead, and help educate / Brothers and sisters" (79) after her father died. Although Ruth has rich relatives who would have helped if she had agreed to be "adopted lady-daughter" (44), she chose "A way more independent" (44). Because of Ruth's determination to alleviate her family's financial distress, she is "continually anxious for more work" (79), but her supervisor notices that the Ruth's ambition may be "more than her strength can bear" (79).

Ruth, like Eleanor, is too much of a lady and, therefore, too delicate to labor for wages. Observing that Ruth has a "striking brow" and the appearance of "an intellectual girl" (79), an English visitor touring the mills also observes the harmful effects of labor on Ruth, telling the superintendent, "I wish / she had an easier life: she looks too sad. / And grave and worn-out,—homesick, I am sure; / And this room's heat must undermine her strength" (79). The "good Superintendent,—a grave man, / Kindly and manly, and esteemed of all" (77) admits that "work's a blessed curse," adding, however, that "some of these / Would wonder at our pity" (80). While Ruth may "wonder at [their] pity," there is no doubt that she, who "learned / The Creed and Ten Commandments!" in the "ancient church" (44) in her hometown, and, she who inherited nothing more than a love

of books from her father (44), deserves their pity since the damaging effects of her labor are so readily apparent to the English passer-by.

The needs of Ruth's family necessitate that she assume the role of an ambitious wage earner, but her dedication to work generates not respect or admiration but pity because of the apparent physical toll that her labors exact. The patriarchal perspective of the superintendent and the English visitor send a clear message that "Wholesome-looking country girls" (80) like Ruth should not pursue financial independence because it will diminish their vitality, making them appear unhealthy and distraught. If Ruth's ambition continues to motivate her to seek more work than her delicate body can bear, she will begin to resemble those operatives with whom she is now contrasted, those who display "a stolid face, an eye / That held a covetous glint, a close, cold mouth" (80).

Because ambitious men are admired and respected in America's burgeoning nineteenth-century industrial economy, the superintendent never suggests that conditions inside the textile mill should be improved to enhance the lot of all employees, both male and female, or that his well-paying job²⁰ detracts from his "manly" attributes. The ideology of true womanhood, however, ensures, that ambitious women who are paid a fair wage for their labor will lose caste. Only Ruth, therefore, and not her supervisor or any of her male co-workers must be rescued from factory work. Eleanor Gray's health deteriorates when the demands of her work hasten the advance of her "slow

²⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris reports that in order "to attract women to work in factories" the mills promised "levels of pay substantially higher than those offered elsewhere" (36). An operative could make "about \$1.90 per week, plus board, which amounted to another dollar per week" (37). A Philadelphia seamstress who worked at home in 1821, by contrast, made "about \$58 per year, out of which they paid for thread, heat, light, and all living expenses" (37). However, men working in the mills who "supervised, did the heavy work, and were the skilled mechanics" (36) "averaged 80 cents per day" (37).

consumption,” but Ruth’s ambition to earn as much money as possible is the culprit that will rob her of both her health and her femininity.

Contrasting Larcom’s hyperbolized depiction of Eleanor’s escape from her earthly labors, Ruth’s escape from the factory appears at first glance to be a rational business decision. Many of Ruth’s co-workers are agitating for a strike to protest wage cuts and corporate demands for an increase in the number of hours worked each day. Ruth determines that she cannot participate in a strike, not because her participation might jeopardize her job should the strike fail, but because, as a lady, she cannot align herself with the militant, outspoken and, therefore, decidedly uncouth female operatives organizing themselves into an inharmonious and ungrateful rabble. The catalyst that finally convinces Ruth that she must reclaim her identity as a lady and forsake her role as a wage-earning laborer is the pending strike. When Minta leaves for the country, she urges her co-workers to follow her because “They talk of strikes,—they say that half the looms / Must stop, or wages be reduced. A muss / Of some kind will be stirring” (9). All but Ruth and Isabel take Minta’s advice to “rest with” her “till it settles” (99). Ruth, however, soon writes to Minta expressing her distaste for the “stir / Of work-and-wages questions” (118) and shortly thereafter walks away from her work and her wages to join her co-workers in the country.

The compelling necessity to relieve the financial burden of her mother and siblings suddenly and without explanation recedes because Ruth is repulsed by the “unwomanly sound” of “strike” (119)²¹. Although Ruth optimistically wants to believe

²¹According to historian Thomas Dublin, “In February, 1834, 800 of Lowell’s women operatives ‘turned-out’—went on strike—to protest a proposed reduction in their wages” (51). While the strike was short lived and ineffective, Dublin points out that “[t]his first

that both “employers” and “employed” are “human” with “common interests” (119), she concludes, “If they grind / And cheat as brethren should not, let us go / Back to the music of the spinning-wheel, / and clothe ourselves at hand-loom of our own, / As did our grandmothers” (119). Ruth offers no explanation as to how the “spinning-wheel” or the “hand-loom” of her grandmother’s era offer economic security to women who are dependent on their wages and no rational explanation for a decision that could spell financial doom for herself and her family. The wage-earning operative cannot, as Ruth blithely implies, return to the Idyllic past of her grandmother. Nor will she regain control of her life simply because she has access to a hand-loom and a spinning-wheel and can clothe herself. To deny the importance of her wages by refusing to weigh the merits of the call for a strike is to deny the importance of herself—her independent self. Ruth chooses the socially constructed identity of a feminine self over the identity of a self-supporting, self-authorized wage earner.

Despite earlier assertions that Ruth is working in the mill because she, her widowed mother, and siblings are dependent on her income, Ruth is unwilling to join the protests of her co-workers to defend women’s access to empowering alternatives because lobbying on behalf of oneself, she believes, is unwomanly. Ruth is not concerned that a strike will not be successful or that any potential gain will be offset by wages lost during

strike in Lowell is important not because it failed or succeeded, but simply because it took place. In an era in which women had to overcome opposition simply to work in the mills, it is remarkable that they would further overstep the accepted middle-class bounds of female propriety by participating in a public protest” (52). Writing more than forty years after the first strike, Larcom still is not able to overcome nineteenth-century ideologies of class and gender and offer a realistic representation of the material needs of workingwomen. This is all the more curious in light of the fact that Larcom herself worked in the mills off and on for ten years in order to supplement the income of her mother, who, as a widow with a large family, needed “even the pittance earned” by her daughter to “make ends meet” (Josephson 79).

a strike. Neither is she concerned that the corporation will retaliate against those who participate in a strike. Instead, Ruth is keenly aware that a “girl who / [speaks] on the rostrum for herself, and such / As felt aggrieved” (118) invalidates her claim to ladyhood. The shrill voice of a “girl” speaking out against her employer gives credence to the perception that women who labor in a factory are unfeminine, ungrateful, and uncultured. Ruth cannot afford to align herself with operatives who appear to be more concerned about receiving a paycheck than they are about fulfilling their duty to serve humankind.

In order to preserve the fiction that she is a middle-class lady of leisure who has the privilege of choosing not to work instead of a blue-collar laborer who must work, Ruth must deny herself—her ambition, her economic needs, and her potential to claim autonomy premised on her financial and social independence. Ruth apparently believes that the call to ladyhood offers more promise for intellectual, social, and emotional fulfillment than wage-earning work which is, after all, not her life or her identity but merely a job. Ruth asks, “why should / we, / Battling oppression, tyrants be ourselves, / Forcing mere brief concession to our wish?” (118). Acknowledging that the striking operatives have “wishes” and are “battling oppression,” Ruth admits that labor has valid grievances. She does not dismiss her co-workers’ cause, only their action, because she knows that women who are so bold as to defend themselves against oppressive corporate policies risk transforming themselves into “tyrants.”

Ruth mediates the philosophical gap between the operative’s wishes and corporate oppression by concluding that when it becomes apparent that the owners are motivated by “selfishness,” operatives must “elsewhere turn; for nobody should moil / Just to add wealth to men already rich. / Only a drudge will toil on, with no hope /

Widening from well-paid labor” (119). Ruth does not indicate where those operatives and the families who depend on their wages should turn when they leave their jobs without a murmur of protest. And while she acknowledges the inequity imbedded in an economic system that enriches those who are already rich and indicates that work should offer the wage earner “hope” of improving or “widening” her circumstance, she paradoxically insists that workingwomen can and should forsake rather than fight for their jobs.

Women, Ruth asserts, cannot cling to or take their jobs too seriously, especially if their work has the potential to compromise their claim to true womanhood. Employers, therefore, recognizing that female operatives will either accede to decreased wages and increased hours or retreat to the country without protest, are free to capitalize on this womanly reticence for self-advocacy. Women who leave their jobs rather than defend their right to a fair wage and optimal working conditions send a convincing message that they do not need their jobs or their wages. They minimize the importance of their work by refusing to protest work-place injustice, thereby granting employers a rhetorical *carte blanche* to devalue women’s contribution to the economic well-being of the corporation. The cause of true womanhood and the rights of workingwomen cannot peacefully co-exist. In order to preserve and defend the cause of true women everywhere, a cause that is antithetical to the cause of women who choose or are forced to support themselves, Larcom’s working ladies must escape or be rescued from the textile mill.

The pending strike encourages Ruth, whose “words, / Her every tone, showed culture” (30), to remove herself from the potentially harmful effects of her labor and allows her to reclaim her true self, a self that is ill suited to mingle with “girls / Of the ill-

bred, hoydenish sort” (30). But Ruth’s permanent leave of absence from the “moil” and “toil” of work in the mill and from association with uncultured laborers is not assured until she gets work that allows her to fulfill her commitment to her family, to God, and to self. A “rich lady friend / Of Miriam Willoughby’s, soon to cross the sea” (168) employs Ruth as a teacher for her daughters at “Thrice the mill-fees” (168). Ruth obtains work that will enhance rather than diminish her outward display of “culture” (30) and that also fortuitously provides an economic boon that should relieve the financial distress of her family. Additionally, she will have the opportunity for self-improvement through the study of “the Old-World ways, / Languages, histories” (168) while she is traveling and teaching. The “sad[.] / And grave and worn-out” (79) countenance that Ruth wore in the mill is quickly replaced with “eager, girlish freshness of delight / She never had expected” (168). Even though Ruth may have been “cheated out of youth” (168), she is finally rewarded with work that ennobles and enriches her and restores her youthful exuberance for life.

Steadfastly dedicated to the preservation of her ladyhood and unwilling to cross class boundaries by assuming the identity of factory laborer or aligning herself with the cause of wage-earning women, Ruth quickly regains social and economic privilege, not, however, as a result of her hard work but rather as a result of her association with Miriam Willoughby who “enjoy[s] / Perpetual leisure, drinking peace and health / Out of the mountain chalices” (109). Ruth’s financial burden diminishes not because wage-earning labor provides the opportunity for her to work her way out of poverty and into financial ease but because she is socially well connected. Although Ruth is hired for the teaching-traveling position because of her unspecified “gifts and [her] acquirements” (168), her

greatest asset is that the socially well-positioned Miss Willoughby champions her cause and clears a path for Ruth to re-enter into the middle class, thereby rescuing her from factory labor and a potential downward spiral into the permanent laboring class.

The impetus for Esther Hale's entry into the textile mill is not as clearly delineated as that of Eleanor, Ruth, or Minta. It is apparent, however, that Esther must support herself and that she has neither a country home nor a welcoming family to fall back on since "Aliens were in her childhood's home. No past / Could be revived for her" (35). While Esther appears not to have been the victim of economic misfortune or a precipitous slide down the social ladder like Ruth and Eleanor, she is as out of place in the factory as any of Larcom's ladies. The injustice inherent in Esther's consignment to manual labor emanates not from any sense that she is frail or cast out of her appropriate social sphere but rather from a sense that she is endowed with a superior intellect.

Esther's mind is "Large, fair, well ordered" (13), and the extensive library she keeps "Among a weary house-full, twenty girls, / Who slept beneath one roof" (30) belies her status as a blue-collar textile worker. Although she shares a "small apartment" (30) with Isabel and Eleanor, Esther's library includes Maria Edgeworth's "Helen," Thomas a Kempis, Bunyan's "Holy War," "Pilgrim's Progress" "Locke on the understanding," the Songs of Robert Burns, Irving's "Sketch Book," "Ivanhoe," Watts's Hymns, and she has room for a "small, white-napkin'd table" where "lay / Three Bibles, by themselves" (43). Esther's collection of books and the implied delicacy of the "white-napkin'd table" in the midst of the hustle-bustle world of boardinghouses and fourteen-hour work days function not as a backdrop for the operatives' daily routine but as an ever-present reminder that Esther's days in the mill will be short in number because she is too well schooled to

mingle with the “hands” that produce cotton and because earning a salary is a waste of her finely tuned intellect. Devoid of any reminders of her workday, Esther’s room, a space that three workingwomen share, is more indicative of a woman who has the privilege of dedicating herself to the contemplative life instead of a textile worker who obligated to support herself from the wages she earns.

While Larcom offers no insights into Esther’s accomplishments as a textile worker, she makes a significant statement about her intellect and, therefore, her personhood by including a catalog of the texts that Esther delves into when her workday is finished. Esther’s co-worker, Minta Summerfield, points out that Esther puts her library to good use, telling Miss Willoughby that Esther “studies History, and German, too, / And Moral Science, somehow, between work; / And . . . She can write prose and poetry” (138). If Minta had not slipped in the phrase “between work,” Miss Willoughby might have been misled into thinking that Esther is a full-time scholar rather than a full-time factory employee. Minta praises Esther not because she is a model of efficiency as she tends her loom or because she, as a result of her work, has like Fern’s Ruth Hall acquired a ten thousand dollar bank note. Esther earns recognition from her co-workers because of her dedication to intellectual and cultural self-improvement.

Esther’s co-workers and the Superintendent in the factory also recognize Esther’s “gifts” (137) and acknowledge that factory-work offers no just reward for such a woman. The Superintendent, explaining to a visitor from England that Esther works all day and watches beside the sick at night, “covers the mistakes / Of clumsy learners, till they mend,” goes to church in “all weathers,” teaches Sunday School and “somehow or other” finds time to visit her students (82), concludes, “She well / Deserves to wed a Prince—or

President” (82). Although the Superintendent apparently cannot imagine a greater reward for a hard-working lady of the loom than marriage to a beneficent patriarch, a co-worker envisions a more fitting, less cumbersome reward than marriage for Esther, asserting that she should “choose a better portion, with Saint Paul, / And be a woman-saint” (82).

Although Esther is apparently a dedicated employee and successful wage earner, her supervisor recognizes and praises her for self-abnegation. The wonder is not that Esther has time to visit her Sunday School children; the wonder is that Esther has time to earn the salary on which she depends for the maintenance of life. Larcom never tells her readers whether or not Esther is a successful workingwoman; she only tells them that Esther is a successful lady who is looking for “Her true work [which] / She sought the clew of, here ‘mid endless threads / Shaped from crude cotton into useful cloth” (34). Esther does not derive her identity from her labor. Her identity as a workingwoman is obscured by her penchant for learning and her commitment to self-sacrificial service to her community and her co-workers.

Esther garners no respect because she is a workingwoman; she generates admiration because she gives both her labor and her leisure to improve the lot of others and because she is a self-taught intellect. Esther achieves both of these fetes not because she works in a textile mill but despite the fact that she works in a factory. Esther is a female operative, but this fact of life has no bearing on either who she is or what she does. She may be seeking the “clew” to “her true work” while she bides her time as an operative, but during that time she refuses the identity of a workingwoman.

Although Larcom maintains in her preface that she intends to offer a “truthful sketch of factory life” (vii), she takes the “factory” out of the sketch of life she draws. In

her effort to rescue the public persona of the workingwoman, she loses sight of the fact that the woman does work and that many, like herself, will spend a significant portion of their lives in the textile mill. Esther dreams of finding the means to dedicate herself to “worthy ends,” ends that she can only find outside the mill, but she loses sight of the fact that “worthy ends” may be derived from the work that she and her co-workers are doing. She also implies that a self-supporting, blue-collar woman has not a “clew” about her “true work” and that a working lady must construct a public persona that denies her working self if she is to preserve her femininity.

Larcom creates a great literary chasm between the world of workingwomen and the polite society her laboring ladies inhabit, but she is not ready to send women back to the seclusion of the parlor or confine them within the domestic sphere. Nor does she imagine that women are of necessity destined for marriage and motherhood. All of her ladies except the too delicate Eleanor move from the mill to their “true work.” Esther marries Dr. Mann, but their marriage is not the stuff of which great romance stories are made. Esther marries because she and the doctor agree to “form a partnership” (168) that will take them to the west where they will care for the body and the soul of the Indians. Esther’s marriage leads her closer to her “worthy ends” (35), or, in other words, to work that nourishes the soul as well as the body. Minta who determined that she was “bound to be / A scholar or a writer” (139) decides to return to the mills and work her way through Mount Holyoke School (140) so that she can eventually devote herself to the work she was destined for. Minta plans to establish a school to “teach / Girls to be thorough women, wives or maids. Health of soul, mind, and body, but without / Self-coddling, shall be first; and after that, / All wisdom, all accomplishments desired. / It is

my firm faith that the alphabet / Was meant for woman's use as much as man's" (171). Although her friends tease Ruth that she will return from her European jaunt as a countess or a duchess, Ruth is emphatic that she is not seeking a husband and that she intends to return with her "democratic heart . . . whole" because she believes that "Woman can climb no higher than womanhood" (169). Larcom's ladies finally are rescued from the mill, not by a middle-class hero who proposes marriage and a life of leisure within the domestic sphere, but by the "opportunity for nobler work, / And glimpses of illimitable fields" that "satisfie[s] the soul" (183).

Larcom's retrospective look at the life of New England's female operatives is a bold step forward as her heroines move beyond the confines of hearth and home to show that woman can be multifariously represented in the nineteenth century and that women can and must determine the course of their own lives. Larcom acknowledges that women have an obligation to themselves to find, as Minta claims, "What labor I'm best fit for" (138) and that women, no less than men, are not meant to be idle. Larcom is overly sentimental when she repeatedly claims that work must be ennobling and can even be salvific, but in a less poetic moment, Larcom realistically asserts that work is life defining when she writes: "Work? / As well quit living as quit work" (138).

While the *The Lowell Offering* and *An Idyl of Work* are distinctly different genres and offer diverse insights into the lives and work of nineteenth-century American female factory workers thereby contributing a substantial amount of literary fodder to the cultural construct "workingwoman," both texts ultimately conclude that for a woman the process of establishing personhood must occur outside the confines of wage-earning labor. In their efforts to present a new class of women—those who are financially

compensated for their labor—contributors to the *Offering* and Lucy Larcom explore the unfamiliar terrain outside the domestic sphere and nineteenth-century cultural prescriptions that limit women's access to independence. While they struggle with the tension between the material realities of the lives of workingwomen and the cultural mandate for a woman to realize her greatest potential in the domestic sphere, both texts demonstrate that economic self-sufficiency has the potential to provide women with access to self-authorizing alternatives otherwise unavailable to them. At the same time, however, these authors disavow the importance of personal independence or self-empowerment for their heroines so as not to give credence to criticism that factory work coarsens a woman and destroys femininity, making a woman unsuitable for marriage, motherhood, or the middle-class²². In order to deflect criticism of women who work for a living, Larcom and contributors to *The Offering* dress their heroines in the language of sentiment and domesticity and their fictional hardworking mill girls are hardly distinguishable from the nineteenth-century proper lady.

The Lowell Offering and *An Idyl of Work* masquerade as realistic representations of wage-earning women, but, because the fictional workers in these texts negate the importance of their work and insist that they do not need the money they earn for themselves, *The Offering* and *An Idyl* collapse in on themselves as they offer readers an apologia for workingwomen and guidelines to insure that the lady is not subsumed by the love of career, money, or power. These writers assert that a woman has the right to work for the highest wages available but then aver that the greatest privilege a woman can have

²² Benita Eisler, editor of the 1977 anthology of *The Lowell Offering* explains that the deepest anxiety of the female operative was that she would be “stigmatized by her working environment” (183), and thereby become an “unmarriageable outcast” (183).

is to lovingly and loyally serve her family or her community. They maintain that women have the right to independence but conclude that the ideal is dependence. They celebrate the advantages of wage-earning labor but critique the desire for financial or material acquisitiveness.

Instead of waging war against women's lack of access to the better-paid positions held by men within the factory system or against factory owners' efforts to enhance their own profit margin at great cost to their female employees, contributors to *The Offering* and Lucy Larcom celebrate women's subservient position in a gendered society and reify the ideology that the only "true" woman is the middle-class lady whose leisurely lifestyle allows her to dedicate herself to a more perfect family and community. According to these authors, the domestic sphere is women's "natural" environment, and wage-earning work is but a passage in a young woman's life. Factory work may contribute to a young woman's self-confidence, may enhance her potential for marriage and motherhood, and may provide access to cultural and educational opportunities, but women should neither expect nor desire any increase in social or economic status as a result of their labor. Neither should they expect or desire that success as wage earners will provide them with any leverage in the labor or political arena that would give them more control over the direction of their own lives. Ladies always, these temporary wage-earners labor to empower others but never themselves. The war waged within the pages of *The Offering* and *An Idyl* is not, as might be expected, a war over limitations that the nineteenth-century hierarchy of gender imposed on women but rather a war the authors wage to construct and maintain an aura of middle-class identity for women who are distinctly working class.

It's in the Blood: The Working Girl and the "Smooch" of
Industrialization in *The Silent Partner* and *Life in the Iron Mills*

It ain't so much the bringing up I got, as the smooch of it You may be
ever so clean, but you don't *feel* clean if you're born in the black.

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Silent Partner*

Miserable enough she looked, lying there on the ashes like a limp dirty
rag,--yet not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort
and veiled crime: more fitting if one looked deeper into the heart of
things,--at her thwarted woman's form, her colorless life, her waking
stupor that smothered pain and hunger,--even more fit to be a type of her
class.

—Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills*

Many of the articles in *The Lowell Offering* as well as Lucy Larcom's imaginative
poem *An Idyl of Work* respond to the onslaught of negative press that enveloped
America's first blue-collar women by offering a literary portrait of a working girl who is
more middle-class lady than laborer and of a work environment that enhances femininity
and reinforces homespun family values. However, one anonymous contributor to *The
Offering* defends the working girl by satirizing those who bemoan the lot of female textile
workers. Rather than respond by inference to attacks on women who work for wages, the
fictional story "Susan Miller," published in 1841, lays bare rumors about the dangers that
await the unsuspecting new hire in the mill. This story features the overly concerned,
misinformed Deacon Rand who attempts to dissuade Susan Miller from heading off to

Lowell to earn the money to pay off the mortgage of her family's farm. The deacon claims that Susan will "put herself in the way of all sorts of temptation" (175) because she has "no idea of the wickedness and corruption which exist in that town of Lowell" (175). Rand adds detailed evidence to support his attack on the character of workingwomen, all of which is based on hearsay, unsubstantiated information he gleaned from the ever infamous and unreliable "they." According to Rand, "they"

. . . say that more than half of the girls have been in the House of Correction, or the County Jail, or some other vile place; and that the other half are not much better; and I should not think you would wish to go and work, and eat, and sleep, with such a low, mean, ignorant, wicked, set of creatures. (175)

When Rand is unable to instill in Susan a healthy fear of association with Lowell's morally mangled female operatives, he attempts to frighten Susan by asserting that the physical and psychological demands of factory work are debilitating. He warns Susan that she will be "boxed up fourteen hours a day, among a parcel of clattering looms, or whirling spindles, whose constant din is of itself enough to drive a girl out of her wits; and then," he tells her, "you will have no fresh air to breath, and as likely as not come home a year or two with a consumption" (176). Rand further cautions Susan that even if she escapes the menace of diminished wits and consumption, she may lose "some" of her limbs. Rand emphasizes that he has "heard a great many stories about girls who had their hands torn off by the machinery" (176).

Susan concedes that there "may be" some wicked girls there, but she assures the deacon that she will "keep out of the way of bad company" (175) or spend her leisure in "solitude" (176). She also admits that there may be some danger of bodily

injury in the factory, but counters that the number of accidents is “very small . . . in proportion to the whole” (176). Susan’s willingness to admit that there may be some validity to Rand’s overblown angst about the perils of factory work satirizes the perception that the lure of a well-paying job will inevitably reduce young women to industrial automatons. Her acknowledgement that she is responsible for her own well-being and that she has choice challenges the underlying premise of Rand’s argument that, for women, industrialization and dehumanization are synonymous and that the industrial environment is a cesspool of iniquity where female employees are an expendable commodity. Susan assures the deacon that wage-earning work does not inevitably lead women into vice or destroy their femininity. But then, Sarah Bagley, former contributor to *The Lowell Offering*, charged that the publication gave “a false representation to the truth” and was “controlled by the manufacturing interest to give a gloss to their inhumanity” (qtd. in Foner 60).

The “Susan Miller” vignette challenges demeaning stereotypes of female textile workers, but Rebecca Harding Davis in her novella *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in the novel *The Silent Partner* (1871) seem to have taken their cue from Deacon Rand when they created their fictional working girls. In fact, Rand’s cautionary tale of an industrial wasteland pales in comparison to the portrait of emotional, physical, and intellectual deformation of women that Davis and Phelps provide. There is no hint of satire, hearsay, or irony in these texts, and neither author suggests that factory labor can be a steppingstone that provides those who work hard the opportunity to dig their way out of economic and social privation. Both Davis and Phelps

offer a grim portrait of a permanent class of laborers who lack both the resources and the vision necessary to rescue themselves from the oppression of their labor.

Davis's Deb Wolfe, a "picker" in a cotton mill in America's pre-Civil War South and Phelps's young sisters, Sip and Catty Garth, textile workers in a northern textile factory, are exemplifications of the ills Deacon Rand delineated. Davis and Phelps refuse to "gloss" the "inhumanity" of the manufacturers and, further, refuse to romanticize the lives of those who, Davis and Phelps show, labor without choice, without hope and, therefore, without a future. Factory work as delineated in these texts destroys human potential and desecrates the human spirit. Laura Hapke succinctly identifies the shift that Davis and Phelps signal from earlier literary representations of women's search for self-sufficiency through salaried labor. According to Hapke, Davis, Phelps, and Alcott "were the first serious novelists to explore how industrial wage earning deformed rather than elevated the feminine character" by "refusing to cosmetize waged work or load it with grand claims for character building" (76).

Writers for *The Lowell Offering* and former operative Lucy Larcom in *An Idyl of Work* construct a persona for the working girl that shows that she can, at least temporarily, be both a wage earner and a lady. The working girls in these gilded representations are well aware of the social fault line that separates them from the middle-class lady, but these fictional self-portraits also show that the line is not so rigid that it prevents a working girl, guided by aspiration and inspiration, from carving out a social niche for herself where she can access the same privileges as a lady of leisure. Davis and Phelps, on the other hand, show that the chasm that separates the laboring

classes from those who profit from their labors, those who employ from those who are employed, is unbridgeable.

In the bleak social and economic environment that Davis and Phelps construct, the female laborer is so victimized by the forces of industrialization that she is incapable of aspiring to a better life. In these fictional worlds, personhood is consumed by the life of drudgery that is the inevitable lot of a woman who is forced to earn her daily bread. Wealth and privilege, on the other hand, so totally and conveniently obscure the vision of the capitalist class that they believe as does Phelps's heroine, Perley Kelso, a part owner of the textile factory where blue-collar sisters Sip and Catty Garth work, that those who barely eke out a living in the factories are ". . . happy and comfortable" even though "they must economize . . ." (95). Cecelia Tichi, editor of the cultural edition of *Life in the Iron Mills*, succinctly identifies the oppositional class interests that Davis establishes and that, I would add, Phelps parallels in *The Silent Partner*. Tichi explains:

Life in the Iron-Mills engages the debate about work and class by offering readers two occupational categories: "laborer" and "gentleman." The mill visitors, who represent the latter category, are supervisors and professionals with sufficient leisure time to dabble in matters of art, sport, social theory, and philosophy . . . They speak the language of capitalism.

The laborers, on the other hand, are unschooled, exhausted by physical labor, and lack the necessary vocabulary to make their ideas intelligible to gentlemen. Work is important to both groups in *Life in the Iron-Mills*, but readers quickly see that *work* is a deceptively simple term, for there is little point of comparison between the respective "work" of the

laborer, the overseer, and the physician. Indeed, issues of clothing, speech patterns, schooling, and ancestry divide the laborers from the others.

Though their work might be expected to unite them, Davis takes great care to show that the laborers and the gentlemen are split and stratified along the lines of class. (81 emphasis in original)

Tichi identifies the significant role that education, manner of dress, claims of superior ancestry, leisure pursuits, and patterns of speech play in establishing the social and economic abyss that segregates laborers and gentlemen in Davis's fictional society.

Tichi, however, fails to acknowledge the substantial role that gender plays in *Life in the Iron Mills*, the way, I argue, that Davis places not just "two occupational categories" under the literary microscope, but three.

In *Life in the Iron Mills* and in *The Silent Partner*, the female laborer constitutes a class that is more than downtrodden, a class that is, in fact, less than human. Deb Wolfe in *Life in the Iron Mills* and Sip and Catty in *The Silent Partner* are dehumanized and objectified not simply because they are laborers but because they are female laborers. Davis and Phelps present workingwomen who are less than human and imply that their toil and the machines they operate are the source of their oppression. However, both author offer at best limited support for that implication since the texts provide almost no insight into the specific work that these women do. Instead, as Davis and Phelps attempt to raise consciousness about the plight of the laboring masses in the face of America's burgeoning industrial economy, Deb, Sip, and Catty's humanity falls victim to their author's inability to refute the gendered mores of their culture that insists that a woman cannot be both a lady and a laborer. Laura Hapke argues perceptively that "Davis is

caught between her sympathy for worker sufferings, particularly those of women, and her own classed convictions about lower-class behavior . . . especially about the women's 'unwomanly' conduct" (78). Hapke concludes that Davis "expresses her sympathies with the working-class woman but at the same time underscores her difference from her. . . ." (142). In *The Silent Partner* and *Life in the Iron Mills*, Davis and Phelps unleash onto the personhood of their fictional workingwoman all of the nineteenth-century's fears about what will become of the lady, her family, and her home when she forsakes domesticity to seek wage-earning labor and autonomy.

Deb, Sip, and Catty are the literary victims of their middle-class, female creators' ambivalence about expanding opportunities for women and the potential conflict with traditional values that center on hearth and home. Davis admonishes her audience to hide their disgust, to take no heed of their own clean clothes, and to come down "into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia" (41) so that they might know and appreciate the plight of the laborers whose unnoticed sacrifice immeasurably enriches opportunities for the middle-class. Ultimately, however, neither Davis nor Phelps is able to "hide her disgust" of the meanness of the lives of the women for whom work is neither a choice nor an expression of the self.

In their reformist enthusiasm for exposing the dehumanizing forces of industrialization, Davis and Phelps reify rather than minimize the distance between themselves as well-educated, middle-class women and their subjects who are portrayed as women without potential. Although well intentioned, Davis and Phelps offer their readers a portrait of laboring women who are objects manipulated by forces beyond their control rather than subjects who are striving for autonomy. Because the vision of both

Davis and Phelps is skewed by their social and economic position and by the dominant ideologies that inform that position, they are unable to imagine that those whose class position is so distant from their own can possess agency and be other than pawns of capitalism. Cora Kaplan identifies the near impossibility of subjective cross-class representation when she writes, “the subjectivity of other classes and races and with different sexual orientations can never be ‘objectively’ or ‘authentically’ represented in literary texts by the white, heterosexual, middle-class writer, however sympathetically she invents or describes such women in her narrative” (867).

Analyzing the apparent clash between author and subject in literature about nineteenth-century blue-collar women, Amahl Amireh parallels Kaplan’s argument. Amireh explains, “The fiction that spoke in sympathy with working women also gave much detail of their degradation, deformity, and difference. Thus the working-class woman enters the fiction of writers like Phelps as an Other, as a grotesque sentimental figure who carries the marks of her class difference on her body permanently” (142). Portrayed as victims of creeping and impersonal urban industrialization, the fictional laboring women in *Life in the Iron Mills* and *The Silent Partner* are objectified by the author’s inability to separate the persona of the workingwoman from fears about women’s changing roles in an increasingly mechanized society. Although Davis and Phelps attempt to initiate a project of social rescue for Deb, Sip, and Catty, the project fails because these protagonists are so far below the bottom rung on the social and economic ladder that they are unable to climb up as far as even the first rung. There is never even a hint that these workingwomen have the resources that would give them access to autonomy. Instead, in a state of perpetual and inescapable disempowerment,

the plight of these female laborers is assuaged only by death in the case of Catty or by the benevolent arm of Christianity that swoops down and takes Deb and Sip safely away from the minefields of industrialization.

In need of reform because they are laborers instead of ladies, Deb, Sip, and Catty are the unnatural, self-supporting women that Fanny Fern's middle-class heroine Ruth Hall rejects when she cautions young daughter, Nettie, not to aspire to a career as a writer. "God forbid," Ruth admonishes Nettie; "no happy woman ever writes" (175). Davis and Phelps's objectified female operatives, Deb, Sip, and Catty also labor under the gender inequity that Phelps interrogates when the only "natural" choice for her heroine Avis Dobell is marriage and family rather than career. Furthermore, the objectification that claims the humanity of Deb, Sip, and Catty is the same "naturally" occurring social and legal hierarchy that confronts Wilson's Frado and Jacobs's Linda Brent when they begin the work of claiming a volitional "I." And the label "unnatural" woman that Sip, Deb, and Catty seem to wear so naturally is the exact label that those who chronicled the life of the Lowell female operative sought to erase from the lexicon associated with working girls. While the opportunities available to Ruth Hall, Avis Dobell, Frado, Linda Brent, and the Lowell operatives are limited by the ideologies of class and gender, and additionally in the case of Brent and Frado by race, these women are never wholly diminished or dehumanized by their circumstances. They are, even at the lowest ebb in their journey toward independence, in possession of a voice and an indomitable spirit that enables them to resist oppression. They at all times recognize that the limitations society has placed on them are neither natural nor inevitable, and they participate in the processes of self-representation and reclamation.

Sip, Deb, and Catty, on the other hand, have no weapons with which to defend themselves against the theft of their humanity by the forces of capitalism. They accept their fate, the fact that they are unable to access the fruits of society so seemingly easily claimed by others, because they believe they are unworthy. These female laborers have not lost hope; they never had hope. Although they recognize that society offers them no means to escape the impoverishment of their lives, they do not rail against the inevitability of their situation because they believe that the life they are living is a consequence of their birth, that they are self-limited because something is askew in their genes or their lifeblood. As a result, they conclude that the lack of opportunity available to them is equitable because they live in a society that rewards those who earn their own rewards.

But these self-defeating attitudes are specific to the female laborers who exhibit neither the potential nor the desire to escape her impoverishment. The male factory laborer, on the other hand, could, if given the chance, recast himself in a more socially acceptable and successful mold. Eric Shockett asserts that race looms large over the figure of the mill worker in both *Life in the Iron Mills* and *The Silent Partner*. Shockett maintains that “Unlike the sinner and the slave, the wage laborer finds no salvation in industrial America” (54). In *Life in the Iron Mills* and *the Silent Partner*, however, there is at the very least the potential for salvation for the male laborer. The female wage laborer, however, is rendered utterly defenseless and unable to elevate herself. She has not even the possibility for salvation because she lacks even the semblance of humanity. She “emerges,” as Wai Chee Dimock writes of Deb, “less as an identity than as the impossibility of identity” (95). Deb, Sip, and Catty are a portrait of “impossibility.” The

impossibility of agency creates a class—that of female laborers who are labeled nonpersons.

While the circumstance and outlook for the future for Davis's male laborer Hugh Wolfe is admittedly bleak, Davis offers brief insights into the status of male iron mill workers that demonstrates that their humanity has not been totally eclipsed by the system and that a latent potency lies within these laborers. The male laborers in the iron mills are at least accorded the status of "hands." Deb, as a female textile worker, cannot, however, so much as claim even the lowly status of a "hand." Noting the fixity of both Hugh and Deb's position, Maribel W. Molyneaux, like Shockett, identifies language in Davis's text that suggests parallels between the exploitation of mill workers and that of slaves. Molyneaux argues that Davis presents the factory system as one "in which waged workers were increasingly dehumanized by a rapidly expanding manufacturing economy that saw them not as full human beings but as so many expendable 'hands'" (160). Hugh and his co-workers, admittedly "hands" and expendable hands at that, are, however, unlike Deb, engaged in purposeful activity that creates a product that generates profits for the corporation.

As Hapke points out, though, Deb's textile factory tasks are not delineated. Hapke maintains that Deb fails to offer insights into her toil "because, like many workingwomen of the day, she perceives her work, the lowliest in the textile mill, less as a means of self-support than as a contribution to the family economy" (78). The lack of insight into the nature of Deb's labor is not, I assert, the result of how she "perceives her work" but is rather directly attributable to the failure of the text to acknowledge Deb's humanity. As a person, Deb is more invisible than visible. The labor she contributes to

the “family economy” or to the corporate economy is hidden from view as is her humanity. The text offers ample evidence of the physical and intellectual degradation that Deb suffers because she is a workingwoman but no evidence that she does, in fact, work.

Both the descriptions of Deb’s body and her self-effacing compassion for Hugh contribute to the composite of her as a “thing” that is less than human. Numerous critics have valiantly attempted to locate Deb’s humanity between the lines of a story that refuses to accord this working girl of any semblance of humanity. Jean Pfaelzer acknowledges that Deb and Hugh’s “ignorance, deformities, and even animalistic attributes,” limit their ability to direct their own lives. But Pfaelzer optimistically asserts that, because Deb and Hugh exhibit “free will” and exercise “rational choice,” “they are never in danger of slipping into the grotesque” (xx). While Hugh, the artist, is sufficiently empowered to assert his will and make deliberate, “rational” choices, Deb is propelled by circumstance. She reacts to external stimuli but exhibits no emotion, either anger or desire, that propel her to act, and she exhibits no capacity for self-motivation.

Critics often refer to Deb’s unrequited love for Hugh and her willingness to negate herself in order to serve him as evidence of her humanity. Sharon Harris claims that because Deb “retains both compassion and a humane sense of others,” she is not “completely dehumanized” (29). At the same time, however, Harris admits that the lack of beauty in Deb’s life or her face “shatters the tradition of the “blue-eyed, fair-haired heroines typical of mid-nineteenth-century American romanticism” and that, as a result, she “becomes one of American fiction’s earliest realistic grotesques” (34). Richard A. Hood concedes that, early in the story, Deb is “described as ‘deformed’ and grotesque,”

but he maintains that after Deb hands the stolen money over to Hugh, she is “transformed” because, when Hugh looks at her, she is “young, in deadly earnest; her faded eyes and wet, ragged figure caught from their frantic eagerness a power akin to beauty.” But Deb is a “ragged figure,” not a woman, and while she may momentarily have “power akin to beauty,” that power is derived from a criminal act and is more ephemeral than even beauty. Through sculpture, Hugh has the power to create lasting and haunting images of the dis-ease of the working class. Deb, on the other hand, cements the image of herself as an unwomanly woman by committing a criminal act. It is difficult to imagine that Davis’s readers would have seen the “beauty” in this female criminal.

Despite these critical efforts to find the bright spot in Davis’s portrayal of workingwomen, the reality is that Davis is unable to shed a positive light on this class of women whose experiences are so distant from her own. Deb is a thief, yet little seems to be lost by Deb’s descent into crime. In fact, she is merely living out her destiny as an irredeemably deformed creature stumbling through life without benefit of any sense of morality. Davis offers readers numerous descriptions of Deb that show that she is a “grotesque” who lacks the potential for transformation because she, Deb, does not believe that her life is one that is worth living or that she has the power to begin the process of self-reclamation. Deb is the *product* of an environment that has usurped not just her femininity but also her personhood. Her culture tells her that, because she is one of the class that labors in the textile mill, she is the “ultimate repository of ‘bad womanhood’ or negative femininity” (Kaplan 61), and she accepts their verdict. Because she has been dehumanized, no one, not even Deb herself, notices her suffering or the injustice inherent

in her life. She is a pathetic, not a sympathetic, “creature.” She is an aberration of womanhood and, as such, repulses rather than engenders human kindness.

Deb’s apparent lack of affinity with anything that would identify her as a woman is first apparent when the narrator compares her to Hugh Wolfe’s father, “Old Wolfe.” Described as “a pale, meek little man, with a white face and red rabbit-eyes,” Old Wolfe is wretched as he sleeps on “a heap of straw, wrapped in a torn horse-blanket” (43). But, “Old Wolfe,” is just that—old. His body evidences the effects of years of “incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, [and] drinking” (42). Deborah, however, is a young woman, and she works in a textile factory not an iron mill. Yet her appearance is very much “like” that of the older man who spent “half his life” in a “Cornish tin mine” (42) before coming to work as a furnace hand—“only her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery” (43). But as if Deb’s “ghastly” face, blue lips, and watery eyes are not enough to convince readers that this female wage-earning laborer is a creature more monstrous than human, Deb is also “deformed, almost a hunchback” (43). Deb is trapped in a body mangled by the impoverished circumstances of her life. Corrupted by her labor, Deb possesses no hint of vitality and exhibits not even a tinge of femininity. She more nearly resembles a hardened, wizened male than a workingwoman for whom wage-earning labor is the key to self-ownership. Deb’s “ghastly” face suggests that women’s quest for work that could lead to self-sufficiency may well be the first step toward self-destruction.

Deb also lacks any spark of defiance that might compensate for her loss of vitality and her physical deformity. She is a “weak, flaccid wretch” (43) who has not even a flicker of aspiration that could lead her out of her misery. Additionally, there is a direct

correlation between her spiritual and intellectual impoverishment and her physical deformity. For Deb, “there was no warmth, no brilliancy, no summer . . . so the stupor and vacancy had time to gnaw into her face perpetually” (47). Although Deb is young, “no one guessed it; so the gnawing was fiercer” (47). Deb’s blighted existence has so emaciated her belief in her own humanity that she is barely conscious of her own existence, living each day in a “stupor,” without a sense of self, without a sense of the crime committed against her personhood by a society that refuses to demand that big business balance its right to earn a profit with the right of labor to earn a living.

The absence of Deb’s kinship with humanity is starkly delineated in the sketch Davis provides of Deb as she lies on the “ashes like a limp, dirty rag” (46) in the iron mill after taking Hugh’s dinner to him. The narrator suggests that figure of Deb lying on the ashes is “not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime” (46), but this “thwarted woman’s form” (46) is unfit to crown even a scene of hopelessness. Deb wears no crown. She is neither a martyr nor a human sacrifice to the groaning wheels of industrialization. Deb, stumbling through life in a “waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger” (46), cannot step out of the literary mold into which she has been cast and assert her right to an independent identity—even that of a martyr. She is bereft of any attributes that define her as human; she is an insentient object having less intrinsic value than the industrial waste the pillows her head.

The narrator does question if perhaps “there was nothing worth reading in this wet, faded *thing*, half-covered with ashes” (46 emphasis mine), alluding to the fact that there may be a story lodged within Deb, a story of “groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy” (46). Davis’s narrator concludes, however, that no one

“had ever taken the trouble to read its faint signs . . . “ (46). But that may be because Deb is unreadable, her face displaying only “apathy and vacancy” (46), and, furthermore, she is without resources to put a human face on her tale of woe. Her birthright is a “stupid intellect” and a “dull consciousness” (47). As a result, she is propelled through life without volition, aware of little more than the fact that Hugh possesses a “finer nature . . . which made him among his fellow workmen something unique, set apart” (47). She also intuitively recognizes that there is something “in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her” (47).

Davis endows her male laborer with “a groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure” (47) and her female textile worker with a “stupid intellect.” Even with her “dull consciousness,” Deb recognizes that she possesses no semblance of a womanly nature and, as a result, she “shrink[s] back” (47) whenever Hugh looks her way. Deb herself believes that she is a “limp, dirty rag” that should be disposed of because she is worn out and repulsive. The iron puddler’s story is a tragedy of thwarted potential; the story of the female textile laborer is a cautionary tale of wage-earning womanhood gone awry.

In the industrial world that Davis creates, Deb Wolfe “represents the bottom” (Hughes 124), a bottom she cannot rise above because she is “deformed by class and gender inequity” (Molyneaux 163). After standing “twelve hours at the spools” (Davis 45), Deb attempts to claim a moment of domestic felicity by scurrying off to the mill with Hugh’s supper, but this seemingly autonomous act only further highlights her deformity because Deb is located neither in the masculine world of wage-earning work nor the feminine world of domesticity. Garnering no respect or thanks for her generosity toward

Hugh, Deb's efforts are wasted, her act of kindness superfluous, as Hugh "was not hungry" (46) and ate only to please her.

As might be expected, Deb's presence in the mill is an anomaly, but she stands out in this masculinized hub of productivity not because she is a woman but because she is more animal than human. She is an intruder and is likened to an animal straying into unfamiliar territory. As she enters the mill, a workman immediately remarks that she looks "like a drowned cat" (46) instead of like the care-worn woman that she is. The dehumanization Davis builds into this fictional female character becomes even more apparent as Deb cowers behind Hugh not lovingly but dejectedly "as a spaniel its master" (47). Deb's attempt to show her humanity by caring for Hugh has the opposite effect as it propels her into a setting that reinforces her objectification. Deb's demeanor compared to that of a dog as she waits hopefully for Hugh, her "master," to bestow even the slightest morsel of kindness on her. Deb does not expect thanks because she has negated her own physical needs for rest and nourishment to provide for Hugh. Instead, she only hopes as a devoted pet might, that her master will recognize her loyalty.

Although weary, Deb waits patiently for Hugh to finish his shift in the factory, but the physical manifestations of Deb's exhaustion and her unreturned devotion to Hugh heighten the perception that she is more object than subject. Deb, with her "pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face" (46) more nearly resembles an apparition than a human being. Despite Deb's strange, unsettling appearance, Hugh makes an effort to be kind to her. But Hugh's consideration is not the result of an understanding of shared miseries because they are cousins or because they live in the same squalid apartment. In reality, Hugh neither sympathizes with Deb nor pities her. Hugh is kind only because "it

was his nature to be kind, even to the very rats that swarmed in the cellar” (46). In other words, even in her dejected state, a state that in theory Hugh an oppressed laborer himself shares, Deb, is devoid of any recognizable shred of humanity.

Hugh’s kindness toward her is a reflex that once again highlights his “finer nature,” a nature that enables him to treat his deformed female cousin as kindly or as indifferently as he does the rodents who skulk about menacingly in the dark recesses of his apartment. But when the “rasping tone” of her voice “fretted” him, Hugh is not kind; “he pushed her away,—gently” and told her, “Go back! I do not want you here” (60). As a literary character, Deb Wolfe ranks below the nineteenth-century workingwoman who was so stigmatized that contributors to *The Lowell Offering* attempted to disavow the fact that they and their sisters at the loom were blue-collar laborers. Davis’s nineteenth-century laboring “lady,” Deb Wolfe, however, is so thoroughly devoid of any human characteristics that to label her blue collar would be to gloss the portrait of dehumanization that Davis offered her middle-class readers of this female textile laborer.

Deb’s one volitional act, the theft of the rich man’s money, has the potential to humanize her by showing that she is fully cognizant of the brutish nature of her existence and is motivated to remedy that situation. But it has the exact opposite impact. When Deb steals Kirby’s money, she simply reinforces the absence of any claim to selfhood not, however, because she commits a criminal act. The theft is not an expression of any understanding of the injustices inflicted on her or even a misguided effort to relieve the economic inequity that oppresses her but rather an attempt to empower Hugh so that he can be “free to work, to live, to love!” (62). Deb steals not to free herself or alleviate her own misery, but so that Hugh can “walk like a king” (60).

While she has faith that money will transform Hugh, Deb realizes that no amount of money will enable her to escape the imprisonment of her deformed body, a body that repulses Hugh. Deb well knows that, if Wolfe someday “walks like a king,” she will not be allowed to sit in his presence, but she takes the chance that he may recognize the sacrifice she made when she stole the money believing it would secure his freedom. Ever hopeful, she questions Hugh about her place in his hypothetical future, asking him: “If I were t’ witch dwarf, if I had t’ money, wud hur thank me? Wud hur take me out o’ this place wid hur and Janey? I wud not come into the gran’ house hur wud build, to vex hur wid t’ hunch,--only at night, when t’ shadows were dark, stand far off to see hur?” (61). The absence of any belief that freedom from her dehumanizing labor will somehow humanize her is all too apparent as Deb asks Hugh if he would thank her if she gave him money to build a grand house. Astutely aware of the great and unbridgeable chasm that separates her from Hugh, Deb assures him that under no circumstances will she inflict her bestiality on him, emphatically promising him that she will not “vex” him with her hunchback and that she will be satisfied if he allows her to “stand far off to see” him.

If the money Deb has stolen releases Hugh from the necessity to labor in the iron mill, both his “filthy body” and “his more stained soul” (52) will be cleansed. In other words, the forces that are destroying Hugh are external, and, if they are removed, he will become a man. On the other hand, even if Deb leaves her work at the textile mill and follows Hugh to his grand house, she will be unchanged. Her deformed body will follow her everywhere, and, now that she, as an aberration of womanhood, has predictably slipped into a life a crime, her inherent lack of humanity is ever more glaringly apparent. Deb’s theft of the money is not an act of retaliation against a society that completely

stripped her of her humanity. Intended not to alleviate her own suffering but rather Hugh's, Deb's misdeed is the ultimate self-sacrifice, but she gains no privilege as a result of her self-denial. Deb will not sit on the pedestal alongside the self-abnegating true woman.

Though Deb steals the money for Hugh and has no intention to keep any of it for herself, she is willing to be "be hanged" and "burnt in hell" (61) so that Hugh can fulfill his potential. Hugh recognizes the potential of the money to empower him. He is, unlike Deb, "aware of other options that life has to offer" (Morrison). He envisions himself as "he might be, strong, helpful, kindly" and living a "true life . . . of full development rather than self-restraint" (Davis 62). Deb convinces Hugh that "it is hur right to keep it" (61), but, just when Deb seems to stand up and take notice of the meanness of her condition, she reaffirms her perception of self as a grotesque being lacking intrinsic value. She has the potential only to be hanged; she believes, however, that Hugh has the potential to walk like a king. Deb, though, will have no place in Hugh's royal court. She has none of the personal attributes necessary for claiming autonomy or for forging her own redemption. She is a completed product, not a human being in process.

Deb's stasis, her lack of potentiality, is further exemplified by her lack of facility with the English language. Deb labors with her Welsh dialect to make even minimal sense of her world or to express her affection for Hugh. On the other hand, Hugh, though occasionally afflicted with the indiscernible dialect, miraculously rises above his imperceptibility and uses nearly flawless English to communicate with the visitors to the mill. Noting Davis's use of language to delineate class differences, Harris argues that Davis "indicts the abuse of language when it intentionally seeks to thwart rather than abet

communication” (44). Harris identifies moments in the text when the well-educated visitors to the mill interject foreign phrases into a conversation that is already well above the understanding of their overhearers, the “impoverished” laborers, as a means of reinforcing the strict separation between classes.

While it is certainly accurate to, as Harris does, show how Davis utilizes a variety of speech patterns to differentiate between laborers and capitalists, I am not prepared to say that Davis “indicts the abuse of language.” Rather, I contend that Davis herself manipulates language to reinforce her laboring heroine, Deb’s, imperfectability. Hugh is awestruck by Kirby and Mitchell’s voice which sounds “like music,—low, even, with chording cadences” (51). Listening carefully to the capitalists, Hugh immediately recognizes the power inherent in language as well as its contribution to the “impalpable atmosphere belonging to the thorough-bred gentleman” (51).

There is, however, no musical lilt associated with Deb’s “rasping tone” (60), which irritates her cousin. And Davis’s readers’ sympathies for Deb will be short lived as they struggle to make sense of Deb’s linguistic shorthand where “hur” can refer either to Hugh (him) or Deb herself and where a direct address to Hugh that includes “wud” and “wid” and “t” requires a second and third read in order to discern meaning. Davis is not so much “indicting” the use or abuse of language as she is drawing out the intimate connection between language and identity. Deb’s inability to cast aside her thick Welsh dialect weighs her down, signifying the impossibility of upward mobility and her powerlessness to refute the stereotypes associated with her “class” and become an individual, a human being with potential.

While Harris astutely points out the deliberate attempts of the upper-class visitors to “thwart” communication with the laboring class, Harris never mentions how Deb’s “language” thwarts “communication—both with the upper-class visitors and, more importantly with the readers of *the Atlantic Monthly* where *Life in the Iron Mills* was first published. Harris significantly does, however, note the ease with which Hugh appropriates the language of the class he so admires. Harris maintains that once Hugh appropriates “the language of the capitalists (ownership and possession),” and “begins to embrace their sense of class distinctions,” he is “truly lost” (47). According to Harris, as Dr. May’s assertion “Make yourself what you will. It is your right” (Davis 56) echoes in Hugh’s mind, he comes to the self-destructive conclusion that it is indeed “his right” to keep the money.

I agree with Harris that the values Hugh adopts are the wrong and that they all but ensure his destruction, but Hugh is at least demonstrating that he has economic potential, that he is beginning to understand the system and would be able, if given the slightest opportunity, to capitalize on his newly acquired insights to right the economic and social wrongs inflicted on him. Deb, on the other hand, with her inadequate language skills and limited intellect, is unable to imagine a place for herself in the world of money, fine jewelry, and art. She believes that a handful of money can solve a workingman’s problems, but she cannot imagine how that money might alleviate the degradation she, a workingwoman, endures. She too heard May say “his right,” and she tells Hugh, “But it is hur right to keep it” (61); she never considers that she has a “right” to “keep it” and experience any of the good that she believes the money will buy Hugh.

Deb's inability to believe that she has a redeemable self is evident in her reaction to the rich men's conversation that so intrigues Hugh. Deb assimilates snatches of Dr. May's unsubstantiated rhetoric and uses it to motivate Hugh to become his better self. She is not, however, portrayed as an active, engaged listener since, when the men come near her, she merely "stupidly" (49) lifts her head and then immediately turns over to sleep. Conversely, Hugh is "suddenly roused from his indifferent stupor, and watch[es] them keenly" (49). Emanating a pervasive lack of sentience, Deb falls back to sleep; Hugh, on the other hand, is alert and eager to understand what separates him from the moneyed class.

Listening to the polished diction of the well-dressed men, Hugh immediately intuits the significant role that language plays in establishing identity and in enhancing access to class mobility and, as a result, he quickly sheds the tell-tale dialect. When Hugh first attempts to explain the korl woman, his Welsh dialect is unmistakable. He tells the visitors, "She be hungry" (53). Pondering what it is the korl woman hungers for, Hugh adds, "I dunno . . . It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way" (54). But after listening carefully to the men speak, Hugh handily adopts the language of the upper class. The next time he speaks, the dialect is gone. When Kirby tells him, "A *man* may make himself anything he chooses" (56 emphasis mine), Hugh responds "quietly," "I know . . . Will you help me?" (56). When Dr. May asserts that he has not the money to help the "myriads," Hugh ponders the implications of that claim, adroitly pronouncing every word: "Money? . . . That is it? Money?" (56). Immediately after the visitors leave, Hugh's recently acquired language

skills remain intact as he eloquently asks: “What am I worth, Deb? Is it my fault that I am no better? My fault? My fault?” (59).

As he continues to talk to Deb, Hugh begins to use the clipped words that previously informed his speech, telling Deb, “God forgi’ me, woman! Things go harder wi’ you nor me. It’s a worse share” (59). Even when Hugh falls back into his earlier speech pattern, however, he is a far more proficient speaker than Deb. Guilty of nothing more than the failure to distinctly enunciate every word, Hugh never wanders far from the language the rich men and Davis’s middle-class readers use. Deb, on the other hand, is inarticulate, and, unlike Hugh, apparently unable to differentiate between the “acceptable” speech of the well-educated visitors and her own stumbling attempts to communicate.

Deb never shows the potential to master the language of the upper class, a fete that Hugh accomplishes so effortlessly. Hugh’s facility with language offers convincing evidence that his brain is “full of thwarted energy and unused powers” (62). Deb, on the other hand, is a “type” that cannot be rehabilitated. Her inability to reform her speech imprisons her just as does her “hunch.” She is the personification of the answer to the question Dr. May asks when he notices her sleeping form and asks, “What are taste and reason, to *creatures* who must live such lives as that?” (54 emphasis mine). May implies that it would be a “kindness” if the men who do the “lowest part of the world’s work should be machines” (54). Deb Wolfe is so near the social bottom, so devoid of any humanizing characteristics, that she may already have been the recipient of the “kindness” that May wishes on the men whose labor supports his financial ease.

Although Deb lacks any of the personal attributes required to begin the process of constructing an independent identity, Davis does not leave Deb to wither in the county jail after she is arrested for theft. Deb will not, however, return to the workplace after she completes her sentence since, as Shockett explains, unless “one escapes from the factory into the chimera of Edenic agrarianism, recuperation is impossible” (54). In order, therefore, to contain Deb’s criminal impulse and absolve the capitalists for any responsibility for their wayward woman worker, a *deus ex machina* clothed in the garb of a humble Quaker woman descends from a hillside far removed from the industrial hub of activity and rescues Deb. Thereafter, in the seclusion of a “homely pine house” (73), Deb thrives, and her “impure body and soul” are cleansed and revived. Deb’s salvation through the Christ-like love of the Quaker community is, however, the final act of literary dehumanization of this workingwoman.

Davis rescues Deb from her labors and offers her the opportunity for spiritual reformation, but she is not willing to endow her working girl with the spirit to confront the economic and social injustice that deprived her of a self. Neither is Davis willing to endow her destitute heroine with the potential for either autonomy or even economic reformation. To be sure, when Deb is renewed through the ministrations of the Quakers, she is redeemed for readers of *The Atlantic*. Safely tucked away in the country, her poverty relieved not by her own efforts but through the generosity of others, this workingwoman will not trouble Davis’s comfortable middle-class readers with the unanswered questions that Hugh through his sculpture continues to ask. As she has throughout the entire story, Deb “languishe[s] on the narrative margins, ensnared by the limitations of [her] own body” (Thomson 569). Deb is “contained finally in the Quaker

haven rather than empowered by it” (569). Hugh, on the other hand, continues to reach out through the haunting, inanimate korn woman, forcing the Kirbys and Mays of society to wrestle with its questions: “Is this the End? . . . nothing beyond?—no more” (Davis 74).

Deb, “pure and meek” (73), however, poses no questions. Her recently acquired Christian faith provides both solace and silence. The rasping voice of the degenerate picker has been stilled. “Converted and subdued by another woman” (Amireh 142), Deb is freed from her labors; and society is freed from answering the questions that the life of this workingwoman poses. The korn woman asks, “Is this the End?” Deb’s safe retreat to the countryside signals the end—an end that demonstrates that her labors were for naught, that there is no potential for a female laborer to claim a self through wage-earning work, and that a workingwoman secures her future only when she abandons the quest for self-sufficiency and embarks on a journey that leads her toward spiritual sufficiency. Andrew Silver succinctly identifies the lack of any ameliorative impulse in *Life in the Iron Mills* when he writes, “Deb’s reformation by removal both completes the narrative’s process of valuing the poor for their separation from working-class solidarity and evades the problems of working-class immobility just as surely as the narrative began by underscoring them” (112). As a ward of the Quaker community, Deb is safe and secure as is the culture that created her “type.”

The humanity of this reformed female textile worker is, however, as elusive as it was when she cowered in the shadows of the burning fires of the iron mill. The loss of her voice in the face of the social and economic crimes committed against her is the ultimate theft of her personhood. Deb the Quaker convert, “more silent. . . more humble,

more loving” (Davis 73) than her mentors survives, but she has no more potential for autonomy now than she did as a destitute, debased female textile mill laborer. Deb’s all too womanly dependence—on her faith, on the Quakers, on some “latent hope” to meet the “love denied her here” (73)—will keep this once aberrant woman safely contained until she is freed to “make the hills of heaven more fair” (73). In other words, while there is no earthly remedy for the social ills that beset the laboring poor, there is the promise of release from earthly labor after death if the laborer reforms not the oppressive economic system but herself.

Like Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps tackles the problem of nineteenth-century aberrant womanhood in *The Silent Partner*, a novel that juxtaposes the plight of the working poor against the plight of the idle rich. Both lifestyles, Phelps shows, are debilitating and disempowering, and any feminist project of uplift necessitates cross-class collaboration. Interweaving the life of her socially and economically privileged heroine, Perley Kelso, with that of her female textile laborers, sisters Sip and Catty Garth, Phelps illuminates the struggles of women whose lack of access to self-authorizing alternatives is the result of too little money and too much work or, conversely, too much money and no work, and, therefore, no purpose. Ultimately, Phelps shows how Perley, a woman whose life chances are limited by gender but enhanced by class privilege, can gain access to meaningful and empowering work.

Phelps’s laboring heroines do not, however, fare as well because Phelps, like Rebecca Harding Davis before her, is ultimately unable to extricate her maids from the machines they operate. When Phelps mounts an attack against the impersonal forces of industrialization, the personhood of Sip and Catty Garth is the first casualty because, in

the society Phelps delineates, factory labor is a dehumanizing, destructive force that robs women of the potential for self-ownership. Because their physical and intellectual selves are inextricably intertwined with the work they perform, Sip and Catty are among the finished products of the mill that employs them. As such, they are complete, without the potential for growth, transformation, or rehabilitation. Chance, not choice determines the fate of these female operatives who are the epitome of defective womanhood. While Perley Kelso has the raw materials necessary to, in the words of Anzia Yeziarska's heroine Sara Smolinsky, "make for myself a person" (66), Sip and Catty Garth are unable to rid themselves of the pervasive taint of their laboring life and construct an independent identity. Their survival necessitates that they make cotton, and the cotton they make dictates who they are and what they will become. In Phelps's woeful saga of the plight of female wage earners, a workingwoman *is* what she does.

As a product of the mills, fifteen-year-old Catty Garth is the re-incarnation of grotesque womanhood that Deb Wolfe represents in Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*. There is little about Catty that identifies her either as woman or as human. Catty "was born deaf" and communicates with her sister but no one else using "pathetic language" (80). Occasionally Catty attempts to express herself by making "sounds in her throat" or by talking "on her fingers" (52). Catty's physical appearance is a conglomeration of distorted features more suggestive of a female Frankenstein than a young working girl. She has a "low forehead. . . wandering eyes, with a dull stoop to the head, with long, lithe, magnetic fingers, with a thick, dropping under lip" (86). While Sip says plainly that Catty is "queer and dumb" (52), Phelps's narrator attempts to explain that some integral aspect of Catty's personality failed to develop during the "that difficult evolution

of brain from beast” (86). Although Catty is a specimen of defective humanity, her numerous flaws are not, as might be expected, effects of her work. They are her birthright—the legacy left to her by her mother, an operative who worked fourteen hours each day up until the day before Catty’s birth.

The indelible stamp of industrialization that mars Catty is evidence that the deleterious effects of wage-earning labor can be passed through the womb from mother to child. Although Perley Kelso naively believes that work in a textile mill is a “healthier occupation” (51) than many others, Sip maintains that her sister’s disabilities are the result of her mother’s long days in the factory during pregnancy. She tells Perley, “I only know what I know. I didn’t blame anybody. I never knew any other woman as it turned out so bad” (52-53). Sip explains to Perley that because her father “was on a spree” (51), her mother could not simply quit her job in order to protect her own health and that of her unborn child, and her boss would not reduce her hours because he “hadn’t got it through his head what condition she was in” (52). Phelps asks her readers to understand that Sip’s mother’s economic contribution is essential, both to her family and to corporation that employs her, but Phelps also makes it clear that the textile factory is a toxic environment for women of childbearing years.²³ Catty is damaged goods—both her body

²³Potential harm to a fetus because of a mother’s exposure to hazards in the workplace continues to be a contentious issue. In 1989, the Chicago-based Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Johnson Controls of Milwaukee could ban women who are “capable of bearing children” from working in their battery making division where lead is used. The court determined “that exposing a mother to lead contamination can cause serious damage to the nervous system of a fetus.” In a dissenting opinion, Judge Frank Easterbrook wrote, “No legal or ethical principle . . . allows Johnson to assume that women are less able than men to make intelligent decisions about the welfare of the next generation, that the interests of the next generation always trump the interests of living woman, and that the only acceptable level of risk is zero.” In light of her description of the ills that Catty Garth suffers as a result of her mother’s inability to leave her job in the

and her intellect scarred because she is the offspring of an impoverished woman who of necessity compromised the well-being of her unborn child for a paycheck. The marks of industrialization that this child of the mills bears are a stark reminder that the misfortune of the laboring woman may be visited on her children.

Even though Catty is deaf, intellectually limited, and unable to communicate with anyone other than her sister, she enters the world of work at a very early age, but, work just as it did before her birth, afflicts rather than affirms her. When she was very young, Catty worked as a wool picker and “acquired a disease of the hands” (186). Although the disease is described only as an “ugly thing,” the doctors surmise that Catty rubbed her eyes with her infected hands, and, as a result, she is now going blind. The doctor who diagnoses Catty’s labor-related loss of vision notes that her current work in a textile factory illuminated by “gaslight” has compounded the “mischief” of the original affliction eliminating any chance that Catty will escape total blindness (186).

For Catty Garth, wage-earning labor is a never-ending source of disfigurement. Catty exemplifies the perils that await women who are at the mercy of the impersonal processes of manufacturing. The debilitation Catty experiences first as a result of her mother’s status as a workingwoman and then as a result of Catty’s attempts to contribute to her own support portends not reformation but rather restriction. Catty’s fate suggests that, for women at least, the textile mill is a hostile environment with danger lurking in every corner. The air, the lamps that light the work, the raw materials, and the relentless length of the workday are workplace hazards waiting to rob workingwomen of their health. Female operatives are at risk—at risk of bearing deformed children, at risk of

mills during pregnancy, Phelps would likely have applauded the paternalistic stance of Johnson Controls and the majority court. (“Bias or Safety”)

bodily and intellectual disfigurement, at risk of losing their femininity, at risk of losing their lives. The overarching message of Catty's lamentable life is that women chance irreparable damage to themselves and their unborn children if they are bound to their work in the mill—either by choice or by necessity. The textile mill that Phelps delineates is no place for a lady.

But then Catty Garth is no lady. She is an “ugly girl” (86), both physically and morally. Catty's behavior is, in fact, so utterly unwomanly that she can only be described as antisocial. Sip explains that she and Catty had once lived in the relative comfort of a company boardinghouse, but they were evicted because of Catty's “queer” behavior. When Sip elaborates on Catty's behavior, readers learn that Catty is more than queer; she is amoral. Catty “runs away,” “drinks herself the dead kind,” “runs away about the streets” and, Sip reluctantly tells Perley, “There's sometimes she does—worse” (84). Sip doesn't explain exactly what “worse” is and Perley is momentarily confused by this vague assertion. But when Perley's “*pure*, puzzled face dropped suddenly” (84-85 emphasis mine) in recognition of the implications of Sip's assertion, there is little doubt that Catty is not “pure.” Sip attempts to excuse her sister's wayward behavior by insisting, “It's never her fault” (87), but Sip's explanation has little force when the Catty is repeatedly described as “ill-tempered, ill-controlled, uncontrollable” (85) and responds to her sister's generosity and understanding with a “shrewd, unpleasant smile” (87).

In Catty, Phelps offers readers a portrait of a fifteen-year-old working girl who lacks any sense of conventional morality and who is so thoroughly devoid of any characteristic that would link her to humanity that she is unable to acknowledge the selfless love of her sister. Catty Garth, impure and irascible, is a moral, Intellectual, and

emotional misfit. Neither her sister nor her society can contain her. Yet, she works and earns a salary until she loses her sight. But Phelps is not asking readers to applaud what would seem to some to be Catty's Herculean efforts to earn a living despite her handicaps. Rather Phelps shows readers just how far astray from any notion of conventional womanhood a girl can go when she is damaged before birth because her mother worked too hard and too long. Catty Garth is not so much a victim of industrialization as she is a sacrifice to the unrelenting poverty of a mother forced to earn the daily bread for her entire family and of Catty's own need to support herself.

For both Catty and her mother, wage-earning work compounds the hardship it was meant to alleviate, and, for both women, the only escape from the corrosive effects of their labor is death. The mother dies as only a workingwoman could—from overwork and childbirth. Sip explains that her mother gave birth on Tuesday, went back to work on Thursday, and, by Saturday noon, was dead (50). In Phelps's worldview, a woman cannot be both a mother and a laborer, yet this mother had no choice. She could not work herself out of poverty; she could only work herself to death.

Catty's death is more dramatic than that of her mother but no less predictable because Catty is irredeemable. Not even Davis's Quaker woman could reform the animalistic impulses of this damaged specimen of humanity. Catty is, as Amireh asserts, "impossible to reach," and she, therefore, "must be exorcised from the world of the novel" (130). During a flood, Catty rushes from her house and onto a bridge above a raging river. Deaf and blind, Catty is walled off from the cries of onlookers who seek to rescue her, and she plunges to her death. A spontaneous and temporary memorial created when two logs catch transversely where the bridge washed away is all that marks the

troubled life of Catty Garth. Her death from an act of nature rather than from any of the numerous afflictions she suffered because she could not escape the effects of her mother's and her own days in the mill is unremarkable. No reform movement is born of Catty's unfortunate life and death because her life is just that—unfortunate—rather than tragic. Because Phelps so thoroughly maximizes Catty's inhumanity, Phelps's genteel readers will be more relieved than grief stricken or horrified when this child of the mills is swept safely away from their view. Catty cannot be domesticated; she must, therefore, be destroyed.

Sip Garth, unlike either her sister or Deb Wolfe, at first glance appears to have potential. She is articulate and feisty, and she is a realist. While Sip well knows that Perley's life is one of ease and enjoyment, she does not, as did Davis's Hugh Wolfe, aspire to that life. In fact, Sip shows contempt for Perley's opulent lifestyle and her ignorance of the hardship endured by those not like herself. When they first meet, Sip immediately lashes out at Perley, telling her, "I hate to be pitied by carriage folks" (21). Even after Perley embarks on her mission to redeem Sip from her laboring self, the tension between the two does not evaporate. Perley attempts to justify the distance between herself and those who work in the mills by explaining to Sip, "my kind of folks,' they have kindly hearts, and they have it in their hearts to feel very sorry for the poor" (94). Sip, however, rejects Perley's feeble explanation and her excuse that she knows so little about how those who work in the mills live. Sip charges that Perley's lack of knowledge is deliberate and convenient. She tells Perley bluntly, "That's why I hate your kind of folks. It ain't because they don't care, it's because they don't *know*; nor they don't care enough *to know*" (95 emphasis in original).

While Perley may not “know” depths of the misery of the laboring class and cannot understand why the poor do not simply lift themselves up and out of their poverty, Sip well knows that the source of her never-ending misery is the factory system that capitalizes on the “hands” that work for them. Sip is keenly aware of the meanness of her own condition and recognizes that her own poverty is intimately connected with Perley’s life of ease, but Sip’s insights offer her no advantage in the undeclared war between “employer and employed . . . ease and toil . . . millions and mills, the world over” (Phelps “Note” to *The Silent Partner*). Sip’s intellectual understanding of the inherent inequity of the hierarchy of class does little to empower her because she believes that poverty and lack of opportunity are her fate and that she is powerless to change the direction of her life. Davis’s iron puddler Hugh Wolfe always had a vision of what he could be; Sip Garth’s vision of herself, however, is limited to the scene of abject poverty and misery that envelops her day-to-day existence. Sip believes that she like her deformed sister is a product of the textile mill and that, because “it’s in the blood” (50, 198, 200, 288), she can never be other than a textile laborer.

Sip is convinced that she lacks the personal resources that would enable her to work her way out of poverty and that she is irredeemably lost to the mills. In one of her reformist modes, Perley initiates her “long cherished plan of experiment” (197) to take the mill girl out of the mill, but Perley’s “experiment” only reaffirms Sip’s long-held philosophy that the mill and the mill girl are inseparable. All too aware of her limitations, Sip tries to spare Perley the disappointment of seeing her project fail, but Perley “was persistent in her *fancy*” (199 emphasis mine).

Sip, therefore, agrees to become the subject of Perley's vocational experiment and valiantly takes on job after job, but both she and Perley are ultimately forced to face the fact that Sip is unfit to work anywhere but in a mill. Demonstrating no aptitude for domesticity, Sip burns "all the soup and make[s] sour bread" (199). Lacking any maternal instinct, Sip quickly abandons a job as a nanny because the baby cries and she is afraid she will shake it. Unschooled in the social graces necessary for working with the public, Sip is "saucy" to the housekeeper and loses her job as a hotel table-girl. Sip cannot sew well enough to obtain a position as a dressmaker, and it "worried her to measure off calico for the old ladies" (199) when she attempted to work in a dry-goods store. In a last desperate attempt to rescue Sip from the inevitability of a life as a textile laborer, Perley "finally" placed Sip in a printer's shop, but "Sip had a headache and got inky for a fortnight" (199). Perley's experiment ends after Sip voluntarily returned back to the mills and "asked in" (199).

Sip's journey from the mill into a world of work that is, in Perley's estimation, more conducive to femininity and more amenable to self-actualization leads her right back to the mill, but Perley's experiment is not a complete failure. Both Sip and Perley learn valuable lessons about class. Perley, as a part owner of the factory system that she initially believes oppresses its workers, learns that the textile worker's lack of opportunity emanates from the laborer's inability to learn new skills and adapt to different challenges. In other words, as Sip herself freely acknowledges, textile workers are largely responsible for their own social and economic misery. Perley's grand scheme to help Sip find work that is less physically demanding and more economically and personally rewarding convinces Perley that the people who work in the mills are stuck

there because they are incapable of doing anything else and because they are not motivated to acquire the skills required to change the direction of their lives. In other words, those in the class at the bottom of the social and economic order are in that position not because they have no life chances but because they are socially, intellectually, and vocationally unprepared to capitalize on opportunities when they occur.

Sip is adamant that her failure to survive in the world of work outside the factory results from her own deficiencies and not from prejudice against her or the employer's unwillingness to give her a chance. Attempting to minimize Perley's disillusionment over what she perceives to be a failed attempt to rehabilitate her, Sip explains to Perley that the experiment is not a failure. Rather, the mill girl herself is a failure. Pointing to her own ineptitude as the root of most of her problems, Sip insists that even though she once had a glimmer of hope that her life could be different, now "It's too late. I'm spoiled" (200). Sip rejects Perley's suggestion that education could change her life even though, as Sip admits, at one time "there's things I seem to think I might ha' done with *that*" (200). Sip concedes that she has "lost" any notion of what those "things" were and, "that ain't the worst." Sip volunteers that she has "lost the caring for 'em,—that's the thing I've lost" (200). Although Sip thinks that she "might have been a little different someways; if maybe I'd been helped or shown" (200), she is now convinced that she is "fit for" (199) nothing but the life of "dirt and roughness" (200) that are the only legacy her mother and father had to bestow on her and Catty.

Perley's experiment does not, as she had expected, open the door for Sip to recast herself into a role different from the one her parents had bequeathed her, but Perley's

efforts are not without value for the mill girl. Perley's project to rescue Sip from the mill reinforces Sip's perception of herself and her co-workers, the "whole race of 'em at their looms" (198) as static individuals with no potential. Sip, therefore, can return to her loom content with the knowledge that it is neither her fault nor Perley's that some will forever labor in the mills while others will reap millions from the mills. Sip's access to a better life is thwarted not by insufficient opportunity since Perley created numerous opportunities for her. Rather, Sip is unable to capitalize on the opportunities available because she is insufficiently motivated to overcome the handicap of her birthright. Forced by Perley's experiment to acknowledge that her limited abilities coupled with her unwillingness to change ensure that she will experience never-ending poverty, Sip contentedly wears the "smooch" of the textile worker and her anger at those who "don't want to know" about the poor that surround them dissipates.

Although Sip has assured both herself and Perley that there is no hope she can change the direction of her life, she does muse momentarily over a missed opportunity at education, but her explanation as to why she was unable to take advantage of that opportunity reinforces her original claim that the material circumstances of her life control who she is and what she will or rather will not become. Sip explains that "there was an evening school to one place where I worked" (200). But Sip quickly learned that access to an education requires more than an open door to the classroom. Sip's workload, the work that she was forced to do in order to survive, mandated that she could not be both a textile laborer and a student. Sip's work, running four looms twelve and a half hours a day (201), robbed her of the intellectual and physical vitality needed to acquire an education.

According to Sip, the demands of factory work and an education are incompatible. After work, Sip maintains, “You’re so dull about the head . . . when you get home from work; and you ache so; and you don’t feel that interest in an education that you might” (201). Sip blames no one, not herself and not the corporation that required so much of her physical and mental energies, for her inability to take advantage of the night school. Instead, her explanation offers additional evidence that she is a product of the mills she was born into and that, therefore, she cannot generate the “interest” necessary to acquire an education.

Sip is kept in her place by her perception that Perley’s “kind of folks got made first, and we down here was put together out of what was left” (201). Both Sip and Perley know that working and living conditions for laborers should be improved; neither, however, believes that the laborers have the potential to improve themselves. By repeatedly juxtaposing Sip’s careworn “little brown face” (48, 54, 83, 85, 94, 149, 189) against Perley’s fine, rare face! The womanly, wonderful face” that is “opulent and warm” (302), Phelps reinforces the notion that Sip and Perley, employed and employer, are differently endowed and, therefore, differently entitled. Phelps suggests not that, if given opportunity, the lives of the laboring class can be transformed, only that the conditions under which those folks labor should be improved. Phelps offers no hint of the potential for class mobility. Instead, the working class she presents learns to be content in all things, even the meager portion of America’s increasing industrial wealth allotted to them by their employers, because they believe they are incapable of achieving, therefore, not entitled to economic and social uplift.

In an effort to mitigate the unrelenting misery that informs the lives of her workers, Perley proposes that the factory support a library and institute “relief societies, and half-time schools, and lectures, and reading-rooms . . . to start with” (132), but her plan for relief only further demonstrates the epistemological gulf between her and the laboring classes. Perley’s erstwhile fiancé and business partner, Maverick, attempts to convince Perley to abandon her efforts on behalf of the poverty-stricken laborers because it is economically impracticable and because she “*cannot* understand the ins and outs of the thousand and one questions which perplex a business man” (135-36 emphasis in original). While Maverick’s stance is condescending and represents the unfeeling side of the profit-driven corporation, he accurately points to the fact, as did Sip, that Perley, having lived her life “in a dream” (127) that enabled her to avoid any contact with the downtrodden factory workers simply “*cannot* understand.”

Perley cannot understand that a twelve and a half hour workday precludes developing a taste for “lectures” or having the intellectual energy necessary for attending school or enjoying a leisurely evening in a “reading room.” She cannot understand that, even if half-time schools are available, extreme poverty forces parents to keep their children out of school and send them to the mills in order to “scrape and screw a few dollars” (137). She cannot understand that while a “relief society” may apply a Band-Aid to the gaping social wounds that economic depravation creates, it will do nothing to cure the disease of corporate greed that inflicts those wounds. Eventually Perley decides to bypass the corporation and use her money to support her project. She does not, however, understand that no amount of money can right the wrongs inflicted on the laboring poor by a system that depends on the sacrificial labor of those who so desperately need a job

that they cannot risk the possible consequences of efforts to demand a living wage or to defend themselves against the usurpation of their time and talents.

The plight of Bijah Mudge, a sixty-six-year-old textile laborer who was dismissed after fifty-six years in the mills because he testified in favor of the ten-hour bill before the state legislature, exemplifies the hard truth that the owners' right to a profit supersedes the laborer's right to a living wage and reasonable working conditions (166-67) and that the owners have more control over the direction of the laborer's life than the worker himself does. Phelps's portrait of Bijah Mudge clearly shows that hard work guarantees the struggling laborer nothing more than more hard work and that cross-class sympathy does not promote understanding and certainly does nothing to enhance the life chances of the working poor. When Bijah tries to find work after telling his story to the legislature, he learns that his reputation as a "troublesome character" has spread throughout the industrialized north and that he is unemployable. Bijah knows that there is "something out o'kilter in" (177) the Commonwealth of Massachusetts when a skilled workingman is unable to get a job that will provide him with "vittels . . . close . . . and a roof above his head" (176) and when, after working a lifetime, a man comes into his "old age without a dollar" (178) and ends up in the almshouse.

Bijah understands all too well that the "poor folks . . . can't help" themselves because they are "jest clutched up into the claws 'o capital tight" (179), and he tries to explain this to Perley. But Perley cannot enter Bijah's world anymore than Bijah can enter hers. More importantly, however, Perley cannot understand the "kind of stoopidity as always been to be a layin' atween property and poverty, atween capital and labor,

atween you [Perley] settin' thar with yer soft ways and yer soft dress ag'in you, and me, and the bed, and the chair, and the wall . . ." (178).

Perley sympathizes with the wretchedness of the textile workers, but she cannot fathom the depths of misery experienced by either Bijah, an aging and destitute laborer, or Sip, a poorly paid, overworked female operative. Phelps indicates, of course, that, as the "Silent Partner," Perley is powerless to intervene and change the corporation's exploitative practices. As a result, Perley seems to do the best she can to champion the cause of the laborers; she adopts them as a "charity case" (185). However, Perley's charity toward the workers extends only so far when, instead of supporting the laborers when they strike because of wage reductions, Perley's sympathies are quickly realigned to favor management. Perley quells the strike by explaining to the angry workers that "*she . . . couldn't afford to pay 'em [and] they believed that*" (252 emphasis in original). The poverty-stricken workers "take the young leddy's word for it" and "peaceably stepped up and took the reduction" (253).

The workers are keenly aware that the decrease in their pay will mean that they will "go without . . . breakfast so's the children sha'n't be hungry. . ." (252). They also know that the ease of the folks who represent the "Company" will not be diminished. As "Company," Perley seemingly is unable to recognize the interdependence of her "property" and their "poverty." Perley sees and mourns the physical manifestations of class difference but, from her privileged social and economic position, she conveniently cannot see why these differences exist and, she therefore, is unable to offer the laborers either relief or hope. As a result, Bijah Mudge and many others like him will spend their last days in an alms house, and Sip Garth will continue to work the long hours demanded,

accept the low wages proffered, and live in the damp, bleak stone house that reeks of “cellar smells and river smells” “gutter smells and drain smells,” and “unclassified smells of years settled and settling in its walls and ceiling” (79).

Laboring without hope or without a future, Sip is no less a finished product than was her sister Catty. Phelps’s saga of a feisty young working girl who, unlike Davis’s Deb Wolfe, is intuitively aware of the ideologies that disempower her, offers a vision of a society that is polarized by the disparity of life chances that exists between those oppressed by the poverty of labor and those privileged by the entitlement of ownership. Phelps provides this workingwoman with the intellect and the voice to protest the abuses visited on the working poor, but ultimately Phelps is unable to mediate the class conflict between Perley’s “kind of folks” and the laboring poor. Phelps does, however, rescue her working girl from the wholesale degradation that she heaped on Catty by introducing Sip to Christianity.

Sip, the young woman who seemed so irredeemably incapable of change when she attempted to make the transition from textile laborer to working lady, is miraculously transformed into Sip the “eloquent” (295) evangelizer. Sip, the mill girl who once encapsulated her future in the cliché, “Dust we are and to dust do we return” (81), is now comforted by and preaches a message of hope to her co-workers. However, Sip’s message of hope is also the message of mollification, a message that further disempowers her and her economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised co-workers.

As a result of her spiritual transformation, Sip turns a blind eye to the material inequities that separate those of ease from those who know nothing but dis-ease and preaches that, under Christ, all are the same. Sip urges her co-workers to follow her by

refusing to “look at the rich folks’ ways!” because “that’s none of your business” (299). While Sip concedes that the source of her co-workers’ anger over their lack of opportunity is just, she urges them to accept their fate and wait patiently, caring “more for another world than for this one” and striving “more to be holy than to be happy” (300) because Jesus “knows where the fault is, and where the knot is, and who’s to blame, and who’s to suffer” (298). Convinced by her new-found faith that there is no earthly remedy for the economic disparity that guarantees that some will always be in need and others will “never need” (301), Sip urges the laborers to take comfort in the fact that “Rich and poor, big or little, there’s no way under heaven for us to get out of our twist, but Christ’s way” (299).

Sip, like Hugh Wolfe’s korn woman, is hungry for “Summat to make her live” (Davis 54). Whereas Wolfe tentatively claims, “Whiskey ull do it” (54), Sip determines that religion will do it. The religion that Sip preaches makes it possible for the economically, politically, and socially disenfranchised to endure their oppression; it does nothing, however, to reconfigure the distribution of resources that creates that oppression. Although Christianity changes Sip’s worldview and her perception of self, the material realities of her life remain the same. She is still one of the “poor folks” with a “load of poor folks’ sorrows, and of poor folks’ foolishness, and of poor folks’ fears, and of poor folks’ wickedness” (300). Sip well knows that she will forever be “worked and drove, and up and down, and hurried and worried and fretted, and hot and cold, and cross and poor (295), and she will continue to have “all the rubs” while “Capital has all the ease” (297).

As if to reinforce the fact that Sip's religious conversion does not mean that she is, in fact, capable of being socially or vocationally transformed, Phelps once again juxtaposes the "little rough, brown girl" (294) with her now "lighted" but still "dark face" against Perley's "healthy, happy . . . fine, . . . womanly, wonderful face" that "begged for nothing" and that was "opulent and warm" (302). While "life brimmed" over on Perley's face, Sip's "brown face and bent hands" (295) wait patiently for "comfort" and "joy at the end of it" (300). Convinced that neither laws, nor kings, nor congresses (299) will alleviate the suffering visited upon the working poor, Sip is content because Christ "*knows* the world is all a tangle" (298 emphasis in original) and He will eventually "gather 'em up into his poor cut hands and hold them, and to bow his poor hurt face down over them and bless them!" (299). Sip's spiritual conversion enables her to justify the poverty of her day-to-day existence thereby alleviating her emotional and psychological suffering. "Summat to make her live"—Christianity will do it, that is, Christianity makes it possible for the rich and the poor to live together in harmony.

Phelps and Davis offer a scathing critique of capitalism as a system that economically, intellectually, and emotionally impoverishes its work force. In the mid-nineteenth-century industrialized culture these authors present, men and women who work in factories create wealth for the owners, yet are unable to eke out a subsistence for themselves and their families and, as a result, are unable to direct their own lives. Emphasizing the harsh realities that inform the lives of female operatives, Davis and Phelps conclude that these wage-earning women are a class without choice and without potential because their day-to-day existence is wholly determined by material conditions over which they have no control. Davis's working-class girl, Deb Wolfe, and Phelps's

laboring sisters Sip and Catty Garth struggle not simply on the wrong side of the line separating classes but on the wrong side of a great and immovable ideological wall. Illiterate and unkept, these young workingwomen are so thoroughly impoverished by their lack of opportunity that they cannot envision themselves as other than destitute. They accept as fate their position among America's permanent laboring class and expect nothing more of their life or of the society that benefits from their poorly paid labor. In their zeal to imagine the unimaginable horrors that befall women whose identities are the product of paid employment in the mechanized mill, Davis and Phelps offer readers a portrait of an unnatural woman—the career female operative. The lack of potential in the lives of Deb Wolfe and Sip and Catty Garth are clear and convincing evidence that no earthly good will accrue to women who are dependent on the whims of the marketplace. Modern mechanization and the forces of capitalization rob them not simply of a living wage; it robs them of their humanity.

Conclusion

To think that class does not matter is only a prerogative of those unaffected by the deprivations and exclusions it produces.

—*Formations of Class and Gender* Beverley Skeggs

We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future.

—“What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass

Words, words, words.

—*Hamlet*

My interest in the link between who people are, their identity, and what they do, their work, was sparked when I was a student in English 251 at Hood College in 1993. Our spirited discussion of Dorothy Canfield’s 1924 novel *The Home-maker* focused on Lester and Eva Knapp’s dissatisfaction with their gender-specific roles. While Eva is an accomplished homemaker and dedicated mother of three, the demands of domesticity weigh her down as she strives to organize her household and control her family so that both run with machine-like efficiency. Eva’s husband, Lester, a bookkeeper who goes to work each day feeling as if he is being held in captivity by the tedium of profit and loss statements, is as unhappy in his role as the breadwinner as his wife is in her role as breadmaker. Eva and Lester are well aware that they have accepted roles that are contrary to their nature, but they believe they can do no other because they lack the courage to violate societal norms.

Canfield’s portrait of this unhappy family challenges the notion that men are inevitably more adept at earning a salary than women and that women are naturally

inclined to a life of domesticity and, therefore, have no interest in establishing their independence or competing for a living wage in the marketplace. Canfield challenges but does not, however, dismantle the gender prescriptions that limit the potential of Eva and Lester Knapp. Fate, not choice, intervenes to allow Lester and Eva to escape the debilitating effects of work that is foreign to their nature. Canfield guarantees a happy-ever-after ending only after Lester has a tragic accident that leaves him confined to a wheelchair and unable to work. Economic need forces Eva to relinquish her day-to-day responsibility for both house and children and seek paid employment, and everyone in the family thrives when Eva finds fulfillment working as a manager in the department store Lester hated so much and Lester becomes the full-time homemaker.

Like many nineteenth-century writers who interrogated the tenuous relationship between women's access to agency and their quest for meaningful work, Canfield, writing in the twentieth century, allows her portrait of a successful workingwoman to collapse when she offers an apologia for Eva Knapp's dedication to her work. Eva can only escape the suffocation of domesticity when bad luck, a financial setback as a result of her husband's disability, forces her into the workplace. Both Eva and Lester are unwilling to issue a personal declaration of independence to free themselves from gender-specific work that their culture deems appropriate but that destroys rather than affirms their intellectual and emotional well-being. Eva and Lester's role reversal is fortuitously imposed upon them by circumstances, and, although Eva is obviously on a successful career path, her ambition and success are laudable and socially acceptable only because they are necessary to ensure her family's financial survival. Eva cannot boldly claim to

go where no woman has gone before; she can only go where the needs of her family dictate.

The satisfaction that Eva and Lester derive from their nontraditional roles, he as the consummate homemaker and nurturer and Eva as the dedicated and successful wage earner, sheds a glaring light on the arbitrary and incapacitating nature of the ideology of gender. But, as this study has shown, to critique gender without paying attention to the ever-present but often unremarked ideology of class in discussions about access to agency tells only part of the story. The opportunities available to Eva and Lester are severely circumscribed by their inability to stake a claim for the right to pursue work that is intellectually and emotionally fulfilling as opposed to work that their culture tells them is appropriate for men and for women. However, Eva and Lester, are solidly grounded in the middle class and, as a result, they do have choices, and they do have access to opportunity.

Eva and Lester are always already in possession of the attributes necessary for successfully overcoming the challenges they face. They do not reinvent themselves; they simply redirect their energies and talents to make better use of the resources they have. Lester attended college and has a white-collar job. The Knapps own the house that Eva feels imprisons her. The Knapps have access to medical care as an attentive family doctor diagnoses and treats the numerous psychomatic illness that plague the family as a result of the parents' angst over their lack of access to meaningful work. Eva Knapp is a talented seamstress, provides her family with nutritious, home-cooked meals, has numerous marketable skills as a result of having worked in her father's general store, and

is well respected in the community. Most importantly, Eva has the iron-willed self-confidence that she can succeed.

Eva's lament over Lester's "complete failure . . . to make good" (49) and her own aspirations exemplify the privilege inherent in their middle-class position. Eva silently berates Lester's inability to earn more money because she is desperate to "move to another part of town, the nice part, where the children would have nice playmates!" instead of the "slum boys" who are now "at hand to play with" (49). Additionally, when Eva learns that she is being promoted at work, she dreams of beginning "to lay by a little something every month for the children's college" and buying "a Ford that Lester can get out in with the children" (270-71). The Knapps's income is limited as a result of what Eva believes is Lester's lack of ambition, but their children have far more potential than the all-too-nearby "slum boys" and Eva envisions a future where she will be able to provide a college education for her children and the family will enjoy the luxury of owning an automobile. The Knapp family is not and never has been destitute. Eva is not faced with the impossible task of rescuing her family from poverty. Rather, Eva's success as an independent workingwoman solidifies her family's economic stability and provides additional material comforts.

The solution to the problem of what to do about Eva and Lester lies only partially in sidestepping the limitations that gender prescriptions impose on both men and women. The success that this family ultimately achieves is more a product of the advantages their class position affords them than a result of any realignment or reconfiguration of gendered mores their community so rigidly adheres to. Eva's business success is assured the moment her future employer notices her walk into the store in a "well-made dark

coat” with a “vigorous and swift, and yet unhurried” (124) step. Eva Knapp escapes “the narrow, sordid round of struggle with intolerable ever-renewed drudgery” that being a homemaker represents to her and lifts her family out of what she perceives to be poverty because she is a “wonder of competence” (71). Eva also has the support of her husband and community and can capitalize on her previous work experience and her intelligence.

Though Eva may have believed that being a homemaker and having to survive on the income that Lester provided was, in fact, hell, Eva has choices that are not only unavailable to but that cannot even be imagined by Stephen Crane’s tenement-dwelling heroine, Maggie Johnson, whose life choices are “. . . edder got teh go the hell or go teh work!” (16). Maggie went to work in a sewing factory, but she did not succeed. Being compensated for her labors with less-than-subsistence wages, Maggie could not work hard enough or fight long enough to overcome and the onerous burden of having been born both poor and female. Whereas Eva Knapp had nowhere to go but up, Maggie Johnson had nowhere to go but down. Disadvantaged by both class and gender, Maggie Johnson has none of the resources required to remake herself. She lacks education, self-confidence, and respectability, and, as a result, she lacks opportunity.

To contrast the plight of Maggie Johnson with that of Eva Knapp is not to assert that the limitations imposed by gender are insignificant or even, as Nina Baym concludes, that “class exercises a greater limitation on potential than gender” (69). Rather, my intention is twofold. First, to reiterate a point made throughout this study, a woman who can capitalize on the privileges of middle-class status is empowered and, therefore, has the potential to circumvent the limitations that gender imposes and, as a result, the potential to recreate herself. However, the collusion of class and gender creates an all-

encompassing and nearly inescapable oppression that all but ensures that the struggle for selfhood is futile, lost before it ever begins. In addition, the Maggie-Eva connection demonstrates the necessity for critiquing representations of gender at many different points along a continuum where “the concept of class, which refers first and foremost to the sources and consequences of hierarchy in product and other social relations—[to what] becomes manifest in differentials of power, wealth, and prestige” (Blumin 231).

Attentive to gender as well as more sensitive than many nineteenth-century writers to the influence of class on women’s access to agency, Louisa May Alcott offers insight into the diversity within the category woman and the ways that class encompasses far more than either social or economic privilege. In her 1873 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*, Alcott illuminates the wide variety of subject positions that class distinctions create and attempts to establish cross-class sympathies between her heroine Christie Devon and working-class women. Having worked in occupations as different as seamstress, actress, and housekeeper, Christie is astutely aware of the challenges facing women for whom work is a necessity rather than, as it is for her, a youthful adventure toward freedom. Despite many setbacks, Christie succeeds as a workingwoman, but she leaves the ranks of wage earners when she marries.

Christie does not, however, forget the many times she was disillusioned or taken advantage of and remains committed to the cause of women who work for a living. Yet, when Christie attempts to draw on her own experiences to counsel a group of women assembled to protest the oppression of their labor, she slips into didacticism informed by

her middle-class perspective, a perspective of “ladies” who offer advice in the form of “generous theories” but no “practical methods of relief” (330).

After listening to the well-intentioned but insubstantial exhortations of the “ladies” (330) who spoke before Christie, the “seamstresses, type-setters, and shop-girls” complain, “That’s all very pretty, but I don’t see how it’s going to better wages among us *now*” (331 emphasis in original). Christie, with her plain clothes and work-worn hands, appears to be “one of them” (333), and the workers listen when she attempts to offer more than the ladies who preceded her. But Christie, as one of her many benefactors, Mrs. Wilkins proclaims, “ain’t one of the common sort” (131). By way of contrast, many of the women in Christie’s audience “display[ing] the ignorance, incapacity, and prejudice, which make their need all the more pitiful, their relief all the more imperative” (330).

Christie recognizes that the women in her audience have fewer resources than she does to combat the limitations society has placed on them, but she fails to realize that, as a result, their experience with work is necessarily different from her own. Believing that “labor” had been her “best teacher, comforter, and friend,” Christie reminds the workingwomen that “no matter how hard or humble the task at the beginning, if faithfully and bravely performed, it would surely prove a stepping-stone to something better, and with each honest effort they were fitting themselves for the nobler labor, and larger liberty God meant them to enjoy” (332).

The workingwomen Christie addresses have gathered to “pour out their wrongs and hardships” (330) and their concerns are material not spiritual. For Christie, middle-class privilege—education and family support—is the “stepping-stone” to a better life.

Christie had “dreams . . . of the rosiest sort” (13), and she can also say with confidence to her concerned aunt, “If I fail, I can come back” (13). The workingwomen Christie addresses cannot go “back” to the security of a family home. Neither will they go forward as Christie does when she marries David Sterling, a “sterling” husband who can provide for his wife. The stasis of the lives of working-class women is best exemplified by the fact that they gather to complain about low wages instead of seeking work that offers better pay and more opportunity or quitting their jobs in protest. Christie who has physical and social mobility is well aware of the lack of mobility that limits opportunities for women who do not have the cultural capital necessary to strike back against the forces of capitalism that oppress them. Ultimately, however, Christie cannot bridge the epistemological gulf that class privilege creates between her and women who will forever be dependent on wage-earning work. She offers them empathy but no solution. She stands beside them but not with them.

Although Alcott is unwilling for Christie to take the unlady-like step of encouraging the aggrieved women to organize a strike, Christie accords the women who are bound to work forever for a living respect that is too often missing in stories that focus on the drama in the lives of middle-class women. The concerns of the working-class women in *Work* are validated through Christie who, however fleetingly, joins their ranks and suffers under a similar weight of class and gender oppression. Christie herself may only be able to offer consolation; her experiences as a wage earner, however, authenticate the lives of those who are too often relegated to the subtext unable to speak for themselves.

The contentious debate about the relationship between women and their work, about whose stories are valid and valuable because the lives of the players have social significance and whose stories are mere subtexts because the actors appear to lack prominence, continues in 2005. But, in the intervening 150 years since the texts in this study were published, the debates surrounding women's access to agency through viable work opportunities appear to have changed little. Where once the debate focused on whether or not a woman could be both a wage earner and a lady, now the dilemma confronting a woman is how she can successfully manipulate the demands of both work and domesticity. In other words, in the nineteenth century, women who wanted to be “women” were expected to choose—career or domesticity.

The choices, however, today are similar, but the public dialogue surrounding these choices is now much more subtle so that the appearance is that women “have” choice, have access, have equal opportunity and that, if they are not successful in both arenas—home and office—it is simply because they have “chosen” differently. Even this conclusion is, of course, based on the assumption that women can “choose” to work and are not forced by economic exigency to work. The crucial difference in how the debates about choice and access are framed is always already informed by though not necessarily discussed in with reference to class. Gender as a social and arbitrary construct is always at the forefront of discussions about women and work. Class, though ever present, often remains shrouded in assumptions that the solutions to the problems that face some women can, with minor adjustments, become solutions for the problems of all women.

No dispute more clearly delineates the need to insert class into every discussion about women's access to work and women's identity that the *melée* that followed

remarks made by Larry Summers, President of Harvard, on January 14, 2005. Though Summers refuses to release a copy of his comments, he has attempted to respond to rather than refute reports that he argued that “tenured women are rare in math and science” because “women *choose* family commitments over the eighty-hour weeks” necessary to succeed in those fields, because women are not as genetically gifted as men in the type of skills required for the hard sciences, and because, Summers apparently felt he had to admit, women are discriminated against (Pollitt emphasis mine). The press, feminists, and academics across the country rallied round to soundly thump Summers for his less than judicious comment. Some, of course, defended Summers on the grounds that his comments were taken out of context and amounted to little more than a gaffe. Others, however, vilified him and called for his resignation.

The sticking point that many feminist honed in on was Summer’s assumption that “women, especially when they have families, aren’t willing to put in the hours necessary to get ahead” (Yellin). Katha Pollitt identifies the flaws in Summers’s rationale when she points out that the academic career ladder was established by and for the benefit of men who had the advantage of having a wife who raised the kids, mended his socks, and typed his papers so that he could concentrate on his career. Pollitt maintains that if women had been considered viable candidates for careers in higher education from the beginning, the career ladder “would look rather different.”

The frenzy over remarks made by a man at the top of his career who, to be sure, should have known and said better is instructive in that it points out how it has become all too easy to blame the woman if she doesn’t achieve her career goals. The woman has, according to Summers, chosen family over career and she should, therefore, not be

surprised and certainly has no cause to whine when she is passed over for promotion. In this instance, what is at best, Summer's lack of sensitivity, reflects poorly only on him because the women he attempts to disparage have the resources to defend themselves and, as Pollitt wryly notes, "a first rate woman rejected by one university would surely be snapped up by a rival."

The cacophonous din that greeted Summers's remarks, for the most part, failed to notice the veritable lack of relevance of this conversation to the lives of most workingwomen, "the other 99.9 percent of the female population" (Applebaum). More than forty years after the passage of the equal rights law, women in this country continue to earn seventy-five cents for every dollar that a man makes. Yet, no feminists rant challenges studies that insist that this wage gap is the result of the choices women make, the choice to seek work fewer hours or take time off to raise children, the choice to accept a job that pays less because an employer is potentially more family friendly.

Women who filed a class-action suit against Wal-Mart hotly dispute their company's claims or any research that maintains that they earn less than their male counterparts because they choose family over career. These workingwomen are suing because men who had less experience were earning more money, and the explanation offered was that men had families to support (Teicher). Sixty-five percent of Wal-Mart's hourly employees are women, yet women hold only thirty-three percent of salaried management positions in the chain (Teicher). How would Lawrence Summers and those of his ilk explain this statistic? How would the women in the ivory towers of academia and the mainstream media respond? Any discussion of wage discrimination, access to work or promotion within the workplace, or the necessity that a woman juggle the

demands of career and family is only as relevant as the context in which the debate occurs. And that context must include both class and gender and, oftentimes, race as well.

One last self-reflexive reference to the privilege of class: I am well aware of the numerous privileged subject positions that I occupy and the burden this places on me to “get it right.” For this study and the long years devoted to it to have any meaning, the words and philosophies written here must become praxis. What I have learned through this study must go with me into the classroom every day as I urge my students to consider representations of class in what they read and see around them and to begin to critique their own subject positions. Awareness of the advantages that accrue as a result of class privilege may in turn lead to a better understanding that those who appear not to succeed because, as a student recently remarked, “they made incorrect choices,” perhaps had severely limited choices or choices that did not open doors to opportunity.

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