

ings, or anything of that sort. Sometimes an overseer finds fault, and sometimes offends a girl by refusing to let her stay out of the mill, or some deprivation like that; and then, perhaps, there are tears and pouts on her part, but, in general, the tone of intercourse between the girls and overseers is very good—pleasant, yet respectful. When the latter are fatherly sort of men the girls frequently resort to them for advice and assistance about other affairs than their work. Very seldom is this confidence abused; but, among the thousands of overseers who have lived in Lowell, and the tens of thousands of girls who have in time been here, there are legends still told of wrong suffered and committed. “To err is human,” and when the frailties of humanity are exhibited by a factory girl it is thought of for worse than are the errors of any other persons.

The only punishment among the girls is dismissal from their places. They do not, as many think, withhold their wages; and as for corporal punishment—mercy on me! To strike a female would cost any overseer his place. If the superintendents did not take the affair into consideration the

girls would turn out [go on strike], as they did at the Temperance celebration, “Independent day;” and if they didn’t look as pretty, I am sure they would produce as deep an impression. . . .

Do you wish to hear anything more about the overseers? Once for all, then, there are many very likely intelligent public-spirited men among them. They are interested in the good movements of the day; teachers in the Sabbath schools; and some have represented the city in the State Legislature. They usually marry among the factory girls, and do not connect themselves with their inferiors either. Indeed, in almost all the matches here the female is superior in education and manner, if not in intellect, to her partner.

The overseers have good salaries, and their families live very prettily. I observe that in almost all cases the mill girls make excellent wives. They are good managers, orderly in their households, and “neat as waxwork.” It seems as though they were so delighted to have houses of their own to take care of, that they would never weary of the labor and the care.

Questions

1. What appears to have been the purpose of Susan’s letters to Mary?
 2. How did Susan describe the work environment?
 3. What did she consider the advantages and disadvantages of working in the mill?
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9-3 Morals of Manufactures (1837)

Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) joined a steady stream of British and European visitors to the United States in the early nineteenth century. She published her observations about society in America after a two-year stay from 1834 to 1836. Martineau enthusiastically embraced the radical social implications of the Industrial Revolution and saw in the United States a brave social experiment in human equality. An ardent feminist and abolitionist, Martineau noted that the subordination of women and slaves in the United States contradicted the egalitarian principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. But she saw signs of future progress emerging in New England’s new industrial order. The Waltham plan offered young American women of modest means an alternative to domestic service; the factory system also suggested to Martineau the manner in which the United States could protect itself from the ills of poverty that infected industrial society in Britain.

Source: From Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837).

The morals of the female factory population may be expected to be good when it is considered of what class it is composed. Many of the girls are in the factories because they have too much pride for domestic service. Girls who are too proud for domestic service as it is in America, can hardly be low enough

for any gross immorality; or to need watching; or not to be trusted to avoid the contagion of evil example. To a stranger, their pride seems to take a mistaken direction, and they appear to deprive themselves of a respectable home and station, and many benefits, by their dislike of service: but this is

altogether their own affair. They must choose for themselves their way of life. But the reasons of their choice indicate a state of mind superior to the grossest dangers of their position.

I saw a bill fixed up in the Waltham mill which bore a warning that no young lady who attended dancing-school that winter should be employed: and that the corporation had given directions to the overseer to dismiss any one who should be found to dance at the school. I asked the meaning of this; and the overseer's answer was, "Why, we had some trouble last winter about the dancing-school. It must, of course, be held in the evening, as the young folks are in the mill all day. They are very young, many of them; and they forget the time, and everything but the amusement, and dance away till two or three in the morning. They are unfit for their work the next day; or, if they get properly through their work, it is at the expense of their health. So we have forbidden the dancing-school; but, to make up for it, I have promised them that, as soon as the great new room at the hotel is finished, we will have a dance once a-fortnight. We shall meet and break up early; and my wife and I will dance; and we will all dance together."

I was sorry to see one bad and very unnecessary arrangement, in all the manufacturing establishments. In

England, the best friends of the poor are accustomed to think it the crowning hardship of their condition that solitude is wholly forbidden to them. It is impossible that any human being should pass his life as well as he might do who is never alone. . . . The silence, freedom and collectedness of solitude are absolutely essential to the health of the mind. . . . In the dwellings of the English poor, parents and children are crowded into one room. . . . All wise parents above the rank of poor, make it a primary consideration so to arrange their families as that each member may, at some hour have some place where he may enter in, and shut his door, and feel himself alone. If possible, the sleeping places are so ordered. In America, where space is of far less consequence . . . these same girls have no private apartments, and sometimes sleep six or eight in a room, and even three in a bed. This is very bad. . . .

Now are the days when these gregarious habits should be broken through. . . . If the change be not soon made, the American factory population, with all its advantages of education and of pecuniary sufficiency, will be found, as its numbers increase, to have been irreparably injured by its subjection to a grievance . . . to which poverty exposes artisans in old countries.

Questions

1. Why did the young women at Waltham prefer factory work to domestic service?
 2. Why was Martineau concerned about the "morals" of industrial employment?
 3. What social dangers did Martineau think would result from the absence of solitude in the new industrial order?
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9-4 The "Factory Girls" (1844, 1845)

The images reproduced here complement the written accounts of factory life given in Documents 9-2 and 9-3. The first is a daguerreotype of mill workers from the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, Manchester, New Hampshire, c. 1844. The daguerreotype, invented in 1839, was considered a democratic medium because it was the first to produce affordable portraits. Before this new technology was invented, the only way to have one's portrait made was to commission an artist to paint it, an expense that was not within the average person's reach. The second image is the cover of an issue of the *Lowell Offering*. This literary magazine, a collection of poems, letters, and sketches by the factory workers at Lowell, is excerpted in Document 9-2.

Sources: (a) Daguerreotype of Amoskeag Manufacturing Company workers, Manchester, New Hampshire, c. 1844. Courtesy of the Manchester (NH) Historic Association. (b) Title page from the *Lowell Offering*, December 1845. Permission courtesy of the American Textile History Museum, Lowell, MA.
