

The Abuse of Female Workers

Brook Farm Colony Newsletter

A [Western] member of the United States Senate seems to be extremely pleased with cotton mills. He says in the Senate, "Who has not been delighted with the clockwork movements of a large cotton manufactory? He had visited them often, and always with increased delight." He says the women work in large airy apartments, well warmed. They are neatly dressed, with ruddy complexions, and happy countenances... And at the end of the week, "they enter the temples of God on the Sabbath, and thank him for all his benefits of working in a cotton mill. . . ."

We remark that whatever girls or others may do [after working like slaves for thirteen or fourteen hours every day], there cannot be a single person found who ever thanked God for permission to work in a cotton mill. . . .

We would respectfully advise the honorable Senator to travel incognito when he visits cotton mills. If he wishes to come at the truth, he must not be known. Let him put on a short jacket and trousers, and join the "lower orders" for a short time. . . . In that case we could show him, in some of the prisons in New England called cotton mills, instead of rosy cheeks, the pale, sickly, haggard countenance of the ragged child--haggard from the slavish confinement in the cotton mill. He might see that child driven up to the "clockwork" by the cowskin [whip], in some cases. He might see, in some instances, the child taken from his bed at four in the morning, and plunged into cold water to drive away his slumbers and prepare him for the labors of the mill. After all this he might see that child robbed, yes, robbed of a part of his time allowed for meals by moving the hands of the clock backwards, or forwards, as would best accomplish that purpose. . . . He might see in some, and not infrequent, instances, the child, and the female too, driven up to the "clockwork" with the cowhide, or well-seasoned strap.

We could show him many females who have had corporeal punishment inflicted upon them; one girl eleven years of age who had her leg broken with a bat of wood; another who had a board split over her head by a heartless overseer of a cotton mill "paradise."

We shall for want of time . . . omit entering more largely into detail for the present respecting the cruelties practiced in some of the American mills. Our wish is to show that education is neglected, . . . because if thirteen hours' actual labor is required each day, it is impossible to attend to education among children, or to improvement among adults.

The above article was partly responsible for the United States' first law to control child labor, enacted in Massachusetts in 1842. What were the most serious abuses of labor discussed here?

How were they harmful?

How might a Southerner defending slavery use this to his/her advantage?

The Nature of Slavery

Frederick Douglass

A master is one--to speak in the vocabulary of the southern states--who claims and exercises a right of property in the person of a fellow-man. This he does with the force of the law and the sanction of southern religion. The law gives the master absolute power over the slave. He may work him, flog him, hire him out, sell him, and, in certain contingencies, kill him, with perfect impunity. The slave is a human being, divested of all rights... He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another. To eat the fruit of his own toil, to clothe his person with the work of his own hands, is considered stealing. He toils that another may reap the fruit; he is industrious that another may live in idleness; he eats unbolted (unrefined) meal that another may eat the bread of fine flour; he labors in chains at home, under a burning sun and biting lash, that another may ride in ease and splendor abroad; he lives in ignorance that another may be educated; he is abused that another may be exalted; he rests his toil-worn limbs on the cold, damp ground that another may repose on the softest pillow; he is clad in coarse and tattered raiment that another may be arrayed in purple and fine linen; he is sheltered only by the wretched hovel that a master may dwell in a magnificent mansion; and to this condition he is bound down as by an arm of iron.

From this monstrous relation there springs an unceasing stream of most revolting cruelties. The very accompaniments of the slave system stamp it as the offspring of hell itself. To ensure good behavior, the slaveholder relies on the whip; to induce proper humility, he relies on the whip; to rebuke what he is pleased to term insolence, he relies on the whip; to supply the place of wages as an incentive to toil, he relies on the whip; to bind down the spirit of the slave, to imbrute and destroy his manhood, he relies on the whip, the chain, the gag, the thumb-screw, the pillory, the bowie knife the pistol, and the blood-hound. These are the necessary and unvarying accompaniments of the system. Wherever slavery is found, these horrid instruments are also found. Whether on the coast of Africa, among the savage tribes, or in South Carolina, among the refined and civilized, slavery is the same, and its accompaniments one and the same. It makes no difference whether the slaveholder worships the God of the Christians, or is a follower of Mahomet, he is the minister of the same cruelty, and the author of the same misery. Slavery is always slavery; always the same foul, haggard, and damning scourge, whether found in the eastern or in the western hemisphere.

What types of appeal does Douglass use to convince the reader of the evils of slavery?

In what ways was the non-physical abuse of slaves worse than the physical abuse?