**Lowell Mill Girls and the factory system, 1840**

*A primary source by Orestes Brownson and "A Factory Girl"*

***Background***

Lowell, Massachusetts, named in honor of Francis Cabot Lowell, was founded in the early 1820s as a planned town for the manufacture of textiles. It introduced a new system of integrated manufacturing to the United States and established new patterns of employment and urban development that were soon replicated around New England and elsewhere.

By 1840, the factories in Lowell employed at some estimates more than 8,000 textile workers, commonly known as mill girls or factory girls. These “operatives”—so-called because they operated the looms and other machinery—were primarily women and children from farming backgrounds.

The Lowell mills were the first hint of the industrial revolution to come in the United States, and with their success came two different views of the factories. For many of the mill girls, employment brought a sense of freedom. Unlike most young women of that era, they were free from parental authority, were able to earn their own money, and had broader educational opportunities. Many observers saw this challenge to the traditional roles of women as a threat to the American way of life. Others criticized the entire wage-labor factory system as a form of slavery and actively condemned and campaigned against the harsh working conditions and long hours and the increasing divisions between workers and factory owners.

The Transcendentalist reformer Orestes Brownson first published “The Laboring Classes” in his journal, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, in July 1840. It is an attack on the entire wage system but particularly focuses on how factory jobs affect the mill girls: “‘She has worked in a Factory,’” Brownson argues, “is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.” In response, “A Factory Girl” published a defense of the mill girls in the December 1840 issue of the *Lowell Offering*, a journal of articles, fiction, and poetry written by and for the Lowell factory operatives. The author was probably Harriet Jane Farley, a mill girl who eventually became editor of the *Lowell*

EXCERPTS

**Orestes Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1840.**

The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture . . . There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence . . . the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. “She has worked in a Factory,” is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.

**A Factory Girl, “Factory Girls,” *Lowell Offering*, December 1840**

Whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? . . . girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! . . . It has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence and restraints of corporate bodies, is contrary to the spirit of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we ought to cherish. . . . We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole, and for the promotion of the design for which we are collected, namely, to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can; and it is because our toil is so unremitting, that the wages of factory girls are higher than those of females engaged in most other occupations. It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell, and other factories; and it is the wages which are in great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. . . . Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him *God speed*, if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much *independence* for *that*. . . . And now, if Mr. Brownson is a *man*, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; . . . though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the conditions in America around 1840 that encouraged young women to seek employment outside of their home.
2. List and explain three reasons Orestes Brownson used to oppose the employment of women as factory “operatives.”