

working girls and millionaires

the melodramatic romances of

laura jean libbey

joyce shaw peterson

Forth from the shop on a wintery night,
The working-girl trips with heart so light;
Buoyant her step - a bread-winner she,
Surging along in humanity's sea;
Honest and fearless in life's busy whirl,
And proud of the title - a working-girl.¹

Historians recognize the fifty years between 1870 and 1920 as a period of transition for American women during which their image and actual position gradually changed. As Americans grappled with the implications of their increasingly industrial and urban society, they scrutinized anew the meaning of woman's proper place, struck particularly by her increasing propensity to seek and find paid employment. Debate over the proper role of women thrived on a re-examination of the meaning of work and the significance of woman's role within the domestic sphere in a society seemingly dominated by the industrial sphere.²

Statistics clearly indicated a growing number of women spending a portion of their lives in paid employment outside the home. In 1870 15 percent of all women over the age of sixteen were found by the Census to be gainfully employed. Decade by decade the Census found a steady increase in the percentage of women employed: 16 percent in 1880, 19 percent in 1890, 21 percent in 1900, 26 percent in 1910 and 24 percent in 1920. Since most employed women were young and single, working in the space between the end of their schooling and the beginning of their married lives, the statistics were even more impressive when age categories were

narrowed. For example, by 1900 one-third of all women aged 16 to 20 were found among the ranks of the gainfully employed. In factories and stores these young women were usually immigrants or the daughters of immigrants; in offices they were more likely to be native born from families longer in America. Their presence in the work force in such large numbers, nearly four million by 1900, signalled the emergence of a newly recognized stage of life for women, no longer a child and not yet a married woman, during which paid employment became increasingly acceptable and respected.³

The statistics suggested to some observers that women were beginning to abandon, at least for a portion of their lives, their domestic role and adopt a more public one similar to the public economic role of men. Young working women, almost always referred to by the term “working girls,” may have held jobs that were largely becoming gender specific by custom, but their general circumstances as wage laborers were not that much different from those of men. Public attention focused on young women workers reflected an attempt to use them to explore the meaning of femininity, of work, of possible urban and industrial abuses, of what would happen to the moral foundations of the society if some women, before they became moral guardians in the home, were exposed to the values of the work place, the very values that the home was supposed to offset.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a spate of magazine articles chronicled the woes and triumphs of working women. Middle-class women disguised as working girls applied for jobs in restaurants and factories and published accounts of their experiences, and several state and federal investigations inquired into the conditions of women who worked.⁴ In addition, a new variety of popular fiction emerged to accompany the transition from a primarily domestic definition of womanhood to a potentially more public one, just as it accompanied the actual increase in employment for women that took place at the same time. Popular writers discovered the working girl as heroine and as reader. The best selling domestic novels of the earlier nineteenth century began to decline in popularity. The domestic novels, typified by those of Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, featured middle-class ladies who suffered through a series of domestic trials with womanly self-sacrifice and reliance upon religion to triumph in the end, rewarded for their virtue by erring males returned to the domestic fold and to religious faith. In contrast, the new working girl novels featured young working-class women who never endured domestic trials but rather ended their fictional adventures with the marriage ceremony.⁵

Laura Jean Libbey (1862-1925) perfected the formula of the working-girl genre and became its most popular and successful practitioner. During the 1880s and 1890s she published over sixty novels, all melodramatic romances of young and innocent girls who survive a series of narrow escapes from assaults upon their virtue and their lives to emerge the wives of rich and handsome husbands in the end. A significant portion of Libbey’s stories were in the working-girl genre that paired beautiful, innocent but spirited working girls with wealthy and noble gentlemen. In fact, such books became known in bookselling circles as “Laura Jean Libbeys.”⁶

A few facts are known about the highly successful Laura Jean Libbey,

whom one journalist referred to as the “Prophetess of the proletariat.” She grew up in Brooklyn, a member of a middle-class family, and when still in her teens turned her talents to writing for popular magazines and newspapers. Her romantic melodramas prospered in serial form in magazines like the *Fireside Companion* and the *Family Story Paper*, appeared as paper covered books in the late 1880s and the 1890s, selling for 15 to 25 cents, and were reprinted again and again well into the 1920s in series published by Robert Bonner, George Munro and Street and Smith. At the peak of her publishing career in the 1880s and 1890s Libbey claimed to earn between \$60,000 and \$75,000 per year. Her earnings enabled her to live most comfortably and to take numerous foreign tours, one a nine-month grand tour of Europe and Egypt in 1892.⁷

The Libbey formula was simple enough. Take a beautiful young woman, make her an orphan or the sole support of an invalid mother or sister and thus create the necessity for her to go to work. The wealthy hero is quickly smitten and the villain is quickly attracted. The work place then drops from the story, although not the description of the heroine as a “poor little working girl,” and is replaced by numerous obstacles to the final reuniting of hero and heroine. These obstacles may involve the disapproval of the hero’s parents, abduction of the heroine by the villain and near brushes with both death and rape. There is always a happy resolution that brings hero and heroine together and promises a blissful future.⁸

Libbey’s novels undoubtedly had a multiple audience. The story papers were intended for family consumption and were subscribed to by many rural and small town readers as something suitable for young people and parents alike. Even in more urban middle-class families Libbey’s novels probably found at least a female audience although perhaps a somewhat secret one. Critics either disparaged or ignored her works and anyone desiring to preserve a reputation for cultivated literary taste would do well not to make public a liking for Libbey. Libbey herself described her writing as intended “for the masses.” Expressing a desire to provide a reading experience that would “lift people out of themselves,” Libbey no doubt hoped she was describing reality when in one of her novels she provided fictional readers for the story of Leonie Locke. Declared Libbey:

Many a working-girl read the story of Leonie Locke, and their honest hearts thrilled as they read the story of her struggle against adverse fate. She had been a working-girl like themselves; she had known all their privations, the early rising, hurried toilet and hurrying steps to the work-shop. She had known what it was to toil late and early for the sweet bread of life, and she had known all their sorrows and the pitiful desolation and fear of being discharged from work.⁹

Certainly the statistics on young working women indicated that Libbey had discovered in them not only subject matter for her stories but a potential audience as well. And evidence suggests that potential was realized. One of the best known accounts of working girls’ lives in New York in the early twentieth century, Dorothy Richardson’s *The Long Day*, includes a discussion of the reading choices of young paper box factory women workers who favored romantic stories of innocent young women who safely wend their way through a myriad of big city dangers eventually

to marry the handsome rich hero. Richardson reports that one day the girls in the factory told each other the story of *Little Rosebud's Lovers*, a title she attributes to "a well-known writer of trashy fiction." Libbey, for it was she, might have preferred the publicity of being identified by name.¹⁰

An examination of Libbey's popular novels allows us to think about the social image that Americans maintained of the working woman in a period of transition and the tensions and questions raised by women in the work place. In addition, since these books were both written for and read by a mass audience that included young urban working women we can use them to see both the social values and world view offered by the author to the working girls and, perhaps, to glimpse something of the hopes, aspirations and world view of the working girls themselves by examining what was so appealing about these novels that built up their loyal readership.¹¹

The definition of ladyhood that had evolved in the nineteenth century was one which included all women as properly exemplifying the ideals that Barbara Welter has summed up in the qualities of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Yet not all women were equally well placed by circumstances of social class to be perceived as ladies.¹² Laura Jean Libbey's romantic tales translate into the conditions of the working-class girl's life the requirements of ladyhood. Over and over they make the point that there is nothing to be ashamed of in working for a living, that in fact one way of distinguishing between the noble and the villainous among the other characters is their attitude toward the "pure young girl whose honest toil wins for her her daily bread" (*Willful Gaynell*, p. 25). The working girl heroines of these books are all true ladies by virtue of their qualities of purity and innocence of soul. When they eventually inherit fortunes through adoption or discover themselves to be long-lost heiresses it is only outward confirmation of a status that has been apparent all along. There is no impediment to a working girl being a lady if she follows the rules of respectability and keeps her femininity amidst the working world. This conception is implicit in all the novels and most explicitly articulated in *Little Leafy* when Leafy, fearing that her wealthy admirer could not truly love her, protests, "Oh, I could never believe that a grand rich gentleman like you could care for me. I am not a lady. I am only a poor little working-girl!" (p. 20). The handsome and wealthy Mr. Forrester is quick to respond, "Every working-girl is a lady . . . and every man knows when a young girl works for a living she is pure and good. God bless them! They deserve the noblest husbands in the land. To be dressed in silks and jewels does not make one - a lady" (p. 20). The hero can always be identified by his respect for the status of the working girl. He is often known among the workers as their champion and his behavior reflects his respectful attitude. Allan Drexel, the nephew of the mill owner, hands his card to Coralie "with as much deferential courtesy as though she had been some great heiress instead of a poor little working-girl in his uncle's employ . . ." (*Master Workman's Oath*, p. 10). Villains, on the other hand, can be identified by the total lack of respect they express. Male villains see

working girls as helpless and defenseless, hence easy prey for their designs; female villains see them either through a veil of snobbery as beneath them and unworthy of any attention or through jealous eyes as beautiful fortune hunters not to be trusted around rich men. Dora Lancaster is outraged that she, “a beauty and an heiress,” could be “insulted and slighted for the sake of Leonie Locke, a working-girl” (p. 43).

Not only do poor working girls emerge as ladies but also there is clearly no necessary connection between wealth and ladyhood. The ubiquitous female villains work evil designs against the heroines in their capacity as rivals for the heroes’ love. The female villains are always rich and a perfect foil to examine the true qualities of ladyhood apart from its unnecessary accompaniments of fashion, high society and a domestic life of great comfort and ease. Fashion is depicted as false; it is merely something used by wealthy women, who are not truly feminine, to snare men. One unscrupulous rival takes two hours to dress most elaborately every day whereas the heroines need no artifice to enhance their beauty which is both of form and face and underscored by their lack of guile or sophistication. Ione in her “charming simplicity” of dress is contrasted to the “over-dressed, bejeweled young girls” (p. 148). Little Leafy’s “blue-dotted lawn fitted her lissom, girlish figure to perfection; but it boasted of neither ruffles nor tuck. She wore no ornament save the wealth of shining golden hair that fell to her waist in waves of glittering splendor. Indeed, the sweet dimpled face needed no adornings to enhance its winsome loveliness” (p. 77).

At the heart of the world explored by the Libbey novels is romantic love. Love is the most important, indeed it seems the only important, end of life. For men as well as women it is presented as all sufficient. The romantic doctrine that “somewhere in this great wide world there is another heart which God made to be the other half of our own” (*Happy-Go-Lucky Lotty*, p. 11) is presented as an accepted truth as is the instantaneous recognition of the true lover when he appears.

The spark that but by slow degrees
Is nursed into a flame,
Is habit, friendship, what you will;
But love is not its name! (*Lotta, the Cloak Model*, p. 165)

Love is constantly counterposed to wealth. Characters fall into good or bad categories according to whether their primary allegiance goes to love or to money. The continual message is that wealth without love is nothing, that marriage for money leads to unhappiness, that renunciation of fortunes for love is noble and that “love levels all barriers” (*Master Workman’s Oath*, p. 17).

A test of manly virtue is the willingness of the hero to be disinherited to pursue marriage with a working girl not favored by his parents. Each hero has to face the realization that comes to Clinton Dunbar as “he stood face to face with this one fact at last - that wealth, social position, fame, or grandeur, nothing that this earth could give him, would be of any value to

him hereafter unless it brought with it that which he so deeply wished for: the love of charming little Lotty” (p. 157). When Frederick Forrester’s father threatens to cut him off without a penny he responds manfully, “I can work for Little Leafy, father. . . . We can be happy together in a cottage; she will marry me for love - not for money” (p. 37).

Libbey’s combination of democratic respect for work with romantic hopes for love and riches provides a success myth for women to complement the male myth typified by Horatio Alger’s plucky poor boys rising through hard work, thriftiness and loyalty to their employers. The sympathetic advice extended to Alger’s hero, Ragged Dick, that “All labor is respectable my lad and you have no cause to be ashamed of any honest business . . .” is mirrored in advice given to many a Libbey heroine. The difference that gender makes, however, is quite clear. While work is respectable for all, the prescription for success differs. Mr. Whitney continues his remarks to Ragged Dick with the recognition that while there is nothing to be ashamed of in honest labor, nonetheless, “when you can get something to do that promises better for your future prospects, I advise you to do so.”¹³ Along the way to success Ragged Dick also has to learn to save, study and improve his appearance and manners. To Libbey’s working girls no such advice is offered. They are already perfect in their personal characteristics and the arena in which they will elevate themselves is not the business world but marriage. Their success derives from being discovered by the right man.¹⁴

Thus to the popular wisdom that “Eagles never mate with sparrows” (*Master Workman’s Oath*, p. 5), Libbey counterposed a kind of socialism of love expressed by Gordon Carlisle’s housekeeper when she learns that her rich employer is to marry a simple working girl. “It is just as the Lord intended it,” she observes with pleasure, “the rich should wed with the poor” (*Leonie Locke*, p. 56). When reality occasionally did rise to Libbey’s standards for romance, newspapers around the country did take notice. In 1905 a poor immigrant factory worker, Rose Pastor, married the millionaire socialist, J. G. Phelps Stokes. Countless newspaper headlines proclaimed them the Cinderella couple, and Rose Pastor Stokes later found herself the thinly disguised heroine of a novel based on her life.¹⁵ Libbey made explicit the connection between working girl status and the ultimate reward of success in a good marriage in advice delivered by the heroines to her fellow workers at the conclusion of many of the novels. Typical are the final page parting words of sympathy and advice from Ione to her former workmates in the textile mill.

“Do not despair,” she whispered to the weary-hearted girls, as she turned away. “None of you know how soon you may meet your fate - what hour or what day. It was the day when the world looked darkest to me that I met Arthur first, and had not Providence directed my steps here - and in search of work - I would not now be his bride” (p. 256).

I do not wish to minimize the appeal of this romantic myth nor the serviceability of such a success myth for a rapidly changing and quite

unstable urban industrial society. For middle-class readers these stories would provide sentimental justification to stay away from reform efforts designed to improve conditions of work for women. The best solution for the oppression of the work place was a happy marriage, and submersion in such fiction would provide a convincing sense that such solutions were indeed commonplace. For working-class women the advice contained in the myth could be summarized as work hard now, believe society values your work and wait patiently for the reward: a loving husband and happy marriage and an end to the harshness of work. Acceptance of the terms of the myth would mitigate against the development both of class or feminist consciousness among young working women and the popularity of these books could be taken to indicate a low level of just such consciousness among their readers. This is not, however, the only conclusion and there is much to suggest that it would be a limited and imperfect one.

Both Libbey and her readers may have had more complex ties to the stories. Evidence from the novels themselves, from Libbey's essays and from her life suggest that Libbey had discovered a simple formula for successful story writing which she used in a quite calculating, even cynical, manner to sell stories and books that masked her own more worldly evaluations of life's rewards for young working women. Libbey's novels really have two main themes: 1) an assertion of democratic values that claims dignity and respect for working girls and poses tests for ladyhood based on behavior and inner worth, not on class or wealth, and 2) an assertion of the primacy of love over all other human emotions coupled with an assurance that for every woman fate has selected the perfect man, the two have only to find each other to know love.

But Libbey undercuts the presentation of her themes throughout her books. The promise that anyone can be a lady if she is properly behaved, demure, innocent and feminine is undermined by the physical attributes of the heroines, attributes not available to just anyone. Libbey's working-girl "ladies" are universally extremely small and girlish. They have tiny hands, stamp mites of feet, possess slim waists and are frequently described as dainty. What Libbey has done is taken two stereotypes and reversed them. In order to create an image readily recognized as a lady she borrows the dainty persona associated with higher class status. The coarseness and vulgarity popularly associated with the working class she attributes to the personalities, if not the bodies, of her female villains.¹⁶ She then uses the emphasis on daintiness and smallness to heighten another aspect of the heroines' femininity, their extreme dependence. They are alone in the world and are constantly placed in situations of great danger, fires, floods and the villain's clutches, from which masculine rescue is necessary.

In addition, the worth and dignity of honest poverty and toil are called into question by the clear superiority of the wealth into which the heroine always comes by the end of the story. Whether through coming into her own inheritance or through being rescued by love, all of the Libbey working girls conclude their adventures by giving their hearts to truly noble men who incidentally happen to be millionaires. Even when there is

a working-class youth who loves the heroine and proves his nobility and heroism by helping to rescue her (an Alger hero, as it were), he is never a suitable mate. Heroines are not forced forever to live with the beauty of love in poverty.

Finally, the assertion of the nobility of poverty is eroded by the frequent turn of plot which reveals the heroine to be a long lost heiress, her ladyhood now confirmed by birth; she was never destined to be a working girl at all. Libbey openly decries the popular tendency to equate working girl with easy morality and disreputability and replaces this stereotype with an equation of working girl with innocence and misfortune worthy of respect and sympathy. But Libbey's equation is proved false at the end of the book when it is revealed that the working girl heroine is really a born lady and only taking her rightful status at last.

Just as assertions of democratic values are eroded by counter messages, so too are the consolations of love. For while love is the greatest and most ennobling of human emotions it can just as easily turn to viciousness and lust if it sways people of low character. Jealousy and lust are also fueled by love; a love gone sour, perhaps, but still called love.¹⁷ Where love motivates heroes to acts of bravery and self-abnegation, love motivates villains to abduct, hide away and forcibly marry the unwilling and innocent heroine. While heroes hold their passion in check until given some sign of returned affection, villains delight in force. Typical is Harold Tremain's response to Gaynell's slap of rejection:

“By George, this difficult wooing gives a zest to it; but from the first your deep-rooted dislike made me all the more anxious to win you and tame you and clip your wings, my beautiful, struggling bird of paradise, whose beauty has bewitched me. There's nothing tame about this romance, by the eternal! But my charming Gay, my bride to be, I must exact a kiss for the blow you dealt me, here and now. Why struggle when you know you must submit to it?” (p. 125).

The behavior of the villains and the paucity of good men in the books raise another problem. While the doctrine promises, indeed requires, one perfect man for each woman, the question arises as to how easy they are to find in a world that contains so many of the other sort. Can there really be enough of the good men to add up to a perfect love match for the reader?

In the opening paragraph of *Madcap Dorothy* one of Dorothy's fellow workers in the book bindery laments that,

“It's so hard for working-girls to get acquainted. They never meet a rich young man, and they don't want a poor one. It seems to me that a girl who has to commence early to work for her living might just as well give up forever all hopes of a lover and of marrying. . . . It's get up at daylight, swallow your breakfast, and hurry to work; and it's dark before you are out on the street again. How can we ever expect to meet a marriageable fellow?” (p. 5).

Precisely, and Libbey herself was well aware that life rarely imitated her

art. When criticized by a reader for making her heroes too noble and pure rather than men “as they are,” she replied in favor of fantasy:

“The happiest epoch of a young girl’s life is the daydreams she has of the lover who shall come to her some day, and of the roseate future stretching away beyond. I should not like to destroy these girlish fancies. It is not pleasant to think of white doves coming to the muddy pool to drink; it is less pleasant to contemplate innocence drinking at the fountain of knowledge. . . .”¹⁸

In some of Libbey’s prose writings of the advice variety, she is more explicit than in the novels about the possibility that love may be harder to recognize, and less glamorous, than the novels suggest. In a piece, the title of which states the problem, “Do We Ever Find the Love Heaven Intended for Us?”, Libbey warns that

the handsome, smiling, affable, elegantly attired man who smiles down in your eyes as he takes you [sic] hand, and whispers flattering little nothings that set your heart all in a flutter, is, nine times out of ten, of unbearable temper and manner to his family; and the plain, diffident, sincere man - too honest to flatter and too earnest to raise hopes which find no answering echo in his own heart - who is plain of face and in his dress, and whose eyes do not follow with admiration and eagerness every pretty-faced girl who crosses his path, is, in truth, nature’s true nobleman.¹⁹

Since love leads to marriage, the end reward, Libbey arouses suspicion by her failure to depict marriage within the novels. That marriage may not have been bliss for Libbey is interesting speculation. She married at age thirty-six. When she died at age sixty-two she left instructions that her tombstone carry only her maiden name. In addition, her estate was left to her sister and sister’s children, not to her husband.²⁰ Another indication that Libbey found marriage a ruder experience than her novels promised comes in an advice column to mothers suggesting that daughters need friends of their own age to share their fancies because mothers are “too worldly-wise for delusions, such as make up the brightest years of girl-life.”²¹

It is possible, then, to imagine that Libbey’s readers could sense a harsher reality lying underneath the surface of her romantic fantasies. In addition, the stories themselves have enough hold on reality to keep them from being pure fantasy. The heroines were working girls like their readers who worried about keeping their jobs or being fired if they displeased their bosses, planned dances and picnics and expressed considerable pride in their ability to support themselves. Dorothy Richardson’s fellow workers did not want to hear the story of *Little Women* which seemed “no story” but just “everyday happenings.” They allowed that “farmer folks” might find such a book appealing but only because “They ain’t used to the same styles of anything that us city folks are.”²² Indeed, part of the appeal of Laura Jean Libbey’s stories must have been their lurid rendering of the city as a place where anything can happen. The girls who read these novels

also lived in cities and knew them to be somewhat more commonplace environments. While writers debated, “Should she come to New York?”, most working girls had little choice about where they lived.²³ They lived in cities because their families did or because they could find employment there and they had already developed the sense of most urbanites that while the city might indeed house vice and evil it also held far more excitement and opportunity than were to be found on the farms or in the small villages of the nation. The extreme innocence of Libbey’s heroines, their total lack of street-wise behavior, must have made her readers smile and congratulate themselves that at least they knew better than that.

Libbey’s books are determinedly urban in setting. They reveal the social tensions created by increasing urbanization and use the city as a site for danger and evil, and as the setting where the heroines are discovered and conquered. While the stories often begin in smaller cities or rural villages, the scene soon turns to New York as the plot picks up, “the great, cruel city of New York, rampant with wickedness and crime” (*Pretty Madcap Dorothy*, p. 177). It is a city, unlike Alger’s, that is devoid of detail even though Libbey’s Brooklyn upbringing and New York publishing house career must have provided her with detail had she chosen to use it. She is not interested in realism. She takes New York ready-made as a setting for evil and feels no need to argue the case. New York is central to the plots as a dual location where economic opportunity exists and girls can find jobs and where evil plots against the heroine take place in their proper, most believable setting. The kind housekeeper in Lotta’s original home in Virginia is horrified to hear that Lotta contemplates finding a job to support herself and her sister in New York.

“Anywhere but there, child. . . . It is a great big, wicked place,” and she shuddered as she looked back through the dim vista of past years and remembered the many who had gone forth to the great, cruel city of New York and what had become of them. They had all gone, as this young girl was going, in search of employment. One had gone forth from her own home - her mother’s only child, her all - and had crept back, a poor, painted thing - a wreck of sweet, innocent girlhood - to sob out her story on her breast and die in her arms. Others whom she had known had traversed the same fatal road. No wonder she cried out in horror: “Any place but New York, little Lotta -anywhere but there” (p. 9).

New York is such a wicked place that there a woman’s beauty becomes a curse and more than one Libbey heroine is advised that to navigate safely the streets of New York she should wear a heavy veil to cover the beauty of her face. In such a setting Charlie Hart can suggest to Leonie Locke that “a young girl with such a glorious face as yours need never look for work” (p. 7).

Looking again at Barbara Welter’s four virtues of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness one can detect a clear change in emphasis in the Libbey stories. Piety is the first and most completely vanquished of the earlier virtues. Religion simply disappears. It has been replaced by a

romantic conception of love in which two souls are ordained in the order of things to find happiness only with each other. Those who find love are the new elect whose chosen condition is signified by their happiness.²⁴

Blows also fall on domesticity and its twin, self-sacrifice. These novels delineate a special period of life of young womanhood that makes appropriate a certain kind of girlish behavior, ladylike but not totally womanly. Indeed the use of the title "working girl" for young, working-class women and "working woman" for professional women is usually in a context where the "girls" receive much less criticism for their presence in the world of work and are seen as much less threatening to the social order than are the "women" who after all do not need to work and often do so at the denial of marriage and motherhood. Domesticity need not be considered as a cardinal female virtue in these novels since the action of the story always precedes marriage and only envisions marriage as the conclusion of romance rather than the beginning of domestic life. The spirit of self-sacrifice so essential to the nineteenth-century celebration of womanhood is hardly necessary for these heroines except where they may have dependent sisters. Their situation rather calls for them to be spirited and proud both as ways of turning aside assaults on their purity and of asserting their integrity and self-worth.

Purity remains as a virtue but defined rather narrowly as resistance to villains. Villains represent a sexual menace that must be resisted even if the villain claims the privileges of marriage, a marriage which always proves to be illegitimate. The need for purity, however, stems from both the illegitimacy of the claims of the villain and his personal repulsiveness. The abductor of Lotta, the cloak model, begins his assault with "a low, chuckling laugh; and then - oh, Heaven; the horror of it! - mustached lips were pressed to hers in a sudden kiss; lips that fairly reeked with the odor of strong liquor and tobacco" (p. 51). The passion that accompanies romantic love is neither denied nor proscribed. Libbey heroines are allowed to retain their innocence and demure demeanor while willingly receiving the caresses of good men. After escaping from her false marriage to the villain, and being reunited with the hero, Frederick Forrester, "with a little quivering cry," Little Leafy "rose to her feet, and the next moment her lover's arms enfolded her, just as they would hold her through life, pressed close to his throbbing breast; and love's passionate kisses were burning the fair, sweet face, the rippling golden curls, and the rosy mouth." Afterwards she showed her combined confusion and pleasure by "shyly lifting" her "wonderous blue-bell eyes to his face with a glance so full of adoring love that it almost took his breath away for rapturous ecstasy" (p. 235).

While the Libbey novels do seem to suggest a more relaxed and approving attitude towards women's sexual pleasure, there are clear limits. It is a pleasure to be received—not pursued. The female villains are sexually aggressive and so passionate they frighten good men. The "great love" which Evelyn St. Clair "lavished" upon Percy Granville "wearing him" and he consciously contrasts her to the lady-like Gaynell, "whom a

bold wooer would have frightened as a huntsman frightens a timid bird'' (p. 204).²⁵

The dominance of personal happiness as an ethical value also assails the concept of purity and innocence. Libbey proffers a moral code that has gone a bit soft. The primary plot devices of Libbey's novels are melodramatic. Like the theatrical melodramas of the first half of the nineteenth century examined by David Grimsted, Libbey's novels portray a moral universe in which virtue triumphs and is rewarded and evil finally is conquered and punished.²⁶ With Libby, however, heroines are not called on to sacrifice much for virtue's sake nor does fate inflict punishment for a little girlish straying from the strict straight and narrow. Little Leafy, for instance, although she believes herself married (admittedly against her will) to the villain is so swayed by love for the hero, Frederick Forrester, that she plans marriage with him and tries to withhold her secret. The marriage to the villain ultimately turns out to be not legal, since her husband was already married to another woman, and Leafy is allowed to emerge happy and enfolded in the arms of her true love in the end, saved more by a turn of plot than by her own virtue. She even escapes retribution for pretending to be the long-lost heir of Colonel Alden. Of course, the final revelation of a switch of babies that means she is truly the heiress makes her masquerade honest, but she did make it believing her position to be false. The possibility of a moral universe ever seeming to inflict a harsh penalty for even momentary lapses from the true path (as happened in earlier nineteenth-century melodrama) is not so clear in these working-girl novels. Here the heroine always emerges happily wed, never redeemed but to die. The emphasis is much more upon personal happiness as the goal of the plot than it is upon affirming a world in which all works out for the right as an express of moral law.

The last of the virtues is submissiveness. It remains the strongest of the four, but its place is limited to submission to good husbands, indeed perfect men who earn their right to mastery through their sacrifice of inheritance, their manly courage in pursuing the heroine and effecting her rescue, and their own personal virtue that obviates against mastery ever being used for bad or unpleasant purposes. Restrained by the overwhelming desire to please and make happy that romantic love imposes, mastery and submission lose much of their sting.

A natural question arises as to the relation of these novels about working women to the feminist and suffragist movement of the 1870 to 1920 period. By the late nineteenth century, feminists and many other progressives adopted the theory that women had been robbed of the useful productive labor that used to be theirs in the home, as part of family production, and had been made largely useless, though decorative, by the industrialization of the productive process. In the influential writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, work and economic independence became necessary ingredients of sexual equality and women's free development.²⁷

The debate between feminists and conservatives over the proper place of women in society and over their specific relation to the world of work is

one to which fictional working heroines might well be expected to contribute. But feminists would find little to value in Libbey's writing. On the one hand, Libbey's young women show signs of being proto-feminist heroines. They work for a living; they are spirited; they are proud; they have integrity. They establish clear limits upon the degree to which any woman should be submissive to men, even husbands. They are lively, fun-loving and venturesome. When abducted they often manage to run away on their own although their permanent safety always depends upon male protection. On the other hand, there are definite limits upon their behavior and the world of female and male virtues often diverge. Libbey's heroines are indescribably innocent, unable to see danger when it approaches them on the street and thus constantly in need of rescue. Although the heroines are seen as being true to their class in not putting on airs and always remembering the girls with whom they once worked, their primary relations with other women are as rivals for the attentions of men. There is not much of sisterhood except in fleeting mention of the benefit of trade unions and very occasional genuine friendships. Most other women in the novels, including some of the workmates of the heroines, are intensely jealous of their beauty and plot against them at every turn. And while working status is seen as entitled to dignity, the work place itself is given short shrift and a happy ending is defined as a happy and wealthy marriage that automatically transforms the worker into a leisured lady, albeit a sweet and unaffected one. For Libbey the problematic lies more in limits to happiness imposed by false snobbery with respect to social class than it does in false social definitions imposed by gender. Thus Libbey's stories are essentially outside of the feminist stream. They make no connection between economic independence, self-fulfillment, female equality and happiness. The importance of work lies in the opportunity it creates to find a wonderful husband, not in its relation to freedom and self-definition.

This being the case, one might assume that readers of Libbey's novels were also hopelessly outside of the feminist stream and outside of the labor union stream as well. That a fantasy of a wealthy lover could have appeal does not have to mean, however, that working-girl readers longed for love and rich husbands as a quick release from factory or shop life. Most of the young women who read Libbey's novels did marry and leave their working lives, never to return unless they became widows or dependent upon a husband who could not or would not provide. Since only 5 percent of all women workers in 1900 were married, such cases were rare and not part of a young woman's expectations. While factory jobs rarely provided self-fulfillment or true economic independence, they were at least indirectly connected to a period of at least quasi-freedom. Perhaps these stories were particularly appealing to girls because of their relevance to what was emerging as a distinct and quite unique period of a woman's life, an interval of relative freedom between submission to parental authority and submission to husbandly authority. Such a "transition to adulthood" was a stage of life experienced by many young women of all social classes in the late nineteenth century, but for working-class girls it may have held a

special quality of independence because of its association with work. While many girls contributed all of their income to their families and others needed all of it simply to survive, surveys suggested that some young working women had a fair degree of control over their incomes. A Bureau of Labor survey in 1887 found that working girls spent one-fourth of their wages on clothing alone, and a Massachusetts survey of 1884 found some women choosing work (without family pressure) out of a desire for independence and self-support.²⁸

The degree of independence that a young woman acquired through working varied greatly depending on her family background and whether or not she lived at home. Some were as independent, or vulnerable, as a Libbey heroine, entirely dependent on their own wages for self-sufficient support. Many more contributed some or all of their earnings to their families. Ethnic background could be decisive. Jewish immigrant families often accorded their daughters more freedom than Italian Catholic families. For many immigrant young women their period of employment offered a wedge to break open family tradition with respect to marriage even if it failed to provide much economic freedom. Indeed, the romantic appeal of Libbey's novels was consistent with the expectations of many young women undergoing a process of Americanization that identified choosing one's own husband as an American freedom. Romantic love could be promoted as the American way in opposition to parental desires to retain a tradition of arranged marriages and Libbey's insistence on romantic love as the only basis for marriage probably accounts for some of her appeal.²⁹ Fantasies of love and aristocratic husbands were not cherished because young women wanted to be removed from this working period of quasi-freedom; most of them would be removed into marriages that might include little money, many children and perhaps little enough love. The appeal of romantic fantasies lay in positing a future so different from the reality of what young working women knew their lives eventually would be like. Fantasizing a different future underscored what pleasure there was in the freedom of young womanhood and kept alive the sense that life was not entirely predictable.

That it did so in ways that were foolish and sentimental and tended to deter young women workers from serious challenges of their employers—challenges that would have improved their immediate situation—was a theme taken up with increasing frequency both by feminists and labor organizers in the early years of the twentieth century. Feminists criticized young women workers for their romantic notions and for their interest in fashion and frivolity. They preferred a sterner image, one that could directly challenge the dependent domestic lady with an independent working woman.³⁰ Labor organizers criticized women workers who looked to romance and marriage as a cure for their problems and pointed out that marriage might instead prove to be the beginning of another set of difficulties.³¹ Their argument was that the abuses of the work place could only be remedied by changes brought about at the work place itself, and that these changes could only come about through the organized pressure

that flowed from unity expressed in trade unionism. That the longings for a fuller life that romantic stories preyed upon were legitimate longings, however, was indirectly acknowledged and supported by women labor leaders. Woman workers in the Lawrence textile strike of 1912 raised the slogan, “We want bread - and roses too!” This slogan was translated by Rose Schniederman, then president of the Cap Makers’ Union and an activist in the Women’s Trade Union League, to be a claim to “the right to live, not simply exist - the right of life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun, and music, and art.”³² The appeal of romantic novels produced by a silly and quite calculating middle-class writer³³ to her working-class readers may rest in the ability of their combination of work, adventure and romance to appeal to generalized longings for dignity and a fuller, richer and more comfortable life. Stripped of their preposterous plots, what remains is an insistence that life should be more than work and poverty. Waiting for millionaire husbands to provide the more was justly deemed “Hot Air” by Dorothy Richardson’s fellow box maker, Phoebe; wanting something more was not.³⁴

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notes

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1. Laura Jean Libbey, *Leonie Locke; or The Romance of a Beautiful New York Working-Girl* (New York, 1884), title page.

2. On the years 1870 to 1920 as transitional see Margaret Gibbons Wilson, *The American Woman in Transition; The Urban Influence, 1870-1920* (Westport, Connecticut, 1979).

3. Barbara Meyer Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York, 1977), 195-197; Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America* (New York, 1959), 17-18; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1978), 204; Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America* (New York, 1979), 119; Joseph A. Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations 1870-1920*, Census Monographs IX, 1929 (Westport, Connecticut, reprinted 1978), 19; Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, Susan Reverby, eds., *America’s Working Women* (New York, 1976), 83.

4. For samples of two opposing images of working girls see E. Fawcett, “Woes of the New York Working Girl,” *Arena*, 5 (December, 1891), 26-35; and M. G. Humphreys, “New York Working Girl,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, 20 (October, 1896), 502-513.

5. For the domestic novels see Helen Waite Papashvily, *All The Happy Endings* (Port Washington, New York, 1972; first published 1956); Mary Noel, *Villains Galore: The Heyday of the Popular Story Weekly* (New York, 1954); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977).

6. On the working girl genre before Libbey see Noel, 275-288. For the name as synonymous with the genre see *Bookman*, 32 (September, 1910), 18-19.

7. On Libbey see Russell Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse* (New York, 1970), 28-29; Sue G. Walcutt, “Laura Jean Libbey,” in Edward James, ed., *Notable American Women*, 2, 402-403; Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York, 1947), 10; Victor Rousseau, *Harpers Weekly*, 53, January 23, 1909, 12-13; Papashvily, 199-207; Noel, 151-152; Albert Payson Terhune, *To The Best of My Memory* (New York, 1930), 208-209; Louis Gold, “Laura Jean Libbey,” *American Mercury*, 24 (September, 1931), 47-52. For Libbey’s accounts of her travels see her six travel journals in the Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library.

8. So similar were her plots that Libbey once quarreled with Robert Bonner over his suggestion that she introduce some variety. As a result she left her association with the *New York Ledger* and took her stories elsewhere. See Walcutt, 402.

9. Libbey, *Leonie Locke*, 285. Actual figures on sales and readers are difficult to come by. The publishing houses involved are no longer in existence. Both Mott and Noel cite Libbey’s books as

examples of the kind of title that does not appear on the best-seller list of any particular year but that consistently sells many copies over a series of years. Taken as a whole (and her books are so similar it is entirely reasonable to consider them one), Libbey's production places her among the best-sellers. The question of audience is even more difficult. Certainly critics at the time assumed Libbey's stories were read by poor, immigrant, working-class girls (with the implication that anyone else would have better taste). Undoubtedly they also had some middle-class readers. Noel reports that reprinting of the story papers in book form served a working-class readership and cites an executive of Street and Smith as authority that such books were sold "almost entirely in the areas with big foreign populations of very low incomes." (Noel, 290-291.) For Libbey's intentions see Walcutt, 402.

10. Dorothy Richardson, *The Long Day* (1905), in William O'Neill, ed., *Women at Work* (Chicago, 1972), 75-86.

11. The following novels by Laura Jean Libbey form the main source for this paper and are representative of the working girl genre: *Leonie Locke*, op. cit. *Willful Gaynell*; or, *The Little Beauty of the Passaic Cotton Mills* (New York, 1890); *Little Leafy*; *The Cloakmaker's Beautiful Daughter* (New York, 1891); *Pretty Madcap Dorothy*; or, *How She Won a Lover* (Cleveland, 1891); *Happy-Go-Lucky Lotty* (New York, 1895); *Lotta, The Cloak Model*; or, *Strong in Her Faith* (New York, 1900); *A Master Workman's Oath*; or, *Coralie, The Unfortunate* (New York, 1892); *Ione, A Broken Love Dream* (New York, 1887). I have also made some use of the following Libbey titles in which the heroines are not actually working girls but come from working-class or farmer families or are poor relations: *Only a Mechanic's Daughter* (New York, 1892); *Little Rosebud's Lovers*; or, *A Cruel Revenge* (New York, 1888); *Florabel's Lover*; or, *Rival Belles* (New York, 1887); *Daisy Gordon's Folly*; or *The World Lost for Love's Sake* (New York, 1892).

12. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," in *Dimity Convictions* (Athens, Ohio, 1976), 21-41.

13. Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick* (New York, 1962, originally published in 1868), 109.

14. On the propriety of women waiting to be found, and not searching themselves, see Libbey, *Ione, A Broken Love Dream*, 80-81.

15. David A. Shannon, "Rose Pastor Stokes," *Notable American Women*, 3, 384-385; June Sochen, *Movers and Shakers* (New York, 1973), 59-61; Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (New York, 1923).

16. Even in physical attributes the wealthy female villains often reverse the stereotypes; they are tall while the heroines are petite.

17. While a more careful writer might choose to distinguish between love and lust and employ a wider and more precise vocabulary, Libbey did not. Love is a cover word for a great variety of emotional motivations. It can cover lust, selfish desire, even hatred as well as passion, romance and genuine concern and affection. Libbey's failure to make such verbal distinctions may well indicate more than sloppy writing, and include a sense that such emotions constitute at least a continuum and that one word covers one concept.

18. Laura Jean Libbey, *That Pretty Young Girl* (New York, 1889), Author's Preface.

19. Laura Jean Libbey, *He Loved But Was Lured Away* (New York, 1891), 212 (after novel).

20. Walcutt, 402-403.

21. Laura Jean Libbey, "Are Mothers and Daughters Truly Companionable?," unidentified clipping of Libbey article found in Laura Jean Libbey travel diaries, New York Public Library.

22. Richardson, 86.

23. See for example: A. O'Hagen, "Shall She Come To New York?," *Munsey*, 26 (January, 1902), 554-557.

24. Horatio Alger also made little use of religion as an important influence on his heroes. They may go to church but more as a sign of respectability than of piety. See John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago, 1965), 104, 117. The emphasis on personal happiness as a quasi-religious value could be seen as further extension of the "feminization" of culture described by Ann Douglas for the early nineteenth century. With Libbey, instead of a sentimentalized religion, sentimentality has taken over entirely and become independent of its former ties.

25. There may be an added necessity in making working-class heroines totally non-aggressive in romance since otherwise they would arouse suspicions of fortune hunting. The only way that love can emerge triumphant over wealth is if wealth seeks out poverty through love. The reverse would not be believable.

26. David Grimsted, "Melodrama as Echo of the Historically Voiceless," in Tamara Harevan, ed., *Anonymous Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1971), 80-98; David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled* (Chicago, 1968), 171-248.

27. Rodgers, 182-209; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York, 1966, first published 1898). For a general discussion of the debate on women's place see Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (New York, 1972, first published 1959). For the women's suffrage movement see Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement 1890-1920* (New York, 1965).

28. Smuts, 42; "The Working Girls of Boston," from 15th Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, for 1884, excerpted in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness; Documents of the Social History of American Women* (New York, 1972), 320.

29. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women, Industrial Work and Family Life in the*

United States, 1900-1930 (New York, 1979), 85-93; "Working Girls of Boston," in Cott, ed., 311-321; Carol Hymowitz and Michael Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York, 1978), 208-217. On stages in the transition to adulthood see John Modell, Frank Furstenberg, Theodore Hershberg, "Social Change and Transition to Adulthood in Historical Perspective," in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1978), 192-219.

30. For two ideals of domesticity see Rodgers, 182-209 (for the feminists' challenge see especially 206-208). On the older domestic ideal see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood; Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977).

31. See for example a speech by shirtwaist makers' organizer Clara Lemlich cited in Meredith Tax, "Conditions of Working Women in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries," *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, 2, (1971), 20.

32. Quoted in Tax, 20.

33. Albert Payson Terhune visited Libbey in her home and witnessed an accident sustained by a plumber's assistant working on the house. Libbey provided the worker with whiskey and called a doctor. When Terhune reminded her that one of her fictional heroines, in a similar situation, once offered blood from her own arm, Libbey replied, "That's all right enough in novels . . . but, in real life, whiskey is good enough - for plumbers." Terhune, 208-209.

34. Richardson, 79, 81.