Patricia E. Johnson. ***Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction.*** Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. 224p.

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Although the voices of most nineteenth-century working-class women have been irretrievably lost, Patricia E. Johnson's *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction* encourages us to reconsider the importance of such voices to Victorian culture. Johnson's project addresses a prominent contradiction in recent scholarly treatments of the mid-nineteenth century: the critical tendency to acknowledge the prominence of women to the emergent domestic ideology that becomes crucial to Victorian society and the simultaneous absence of the working-class female in this historical criticism. She indeed suggests that "the very concept of 'the working-class woman' became an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms" (6). Johnson traces the role of this absent working-class female in solidifying male dominance within working-class culture and ensuring the authority of middle-class domesticity. Johnson's book explores this complex nature of working-class women and discovers "openings through which history pours" (15). *Hidden Hands* continually relies upon such exposed histories to provide intelligent readings of nineteenth-century texts by Gaskell, Dickens, Eliot, Disraeli, Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, George Gissing, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and others. Johnson's examination of the findings published by the Children's Employment Commission and her consideration of working-class women's experience of sexual harassment are especially important contributions to the study of class and gender in the nineteenth century as they invite critics to rethink the cultural function of the Victorian working woman.

Johnson begins her first full-length chapter by evaluating the public response to the research of the Children's Employment Commission. Her attention to the Commission's use of wood-engravings is commendable, and her assessment of their impact on the status of women complicates previous critical work by Nancy Armstrong and Catherine Gallagher. Johnson explains how the report essentially prohibited the accurate representation of the working woman; she adds that "rather than addressing the real problems in the working conditions that the report revealed, there was merely an attempt to abolish the image of women at work" (22). Johnson employs this vital historical research to explain the relative absence of working-class women in many nineteenth-century texts ostensibly concerned with industry and labor. Her analysis of the confusing presence of Rachel's dead little sister in *Hard Times* (1854) is a good example of this critical technique. She

argues that while Dickens removed the actions of Rachel's sister from the narrative, the text "still contains a handful of vague references to her" that suggest "through their very incoherence how ideologically disruptive the female factory worker might be" (41). Johnson claims that these allusions prompt Stephen Blackpool to resist both joining the union and acting violently toward his degenerate wife. According to Johnson, these brief textual appearances of the absent girl show how the social conception of the "factory girl is linked to ideas of gender conflict and political change. The dead factory girl in heaven becomes the image through which all conflict—both domestic and political—will be magically resolved" (41). Johnson's treatments of nineteenth-century social-problem novels consistently offer such smart close readings that highlight the importance of these literary texts to the reproduction of Victorian domestic culture.

Her discussion of working-class women's endurance of sexual harassment also combines impressive historical research with careful textual analysis. Johnson takes up this issue in chapters 2 and 5, suggesting the prevalence of such abuse and its importance to Victorian domestic ideology. She points out that the presumed sexual immorality of factory girls was used both to mask the realities of their maltreatment and to justify middle- and working-class efforts to "exclude or control women's labor" (50). Johnson proceeds to investigate the presence and effects of sexual harassment in Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1839-41), Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). She argues that while women's resistance to their abuse and abusers is never direct or complete, these females are also not fully silenced. In addition, she details how middle- and working-class men used this violent harassment to forcibly return women to the home—a strategic move that coincided with a widespread Victorian social attempt to isolate the domesticated woman as the savior of the nation and its culture. In chapter 5, "Domesticating Violence: Hard Times for Working-Class Women," Johnson offers a compelling reading of Frances Power Cobbe's essay, "Wife-Torture in England" (1878) in which the author overtly critiques the abusers of domesticated women. Johnson notes that "at the center of Cobbe's presentation is the direct connection she draws between domestic violence and class." Johnson explains that while Cobbe defends "upper- and middle-class Englishmen … for their courteous treatment of women, working-class men treat their wives like chattel" (137). Johnson's assessment of Cobbe's text uncovers an important reality of the lives of working-class women that provides crucial contextual information for her readings of novels by Gaskell, Tonna, and Disraeli.

Johnson's work represents an important contribution to ongoing critical discussions about the complex dynamism of gender and class, but it is her consistent

attention to the historical construction of class that distinguishes her scholarship from much of the criticism concerned with the nineteenth-century novel. In her epilogue, she attempts to provide "an ending and a beginning" to her account of the nineteenth-century working-class woman (166). Her conclusion to the study focuses on George Eliot's oft-forgotten *Felix Holt* (1866); Johnson specifically explains how this late-Victorian narrative effectively "excludes the possibility of politically engaged working-class women" (171). While this "ending" offers helpful closure to her study, her brief look at late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives by working-class women is notably underdeveloped. She does, of course, recognize that this cursory survey of recent memoirs by working-class women is only "tentative" and acknowledges that "much more needs to be investigated here that lies beyond the scope of my study" (187). Johnson should be applauded for considering neglected works like Emma Smith's *A Cornish Waif's Story* (1956) and Kathleen Woodward's *Jipping Street: Childhood in a London Slum* (1928), but this final component of her book is nonetheless inferior to the rest of her exciting scholarship in *Hidden Hands*—an impressive critical text that perpetually exposes "the uncanny resonance between literature and history" (173). ❋