
“The Spirit of Discontent”: A Young Woman Reflects on Factory Work

A Story From *The Lowell Offering*, circa 1841

The Lowell Offering was a monthly literary magazine produced by the young women employed in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. Although the following piece initially seems subversive, it ultimately defends the way of life of the factory employees, whose labor and morality were carefully overseen by the factory managers. In several ways, this story also defends the growing industrialization of Northern society. —D. Voelker

{1} “I will not stay in Lowell any longer; I am determined to give my notice this very day,” said Ellen Collins, as the earliest bell was tolling to remind us of the hour for labor.

{2} “Why, what is the matter, Ellen? It seems to me you have dreamed out a new idea? Where do you think of going? and what for?”

{3} “I am going home, where I shall not be obliged to rise so early in the morning, nor be dragged about by the ringing of a bell, nor confined in a close noisy room from morning till night. I will not stay here; I am determined to go home in a fortnight. . . .”

{4} “And so, Ellen,” said I, “you think it unpleasant to rise so early in the morning, and be confined in the noisy mill so many hours during the day. And I think so, too. All this, and much more, is very annoying, no doubt. But we must not forget that there are advantages, as well as disadvantages, in this employment, as in every other. If we expect to find all sun-shine and flowers in any station in life, we shall most surely be disappointed. We are very busily engaged during the day; but then we have the evening to ourselves, with no one to dictate to or control us. I have frequently heard you say, that you would not be confined to household duties, and that you disliked the millinery business altogether, because you could not have your evenings, for leisure. You know that in Lowell we have schools, lectures, and meetings of every description, for moral and intellectual improvement.”

{5} “All this is very true,” replied Ellen, “but if we were to attend every public institution, and every evening school which offers itself for our improvement, we might spend every farthing of our earnings, and even more. Then if sickness should overtake us, what are the probable consequences? Here we are, far from kindred and home; and if we have an empty purse, we shall be destitute of friends also.”

{6} “I do not think so, Ellen. I believe there is no place where there are so many advantages within the reach of the laboring class of people, as exist here; where there is so much equality, so few aristocratic distinctions, and such good fellowship, as may be found in this community. A person has only to be honest, industrious, and moral, to secure the respect of the virtuous and good, though he may not be worth a dollar; while, on the other hand, an immoral person, though he should possess wealth, is not respected.”

{7} “As to the morality of the place,” returned Ellen, “I have no fault to find. I object to the constant hurry of every thing. We cannot have time to eat, drink, or sleep; we have only thirty

minutes, or at most three quarters of an hour, allowed us to go from our work, partake of our food, and return to the noisy clatter of machinery. Up before day, at the clang of the bell—and out of the mill by the clang of the bell—into the mill, and at work, in obedience to that ding-dung of a bell—just as though we were so many living machines. I will give my notice tomorrow: go, I will—I won't stay here and be a white slave.”

{8} “Ellen,” said I, “do you remember what is said of the bee, that it gathers honey even in a poisonous flower? May we not, in like manner, if our hearts are rightly attuned, find many pleasures connected with our employment? Why is it, then, that you so obstinately look altogether on the dark side of a factory life? I think you thought differently while you were at home, on a visit, last summer—for you were glad to come back to the mill, in less than four weeks. Tell me, now—why were you so glad to return to the ringing of the bell, the clatter of the machinery, the early rising, the half-hour dinner, and so on?”

{9} I saw that my discontented friend was not in a humor to give me an answer—and I therefore went on with my talk.

{10} “You are fully aware, Ellen, that a country life does not exclude people from labor—to say nothing of the inferior privileges of attending public worship—that people have often to go a distance to [a] meeting of any kind—that books cannot be so easily obtained as they can here—that you cannot always have just such society as you wish . . .”

{11} “What difference does it make,” said I, “whether you shall be awakened by a bell, or the noisy bustle of a farm-house? For, you know, farmers are generally up as early in the morning as we are obliged to rise. . . .”

{12} Presently we proceeded, very pleasantly, to compare a country life with a factory life in Lowell. Her scowl of discontent had departed We agreed, that since we must work for a living, the mill, all things considered, is the most pleasant, and best calculated to promote our welfare; that we will work diligently during the hours of labor; improve our leisure to the best advantage, in the cultivation of the mind,—hoping thereby not only to increase our own pleasure, but also to add to the happiness of those around us. —“ALMIRA”

Discussion Questions:

1. Name at least 4 criticisms that “Ellen” made of factory life.
2. What counter-arguments did “Almira” present in order to persuade her friend to stay?
3. Whose argument do you think was stronger?

SOURCE: Hypertext version, scanned and tagged by Mary Halnon; available on the internet at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/fem/sturge.htm>. Spellings have been modernized and paragraph numbers have been added.



This electronic text is © 2006 David J. Voelker. Permission is granted to reproduce this text freely for educational, non-commercial purposes only. All users must retain this notice and cite <http://www.historytools.org>.