

**Charlie's Angels in the House:
Hard Times and the Crisis of Middle-Class
Gender Ideology**

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Coketown, the setting of *Hard Times* (1854), focuses on the social problems that attended the Industrial Revolution. Charles Dickens describes the town as an “ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in” (83). The word “citadel” indicates the town’s fear of external dangers; but, ironically, the primary threat to Coketown is its own spiritual corruption, symbolized in the “interminable serpents of smoke” that emanate from its smokestacks (28). The socio-economic desires of middle-class industrialists produce an ugly pollution that infiltrates their own homes and social institutions.

The Victorian model for gender relations is one such institution. Codified by such writers as Coventry Patmore, John Ruskin, and Sarah Stickney Ellis, this system involves the middle-class wife having exclusive moral and spiritual dominion over her home so that she can provide a haven from the harsh, immoral conditions her husband and sons face in the outside world. Dickens suggests that the ability to create this sanctuary and to become, in Patmore’s phrase, an “angel in the house” comes naturally to all women, but flowers most easily within the middle class, in which financial means purchase ample leisure time for the development of moral tuition and comfort. In this novel, however, just as new technologies adversely affect the natural environment, the ideology of Utilitarianism bricks out the feminine “Nature” of the middle-class woman, especially her ability to exert a moral influence on her “separate sphere.” The middle-class home

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becomes an “ugly citadel” in which greed and vice are walled in. The true heroines of this novel are not middle-class women, as they are in most other Dickens novels. *Hard Times* gives us working-class women who become shining examples of “natural” femininity and bring their “angelic” influence into the homes of those who have fallen away from the Victorian middle-class domestic ideal.

Elizabeth Langland observes that “the domestic sanctuary overseen by its attending angel can be decoded as a theatre for the staging of a family’s social position,” a position which usually falls somewhere in the middle class (291). It is imperative to establish that the idealized woman, according to the Victorians here discussed, is to a great extent a middle class construction. Indeed it is this intersection of gender and class roles which makes Dickens’ use of the angel-in-the-house rhetoric in this novel so unique: by imagining *working-class* angels, he deviates significantly from contemporaries such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, who consistently perceives the angel in the house as the role of the specifically middle-class woman. Victorian readers would likely have expected the angel symbol with its attached domestic associations to emerge within the world of leisurely speculation and moral reflection inhabited by Louisa Gradgrind, the daughter of the wealthy industrialist and politician. Ironically, Dickens instead associates angelic symbolism and its virtues with Sissy Jupe, born and raised among circus performers, and Rachael, an unmarried working-class seamstress. Coketown’s wealthier tenants envision the class from which Sissy and Rachael emerge to be altogether immoral and ungrateful. They are “a bad lot altogether, gentlemen,” as Bounderby and Gradgrind assert; “do what you would for them they were never thankful for it, gentlemen” (31). Yet the female representatives of this class teach moral lessons rather than learn them from their “betters.”

Hard Times presents only one *parole* within the expansive *langue* of Victorian middle-class gender expectations. Coventry Patmore’s 1876 poem “The Angel in the House” is an oft-cited example of the Victorian discourse on femininity; its title evokes both the religiously and morally charged image of the Angel and the comfortable realm of the House to which she is bound and over which she is mistress. The poem situates the ideal woman firmly in the domestic realm, with men

dwelling primarily in a more public sphere. Elaine Hartnell identifies the intellectual context of Patmore's work as being rooted in a "Post-Enlightenment discourse of binary opposition with regard to gender" (458). According to Hartnell, Patmore's poem stereotypes women as "innately virtuous, trusting, and childlike" and thus well-suited to the comfortable world of domestic concerns (467). Within this binary discourse, women are opposed to the purportedly more rational and therefore less innocent men, who are fit to exert their influence in the ruthless and complex environment of politics, business, and labor. The role of Patmore's idealized woman corresponds to Chantel Langlinais's description of the typical middle-class Victorian woman: she is "comforting and compassionate" and provides "a safe haven from a turbulent outside world" occupied by her husband, rather than risking these ethically confusing and dangerous encounters with broader reality (84). The couple enjoys the financial and social comforts provided by the successful middle-class husband as well as the moral security cultivated within the separate and uncontaminated domestic realm of the wife.

Patmore suggests that there is an innate capacity for spiritual guidance which is bestowed upon women, despite, or perhaps because of, their limited gift for reason. Describing the immorality of a woman who has "on her own sweet self set her own price" (in other words, prostituted herself), he pontificates: "How given for nought her priceless gift / How spoil'd the bread and spill'd the wine / Which, spent with due, respective thrift, / Hath made brutes men, and men divine" (Book I, Canto 3.3). Here, as Hartnell argues, Patmore establishes an analogical connection between the body of Christ and the saving power of an upright woman (468). The emphasis on "spending" and "prices" reveals the extent to which this power is an economic one: the (presumably innocent) body of a woman is used as a spiritual "gift," given, like the body of Christ, in the context of a religious ceremony (in this case, matrimony). When turned into a profession and thus "given for nought," this feminine potential for spiritual betterment through physical relations is lost—the only "due, respective thrift" worthy of such a gift is the sacrament of marriage. To Patmore, prostitution is the remotest outpost from the inner circle of feminine morality because it draws a woman's body as well as her time and

talent away from her domestic role and marks her as physically tainted by the working world.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, frequently cited for her views on proper feminine behavior, also believed that women were endowed with a certain propensity to direct the moral atmosphere within the home. In her 1839 book *The Women of England*, Ellis attempts to “show how intimate is the connexion which exists between the *women* of England, and the *moral* character maintained by their country in the scale of nations” (53). Ellis’ ideal woman is one who takes on her domestic responsibilities with an air of sacrificial deference rather than professional concern. The “domestic drudges” who “employ their whole lives in the constant bustle of providing for the mere animal appetite” are powerless to provide such guidance because their interests are turned toward physical rather than spiritual needs (54). Needless to say, a woman of higher social standing would more likely have the time and resources to spare in taking on such philanthropic endeavors than the “drudges” who must work for a living. It is the middle-class woman who has the time to impress upon the men in her domestic circle that “they are hastening on towards a world into which none of the treasures they are amassing can be admitted;” much less easily can she do so if she is amassing similar treasures for herself (57). According to Ellis, men must struggle in the marketplace for socio-economic advancement; they must necessarily worship “another god—the Mammon of unrighteousness.” Short of gleaning guidance from literal heavenly beings, “the society of woman, in all her moral capacity” is the best remedy for this focus on worldly concerns (57).

Social critic John Ruskin refers to the domestic sphere governed by the “true wife” as a “shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” and, later, “a sacred place, a vestal temple” (261). The woman who presides over this holy space holds authority over the spiritual life of its tenants, who will then be better prepared to go out into the world “to assist in the maintenance, in the advance, in the defense of the state” (Ruskin 264). Ruskin does challenge middle-class women to extend their governance beyond the walls of their homes, but, like Ellis, he places them on pedestals of moral rectitude.

Victorian writers certainly seem to be drawn to women who

“approach[ed] the divine on Earth by functioning as the holy refuge” (Golden 7). Dickens himself frequently reveals a belief in women as beacons of spiritual and moral direction. For instance, the protagonist of *David Copperfield* describes his beloved Agnes as “the better angel of the lives of all who come within her calm, good, self-denying influence” (273). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Lucie Manette is also called an “angel” (49). In her domestic life, she is shown “ever busily winding the golden thread that bound [her family] all together, weaving the service of her happy influence through the tissue of all their lives, and making it predominate nowhere” (218); the subtlety—indeed, the invisibility—of this feminine influence is markedly just as important to Dickens as its strength. Both of these novels cast a middle-class woman in the role of the “angel,” arranging both her domestic space and her personal character so as to infuse all who are exposed to it with a sense of strength and comfort. But *Hard Times* is notably bereft of a figure who represents the sanctified image of middle-class femininity. Stephen Blackpool’s wife is a degenerate, a drunk and a prostitute; Mrs. Sparsit is a conniving servant, fallen to such a state from a corrupted upper class. When Louisa Gradgrind fails to fulfill her position as the middle-class angel-in-the-house as a foil to these two characters, she creates a vacuum that is only filled when Rachael and Sissy Jupe assume the ideological function of the “angel,” despite their working class origins.

Dickens represents Mrs. Blackpool as the middle-class angel’s demonic other. Though she was, upon her marriage to Stephen, “a young lass—pretty enow—wi’good accounts of herseln” (94), she is now “a dead woman,” and her husband is “tormented by a demon in her shape” (108). She is “a creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy” (89). Dickens’ characteristic suggestion of the link between outer appearances and inner temperament is at work here. The dilapidated state of her attire and the filthiness of her countenance help to blur the distinction between “woman” and “creature.” The narrator uses both of these terms to refer to Mrs. Blackpool here, rather than give her an appellation which would confirm some degree of humanity beneath her uncouth exterior—as if, through the cultural process of signification associated with naming, he might risk construing her as a

cultural being rather than a barbaric beast. Upon first seeing her, Stephen calls out for “Heaven’s mercy” (89) suggesting that unlike his beloved Rachael, his wife necessitates merciful treatment rather than disseminating it. Indeed, the very entrance of Mrs. Blackpool into her domicile elicits the very opposite of angelic harmony and order. Rather than attending to the “minutiae of domestic comfort” (Ellis 57), she sells the furniture and commandeers the nuptial bed, which ought to represent a site of physical comfort and marital harmony, for her drunken slumber. “I ha’ gone home, many’s the time, and found all vanished as I had in the world, and her without a sense left to *bless herseln* lying on bare ground” [emphasis added], Stephen articulates (95). She is bound to her demonic status, unable even to nurture moral sensibilities within herself, much less in other members of her household. Rather than working as a priestess by tending to the “minutiae” Ellis describes, Mrs. Blackpool functions as a motionless, witless almswoman in an empty temple.

Whereas Mrs. Blackpool is the demonic antithesis of the domestic angel, Mrs. Sparsit, who hails from the upper stratum of society before the opening of the narrative but who has been reduced to a meager housekeeper in the home of a *nouveau riche* banker, is a parody of the angel. Sparsit knowingly appropriates the symbolism of the angel-in-the-house as a means to improve her position in the eyes of Bounderby. But Dickens prevents Mrs. Sparsit from attaining the status of domestic “angel,” in part because she is tainted by the corrupt values of class from which she has fallen, and in part because her salaried position as bank guardian reveals a disconcertingly masculine ambition.

Ellis depicts the ideal English woman as “guarding the fireside comforts of [her husband’s] domestic home” (57). This reference to the fireside or the hearth would have been a common synecdoche for the home as a whole—in other words, for the center of a woman’s moral authority, the source of her ability to provide her family with light against the darkness and warmth against the outside cold. Mrs. Sparsit is a kind of hearth-mistress in Bounderby’s life, but because of her role as a servant who works for a living her attentions are directed to a more public than private sphere:

[S]he was guardian over a little armoury of cutlasses and

carbines, arrayed in vengeful order above one of the official chimney-pieces; and over that respectable tradition never to be separated from a place of business claiming to be wealthy—a row of fire-buckets—vessels calculated to be of no physical utility on any occasion, but observed to exercise a fine moral influence, almost equal to bullion, on most beholders. (Dickens 150)

The language here indicates a comical parody of the angel-in-the-house role. Mrs. Sparsit establishes a “vengeful order” within Bounderby’s workplace—rather than his home. The “fine moral influence” the fire buckets exert is misplaced because it is directed at a public target, rather than being situated within the female sphere. That the “cutlasses and carbines” constitute an “armoury” suggests their use as weapons; instead of gently tending to the fire and ministering to the needs of men, Mrs. Sparsit is prepared to douse the fire and wage war against the restrictions which bar her from transcending her new place at the bottom of the hierarchy. Moreover, her position as a fire fighter, rather than one who lovingly tends the hearth, aligns her more with the male sphere than the female. The tools of war and violence of which she makes use are symbolic of the masculine role she is required to play in her employer’s life, which no attempts at establishing herself as feminine can circumvent. The parody of the angel in the house reaches its zenith at the end of the novel when Mrs. Sparsit plays the role of detective to find the thief of her employer’s bank. Her willingness to intrude into the middle class in such a violent manner betrays her inability to wield the quiet and gentle influence of the middle-class domestic angel.

Louisa Bounderby is perfectly positioned within the narrative to be a foil to both Mrs. Blackpool’s demonic otherness and Mrs. Sparsit’s parodic absurdity. She is a young middle-class woman, entering into a marriage in which she ought to be able to utilize the reformatory power of domestic comfort and moral sway to beautify her new husband’s life. Why is she unable to do so? Dickens suggests that her upbringing, in which factual knowledge was emphasized over emotional and spiritual development, and her constant exposure to the ‘evils’ of industrialization and Utilitarianism, prevent her from developing her

angelic potential.

Louisa seems at first to bear resemblance to Dickens' typical angelic heroine; we see her nurturing her brother Tom in their shared captivity within the Gradgrinds' morally stagnant home as best she knows how. "You are the only pleasure I have—you can brighten even this place—and you can always lead me as you like," he confesses to her (67). He speaks here of his sister's inner ability to "lead" him in positive moral directions, even though his familial relationships based on the tenets of Utilitarian philosophy and his working conditions in the employment of Mr. Bounderby continuously break down any sense of goodness he might develop. Louisa helps her brother manage his grueling workdays at the bank, mirroring the model of gender relations established in the works of Ruskin and Ellis. His role is to work in a harsh, morally dead place, and hers is to make it bearable for him once he arrives at home through her special "feminine" charms.

Despite her apparent moral power, Louisa acknowledges a weakness within herself that prevents her from fulfilling her role as domestic angel. She admits to her brother:

I often sit wondering here, and think how unfortunate it is for me that I can't reconcile you to home better than I am able to do. I don't know what other girls know. I can't play to you, or sing to you. I can't talk to you so as to lighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about, when you are tired." (67)

Here Dickens demonstrates the effects of Utilitarian education on the ability of a woman to exercise her role as angel. Louisa is a product of her father Gradgrind's system of schooling, which emphasizes "nothing but Facts" and is uniformly stark and rigorous for boys and girls (Dickens 1). What Ellis calls "that most valuable of all faculties—*moral power*" should be cultivated "unaccompanied by any high attainments in learning or art" (56). Ruskin prescribes that a woman should study subjects "only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures" (263). Gradgrind-style education does not allow for this surface-level education in either sex; M'Choakumchild's

female students are prepared, just as his male students are, to “weigh and measure any parcel of human nature” rather than understand them from a moral perspective (Dickens 3). The grandest failure produced by this system, as Louisa’s lamentation to her brother indicates, is that it impedes the natural development of moral sensibilities in the character of young women such as Louisa. This would-be angel is thus unable to provide more loving guidance to those in her care.

The fire imagery surrounding Louisa is a key to the underdeveloped and misdirected manifestations of her feminine character. Louisa’s frequent juxtaposition with fire signifies her preoccupation with questions unique to her gender and its expectations within broader society. Louisa broods on “her own fire within the house, and then in the fiery haze without,” attempting “to discover what kind of wool Old Time...would weave from the threads he had already spun into a woman” (126). Dickens makes a distinction between the fires of the outer world, which come from the nearby factories, and the ones she tends herself, which are commonly associated with the domestic ideals of “hearth and home.” But, for Louisa, the same images and emotions are linked to both kinds of fire. The mood of her home is forever set by the industrial and Utilitarian ideologies her family espouses in both the public and the private aspects of their lives, and her domestic space is infested with these dogmas. Thus, the motif of fire as it applies to her inner journey encompasses both the “feminine” hearth flames and the smoking chimneys of the industrial world. She cannot isolate her domestic impulses, because they are permanently entwined with the harsh outer environment to which she is exposed.

Louisa’s liaisons with Harthouse and her departure from Bounderby’s house demonstrate the demonic, sexual meaning this “fire” can acquire when it is not bound up in the rhetoric of domestic concerns. She observes the “languid and monotonous smoke” of the Coketown chimneys from afar and admits that “fire bursts out” at night, indicating the barely-contained frustration she feels under such restraint from a healthy expression of her natural desires and needs (70). What began in her childhood as a potentially angelic position in the life of her brother has turned sour when Louisa enters her marriage and is entranced by Harthouse’s impossible promises of romantic felicity. As she falls increasingly under his spell, she begins to fear

that she has “crushed [her] better angel into a demon” (298).

Ruskin describes the space entrusted to the middle-class woman as a Temple of Vesta, a metaphor that links the fireside imagery to virginal purity. The Vestal Virgins, like the angel-in-the-house, were bound to a sacred sphere of influence, and the flames they nurtured appeased a goddess and thus brought prosperity upon Rome as a whole. Dickens extends the association of hearth-related imagery, sexual continence, and moral influence. Louisa’s flirtation with Harthouse disrupts this sacred connection. Her inner flames are ignited not by her husband but by a seducer. She does not tend them in the spirit of sacred love; they are repressed for many years and then burst forth, almost beyond her control. She is thus characterized by what Patricia Ingham calls “Biblical language of condemnation” (94): the novel carefully monitors her infernal descent as her proximity to sin increasingly affiliates her inner fires more closely with hell than hearth.

Ironically, it is Rachael, the working-class seamstress, who fulfills Victorian expectations of a well-behaved, morally upright woman, and plays a role that middle-class Louisa cannot. As her beloved Stephen Blackpool says to her, “Thou changest me from bad to good...Thou’rt an Angel; it may be, thou hast saved my soul alive!” (118). Rachael epitomizes the perfect woman because she transforms moral character, as per Ruskin and Ellis’ suggestions, and even possesses the religious purity and authority of Patmore’s heroine. Rachael symbolizes a kind of “natural” femininity that sometimes crops up outside of the middle class. She lives in the outside world and yet is untainted by it, maintaining her purity and reflecting her goodness onto her compatriots. But while other Victorian novelists might have caused Rachael’s marriage plot to end happily, probably by having her beloved’s crazed wife die prematurely—as Charlotte Brontë did with Jane Eyre’s rival in similar circumstances—Dickens kills off Stephen Blackpool before this wedded delight can come to fruition.

The reason that this irreproachable woman is unable to take her rightful place at Stephen’s hearth, becoming the angel in his house, is largely because of Coketown’s reprehensible unionist rabble-rousers who, along with Bounderby, force her beloved into exile. Dickens translates a fear of political discord, namely of the Chartist movement (which advocated egalitarian voting rights and the possibility for

members of any social class to become Members of Parliament), into a threat to the middle-class construction of femininity. Tellingly, one of the major ways Rachael exhibits her status as an “angel” is through a rejection of the union. She makes Stephen promise her that he will not join. “When I passed that promess, I towd her true, she were th’ Angel o’ my life,” Stephen declares (211). This allies her with Ellis’ heroic women who “accomplish great and glorious purposes” when “called into action by pressing and peculiar circumstances,” despite being disenfranchised by lack of social prominence, education, or compelling intellectual faculties (56). Ultimately, however, by inspiring Stephen to sacrifice his life in Coketown to the cause of political stability, the angel Rachael sacrifices her own rightful province of domestic felicity. She is required to take a more worldly than domestic role in spiritual leadership for the sake of “sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” within larger Coketown (Ruskin 260), and must risk and lose her happiness because of the moral influence she dispenses. Although in looking at her in this light we see that she is truly representative of the “minor morals of domestic life which give the tone to English character” (Ellis 54), it becomes evident that her status as an angel-in-the-house is more complicated than it would be were she a member of the middle-class and thus beyond the concerns of proletarian rebellions and unionist propaganda.

Where Rachael fails as a true angel, however, Sissy Jupe succeeds. Raised in the environment of a traveling circus, Sissy can certainly be identified as working class; however, the specifications of her art-infused lifestyle place her in a very different position from Rachael in her concerns and her outlook. She is more able to cross the boundaries of gender and class to communicate the need for social and personal change in other characters, while simultaneously adhering to a great deal of Ruskin and Ellis’ qualifications of a morally upright woman with the power to inspire and warm those whose lives are hardened by harsh external conditions.

Sissy, a newcomer into the Gradgrinds’ austere world of Facts, finds it impossible to train her mind to them. While she receives a partial education from Gradgrind’s school, Dickens intimates that she is too situated in the sphere of delicate femininity to be touched by the cold facts her new educators force her to learn. Rather than grasping

the concept of proportions in Mr. M'Choakumchild's question about twenty-five starving people in a town with a population of a million, for instance, Sissy understands that "it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million" (75). Notions of mathematical and economic exactness are important to the Utilitarian thinker, Dickens insinuates, because he will be able to supplant the human face of suffering with a numerical value. For a young woman like Sissy, "feminine" compassion prevents her from forgetting those whom even the philosophy of "the greatest good for the greatest number" excludes. She approaches Ruskin's ideal educated woman when he suggests that, rather than being burdened with miniscule facts and data, concerning herself in this case with the wide but potentially unequal distribution of money and material comforts among a large population, she gain a sense of compassion for everyone who suffers. He stipulates that

she is to be taught to extend the limits of her sympathy with respect to that history which is being forever determined, as the moments pass in which she draws her peaceful breath; and to the contemporary calamity which, were it but rightly mourned by her, would recur no more hereafter. (262)

Sissy's first appearance casts her as "irradiated," coming "in for the beginning of a sunbeam" (5). This heavenly beginning is a premonition for her angelic career in Coketown, where she exerts her saving power in various ways. Even Mr. Gradgrind, among the most hardened of the Utilitarian characters in the novel, comes to think of Sissy as "a good fairy in his house" (368) who can cause miracles, not least among them being his ability to imagine something as fanciful as a fairy. The novel's end finds him "making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity" (395); his sense of morality has been forever changed, and all of his future endeavors will be touched by Sissy's influence.

Louisa believes her life to have been forever altered as well, when she says of her family, "'They will be different, I will be different yet, with Heaven's help.' She gave her hand to Sissy, as if she meant with her help too" (367). Dickens parallels Sissy's help with Heaven's, and

Sissy's power over the characters in *Hard Times* takes on a religious connotation similar to Rachel's. Most importantly, she displays her own goodness by bringing out the angelic, heavenly qualities in others. The success with which Sissy accomplishes this is demonstrated in her tactful handling of Louisa's near-affair with Harthouse. Because Sissy intervenes, Louisa is able to reject the seducer and, eventually, to "know her fellow creatures and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with those imaginary graces and delights, without which...the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death" (397). Sissy is not only an angel in her own right; she is a vigilant protector and champion of the angel ideology.

The connection between gender and class in Dickens' works is a long-standing topic of critical concern. Critics have examined how this connection manifests itself, and questioned why the standardization of the gender code to the ideals of one relatively small class was so important to a writer so hugely preoccupied with the vast chasm between the rich and the poor. Peter Scheckner theorizes that Dickens uses women in his novels to symbolize his ideal working class, and that the attributes Dickens praises in these two groups are similar. He argues that representatives from both groups are successful when they are "grateful for favors received, humble, patient, and passive" (236). *Hard Times* certainly shows us that the same social forces threaten the survival of the poor and the development of the middle-class angel-in-the-house. As Lynn M. Alexander writes, many Victorian authors used the figure of a working class woman to "illustrate the hardships and possible social repercussions of industrialization" (29). She maintains that the use of female characters required by necessity to work in factories would "strike a sympathetic note" with a readership who would then be inspired to rally against the injustice of women forced out of their domestic spheres (37). In *Hard Times*, Dickens locates the seat of morality, thought to be the possession of bourgeois housewives, within the hearts of two poorer women. In so doing he encourages a rejection of those aspects of Utilitarianism, industrialization, and Chartism which make it more difficult to create feminine order in the home—which, according to the angel-in-the-house rhetoric, functions as the base of society, determining the way the superstructure as a whole is ordered. Dickens uses the working-

class angel-in-the-house as a sign of absent virtues among middle-class women, then, in an attempt to illuminate factors which could rock England to its foundations.

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